

How Welcoming are Your Physical Facilities?

By Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp

Concept: The church's physical facilities can be part of your congregation's welcome or can be a barrier to participation by members and visitors.

“**I** sure feel ashamed of myself for all the times I said we didn't need a wheelchair ramp or an elevator,” Howard gasped to his wife as he used the railing to help pull himself up the steps from the church basement to the main floor.

“Don't you think you should rest a few minutes before going the rest of the way?” his wife Martha asked.

“Can't risk the loss of momentum. I'll be okay,” but his voice didn't sound reassuring to himself or to Martha. Since a triple bypass surgery nine months earlier, Howard continued to feel like everything took three times as much energy as it should. The surgeon had told him that it would take six months for him to resume normal activity, but Howard felt more like it would be six years, if ever.

“I still think we should ask them to move the class to one of the first floor rooms,” Martha said as she took Howard's arm to offer him some support. He didn't jerk his arm away from her and make his frequent snorting noise, which told her that he was indeed feeling drained.

“But there really isn't another classroom upstairs that's available. What would they do, make the Happy Days class change to the basement? Those people are older than I am. I think you have to have arthritis, diabetes, or heart disease to be a member of the class.”

“Howard,” Martha scolded, “you know better than to talk that way.”

He sighed as he paused for a moment a third of the way from the top of the stairs. “I sure do,” he agreed. “The truth of the matter is that most of the people in that class are in better shape than I am. Maybe we should ask them to trade rooms.”

While Howard and Martha were making their way up the stairs, Paul and Jane, a very healthy young adult couple, were getting ready to visit another congregation on the opposite side of town. They were

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A note from the editor

Our church buildings speak volumes to those who casually pass by and to those who enter for the first time. The congregation has the ability to program the words the buildings speak. A colleague told me recently he had visited a congregation that clearly said to him, “welcome . . . to the 1950s.”

The excerpts included in this issue come from a book titled *Widening the Welcome of Your Church*. This book was written by two pastors in the Church of the Brethren who raised the consciousness about the importance of welcome in their respective congregations. While the excerpts here come from a chapter on physical facilities, the two authors go far beyond facilities, recognizing that the building is only one piece of the welcome puzzle.

When I served on the staff of a local church, each year I would take the evangelism committee on a walk. We would start on the street and ask each committee member to approach the church as a first-time visitor. I also asked them to imagine they had not been to church in ten years and were carrying an infant and holding the hand of a toddler. We parked our car (in our imagination) and approached the church building, tried to find the right door, tried to find child care, and restrooms, then examined the church bulletin. Such an exercise is eye-opening. Like the authors point out, the committee would suddenly see peeling paint, stuck doors, invisible restrooms, and a bulletin that made no sense unless they knew the secret code.

Hopefully, with this issue, you can begin to ask questions about the welcoming nature of your church.

—Ryan D. Hazen

driving around First Church's block for the third time. "I really think it's okay to park in the restaurant's lot," Jane offered to her husband for the second time. "The restaurant looks like it's closed and there are a few cars there already. Those must be people going to church."

"But if you're wrong, they're going to tow the car. That sign looks pretty explicit and doesn't say that Sunday is an exception," her husband, Paul, responded. "We saw a lot of people parking a couple of blocks down the street and walking. I think that's what people do when the lot by the church gets full."

"We could just keep driving around the block for another hour or so," Jane suggested, "and then the service would be over."

Paul laughed at her comment and at himself. "You're right," he admitted as he pulled into the restaurant's parking lot. "We're going to need time anyway to figure out which door to go in. There must be five entrances, and we've seen people use all of them except the big doors that look like they'd lead to the sanctuary."

"But I think that's just like my home church," said Jane. "Because there's no parking right in front of the sanctuary, no one ever enters that way. Sometimes they even forget to unlock those doors."

"Well, this church is even bigger than yours. We'll be lost for sure if we go in the wrong door." They got out of their car and headed toward the church.

Underestimating the Message of the Facilities

We can too easily grow comfortable with aspects of our physical facilities that really aren't welcoming. Our physical facilities do communicate a message to members and visitors. We want that message to be consistent with what we are attempting to communicate through our words to people.

Lack of attention to physical facilities can especially be a problem for those of us in traditions which emphasize simple lifestyles and who don't want to go overboard in what we spend on the building and grounds. Think about the barriers or potential barriers experienced by the persons at the beginning of this chapter:

“ Our physical facilities do communicate a message to members and visitors. We want that message to be consistent with what we are attempting to communicate through our words to people.”

- Stairs and steep inclines can be significant problems for persons in wheelchairs, for persons with arthritis, and for persons with conditions such as heart disease, emphysema, and severe asthma.
- Unclear parking instructions can leave people in a state of confusion.
- Not knowing which door to use for a church can be frustrating to those who have not attended before. Churches which have multiple entrances need to have signs which make it clear which entrances are for the sanctuary, for education, and for church offices.

- Although people often do not think to verbalize that the church's physical facilities appear well-maintained, that in fact is an expectation which almost everyone has.

The church is not a building.

We know that. But one or more buildings house the majority of our church services and programs. The welcome communicated by those facilities needs to be just as positive as that communicated by the words of the pastor, other church staff, and members.

A Checklist on Physical Facilities

Check as many of the following statements as apply to the physical facilities of your congregation. Items which you check merit further evaluation by appropriate groups in the congregation.

— **Our sanctuary seats far more people than our average worship attendance.** While people don't want to be crowded, they also feel strange if sitting too far away from other worshipers. They are not likely to greet or to be greeted by persons not sitting near them. If your sanctuary seems to be swallowing your congregation, encourage people to sit more toward the front of the sanctuary or to consider meeting in another part of the church. A change of location works especially well for a contemporary service.

— **Our sanctuary is 80 percent or more full at most worship services.** If that's the case, then you may be getting close to a leveling off of worship attendance. People in general seem reluctant to sit in a sanctuary that is completely full. You may need to consider expanded physical facilities or a move to an additional service of worship.

— **Our sanctuary doesn't provide an especially attractive setting for worship.** This generally means there's nothing wrong with the sanctuary but also nothing unique or uplifting about it. Re-

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member, as in one's own home, it isn't always the amount of money spent on furnishings so much as the feeling of warmth conveyed by the colors and textures which are present.

___ **Our sanctuary and other facilities aren't especially "child friendly."** If children spill something on a pew, chair, or the floor, does it create a significant problem? If so, as opportunities arise, try to increase the comfort level for children and their parents. Use stain resistant fabrics whenever possible.

___ **Altar furnishings in our sanctuary cannot be arranged to accommodate drama or other innovations in worship.** If this is the case, then you must work under some limitations if you want to experiment with more contemporary forms of worship. If your church decides to start a separate contemporary service, then one option may be to hold that service in another part of the church building. Some congregations which have sanctuaries which are much larger than needed for the average worship attendance have taken out a few pews or rows of chairs near the front to make more flexible space available.

___ **The speaker system in our sanctuary doesn't work well, and a hearing-impaired person would have problems knowing what is happening.** If that's the case, then you should investigate upgrading that system. People develop hearing problems for a number of reasons but are especially likely to experience difficulties with advancing age. Our worship settings should be ones in which persons with impaired hearing feel comfortable. That generally means a good speaker system and special units for those who need extra enhancement. Deaf persons, of course, can benefit from signing; and increasing numbers of congregations are making that available.

___ **We couldn't add classes or groups without expanding our Christian education facilities.** If that is the case, then it's

time to take a careful look at available space. Classes and small groups are among the very best ways to help new persons feel welcomed into the life of the congregation and to give those persons opportunity to build relationships with others. It's often easier to accomplish growth by adding class and group opportunities than by trying to increase the numbers in existing groups.

___ **Our Christian education classrooms can't really be described as comfortable and attractive.** If they aren't, then do something about it! They are part of the welcome of your church to present members and to potential members. Some churches spend enormous amounts of money on attractive worship settings but almost completely neglect Christian education facilities. Rooms need to feel bright, warm, and welcoming.

___ **We do not have a comfortable and attractive area for youth to meet.** If that's the case, then you need to involve the young people themselves in the process of upgrading one or more meeting areas. Remember that what is comfortable and welcoming to teenagers may not always be what adults would choose!

___ **We do not have all the ramps, elevators, and/or other accommodations needed for persons with physical handicaps and other mobility or energy limitations to use our facilities.**

Making these changes can be an expensive process, and some churches are tempted not to do so on the basis that "No one who needs a ramp or elevator is coming to our church right now." Such persons are also not likely to start coming unless the accommodations to their needs have been met. There's nothing more unwelcoming than discovering that you can't even get inside a building without the help of one or more other persons.

___ **We need more parking for our congregation.** If so, start developing a strategy for expanding your current parking. That could include asking a nearby business for permission to use its lot when the business is closed and offering to pay for a sign to that effect. It could include utilizing parking ushers or greeters to watch for people who need help finding a parking space. It could include acquiring more property for an expanded or additional parking lot. Hospitality includes not expecting

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The new church building at First Christian Church, Black Mountain, North Carolina, features a round narthex with natural lighting and knotty pine paneling. The spacious narthex is a prime location for people to visit before and after worship.

people to walk too far in order to attend church events. Having to park five blocks away isn't reasonable.

___ **We have plenty of parking, but it isn't paved. We simply park in a dirt or grass lot adjacent to the church.** If that's the case, then you need to consider paving that lot. When it rains, people get their shoes covered with mud if they have to walk through a grass or dirt parking lot. That doesn't make people feel they've been warmly welcomed by the congregation.

___ **The narthex area or entrance to the sanctuary is fairly small and doesn't encourage visiting by those who come.** If this is the case, give careful study to strategies for improvement, including the possible elimination of some pews at the back of the sanctuary or an expansion by construction. The time just before and just after a worship service is a prime opportunity for people to visit with one another. You want a physical setting which encourages those interchanges to take place. Churches which are arranged so that their coffee or fellowship time can be held in the narthex or adjacent to it have larger percentages

of individuals stay for that time and mix with one another as a result.

___ **Our church office facilities feel crowded and/or aren't especially attractive.** The church office is the setting in which many persons experience the hospitality of the church. If the office is too small and feels crowded, people feel uncomfortable and won't stay long. While it may sometimes feel desirable to a busy church secretary or pastor to have people stay only briefly, that isn't the overall impression which the church wants to give.

___ **It's actually a little difficult to find our church if one isn't familiar with the community.** If this is the case, then you need to invest in signs which can help people locate your building. In fact, you need signs showing the way to your church even if it is easy to find! You also need a sign on the church building or in front of the church building which clearly identifies it! Some churches simply assume that everyone will know their name without the necessity of its appearing prominently on the building itself. That's not the kind of welcoming spirit the church wants to convey.

___ **Our church building(s) and grounds don't stand out as especially attractive or inviting.**

If that's the case, then it's time for work to be done! The building needs to communicate that the body of Christ takes pride in the place where it gathers and welcomes others who wish to share in its activities.

The preceding checklist, of course, is not exhaustive. We do hope it will encourage you to think with greater intentionality about what is communicated by your church building(s) and grounds. Just as our residences communicate something of our values and personalities, so also do our church buildings convey a sense of the values and personality of the congregation. Be sure the message is one of welcome!

Excerpts included in this issue come from Widening the Welcome of Your Church, written by Fred Bernhard, pastor of Oakland (Ohio) Church of the Brethren and Steve Clapp, consultant for New Life Ministries and Coordinator for Christian Community. Copies of the book are available from New Life Ministries at 1.800.774.3360.

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