



A Church Extension Planning Guide

Choosing a Site

One of the most important steps in a new church project or in the relocation of an existing church facility is the selection of a proper site. A good site contributes to the attractiveness of the church property, provides both good access and visibility, and will tend to draw people to the church.

A poorly located site can be a serious handicap to the development of a congregation and may be a major cause in the failure of a church to make the most of its opportunities. Furthermore, the purchase of a poor or inadequate site simply because it costs less money may, in the final analysis, result in sheer extravagance on the part of the congregation. This applies also to the acceptance of a site as a gift. Although the gift is offered with the best of intentions, it may prove to be an extravagance the congregation cannot afford if the site does not meet or exceed the best criteria for church site selection.

Location

More often than not the most suitable site is located where land values are rising. Therefore, to buy a fully adequate site at an early date may result in considerable savings on the purchase price. However, it is worth noting that price and quality are closely related and although the church should seek to spend its funds wisely, it should not slip into the trap of false economy by purchasing a site on the basis of cost alone. Consider these important points:

- The site should be easily accessible to the people it serves. Even though members may live some distance away, it is important that location of the church be convenient.

- A site near a shopping center, an elementary, junior or senior high school may be advantageous.

- A corner site is preferred in order to permit maximum exposure and easy movement of cars into and out of parking areas.

- The site should be prominent and on a major street or thoroughfare that is used by residents of the area as they go from home to work or shopping. This does not necessarily mean it should be on a major highway, but easy access from nearby freeways or expressways is important. Streets carrying heavy truck traffic should be avoided if at all possible. Avoid side streets or dead-end streets.

- The site for a new suburban congregation should be on the growing edge of the developing community.

- The site should be located so as not to be blocked from the free flow of traffic by major barriers such as cemeteries, railroad tracks, factories or industrial parks, rivers, and expressways. Note that barriers may be either physical or psychological.

Size

All the land the congregation might need in its future development should be purchased at the beginning. It is usually difficult and expensive to acquire adjacent property after the church has been established and the surrounding land area has been developed. If, after a period of time, the congregation finds it has more land than it needs and can use, the excess land can then be offered for sale. However, it is to be emphasized that the church should sell only that land

which is excess and only when, on the basis of a careful examination and projection of future needs, such excess has been determined to exist.

How large should the church site be? To answer that question in terms of an exact number of acres is difficult because varying conditions and situations may lead to different answers. There is no doubt, however, that the question can be answered in terms of the function that the site must perform in the life of a congregation under current needs and conditions. An adequate site for any congregation must care for the following needs:

- Construction and development of the full master plan for the church building and facilities.

- Provision for landscaping that is both attractive and will afford the proper setting for facilities constructed.

- Provision for off-street parking at a ratio of approximately one parking space for each three seats in the sanctuary, or one space for every two people in attendance at the largest weekly service or program. It is expected that such a ratio will meet or exceed code requirements in most cities, but no higher ratio of seats to parking spaces should be planned, even if the local code may allow it. (A minimum of 300 square feet is needed for one parking space.)

- Provision for adequate space to accomplish all three of the foregoing requirements and at the same time meet all zoning and planning regulations established for the city or the neighborhood.

At this point it is possible to state at least a guideline with respect to the

size of the site, taking into consideration the four requirements previously listed. Surveys have indicated that the minimum site that will satisfy the preceding requirements must contain at least five acres of usable land. Thus, the site that is rough and uneven or that has an unusual shape offering use of only a portion of the site, will need to exceed five acres in order to be adequate. The congregation that needs to build more massively or expansively or that desires to provide areas for recreation and athletic fields, will also need to provide additional land beyond the minimum of five acres. Another rule of thumb is to provide two acres for every 100 people in worship on Sunday morning.

On the other hand, congregations that are located in congested city areas may not find it possible to purchase sites as large as five acres. In these cases and in locations where less than five usable acres are available, there should be continued effort to obtain property to allow for off-street parking, an essential for today's congregations. Certainly, those congregations that find it advisable to relocate but choose to remain in a congested area, should seek to control at least one entire city block of land. Such a site will still make it probable that the church building will be of multilevel construction, and may mean that nearby off-street parking will be needed to supplement that provided on the church site.

Shape

As a general rule, the most desirable church site will be one that is in the shape of either a broad rectangle or a square. Long narrow sites with narrow frontage may greatly restrict the development of the building, as well as the location and convenience of the parking area. Furthermore, when proper or required setback of the building is accomplished on a long narrow site, visibility may be seriously limited by adjoining buildings, trees, and shrubbery.

It is also good to avoid triangular sites or sites that are acutely irregular, unless the amount of land available is large. Although such sites may be picturesque and may lend themselves to unusual types of development, it is to be remembered that their size will generally need to be larger than that of a square or rectangular site and the

resulting price of the total site may be much higher.

Other Considerations

- The terrain should be one which, when all church buildings are placed, will allow for access without the use of steps between the unloading area or the parking lot and the program areas of the building.

- A relatively level site, gently sloping up from the street, is generally preferred.

- The site should be slightly higher than, or at least at the same level as, the surrounding land.

- The site should be well drained and should have soil suitable for the support of a building. Test borings should be taken if there is any question about this matter.

- Public utilities should be in place or available. Water and sewer are most critical since electricity, gas, and telephone lines are generally available. If city sewers are not available, soil should be suitable for septic systems and it should be determined that local codes permit their use.

- All zoning regulations and restrictions should be studied to make sure that, in the first place, church construction is permissible on a particular site, and there are no unusual restrictions in terms of setback, site size, or other factors that would make it difficult or costly for a church to be located in the area.

- If street improvements have not been completed, not only should the assessment of costs for such streets be taken into account, but their width, location, and the permissibility of curb cuts for accessibility to the church driveway and parking area should be determined.

- Regardless of its appearance in its undeveloped state, the site should be one that is capable of being made beautiful once it is developed.

- If the terrain of the site is not level, particularly if there are low areas on the site, or if the condition of the surface of the site is such as to require a large amount of cleaning, the cost of leveling, filling, and otherwise improving the site before building can commence should be taken into consideration.

As soon as the site is purchased, it should be put in a clean and attractive condition and a suitable sign should be

erected pending the actual development of the site and the construction of facilities.

The Site Selection Committee should seek professional help in locating and evaluating sites. Local realtors should be contacted; they know the general area, market values, and available properties. A professional appraisal might also be secured for an impartial evaluation of the market value of the properties.

Counsel Available

Counsel concerning the suitability of specific sites is provided by Church Extension without cost to the congregation or sponsoring unit—this is one of the many services provided by Church Extension. It usually includes a period of orientation to the local situation, a viewing of the general community and the specific properties being considered, a period of time to analyze what has been seen, and then a meeting at which recommendations are made to those people responsible for the purchase.

The "Site Selection Worksheet" will assist in gathering the vital information needed to make a judgment of each property. Copies are available from Church Extension.

Planning Guide



Choosing a Site

Additional Planning Guides addressing a variety of facility planning issues are available from:

Church Extension

P.O. Box 7030

Indianapolis, IN 46207

Phone: 317.635.6500

Fax: 317.635.6534

Web: www.churchextension.org

E-mail: info@churchextension.org

Church 
Extension
Building churches. Touching lives.