A Church Extension Planning Guide

The Master Plan

While there is no planning that can anticipate all future changes, there can be planning for orderly building expansion to accommodate growth, change, and serve people effectively. This is master planning. Sites can be planned for the best use of land, the best presentation of the building, and the most efficient traffic patterns.

Many church buildings appear to have been built with no thought to future expansion or possible modification. They may have small sites with no planned parking or outdoor recreation space. There are many older church buildings with additions that are noticeably "add ons," often making a complex circulation pattern within the building. Parking is added wherever land can be purchased, not necessarily related to the principal entrances. Front doors are not used because the parking and circulation patterns have changed since the building was first constructed.

Why is a Master Plan Needed?

Because a new congregation will rarely build all the facilities it will eventually need, a master plan for the first unit and future additions must be developed. Future additions should fit in and complement the first building. Major, costly architectural or structural changes will probably not be necessary if a master plan has been projected. This is also true for established congregations relocating to new and larger sites. Rarely are all anticipated needs built initially. Therefore, a master plan is recommended.

Even congregations remodeling or building additions to the older building should take a comprehensive look at the future, and attempt to have a total view of building requirements for the present and the future. Lack of a comprehensive view or piecemeal planning can cause congregations to undo—at great financial and emotional cost—what was done earlier because there was no master plan for building and site development.

Master Plans Do Change

This is not to say a master plan will not be modified. Rarely is an original master plan completed without modifications. Changing program requirements, growth projections that fail to materialize as anticipated, and other unforeseen factors will inevitably call for modification of a master plan. But a well-conceived, professionally planned building and site will help the congregation avoid many of the problems facing the church built with no thought for the future. Neither should a congregation be so wedded to a master plan that members feel it is wrong to change the concept if conditions arise that would make changes necessary to serve the congregation's program.

A master plan for building development and site use is essential for good stewardship and functional efficiency. It is an essential step for providing adequate facilities. One architect stated it this way: "The ultimate goal of a master plan is to provide a workable homogeneous building complex that works well and gives an appearance of a total design."

What Should Be Included?

The master plan for the building should show the location and relationship of all program space areas, and how additional units may be added without major structural changes. Unless the church is planning to build all required space initially, detailed construction drawings would not be made for future projected buildings. A simple line drawing showing a general layout for future units would be made by the architect.

Detailed plans for future construction should not be undertaken since this is costly work. Furthermore, it may make a congregation feel it must build the original scheme to justify its investment. Modifications will be made as future units are built. For most new congregations and many relocating congregations, buildings are constructed in two, three, or more phases. Construction drawings would be produced only for the phase to be built immediately.

Anticipating the Future

The master plan will show how good circulation will be retained as additions are built and how buildings will be used during the various stages of

development. It will assure continuity and cohesiveness of style, but will also allow for modifications and unexpected changes. It will show all potential units and the logical progression from one phase to another. Construction should allow for ease of modification and keep options open for adaptation to changing program requirements.

Master planning requires serious study and projections of future needs. The planning committee must try to anticipate growth, community changes, and program development. It should prepare a written statement showing all program needs for worship, education, administration, fellowship, recreation, community service, and parking requirements.

What Must Be Included in the Site Plan?

Professional architectural assistance is essential in developing a master plan and will take into consideration how the site is to be used. A master site plan would take into consideration:

- Local zoning and setback requirements;
- The buildings and their orientation for accessibility, visibility, and energy conservation;
- Parking and driveway location;
- Sheltered unloading area at the principal entrance;
- Sidewalks and approaches to the building;
- Landscaping;
- Protective play areas for children; and
- Recreation and other special-use areas.

Orientation of Buildings

The placement of first and future units on the site should be planned by an architect. The placement should enhance visibility of the buildings from roadways—an extremely important factor. Even when a first unit of modest size is planned, it should be clearly identifiable and visible from streets. There is often the temptation to develop an ambitious master plan placing the small first unit at the rear of the site, therefore, making it invisible to passersby. While the first unit may not occupy the most visible portion of a site, it should be easily identified.

Energy Conservation

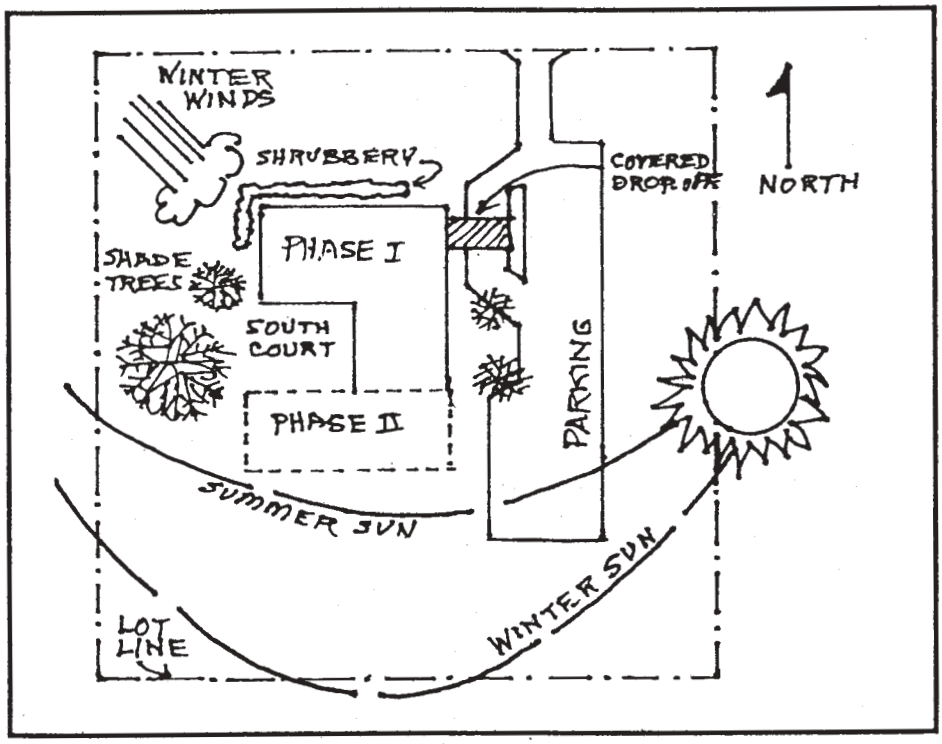
The placement on the site for the best energy conservation is important to avoid high energy costs. Use of the sun in winter, shading from the sun in summer, protection from winter winds, and use of summer breezes can be planned. Terrain and earth berms can be used for economy of energy. Trees, shrubs, and landscaping can be planned to protect from wind and sun. Natural light can be used to advantage or to distraction of the building. The location of the sun and the time of day the buildings are used are generally considerations in this orientation.

Landscaping

Too often budget items for landscaping are neglected, and no plans are made for enhancing the property with a professionally planned lawn and grounds scheme. A master plan for landscaping should be made initially, even if funds are not available. This would assure the church having the right kind of shrubs, trees, and flowers as the congregation develops its financial resources.

Landscape architecture is to exterior space what architecture is to interior space. Correct landscaping can balance and join structures to the site. It can direct and provide focus for various areas, give proper direction to circulation patterns and entrances. Landscape architecture provides essential functional uses of the site.

Landscape materials can be used as protection from erosion and provide energy conservation. Deciduous trees could be planted on the south for solar energy control in the summer while allowing the sun's warmth in the winter. Evergreen plantings on the northern side of the building will aid in buffering winter north winds. Plantings and landscaped berms can also muffle sounds of traffic and other disturbing noises. Appropriate plantings will enhance the aesthetic quality of the site and buildings.



Effective master planning will help assure that site characteristics will be used to achieve cost effectiveness and energy efficiency in the placement of buildings, as well as presenting the most aesthetically pleasing arrangement of facilities to the surrounding community.

Parking and Driveways

The driveway should be planned so the principal entrance is clearly identified with some major parking areas in full view of the passersby. Access from parking to the principal entrance should not be an obstacle course. It should be developed as a friendly meeting area for members. At least one parking space for every two persons attending worship is recommended. Provision for adequate off-street parking is a major consideration in site development. (See Church Extension Planning Guide: "Parking for Your Church.")

Sheltered Unloading Areas

In areas where there is moderate to frequent precipitation, a covered unloading zone should be provided at the principal entrance. This entrance should be planned to give access to all functional areas of the building. It should be large enough to accommodate more than one car at a time or an additional traffic lane should be provided. Otherwise, bottlenecks will develop during inclement weather.

Sidewalks and Approaches

While few people walk to church in most communities, many church sites have sidewalks developed on the streets bordering the church grounds. Access needs to be planned for persons who will park on streets or parking areas not on the church property.

Protected Play Areas

These areas should be adjacent to the building and preferably to the rooms used by the children. They should not be near regular traffic. A driveway or parking area should not be crossed to reach the play area. A fence or hedge can be provided to confine small children to the area. Remember to include play equipment in the planning. This is of particular importance for congregations who plan or sponsor weekday children's programs.

Recreation and Other Special Uses

Depending on the size of the site, areas for softball, basketball, volleyball, outdoor picnics, and cooking can be provided. They should be at some distance from the building and possibly screened by landscaping. A large part of the parking area will be unused during the week, permitting space to be used for activities requiring a hard surface. This area could be chained off for protection of players. Basketball goal posts and volleyball net posts might be permanently placed on parking lot driveway strips. Roller skating areas and bicycle courses could also be developed.

The first unit should have the appearance of a completed building—something in which the congregation can take pride.

What to Build First?

Every new congregation and many relocating congregations cannot erect all the needed buildings at one time—the reason we need a master plan. The major issue is, "What do we build first?" There is no one right answer. Major factors determining what is built first will be priorities in program requirements and the building budget.

A basic principle is to plan a balance of space to provide for all program areas. This means that the space will be allocated according to the numbers of persons and type of programs anticipated. One program phase should not be overbuilt while another program phase suffers from inadequate space. This will probably require compromises utilizing space for several program activities.

Provide for Various Needs

Most congregations normally think of adequate worship space as a priority. However, for new congregations restricted by limited resources and the uncertainty of future worship requirements, this becomes a difficult choice. They will usually build one large room to be utilized for worship and fellowship initially. Later it may become a fellowship and recreation room. This, with some educational and administrative space, would be the first unit space caring for all of the program phases.

If the total building budget is used for worship space, facilities will be out of balance unless other facilities nearby are available for education, fellowship, and administrative uses. There is some practical and psychological wisdom in making the worship unit, often the most expensive type of space, the final phase of construction at a time the congregation has sufficient size and financial strength.

Occasionally, a congregation can build a first unit, including a worship room and a fellowship area, subdivided by movable screens or walls for class use. There will still need to be provision for separate rooms for preschoolers and younger children whose furnishings cannot easily be moved weekly.

A large narthex or concourse could be developed as a central core to the first phase. This could serve as a fellowship area directly adjacent to the worship area.

Again, it is essential that the first phase provide usable program space for all areas of church life, even if much of the area is multipurpose space. Rooms planned for both worship and fellowship need not be barren and unattractive. They can be beautiful and usable for more than one function. Attractive and comfortable movable seating is available and offers more flexibility for worship than fixed seating which would not be acceptable in a multipurpose room. (See Church Extension's Planning Guide: "Discovering the Value of Chairs.")

It is also essential that the first unit be visible and identifiable on the site regardless of the ultimate plan which has been conceived. The first unit should have the appearance of a completed building—something in which the congregation can take pride.

Two Levels or One?

Many building committee members begin with the assumption that a two-level building is proper and more economical than grade-level construction. When developing a master plan for new buildings, planners should not be misled by the myth that basements provide economical and practical space for church programs. This simply is not true!

In addition to the sentiment that basements are to be built "because we always did it that way" is a common argument that basement space is economical space. This may be true for unfinished residential basements but it is not the case for church buildings.

With the prevailing slab construction it can be demonstrated that the same amount of usable space can be built as economically on grade level as two-level buildings, thus avoiding the problem of accessibility and the darker atmospheres of basement space.

Two-level construction requires expensive space for stairwells. A stairwell and elevator will consume as much space as a moderate size classroom. Accessible toilet facilities should be placed on both levels and this additional expensive plumbing may not be required if the building is all on one level. While it is often stated that two-level construction conserves roof area, the additional structural support for two levels should offset the cost of roofing on the one level. Roofing costs are one of the less expensive elements in building. Heating and cooling of single-level buildings can be done as economically as in two-level buildings.

Putting aside economics, there are other disadvantages to basement space or second-story space for church building. First, there is the barrier to accessibility for the very young, the elderly and those with physical disabilities. With increasing numbers of persons over the age of 65, we need to work toward eliminating barriers, not building them into our church structures. And, not all persons with physical disabilities are over 65. Physical disabilities occur at all age levels! Most building codes for public buildings require access either by grade level entrances or elevators where there is more than one level.

Furthermore, children should have bright, naturally lit rooms. Most, if not all, building codes prohibit the use of space in basements or second story for daycare programs or weekday preschool programs.

Noise can be a problem with two-level construction unless costly methods are used to deaden the noise from the floor above.

In addition to being more accessible, single-story construction provides more flexibility for planning and using space. With two levels, one level must follow the pattern of the other level. A church needs a variety in room sizes, not repetitious sizes like a hotel. The lower level will require columns and support structures that will affect the flexibility of arrangement and usage.

Rooms on the same level can be more easily used in connection with other rooms. It is also more economical to expand single-level construction, one room at a time if necessary. Two levels dictate that we need to add two floors with expansion work. One-level construction can be built with a minimum of load-bearing walls. In general, fewer restrooms and sanitary facilities will be required in the one-story building.

There are two exceptions to the case for single-level construction, however. If the terrain provides a slope that will allow grade-level entrances on both levels and an abundance of outdoor lighting for both levels, it may be economically advantageous to build on two levels. The other exception is where there is limited land space, such as a downtown church, where land is unavailable. In this case, multi-level buildings may be essential to accommodate the church's program.

The Need for Adequate Planning

One can readily see that professional and skilled architectural help is needed for master planning and building design. It is often lamented that the architect's service is too expensive, so a builder or contractor is asked to design a first unit and site plan. This is a costly mistake since the congregation will be investing hundreds of thousands of dollars in the building that may be used for a half century or more.

The most expensive route is to cut costs by not employing the best architect available. Mistakes can be costly to correct and irritating to live with over a long period of time, and most errors can be avoided with skilled planning. The aim is to serve people in the best possible way and the best in skilled planning is required to accomplish this.

The architect cannot do all of the work alone. A knowledgeable, dedicated committee of members must spend sufficient time to define the mission and program of the congregation and think through the theological and practical implications for space to house the congregation's program.

Assistance Available

Church Extension has resources and staff available to assist congregations in the proper study prior to developing a master plan.

Planning Guide

The Master Plan

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

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