



A Church Extension Planning Guide

Confronting the Relocation Issue

Whether churches are willing or reluctant to face the question of relocation, hundreds of Disciples congregations should be asking if they could serve more effectively at a new location. A high percentage of church buildings constructed before the 1950s have too little land and buildings outdated for present programs.

“Should we relocate?” is an important question for congregations examining their mission for the coming decades.

As long as communities grow and change, the location of the congregation’s meeting place may need to change. As long as programs change, the adequacy of sites and buildings will need to be examined. As long as living patterns and expectations of the church’s ministry change, the location of the congregation’s place of work and worship will need to be reevaluated. As long as physical facilities age and deteriorate, the question of replacing them will be raised. The question will not go away for many congregations even though it may be difficult to answer. And many churches will decline in numbers and effectiveness unless they are willing to consider a change.

Why Relocate?

The need for more space is a key issue for congregations with buildings constructed in the era where initially only one or two building lots were required. Times have changed.

Now nearly everyone comes to church by auto (some families in more than one), so adequate space for parking is necessary. Those born after 1945 are also accustomed to higher quality facilities with more space than in the past. New church properties are used for more than Sunday morning worship. They have community ministries, recreation programs, daycare, and weekday schools. For these reasons, one or two building lots are inadequate.

A significant number of congregations must relocate because changes in their immediate neighborhood have diminished their potential to reach new people. Changes in streets and traffic patterns have left some buildings invisible or very difficult to reach. The commercialization of an area may isolate a church building.

In other instances, the cultural differences of the newer residents of an area pose some genuine barriers to reaching them for the particular style of congregation. The greater the cultural and economic differences of the members and the neighborhood residents, the more difficult it is to reach them. While some congregations have been able to broaden their ministries to reach different racial or ethnic groups, others are not able to bridge the differences, and find their membership dwindling. Finding it difficult to reach new people, the congregation believes it must move to a place where there will be persons receptive to their particular approach.

Many of these congregations feel they should be serving their neighborhood. They resolve to reach out to serve their immediate area, but after several years of struggle and decline they admit they have not been effective and decide to move.

Facilities May Hinder Service

Older congregations relocate when they conclude that their facilities are outdated and become a hindrance to service. Old buildings on small sites make it necessary to find a larger site and provide modern buildings to serve effectively. In many instances it is a matter of good stewardship of resources to make such a move. The cost of remodeling old buildings and purchasing additional property, in contrast to building new buildings on an adequate site, makes it economically wiser to do the latter. Even after remodeling old buildings, problems of arrangements and accessibility exist.

In a number of instances congregations have made feasibility studies to compare the cost of relocating versus remaining, and have found the long-term costs of remaining exceed those of relocating.

The desire to serve growing areas is a principal reason many congregations will seek a new place to work and worship. Demographic information will show where people are moving and will beckon older congregations to go with the flow of people movement. There have been situations where congregations have

moved, to find in a few years that they moved to the wrong place because they did not understand the nature of the area to which they moved. Some have moved to areas of anticipated development that never occurred. Therefore, careful research into the demographic changes and housing patterns should be made before a move is made.

The desire for survival is strong in institutions. City congregations that have experienced continued decline over several years or decades may conclude that their only hope of survival is to find a new location providing promise for recapturing a lost vitality. Some of these wait too long. They become weak numerically or are unable to change their patterns of life, and find relocation requires more energy than they have. Unless there is a willingness to reevaluate roles and to find new ways of serving, many of these relocation efforts will not be successful. Survival, along with the hope of reproducing a bygone era, will not guarantee success in relocating.

The necessity for a congregation to reevaluate its mission and role is related to the whole issue of location. What it did in the past may no longer be effective. As it attempts to determine its mission for the present and future, it may conclude that new efforts of ministry should be made in a new location.

Relocation Resistance

As human beings we have built-in resistance to change. Therefore, the proposal to relocate a church's place of worship will inevitably meet initial resistance and disapproval. The first time the question is raised by a leader or outsider, the automatic answer will be "our members want to stay here ... they wouldn't agree to moving." The prospect of relocation is a traumatic issue for a congregation because of the radical changes required.

Add to the resistance to change, the human attachment to "place," and we begin to observe powerful negative feelings aroused by the proposal to go to a new place. The fact that three quarters of Americans

still reside in the state of their birth indicates how attached we are to particular physical places. We move to new places with fear and reluctance. We get attached to buildings and the associations of many years and think that no other church

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building could be this warm or meaningful for our religious life.

Occasionally a congregation has a building that is historically or architecturally treasured by members. The building has become the mission. The congregation must ask where they best perform their mission of reaching people for Christ. The building should not be a deterrent to its service and become the master rather than the servant.

Then there is the sense of loyalty to serve a particular neighborhood or community. The congregation has ministered at a particular place for several generations and believes it would be deserting people and its mission if it moved. However, the church may not really be serving the neighborhood. They may realize that they are simply resisting change rather than effectively serving their real community. Guilt may be the motivation for staying rather than ministry. The fact is that there are few neighborhood churches in our time; most congregations have only a small percentage of their members in the immediate neighborhood. While proximity to one's residence may be a helpful factor in joining a particular congregation, other factors usually outweigh this one.

The financial

cost may be a strong factor in resisting relocation. For the numerically and financially weak congregation, moving may be an insurmountable problem. The cost of land and buildings may be beyond their reach. For most congregations, however, the greatest deterrent to making a move is fear of the unknown, not the absence of resources. In many cases the dollar cost will be the first issue raised to block further discussion, while the underlying reason is the resistance to change. The economic factors are not to be taken lightly, however, and must be seriously considered in assessing the course to be taken.

Often the question is raised, "If we cannot raise our budget, how could we even consider building?" Members do not realize that capital projects are always possible, and far more can be raised for building than most people imagine. Experience shows that most congregations can raise from one to two times their annual operational income in a three-year capital campaign. A few can raise more. In addition, they can borrow from one to two times the amount they raise in a three-year capital campaign with a 10-15 year loan. This would give them from three to five times their annual operational income for building by the end of a three-year capital campaign pledge period.

Relocation Criterion

The reason for a congregation's life is to fulfill its mission as a servant of Christ, reaching out and serving people. Congregations must ask,

Congregations do relocate:

- For more space
- Because community changed
- Due to outdated facilities
- To escape remodeling costs
- To service a growing area
- To survive

“Where can we best be faithful to our mission?” This means the church must first wrestle with the issue of its mission. Each congregation must answer this for itself in the light of its understanding of the responsibility of being a part of the body of Christ.

If the congregation concludes that the mission is being achieved at its present location, then it must focus on ministry in that place, providing the program and physical tools to perform this ministry. On the other hand, if ministry can be more faithfully and effectively performed in another place, it must consider making a change.

The reader might gain the impression that the writer is biased toward the advantages of relocating. This is not the case. If congregations are serving effectively with adequate space and buildings, relocation may be the wrong choice. Remaining at a traditional site, however, may require major changes in program, facilities and attitudes, but this could be the right choice. In some instances inner-city congregations experiencing decline in membership have redefined their mission and role. They changed the focus of their programs and services to meet specific needs of their areas. They realize they may not reproduce the numbers of an earlier time, but they hope to minister in new and needed ways. That best location is one that enables the congregation to serve. That is the principal basis for determining the appropriate site location.

Relocation does not guarantee growth. A congregation will not automatically thrive in a new setting.

Generally, the existing trends of a congregation will continue in a new place. If it is an ingrown, static congregation, it may continue to be. To change, it may need to re-define its goals for ministry and make major shifts in its attitudes and program. Some declining congregations would do better to terminate their life as congregations and pass their re-

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sources on to the establishment of a new congregation elsewhere rather than carrying their old baggage to a new area, seeking to revive yesterday rather than finding new ways to minister.

Here then are some of the key questions a congregation must ask to determine whether or not it should relocate:

- Can we effectively reach and serve people in our current location?
- Will people come to this location?
- Are we visible to the community and to those who come to this community?
- Is it becoming more difficult each year to reach people and attract newcomers?
- Are population shifts or travel patterns making this location a problem?
- Is the place accessible from all parts of our community?
- Do our building and facilities enable us to carry out our ministry?
 - Can we accommodate present and future programs in this facility?
 - Is the building so outdated that it is a deterrent to our program?
 - Is it accessible to physically

challenged people by its arrangement?

- Do we provide adequate parking space that we control and can count on for the eventual future?
- Will it be more costly to obtain additional land and update our building here than it would be to provide new, more functional facilities with adequate land?
- Are we in a place being served by many churches?
- Is there a place where we are more needed?

The Process of Deciding

The decision to relocate is usually the result of a long process that may include diversionary tactics, denial of need, “no” votes, building remodeling, study, discussion, and reconsideration. In a few instances where conditions are critical, the process may take a few years. In most instances the process may extend more than a decade. It is not unusual to find congregations that have courted the idea for 20 years or more before a definite decision is made. Patience and persistent education are essential in all instances.

What happens when a congregation considers relocation? It will vote to either accept or reject a proposal. Typically, the rejection of a proposal to relocate results in remodeling the existing facilities one or possibly two times. This may be followed by further decline or with new leadership, redefinition of role and ministry.

If a decision is made to relocate, a new site is acquired, capital funds raised and the first unit is constructed. It is important for the relocating congregation to concentrate on ministry concerns rather than institutional concerns (land and money). Ten or fifteen years after relocation, the large congregation may average fewer in worship than before unless it has had continuity of pastoral leadership, increased newer lay leadership, provided additional points of entry (new program and group life) for newcomers, and developed contemporary ministry goals.

The more a relocated congregation

Congregations don't relocate:

- Because of reluctance to change
- Due to attachment to place
- Because of neighborhood loyalty
- To avoid expense

works at integrating newer leadership with “greater emphasis on contemporary goals (as opposed to preserving the heritage of the past), the more likely the congregation will be able to assimilate new members,” according to Lyle Schaller. Emphasis on heritage or shared roots must give way to contemporary goals for ministry if growth is to take place.

We need to remember that a “no” vote does not settle the issues or solve the problems. Therefore, an initial rejection of a proposal becomes the first stepping stone for further consideration of the congregation’s strategy. Any change must begin with informed investigation and discussion of the congregation’s mission, program and effectiveness. It does not begin with an opinion survey. Attachment to the place or veneration of an old building will be revealed by such a survey.

Study Is the Key

An informed study should be made by a perceptive, forward-looking representative committee. The study should include conclusions based on a definition of the congregation’s mission—emphasizing contemporary ministry goals with an eye toward the future. The study will include accurate data on demographic changes.

If the committee concludes that the congregation must take some radical steps, such as new buildings or relocation, it will need to have a clear, understandable rationale for its recommendations. Then it will need to allow much time and opportunity

for discussion by the congregation before it begins to call for a vote. (See Church Extension Planning Guide “Getting a ‘Yes’ Vote.”)

If the congregation, after having time to consider the committee’s findings, is still not ready or

For a nominal fee, architectural consultants are also available through Church Extension to help compare the cost of using existing buildings to providing new facilities.

finds new conditions have altered the situation, its leaders must reevaluate the situation, draw back and wait for some time to pass while still keeping the issues before the congregation.

The recommendation to relocate probably should not carry with it the designation of a particular property, though in some instances a particular area might be indicated. If the congregation is asked to consider redefining its mission, which includes the proposal to relocate, that issue should be decided first. Approving a recommendation for a particular site should be taken after the vote to relocate has taken place. There will always be some members who do not like a particular site, so deal with that issue after the congregation has agreed on the necessity to relocate.

Church Extension’s consultants can assist congregations in relocation decisions with counsel at several points. A program study, including

demographics, to determine the suitability of a location and facility for its present and future program is available. Site evaluation counsel is available to assist in the choice of a site. Financial counsel can help the congregation determine its financial capacity. Church Extension also provides professional leadership for conducting capital campaigns at a very modest cost. For a nominal fee, architectural consultants are also available through Church Extension to help compare the cost of using existing buildings to providing new facilities.

After the site is approved, the congregation can proceed toward developing plans for its first unit(s). Most relocating congregations are not able to build at one time all the facilities they may eventually need. Therefore a master site and building plan should be developed. (See Church Extension Planning Guide “Master Plan.”)

Relocation is no guarantee to growth in numbers or changes of congregational effectiveness. However, it may be the doorway to improved ministry if the congregation has clearly determined its mission and goals for the future.



Planning Guide

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

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