



A Church Extension Planning Guide

Is There a Basement in Your Plan?

by Bill Brown, A.I.A.

Church basements are, surprisingly, hardly any kin at all to the residential variety. Yet they are often mistaken for siblings as building committees think about social uses, bountiful storage, and irreplaceable future expansion.

The major reasons church basements can't be thought of like house basements in scale include: size, structural spans and loads, clearance requirements, safety and building code factors, the number and intensity of users and uses. Consider the following points:

- Residential basements generally have ceiling heights of seven to eight feet; church basements used for social purposes need heights of 10 to 12 feet.
- The size of a useful church basement dictates a substantial and expensive structural system, usually of steel and concrete. Increased wall heights require greater reinforcement and better drainage.
- Residential basements are permitted to have exposed structural, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing services; occupied areas of church basements are not.
- Safety and building codes require that church basements be finished at a stipulated level of "fire separation" from the space

above; this is not typically required in homes.

- A minimum of two enclosed, fire-rated stairways (located in accordance with code guidelines) are necessary for churches; one unenclosed and unprotected wood stairway usually suffices in a home.
- Church basements are often required to have an automatic

sprinkling system as well as regularly spaced perimeter access ports for fire fighting.

- Often a house basement is windowless, but this will hardly do for a place of frequent occupancy.
- Churches should be sensitive in accommodating the physically challenged (ramps, elevator, restroom, etc.).

Editor's Note

Those who work with church building planning groups frequently hear members advocating the inclusion of a basement in the new building. For some reason, probably because the old building had a basement, church people seem to think that basements provide good, practical, and economical space.

Very often the advocate of a basement will state that it is the least costly space we can build. Usually that is based on the typical unfinished residential basement, which costs significantly less than finished living space. But basements for church programs are far less satisfactory and are less economical than grade-level construction.

For many years, Church Extension has discouraged the construction of basements. We suggest that grade-

level rooms are no more costly than basement rooms, and that the basement space is psychologically a poorer environment and is less accessible than a grade level building. Because of accessibility issues, many localities are beginning to require elevator or ramp installations, which further increases the cost of basements.

It is safe to say that when a group chooses a meeting place, it will opt for a room that is light, cheery, and easy to reach. It is not unusual to find adult groups claiming the better rooms and relegating the children to the basement.

We continue to believe that basements are not first-class space for church programming. Therefore, we want to pass along this excellent statement by Bill Brown, A.I.A.

- Heating, cooling, and ventilation are entirely different when one moves from planning a house basement to a church basement.
- Sound isolation, particularly needed under worship space, carries a major price tag.
- Lighting, partitions, doors and hardware, exit signs, fire alarms; the list of items needed to make a church basement habitable is lengthy and expensive.

One should also take time to listen to the laments of parishioners who have such basements in their churches:

- “The space is not accessible to the physically challenged and is difficult for the elderly who have to climb all those stairs.”
- “It’s hard to get supplies down there and refuse out from the kitchen.”
- “It’s becoming a fire-trap.”
- “There’s no sunlight.”
- “The ceilings seem so low and the rooms are cramped.”



- “The lighting’s bad.”
- “Coffee and donuts would be better someplace else not so far off the path between pew and parking lot.”

It comes to this: lower levels under worship spaces can cost as much or more than comparably sized space at grade level and they often end up being used and enjoyed very little. Lower levels make sense (just like

multi-level parking garages make sense) only when land size is small enough and land value is high enough.

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Planning Guide

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