



A Church Extension Planning Guide

Discovering the Value of Chairs

By Jerry Ellis, A.I.A.

For some years those who deal with congregations and their attempts to utilize building space for church programs have found pews to be a hindrance to the use of facilities. Several years ago, a Joint Committee on Architecture of the United Methodist Church voted unanimously to recommend that all United Methodist Churches use portable seating (chairs) in lieu of fixed seating (pews).

This recommendation was made for the following reasons:

Flexibility

In the conduct of worship and full use of the space for worship, a great variety of activities take place, such as communion, baptisms, weddings, funerals, reception of members, evangelistic meetings, concerts, choir programs, dramas, dance, community meetings, audio-visuals, and a host of other special services and programs.

Some of these activities have both traditional and contemporary liturgies requiring different space requirements and arrangements. The variety, for example, of liturgies and arrangements for the sacrament of communion is nearly infinite. Weddings or musical programs might require a variety of arrangements.

A flexible seating pattern will allow a congregation to conduct a variety of traditional or contemporary liturgical settings, which fixed seating will prohibit.

Aside from accommodating different kinds of traditional arrangements, flexible seating can also have a very

positive influence over the congregation's attitude. The conventional procedure for designing pews is to put in all the pews the space can hold and optimistically plan for the largest possible attendance. During vacation season and on low attendance Sundays nothing is more depressing than sitting in the back and looking across rows and rows of empty pews.

With chairs the estimated attendance can be multiplied by 120% and only that number of seats can be placed in the space so that for every service during the year the room can always look full and feel well attended (about 80% capacity). When more than 80% of the seats are regularly filled, persons feel hurried to get there in time for a choice seat in the rear. By the time the attendance regularly reaches 85 to 90% of capacity, serious consideration should be given to instituting multiple services. Latecomers get the front rows and congregations usually have a hard time growing past 80% of their seating capacity without multiple services or a bigger building so that the front rows don't have to be filled every Sunday. Not many people like to sit in the front rows. However, this front row gets smaller and it tends to disappear when four rows of chairs or less are used.

Capacity

By using chairs, one can make small changes in aisle widths (front to back and side to side spacing) and modify the total seating capacity. Last Sunday's capacity could be doubled or cut in half by making such adjustments.

In most states, many pew manufacturers and some architects figure pew seating capacity at 18" per person. Erect posture and a comfortable relationship to non-family members on both sides will find that 20" to 24" per person is close seating. Persons usually do not sit erect in pews and it is common to find that pews designed to hold seven seem full when occupied by five.

When a consistently large attendance is anticipated, it is more difficult to realize the full capacity of pews without having some persons feel crowded. It is far easier and less conspicuous to occupy two spaces in a pew than it is to sit on two chairs at the same time. Thus switching from pews to chairs increases the actual seating capacity of a sanctuary. Also, adding chairs to the ends of pews for overflow capacity is more conspicuous than moving chairs closer together to increase capacity and maintain aisle widths.

It is also safer in case of a fire than reducing aisle widths with loose chairs. Most chairs suitable for use in churches come equipped with ganging devices that mechanically interlock rows of chairs together so that in case of fire or panic over-turned loose chairs will not hinder safe passage down clear aisles to an exit. State and local fire laws should be checked for the minimum required aisle widths for a church.

Maintenance

Cleaning the nave floor under fixed pews has always been difficult. This

cleaning problem has also contributed to the use of carpet runners in the aisles—which can be more easily cleaned—with wood, brick or tile floors under the pews, which are usually only dust mopped. With chairs, carpeting or other floor finishes can be extended from wall to wall, simplifying the floor maintenance to one system of care and reducing weekly cleaning efforts and costs. Carpet runners are a tripping hazard for the elderly, for persons wearing bifocal glasses, and for persons with physical disabilities, and should not be used in churches.

Economy

In addition to reducing the floor maintenance costs, chairs have several economic advantages over pews.

1. With the assured capacity of one person per chair, seating for 200 can be guaranteed with 200 chairs. How many extra feet of pew do you need to buy for 200 people?

2. The major economy is not in the chair but in the room. With chairs the sanctuary can be used more than one hour a week, in more than one way and for more than one purpose. In new buildings, chairs can free up a single-purpose sanctuary and make it into a multi-purpose space for worship and other large group functions that would otherwise require a separate space. With chairs, a multi-purpose space can be used for worship, fellowship, and Christian education. One chair in a multi-purpose space can replace the cost of buying a section of pew and the sanctuary building around it for worship, a chair and the fellowship hall around it, and a chair and the classroom space around it, all for the same person who can only be in one of those seats and spaces at any one time.

In new buildings, the use of chairs with the multi-purpose concept for space has reduced the initial cost of construction by as much as 60% over the typical church building plan with individual single purpose spaces for each church program. While the cost to seat a person is roughly the same in a chair as in a pew, the use of chairs and multi-purpose space could easily mean savings of up to a hundred thousand dollars for many new church building programs.

3. The other great economical aspect of chairs is for existing buildings. By replacing existing pews with chairs, an existing sanctuary can become the new fellowship hall or that much needed extra classroom space without a major building program. Those congregations wanting to provide new programs but lacking the space in their existing building have found the nave to be an untapped resource. Vital church programs can be undertaken immediately without waiting for a building addition to be constructed. Then program funds will not be needed to pay for a new facility.

Comfort

Although chairs and pews cost roughly the same per inch, chairs costing around a dollar an inch are far more comfortable than pews of an equivalent price. Many upholstered chairs on the market today can't be equalled for comfort by pews. Both chairs and pews can cost up to \$120 per person but the individual upholstered chair will probably provide the most comfort. The issue of comfort is largely a personal matter, however.

Another aspect of comfort is crowding. With chairs each person has a fixed territory that cannot be encroached upon by trying to squeeze another person into the pew.

If persons are crowded or uncomfortable in a pew, their attention tends to focus on how uncomfortable they are rather than on worship.

Formality

Rigid formalized seating patterns are a recent innovation in Protestant worship. Traditionally, worship has been a more dynamic experience and for centuries everyone stood. Seating of any kind is a limitation to the congregation's ability to participate in the liturgies of worship. The largest cathedrals in Europe and this country are still not cluttered with pews. The easily removed cathedral chair is the contemporary accession to those seeking physical comfort. Chairs that look like pews when ganged together in formalized rows are available for those whose traditions are as historically short as the pew.

If all acts of worship and praise were confined to the chancel and the role of

the congregation was passive, then a rigid formalized seating pattern would be desirable. However, this is not the case. Many liturgies in use today require involvement and participation not possible with a static space. A problem with a symmetrical seating pattern is that the action or focus is somewhere in front of the seats and persons in the seats are passive observers. Perhaps this is why people shun the front seats in formal sanctuaries. When the seating pattern is informal or casual, the action or focus is in the arena where the seats are placed and the persons seated are expected to be involved in that action. Many liturgists today seek to bring worship into reality, and the informal flexible worship setting is necessary to accomplish this end.

While chairs interlocked in a rigid seating pattern are no less formal than rows of pews, they are capable of being informalized and they do give the space for worship the potential for adapting to and enabling any style of liturgy to be conducted.

It is hoped that more congregations will discover the value of chairs and experience a new freedom with an old tradition.

Jerry Ellis specializes in church architecture and served as a special consultant for Church Extension.

Planning Guide

Discovering the Value of Chairs



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.