

Compact neighborhood plan threatens churches' survival

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=3177#more-3177>

I have just finished reviewing a church project sent to me as an example of what good planning can do to preserve a church in a “typically sprawling suburban lot.” The designer of this project proposed to solve the problem of limited resources of this church by transforming its entire site into a neighborhood with new church facilities in its midst.

The first thing he proposed for the 12-acre site is to add a grid of streets. This would create enough on-street parking to replace all of the parking spaces in its existing parking lot. Once that is done, shops with apartments built on top would be constructed where part of the existing parking lot used to be, then a grocery store and other shops and offices would be constructed, filling up the rest of the parking lot.

From the proceeds of the sale or lease of the land (I couldn't determine who would actually own these new buildings), the church would then have the funds to build a new parochial school. That would allow them to tear down their old school, making room to construct a number of townhouses. The proceeds of that construction would then allow the church to build a gymnasium for their school.

As funds became available, the church would then construct a new church building. After its completion, the old church would be torn down. Finally, when additional funds become available, the church would build a parking structure.

The designer's intent is that this old church, with its massive parking lot, would be transformed into a community of about 75 families, complete with the amenities of life within walking distance, with the church as its anchor.

Could this solution be an answer for churches that are struggling to keep their doors open? And could it possibly help a church maintain its presence within an urban area that is being densely developed? I think the answer is maybe, but not likely.

First of all, this is a massive project, by my rough estimation probably costing close to \$100 million. Financing the project would likely require a partnership with investors and/or a developer. There's a reason the Scriptures admonish us not to be unequally yoked - unless the church was able to maintain control, the church could find itself under the control of others, possibly even unbelievers.

Second, until the parking structure is constructed (which was the last phase), the lack of parking for the church would likely choke off attendance early in the project, which could lead to the demise of the church.

Third, under the kind of regulations that are characteristic of zoning codes written for dense development, it would take a significant span of time to get planning and permitting done, much less each phase of construction. Since the church is the last one to benefit from the plan, is it reasonable to believe that the entire plan would be carried out, and that the church would survive that long?

The blog comments that followed the article describing this project were both positive and negative. The positive bloggers thought it was a great plan, but others raised questions about how a non-profit church could be involved with a for-profit enterprise.

One particularly thoughtful blogger questioned the idea that we should be building a village around a church, since we are now a secular society. He noted that in the old days, when the church was actually part of local government (obviously he was talking about medieval Europe), villages were built around the church, but since we no longer have the church as the center of our government, the “centerpiece” of the village should be secular.

Frankly, I find it fascinating that “progressive” and secular people, who believe in sustainability and environmentalism, who likely recycle their trash, drive hybrids and complain about global warming caused by manufacturing, see no problem with destroying an entire site, including functional buildings, then construct more streets and buildings, all in order to create the kind of urban streetscape that they feel is appropriate.

I have no problem with a church becoming a developer in order to preserve its place, and as a matter of fact I have written articles in the past suggesting that it could be a viable solution for some churches. However, when the real purpose of a project like this is to convert existing church property into a compact neighborhood, then the church’s survival in the plan is incidental, not purposeful. In that case, the church’s actual survival in the plan is not likely.

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