

Finding a Facility

by Mark Driscoll

I was recently going through some old files and found this article I wrote sometime in the late 1990s for church planters. I post it in hopes that it can be helpful to church planters hoping to find a facility.

When you meet, where you meet, and how you meet all proclaim something about your perception of God and your new congregation. Therefore, when selecting a facility, a new church plant is doing a great deal more than simply finding a place to house a gathering. You are making a statement and there are multiple variables to consider according to your priorities. The following article is intended to be a practical means of aiding young churches as they consider a physical home for their corporate gathering(s). The information was collected over a few years of personal struggle as our young new church met in four locations at four different service times in the first two years.

Sight

Simply put, what does the building look like from the outside and inside? Is the entrance easily visible? Does the building look maintained, safe, and clean? Inside, how are the colors, sight angles, and overall décor? When was the facility last updated and how does that relate to the identity of your congregation?

Time Flexibility

This issue may not seem significant, but should be carefully considered. Once you launch your congregation, will it be possible for you to change your time if needed (e.g., from an evening to a morning service)? If needed, can you arrive early to set-up, or stay late? If and when your first service fills to capacity, can you extend your usage to permit you to go to two services in the same room with the same set-up configuration?

Set-Up and Tear Down

How many volunteers will it require to set-up and tear down for your weekly gathering? Storage plays an important role here. Obviously, if you have to transport everything from sound equipment to children's materials each week, you will also need a vehicle and lots of faithful hands. While there is something to be said for the first servants in a church setting an example of diligent labor, the sad truth is that such responsibilities end up being a management headache dumped on a handful of faithful people who are burned out in six months or less. A church plant that begins with a small core must also face the reality that they have few volunteers who should be used wisely for the benefit of the entire church and spread between multiple areas of need (e.g., worship teams, children's teachers, office help).

Smell

Every room has an odor. If you meet in a gym, it is likely your church will smell like sweaty guys. If you are using the building of a church that frequently cooks, or if you are using a building that has old carpet and drapes, or if you are using a building that is musty because of poor ventilation, then it may be an inconvenience to some, and a problem to others who have allergies. This is also true for the use of flowers, incense, and the like in a service.

Comfort

To be considered in this category are simple matters such as room temperature and seating. If you live in a warm climate, does the room have air conditioning? If you live in a cold climate, does the room have adequate heating? If the room is filled, will there be sufficient air circulation to keep the room ventilated with fresh air? Does the seating permit general comfort, particularly for those who may have physical problems such as back pain?

Lighting

Will your building be sufficient with its current lighting or will you need to bring in additional lighting (e.g., lamps, stage lights)? Conversely, some facilities have so many windows and so much natural light that it becomes difficult to project images in the room or to alter the atmosphere when desired. Also, some rooms are so dark that people are forced to squint, which may cause them headaches or eye strain.

Acoustics

This area is particularly important but also very complicated. The costs associated with acoustically engineering a room can be staggering. Therefore, the average church planter will be forced to deal with varying degrees of acoustic difficulty. For example, many older churches were acoustically designed for an organ and congregational singing, while a community center meeting room is designed for a lecture without live music in mind. You will need to determine which types of instrumentation you will use for worship and factor that into your consideration of a room, along with what type of sound equipment you will need. Remember, however, that whenever possible you will want to try and find a way to hear the room when it is full of bodies during a live music performance. This is necessary because the acoustics of a room change dramatically if the room is empty or filled with such things as chairs and bodies, and also vary greatly if the people are standing or seated. The human body tends to greatly deaden sound and the size of your congregation in relation to the capacity of your room will cause marked differences in the sound. Also consider other features, such as balconies, under which sound can be trapped, and high ceilings, which also tend to consume sound. Most acoustic complications can be worked around but the subsequent costs in sound equipment can be quite high.

Power

Many older buildings do not have sufficient power for sound and video equipment. Some buildings are still running on two pronged outlets without a ground. Others do not have “clean” power and can cause feedback in a sound system (usually this is more of a problem with analog rather than digital sound boards). Therefore, you may need to use lots of power strips to protect your equipment, and may need a power conditioner for your sound if feedback from old power is a recurring problem.

Location

Physically, where is the facility? In which neighborhood is it located? How accessible is it to major arterials and freeways for those commuting in? To be considered in this category are such things as natural boundaries that tend to divide people psychographically into various communities. These boundaries often include such things as major freeways and arterials, lakes, rivers, bridges, and railroad tracks. If you want to reach a particular community, it may be vital that you are in that community and not merely near it, since most of its people may rarely leave their neighborhood unless absolutely necessary. For other churches with a regional attraction, a specific location may be less important because their people commute in from varying distances and are less concerned about particular neighborhood identities.

Children’s Space

Does the space have sufficient additional areas to set up childcare? Will the children’s areas be clean, appropriately lit, safe, and have a controlled temperature? Will the children’s areas permit future growth as the number of children in the congregation grows? The issues surrounding children’s ministries can be critical to a new church, particularly those with young families wanting to ensure their children are left in a safe and nurturing environment. The costs associated with children’s items and additional labors of setting up and tearing down each week can make the rental of an existing outfitted church or school with children’s rooms particularly helpful.

Room for Fellowship

Will there be sufficient open space for people to mingle and meet before and after the services? While this item may seem simple, the issue of hospitality can be key for a new church hoping to connect with visitors in an informal setting.

Cost

For most starving church planters this issue is critical. Working on a limited budget trying to juggle start-up costs with salaries, facilities, and programming can be maddening. However, you must remember that it is your hope to remain in your first location as long as possible because the costs and management complexities associated with moving can be very damaging to the momentum of a newly forming congregation. The right location may cost you some additional monies, but as a long-term investment, beginning with the right location can promote quicker growth and subsequent increased financial resources.

Storage

It is often amazing how many things are needed to hold a simple church service. From paperwork, to sound gear, to projection equipment, to refreshments, to nursery items, the list continues to grow as your service matures. Therefore, it will be necessary to have adequate storage for your initial items, as well as additional space for future acquisitions. Ideally, this space would be located in your facility and easily accessible for set-up and tear down. This allows all the items to be stored on wheels for easy transport. However, if your facility does not permit you such storage, you may want to negotiate having a storage facility left on the property, or acquire trucks or vans for weekly transport of all materials to your site.

Public Perception

Some facilities carry with them particular public perceptions that can be either harmful or beneficial. For example, if you occupy a church building recently vacated by a cultic group, or a congregation that had embittered their community, your arrival may cause many to mistake your church for the previous tenant. Conversely, some locations are viewed as beloved community centerpieces and the use of such locations may allow your new congregation to be viewed in a positive light in relation to the general good reputation of a particular facility.

Parking

You should expect to need approximately one parking space for every two or three church attendees. If your congregation is younger and largely single, that number could increase to one parking space for every one or two church attendees. If you are anticipating going to multiple services in your facility, you will need sufficient parking for certain people to be parked for both services (e.g., set-up and tear down people, children's workers, sound engineers, musicians). And if you are anticipating having multiple services and a full Sunday school program, you should plan on needing double the amount of parking of a single service. In urban areas parking can be tremendously costly, sometimes as expensive as the actual facility and requiring separate negotiations and contracts. Some facilities in neighborhoods rely primarily on off-street parking, but this parking should be used with regard to the neighbors, who often become embittered if they cannot park in front of their homes or are forced to deal with increased traffic.

Additional Space

Does the facility have a kitchen? Does the facility have a gym? Does the facility have a dining area for a common meal? Does the facility have available classrooms for education, prayer, and other meetings? Does the facility have any potential office space for use during the week? How can these additional spaces be resourced to benefit your new work?

Additional Use

Can you have access to the location for special events (e.g., concerts, meals, lectures, parties, weddings, outreach events) and special services (e.g., Christmas Eve, Easter, New Year's Eve)? Can you use the facility for midweek activities if and when the need arises? The more flexibility your facility provides, the wider range of options you have at your disposal for creative programming and experimentation. This is particularly important as your congregation transitions from a core to a public congregation since many of your initial programming ideas may prove unfruitful and force you to examine additional options.

Cleanliness

Very simply, is the location clean? Will people be comfortable in the restrooms? Will people be comfortable if they have small children crawling on the floor? If the overall atmosphere is not generally clean and adequately maintained, a statement is being made about your congregation.

Accessibility

How difficult is the facility to find? Is it near a known landmark, in a known neighborhood, and/or accessible to the freeway and major arterials? If not, it may be cumbersome and difficult for people to find you and thereby inhibit your growth.

Signage

Is there any opportunity for you to either temporarily or permanently place signs on or near the facility to notify people about your services and related events and information?

Conflicting Dates

Will there be days that you do not have access to the facility, or have access for limited or altered times? Will your rental agreement have precedence over other rentals, or will there be an ongoing possibility that your event could be bumped in favor of another? If possible, it will be important to clarify these issues in your contract, as well as the length of notice you are guaranteed if a conflicting event is scheduled. You will likely need at least sixty to ninety days' notice to successfully relocate your service or alter its meeting time. You should include in your contract that such notice be given to you in writing in order to safeguard your interests.

Contract Length

It is to your benefit to negotiate for a long-term contract that provides you a short escape clause should you decide to move to another location. Since you will be purchasing supplies and equipment for a particular location, as well as promoting that location to the community, you want to ensure that you can remain there for as long as you possibly can. Still, since it is possible that a better option may arise, you will want to have a stipulation in your agreement that lets you out if you give, for example, thirty or sixty days' notice.

Facility Options for Consideration

As a final note, the following categories of potential locations may be of some help for your consideration: schools, churches, hotels, warehouses, community centers, theaters, and concert venues.