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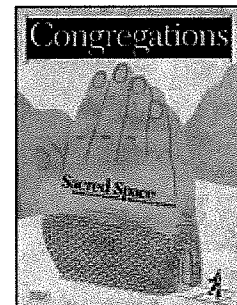
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CONGREGATIONS

Spring 2003

Right-Sizing Your Space or Right-Sizing Your Vision?

"Do you provide architectural services and can you help us 'right-size' our church facilities?" This question was posed to the Alban Institute by an inquiring congregation. While Alban typically has not provided such services, the Institute invited Roger L. Patterson, AIA, an architect with more than 40 years' experience in designing and evaluating church facilities, to join the staff for this and future consultations on this subject.



What follows is an overview of a congregational study that focused on two primary presenting issues: the congregation's current ministry and the facilities that house its ministry. Many in the congregation believed that the facilities were substantially oversized for the current needs of the congregation, hindering its mission and aggravating its financial stress. At issue are the future direction of the congregation's ministry and the stewardship of its resources. The congregation is located on a "campus" made up of six buildings, each adjacent, but two separated from the others by a residential street. The facilities include a large sanctuary and attached education building with offices; a substantial memorial chapel; and a renovated warehouse, which contains the church's nursery school and an expansive storage area and workshop.

Some in the congregation hoped that we could provide expertise to help them determine what portion of the facilities could be sold off as a cost-cutting measure. They referred to this as "right-sizing" the facilities. The strategic question from the consultants' point of view was, "Is this an issue of 'right-sizing' the facilities, or is it a need the congregation has for 'right-sizing' its vision?" Our suggestion was that the congregation make a more complete assessment of the facilities in relation to current and future needs for ministry. The session (the administrative body) of this Presbyterian congregation agreed.

Overview of Current Circumstances

Over the past 20 years this congregation has seen a steady membership decline from a peak of 1,887 members in 1982 to a current active membership of 750. This decline, coupled with ever-increasing ongoing costs for maintenance, utilities, and improvements, has created significant stress on congregational finances. In addition to these concerns, the congregation is in the midst of a search process for a senior minister.

Demographics of the area surrounding the congregation indicate a rapidly changing and changed community. An increasing number of Hispanic American, African American, Asian American, and Caribbean populations reside in the ministry area of the church. Those interviewed noted that as older, long-term white residents vacate homes in the area, ethnic and younger families are replacing them. The local school enrollment figures confirm that this demographic shift has been underway for some time.

The congregation is blessed with a wide range of gifted members and leaders. Members demonstrate a deep commitment to the church; many of them desire a new focus. A critical mass of good will is evident; if cultivated, it can be an asset for the future.

Making the adjustment to the changing demographic reality is, however, one of the most challenging any congregation can face. It calls for the reordering of the congregation's vision, a commitment to cultural diversity, a tolerance for change, well-planned leadership training, and a focused use of resources to reach a community in transition.

Our Process

We at Alban proposed a two-day data-gathering process of interviews, focus groups, and review of facilities on our first visit. Our second visit spanned a weekend two months after the first visit. The second visit centered on presenting our report to the session on Friday evening, meeting in focus groups on Saturday, and finally holding a congregational meeting after worship on Sunday. Before our first on-site visit, we requested that the session provide certain information:

- Most recent annual reports of the congregation's program of ministry.
- Membership and attendance records for the last 10 years.
- A profile of giving for the same period.
- A map indicating the residential location of each member.
- School enrollment statistics for each school in the ministry area, by grade and ethnicity, for the most recent five-year period.
- Photographs of the interior and exterior of the facilities and any existing blueprints or building plans.

During our visit, we conducted prearranged interviews and focus groups, whose participants were representative of the makeup of the congregation. We asked the session to organize the focus groups in a way that invited members to sign up. Interviews were focused on members of the session and staff. We met with staff, toured the facilities, received an overview of the current use of space, and toured much of the surrounding community. Among the questions we raised during the interviews and focus groups:

- "Reflecting on the history of the congregation, what would you say were the critical events or turning points in its story?"
- "What recent changes have you observed in the life of the congregation and larger community that have presented either challenges or opportunities for ministry?"
- "Who are the people this congregation needs to reach?"
- "What is this congregation called to be and do?"
- "What is your vision for the future of the congregation, and what are the constraints and assets in realizing this vision?"
- "Describe why someone looking for a faith community would choose to join this one."

What We Heard

What emerged from these conversations were dominant themes that bear heavily on the story of the congregation. Key among these was the question, "Does this congregation want to grow?" This issue is fundamental for the congregation in light of the cultural transition taking place in the larger community. To grow, this congregation will need to make significant changes in the focus of its ministry, and reach the diverse population that now characterizes the neighborhood.

Evident from these conversations was the perception that the congregation has no commonly held sense of identity and no shared vision. Without this most essential self-understanding, little basis can exist for planning a strategic direction for the future of the congregation. Some participants pointed to the need for deepening the spiritual life of the congregation, and noted that to do so would be to support efforts to develop a much-needed shared vision for the future.

We also heard concerns about an outdated administrative structure, poor communication between leaders and

congregants, unresolved conflicts, a lack of enthusiastic outreach through existing programs, and the lack of programs for those in the 30-to-50 age group. We commented on this lack of outreach as an indication of ambivalence about needed change in the ministry of the congregation.

Specifically, the congregation provides a high-quality nursery school for 140 children. This program has little or no relationship to the ongoing life of the congregation. The congregation also offers a "parents' morning out" program, which maintains a waiting list. This program also operates on a parallel track, rather than being an integral part of congregational life. Leaders are aware that this program is a significant contact point for potential new members, yet no plan is in place for extending hospitality to the families of these children.

Noted throughout our visit were concerns about the criteria that would form the basis for decision-making on the disposition of facilities. Issues of "right-sizing" the facilities—of poor use of space and needed improvements, including the addition of an elevator—were expressed by many, but without consensus.

Architectural Considerations

When consulting with a congregation about members' primary concern or perceived problem with the church building, it is important to have access to all facilities and have a detailed list of the programs of ministry to be carried out. The fundamental consideration: "How do the church buildings and the setting in which they are located make ministry more effective or constrain it?" In overview, church buildings that are the most adequate for ministry will enable equal program opportunities for worship, fellowship, and education in either dedicated or multipurpose space. Multipurpose use and scheduling can provide the balance in programming when equal space is not available.

In reviewing broader considerations about facilities, it is helpful to note the relationship between the parking area and the entrance to the church most often used by members. Is this "real" main entrance clearly marked? Is it attractive and inviting? Is there adequate signage to direct people from the parking area to this most-used entrance? For this congregation, we recommended "dressing up" the actual main entrance through the use of an attractive awning, the positioning of colorful flags, and the use of large planters. It is often the case that the front door of the church is not the main entrance. When the most-used entrance is not clearly marked, visitors may quickly feel confused and unwelcome.

Among the issues raised with us was a concern that the sanctuary was too large for current worship attendance. In a sanctuary that seats more than 900, but with a worship attendance of about 300 scattered amid the 26 rows of pews, any sense of community or intimacy is lost. The sanctuary is a wonderful space with beautiful stained-glass windows. The building and windows were awarded national honors for design at the time they were built in the late 1960s.

The challenge, from an architectural point of view, was to discover how best to create "celebration space" without compromising the integrity of the original design, and to promote a sense of community in worship with the least disruption and expense. It was also important that the space accommodate different styles of worship in light of the diverse nature of the community.

The chancel is in the center of the space between the transepts (see sketches). Each of the two transepts seats about 100 in eight rows of pews. Dominating the space is a large pulpit with a high, flamboyant, jack-in-the-pulpit back. To achieve flexibility in worship, the pulpit would need to be minimized and made moveable. The chancel floor is carpeted, with a marble border and marble steps. We recommended that the carpet be removed and replaced with hard wood to improve the quality of acoustics throughout the worship space. The original design of the sanctuary placed the choir in the balcony at the back of the nave. This arrangement reflected a prevailing view at the time of construction—that the choir should be heard but not seen. A more contemporary view is that the choir is part of the worship leadership and that it should be placed in the south transept along with the organ console. Church architects and some church traditions assume that the chancel is always located at the east end of the church (even if this "liturgical east" does not reflect the actual siting of the building) We recommended removing the transept pews and seating the choir in chairs in the south transept. Having chairs rather than pews in the north transept as well would

afford maximum flexibility, making the space available for small weddings, Bible study, and informal worship settings.

Studying the options for seating in the nave and transepts resulted in three potential scenarios. First was to remove all the pews and replace them with comfortable chairs. A second option was to angle the first ten rows of pews in a herringbone pattern and remove the next five rows to create a wide aisle separating the unused pews at the rear. Finally—the option we recommended—was to angle the first ten rows of pews in a herringbone pattern and to remove all other pews. This solution eliminates the problem of unused pews and creates an open space for gathering before and after worship. During high seasons of attendance, chairs could be added to accommodate more worshipers. Further, we recommended that the impressive baptismal font, now located in the chancel, be placed at the center of the open space and be the focal point of attention for those entering the worship space. This relocation would allow the congregation to gather around the font during baptisms and during the singing of the opening hymn before worship. Starting the worship service by gathering and singing in this new space should help create a new informality for worship. The addition of attractive displays of paintings, sculpture, and colorful children's art, on moveable displays, would enhance the sense of this area as truly celebration space.

Other Recommendations

Among other recommendations we proposed:

- That the congregation frame its ministry by identifying itself as a regional congregation with broad appeal and a diversity of programs.
- That the session clarify the behavioral norms needed to advance its work and develop a more cohesive leadership team.
- That the changes recommended in the worship space be made as soon as possible.
- That a "visioning" and strategic-planning process be initiated in the next six months and that the congregation explore its identity in light of its changed reality.
- That once the vision for ministry is clear and endorsed by the congregation, then decisions about facilities and the future use of space should be undertaken.
- That the relationship linking the nursery school and the "parents' morning out" to the life of the congregation be strengthened by immediately moving to celebrate and support this work.
- That current programs be reviewed. Expanding the parents' morning out program from three to five days a week should be explored in light of the waiting list for this program. Building a future youth program should begin by developing a strong elementary-age program in the short term. Programs for those in the 30-to-50 age group should be considered as well.
- That a plan of leadership training be developed to promote a deeper understanding of the dynamics of change, to provide tools for managing conflict and developing behavioral norms, and to expand capacity for growing a more culturally inclusive community.

A sense of urgency should be present in this congregation for the process of redevelopment. In our view, this congregation is at a pivotal point in its history. Either it will commit to doing the work necessary to ensure its future, or it will continue to decline. The time to map a new course for the future is now. The window of opportunity will eventually close. If this congregation can work at "right-sizing" its vision, of moving from passive tolerance of its changing world to an active embrace of it, congregants' future ministry will energize their faith journey. This congregation still has the strength and resources to create a vital future, but it must be a future based on changing realities, not on a recreated past.

Postscript

The recommendations from our report are now being studied and carried out. We are still working in an advisory role with this congregation, encouraging and supporting the work it needs to do.

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