

Some of the basics that American churches can provide

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Two weeks ago I addressed the issue of the church's role in the community, and how differently our church facilities would look if we were to take hold of our responsibilities to those who are truly in need within our community and within our congregations.

Admittedly my vision of churches – that had in addition to their worship facilities, such things as housing facilities, clinics, halfway houses, schools, training centers or nursing homes – is a bit utopian. Though there are now some megachurches that could manage to do many of these or perhaps even all of them, most churches are too small to place very many under their own roof.

However, there are some basic things that almost all churches in America are capable of providing, and these basics are what will give churches the capability to grow to the point that they actually can extend their services beyond the basics.

More than 20 years ago when I began to specialize in church architecture, I conducted seminars to help churches that wanted to grow their facilities. In those seminars, I taught that there are four basic functions that needed to be provided in balance in order to get the most out of their facilities.

Those four functions (which I called the Basic Four) are worship space, fellowship space, education space and parking. My philosophy then was that if you provided all of these spaces, your attendance would tend to be established by the smallest of these four. So, for example, if your parking, education and fellowship spaces would accommodate 500 people, but your worship space only accommodated 250, your attendance would tend to be closer to 250 than 500.

The new model of church facilities that is being built now is quite different. Most new facilities are designed around worship space and parking, with multiple services. Fellowship and education spaces are no longer seen as necessities.

It is not as though fellowship and education are unnecessary, but that dedicated spaces for these functions are. Fellowship functions are accommodated by temporary conversion of the worship space and education is provided through small groups (though I would argue that small groups are more a fellowship function than education).

Scripture gives us remarkable freedom to conduct these functions any way we feel we are led to do so. Nowhere in scripture are we instructed how to conduct a worship service, what our worship space should look like, or that we even need a built environment for doing so. We are not instructed to build schools to give our children a Christian education or to build clinics to

meet medical needs, or nursing homes to take care of our elderly, but we are instructed in a general way to take care of all of these needs and more.

The freedom we get from scripture – by omission – is that we were not given a formula or a directive as to how to accomplish these services. However, we need to be careful that those around us, in particular secular society and government, do not dictate to us how to do so, or more importantly, deny us the opportunity to do so through onerous laws or tactics.

To allow that to happen would be to allow those outside of the church to redefine the church and its purpose. As one proponent of urbanism once told me, “we are opposed to the mega-church isolated in the countryside or suburbs surrounded by acres of parking. This is an unsustainable model; it paves the landscape, it forces driving, it isolates the membership from the rest of the community, and it isolates the non-driver from the church. It is profoundly anti-civic.”

If we were to believe that, it would drastically alter the mission of the church and hamper its ability to accomplish it. If our churches were to be shamed into giving up their responsibilities to care for others, or to allow human “wisdom” to take precedent over direction from God, then the church and its influence on the good of its community would be greatly diminished.

In the same way, to allow government to control what we build, where we build, or how we build would also diminish the mission of the church. Yet it has become normal for churches to experience difficulty maintaining their place in their communities, and it has become even more difficult for new churches to establish themselves in many communities.

It is imperative for our churches to take a holistic approach to developing and carrying out its mission, one that envelopes knowledge of scripture, knowledge of law, and situational awareness. These are the conditions that will shape its mission and its built environment in the future.



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