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YOUR CHURCH

Building Blocks

Builders and architects address five of your construction concerns

by Gayla R. Postma

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Our church was built in the mid-1950s and has served us well. Many people in our congregation are now elderly, however, and are having some difficulty getting into and around the facility. How can we make our building more accessible for people with disabilities?

For almost any church built more than 20 years ago, accessibility for seniors and people with disabilities is an issue. Prior to 1990 when the American Disabilities Act became law, accessibility was not a requirement for public buildings. Though technically that law does not apply to churches, many churches have chosen to follow ADA guidelines so that they may welcome all people to their facilities.

Before you start planning renovations, Christopher Kidd suggests asking a trained architect or contractor to do an accessibility survey of your building. "This person can itemize where your building is deficient according to handicap codes, especially those of the ADA," says Kidd of Taylor, Kidd, and Associates Architects in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Once the survey is done, you can prioritize the areas that need to be renovated, taking into account factors such as local building codes.

Before finalizing the list, you should see how reprogramming might solve some of the accessibility problems. "Challenge how facilities are being used in spaces such as the balcony or basement," says Todd Brown of Brown Church Development Group in Holdrege, Nebraska. "Try to reprogram so that people who need access won't have to go to those spaces. Moving the fellowship hall from the basement to the main floor of the church is one easy solution."

Bruce Wardell of Bruce R. Wardell Architects in Charlottesville, Virginia, affirms that kind of thinking. "There are administrative ways to be come accessible," he says. "If you have a fourth-grader in a wheelchair, you can make sure the room used by that class is on an accessible level."

If your building has more than one level, however, you might eventually need an elevator. "That is probably going to be the most satisfactory solution in the long run, but it's also the most expensive," Wardell says.

The cost of an elevator will vary, depending on what kind you choose and where you install it. For example, installing an elevator on the outside of a building is less expensive than making room for it inside. But an elevator won't necessarily solve all of a church's accessibility problems because old buildings often have lots of levels in various parts of their complexes.

Our church is old, and, quite frankly, it looks it. It's not old enough to have historic appeal; just old enough to look dated and a bit shabby. How can we give our building a more contemporary look?

One way to change the look of an existing church is to build around it, says Steve Beutler, vice president of Miracle Steel Structures. For example, a large building can be constructed on two

sides of an older facility, then attached, giving a contemporary look to the whole complex.

Bruce Wardell's company did something similar. Wardell says adding to the front and back of the church was like putting a new overcoat on it.

We've maxed out our facilities and are planning to build. We've purchased a large site west of town and are in the process of drawing up plans. The question is: what should we build first, a sanctuary with classrooms or a multipurpose facility?

The decision of what to build first really depends on the vision of the congregation. "Building a facility for a congregation is like designing a tool," Wardell says. "You have to understand what the tool will be used for before you design it."

Brown agrees that the choice of what to build first must be driven by the ministry of the church. "Most churches need to start with some sort of multipurpose facility because of cost," he says. "If you are on a budget, you have to make more use of each space."

A flexible facility allows a congregation to use the same space for worship, education, and fellowship. It also keeps the church's options open, Beutler says. A multipurpose building can also be converted as the need arises. What functions now as a gathering area can be converted later into a sanctuary. Eventually, a separate sanctuary can be built next to the old one and the multipurpose space turned into a gymnasium or recreational facility.

Our congregation is very young and very forward-thinking, but it's also somewhat financially limited. What kind of church can we build that will help us move our ministry into the future without too much financial strain?

One way a church can quickly solve a space dilemma is to put up a semi-permanent structure. The stressed-membrane structures offered by Sprung Instant Structures, for example, are fully insulated, relocatable, and can be put up quickly—as much as 1,000 square feet a day. "Many churches need their facilities now," says Jim Avery of Sprung Instant Structures, in West Jordan, Utah. "They can't wait a year."

A Sprung structure is also ideal as an interim solution while a church is building because it can be put up rapidly on a parking lot or concrete slab. "Pour a slab, run heating, ventilation and plumbing. It is as temporary or as permanent as you want it to be, depending on how you build it," Avery says. It's also economic—up to 50 percent less than a conventional building. Avery believes this kind of structure is the church of the future because it allows congregations to spend more money on ministry than on buildings.

Beutler can relate to that. "Churches are telling us that the added cost of ornate looks is better spent on programs," he says.

Where is church construction going these days? What will churches look like in the future?

Architects and builders differ in their answers to this question, though all agree that the look of churches is changing. For example, Beutler believes churches of the future will still look like churches, but they'll have cleaner, straighter lines with less brickwork.

Kidd thinks that churches of the future won't look much like churches at all. "We're seeing buildings that are extremely functional," he says. "We're designing buildings that are used for worship and athletic events, lecture events, and fellowship events. They're really diversified spaces." Newer churches are looking more like auditoriums than rectangles topped by steeples, he says. The outside is a reflection of what's going inside the building. Form is following function, rather than the other way around.

Brown agrees with that assessment. He sees churches of the future looking more like a mall or what's inside a mall. "There's a movement of people wanting to worship God in a more contemporary fashion," he says. He sees tomorrow's church as a one-level structure with a large atrium, a Starbucks coffee shop, and maybe even a restaurant and shops. "It will become a place for friends to meet, very much like the mall," he says. "You come to the church for Bible study,

but you can also get coffee and a bagel." It's a safe, friendly environment for all people: Christian or nonChristian.

Wardell agrees that churches need multiple-use spaces to use their finances efficiently. But worship space must also provide some contrast to our culture, he believes. "One of the reasons medieval cathedrals were so glorious was that the population as a whole was not very well-educated," he says. "The stained glass and symbolism became a method of teaching church lessons. Peasants would come in from dreary living circumstances, and the opulence of the cathedral would be like a physical manifestation of heaven on earth."

The reverse is true in our culture. "Our secular culture is so enormous, with its movie theaters, baseball stadiums, and Las Vegas resorts," Wardell says. He believes churches should distinguish between worship space and multipurpose facilities. "On one level, holding everything in one room works, but when you come into a space dedicated for corporate worship, it has to be somehow set apart," he says. "Maybe the worship spaces have to be so simple that they set themselves in contrast to the peripatetic culture around us."

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More Than a Face-lift

If your church needs a face-lift, begin with an inward search. Ask what your church's goals and vision are, then what you really hope to accomplish with a new look.

About nine years ago, architect Bruce Wardell began working with Trinity Episcopal Church, a primarily African-American church in Charlottesville, Virginia, that had received a building from its diocese some 20 years earlier. "The people came to us because they needed to expand the facilities," Wardell says.

Once the architect began probing, however, he realized that the renovation was about more than increased space. "The building the people were given was something they had no participation in," Wardell says. "We began to understand that one of the functions in renovating was it to make it their own."

The solution? Wardell designed additions to be put on the front and back of the church. The result was a building that visually opened to the community, was transparent to people, and generously engaged visitors. Best of all, it was now a place the congregation could call its own.

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