

## Church Buildings

The minimum requirement for a church is not a building or a music program or even a pastor; it is two or more Christians meeting together. Of course, it's usually a lot easier and more comfortable in a building. A dedicated church building provides a place for classes and ministry activities as well as worship. You can leave chairs and other equipment set up for ministry. You may even be able to rent out space during the week to bring in a little extra income. But you can certainly be a church and have church without a church building.

For the first few hundred years of the church's existence there were no church buildings. People met in private homes. And the church didn't just survive, it thrived.

In many countries today, especially where the church is outlawed or persecuted, this is still the case. Even in America, with its Christian heritage and religious freedoms, the fastest growing part of Christianity is the house church movement.

Acts 2:42 describes the activities of the first Christians: *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.* All these things happened in private homes, with occasional larger gatherings outdoors or in other public places.

If you need a space bigger than a private home, often the cheapest way is to rent a space part-time. You might rent a theater for a few hours on Sunday mornings. If you meet on Sundays and another church meets on Saturdays, or even a synagogue, perhaps you could share the building, and the cost.

If your church is at the place where you need a building full-time, the easiest way to start is usually to rent. It takes much less money up front. Usually the landlord is responsible for maintenance and repairs. And if you find you need a bigger space, or a different kind of space, or a different location, it's a lot easier to change rentals than to sell a building you own and buy a new one.

Just be careful. People can begin to think church activities have to take place in the building. In fact, they can begin to think the church can't do

anything that doesn't take place in the building. **Eventually they can forget that they are the church, and begin to think the building is the church.**

And don't over-commit yourself. Jesus said, *Don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it?* (Luke 14:28). I've seen more than one sad instance where this verse was apparently ignored. It came to seem as if the only reason the church existed was to pay off the loan on the building.

Owning your building can be a very good thing. It may convey a certain legitimacy in the eyes of the community and local government, which can cut down on petty harassments. It removes the restrictions of having a landlord who may not agree with your church's vision and mission. And if you are able to own a building free and clear instead of paying a mortgage, money that would otherwise go for rent is released for missions, salaries, new equipment and capital improvements.

If your church meets in its own building, here are some things you should consider. If you are planning to build or renovate, or if you are looking for a space to rent, these thoughts are even more important.

## First impressions

"You only get one chance to make a first impression." Some people may decide whether or not to visit your church based strictly on the way your worship place looks from the outside. Is it well kept and inviting, or does it look like you don't care? Is the main entrance obvious?

Once they get in, is it clear where to go? If the place where you worship contains more than two rooms, visitors will feel lost. Invest in some nice-looking signs to tell people where to go. If you only use the space a few hours a week, you can put the signs on stands or tape them to the wall each week.

## Cleanliness

Do you know the one thing that will almost always guarantee that a visiting family will not return? As a male pastor, this never occurred to me until I read it. Then it seemed obvious. You could have the truest doctrine, the best music, and the most inspiring preaching, but if this one area is overlooked, none of the rest makes any difference. This one most important factor is the condition of the women's restroom. A dirty or, worse, smelly ladies' room can undo all your other good work. If visitors have young children the same goes for the nursery, if you have one. If mothers don't feel confident that their children will be safe and well cared for, they are not likely to return.

## Access

You want to make it as easy as possible for people to get to where you worship. Are you convenient to public transportation? If people drive, is there parking? If they ride, is there a safe place to leave their bikes or scooters? Are there stairs or other things that could make it difficult for elderly people or those in wheelchairs?

## Safety and liability

When my wife was a child she attended a special Christmas Eve midnight service where everyone in the congregation was given a candle. Paula was looking around, entranced by all the little flames, when she suddenly noticed a bigger flame right in front of her. Her candle had caught her sister's hair on fire! They were able to put it out without mishap, but it could easily have been otherwise.

Keep fire extinguishers and first aid supplies handy. Clearly mark emergency exits and keep them unobstructed. If your local government has safety laws that apply to your gatherings, be sure you are in compliance.

I've met some Christians who feel that carrying insurance implies weak faith. I disagree. In our fallen world, bad things can happen to anyone –

just like good things (Matthew 5:45; Luke 13:4). What if Paula's candle had caught a book or drapery on fire instead of her sister's hair? The church building could have burned down. Even safety-conscious people can have accidents. Jesus commended the five wise virgins who carried extra lamp oil as insurance against the bridal party being late. I think insurance comes under the category of being wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16). If you are in a litigious place like America, you should consider clergy malpractice insurance. Incorporating the church can also be an important way of protecting yourself and your leaders in case of a lawsuit.

## Security

It's an unfortunate fact in many parts of today's world that churches can be targets for terrorist activity. If terrorists can make your people afraid to come to church or in other ways curtail your activities, they win. That's what they are aiming for. On the other hand, you don't want to needlessly expose your people to danger. If your local police are supportive, by all means consult with them and seriously consider their advice.

At the very least, you and your church leaders should have a prayerful and informed conversation about church security. What kind of thing is most likely to happen – vandalism, harassment, maybe even an attack? When might you expect an incident to happen? Are there any places that might be particularly vulnerable? What specific actions might you consider, such as stationing men at each entrance during church services, or installing an alarm system or cameras?

A church building can be a powerful ministry tool, but it won't take care of itself. Fortunately, most congregations have at least one or two people who love to maintain and care for the building. Encourage them to see that as the important ministry that it is, and celebrate them for it.

## Points to Remember

- The money and property is not yours or your church's; it's God's.
- Mishandling money can destroy your witness, your ministry, your church, even your life.
- Guilt, fear and greed can motivate giving, but they are not fitting tactics for servants of the God of love who created and sustains the universe.
- Failing to spend money when necessary can be as harmful as spending it foolishly.
- The building is not the church, it's a tool for the church's ministry.