



CHAPTER 10

BUILDINGS: WHERE *SHOULD* YOU MEET?

The first Christians met in homes and in public spaces. Today, as the Church rapidly multiplies itself, believers still congregate in nontraditional places. Some groups begin in homes, others in larger structures. But leaders in every church, if they want to see their congregation grow, must understand real estate and its effects on congregational life.

We started the first Hope Chapel in an empty church building. It was designed to hold 66 people. We stretched the space to fit more than 200 by moving walls. We seated people on the floor, in the aisles and outside, where they had to look through the windows to see the service. We also added services

in a nearby community center, conducted children's ministries at a nearby pre-school, utilized a converted garage and found a way to operate in a large steel shed. Later we obtained a long-vacant bowling alley that became our permanent headquarters. The bowling alley enabled our attendance to mushroom into the thousands.

By contrast, we started Hope Chapel Kaneohe Bay on the beach in Kailua. Over the years, we operated in several locations—including a community center, two public schools and three office buildings—before we obtained a permanent worship location.

Both original spots had their benefits as well as distractions. The church building in California was available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and offered great storage. Furthermore, we owned it, so we paid no rent. But it had only seven parking spaces—a limitation that created massive problems. The beach in Hawaii was exquisite (once voted most beautiful in the world), had great parking and featured tremendous amenities. The biggest problem was that we had no permit. There was a policeman who looked askance at us each week as he drove through the parking lot two-thirds of the way through my message. However, if I had to choose one place I have started a church over all others, I would opt for the beach. The sandy, windblown sanctuary gets my vote because it was temporary. We easily abandoned it for better quarters, moving five times before we bought a more permanent location. The church building in California limited our thinking, hence our growth. We remained chained to it for five years.

Flexible thinking and multiple locations will free you to grow at God's pace. Tying yourself down to one spot only creates a growth-restricting obstacle. After the experience on the beach in Hawaii, I became aware of the need for church leaders to keep their minds open regarding meeting facilities.

At Hope Chapel, as a way of freeing our concerns from building-related restrictions, we devised a very large church campus. In a notebook we placed photographs and descriptions of all the locations available to us for ancillary church meetings, whether we owned them, had to rent them or could use them free of charge. Our extended campus included three community centers, a Catholic seminary, various hotels and camps, four public schools and many great homes—if we had owned it all it would have been worth more than a quarter of a billion dollars. We rejoiced that our heavenly Father made so many of His resources available to us at such a low cost and virtually on demand. But we would not have had so many possibilities if we had restricted our activities to a traditional church campus.

My point is that buildings shape *your* thinking. Most often they restrict rather than liberate you. Try to broaden your perspective as we look at potential meeting sites for your new congregation.

THERE ARE UPSIDES TO TEMPORARY SPACE

The church I pastor has relocated to “permanent quarters.” However, for us it is just our *current* location. Although we believe our new campus is a gift from God, we are already trying to expand our activities onto an adjacent college campus. To do less would build a box around the future growth and flexibility of our church.

There are several reasons why every church—especially a new plant—should prefer temporary facilities.

It Allows Flexibility

Viewing a church campus as permanent is very restrictive. Nothing is permanent except God Himself. Your campus is not

really permanent because you will eventually outgrow it, or your people may move to another neighborhood and you may decide to follow them. If you view your location as permanent, the blessing it provides could turn into a curse. If you see your facility as your *current temporary location*, you maintain the mental ability to grow beyond its boundaries or move where the harvest is ripest.

It Eliminates Major Capital Outlay

If you opt for a series of temporary locations, you will not face high rental payments until you have a larger congregation and can afford to pay them.

Some denominations mortgage a piece of property at the outset of a church plant. Although those groups have good intentions, they often unwittingly saddle young churches with expensive real estate. As a result, they unintentionally leverage the church plant against growth.

I advise church planters to grow a congregation without owning land or buildings for at least five years. Try to rent space for a *few hours per week* rather than leasing property that you will pay for 24 hours per day, seven days a week. Obtain space to hold twice as many people as you expect in the next three months. Hold multiple services so you get full use of your rent money. We hold five celebration services in our church each weekend and may have expanded to six by the time this book is published. I would not dream of starting a church without at least two meetings on Sunday morning, because it would be poor stewardship of real estate.

The goal here is to use the church's funds efficiently. Renting space is an operational cost, which you want to limit. As I noted before, you should spend a greater amount of money on outreach.

It Reduces Distractions

Too many church planters get hung up on the goal of finding the *ultimate* building. When you put off the purchase of property for

five years, you do not have to handle major real-estate distractions at a time when you need to be building people. A property acquisition, construction or remodeling program always shifts the pastor and core group's focus away from evangelism and discipleship.

If you delay the acquisition of property, you will not be distracted by real estate details, but you will still think about growth and your eventual physical needs. Ironically, you probably will discover a wonderful location, but at a horrible time. The building I found just a few weeks after planting Hope Chapel in California eventually became ours. Fortunately, however, we did not attempt to buy the place for more than three years. We did pray all along and we occupied it in our fifth year. Had we spent those first three years pursuing that facility, we would have lost momentum.

Helpful Hint: When you find your "perfect" building, put it out of your mind and concentrate on the work at hand. This advice applies to the purchase of your personal residence as well. Rent for the first year or two. Do not allow yourself to get hung up on a remodeling project or new home purchase while you are planting a church. If you do that you will never have enough time for ministry, let alone your family.

It Keeps Expectations in Check

A series of rented facilities keeps members much happier than a semi-permanent location. This is because short-term facilities *feel* temporary. This is similar to the feeling you get on a camping trip. When pitching a tent in the great outdoors, you do not expect a nicely-tiled bathroom or plush carpet. Instead you accept basic services with a sense of thanksgiving. Campers seldom engage in turf wars within their own campsites. They know that whatever boundaries they might tack down will change sooner rather than later.

Church members come with expectations, especially the ones who have been involved in another church. They can place enormous demands on leadership. Temporary facilities temper these expectations. Maintain the camping aura and your people will be less demanding of the service aspects of ministry and more willing to contribute time and energy to providing those services. They will appreciate little niceties rather than complain about the color of the walls. They will be less concerned over ownership of space and more willing to share tools and resources. The time you spend in rented quarters will eventually glow in your memory as the “good old days when we all really pulled together.” Do not fight the good times while you live in them.

It Provides Easy Entry into Ministry

When you operate a portable church in a temporary facility, you need a huge workforce. This is a blessing. One of the downsides of my church's move to our own campus is the loss of available jobs that easily engage and involve newcomers. When we met in public schools we enjoyed recruiting new, sometimes non-Christian people to the task of setting up and tearing down our operation each week. As simple an act as folding chairs at the end of the service brought first-timers into action. We would recruit for other tasks among those who helped without asking. Most of those we invited to serve were pleased that they had been invited onto the team. Virtually all of our current pastoral team members say they first got involved in ministry by helping stack chairs at the end of a service.

YOU CAN OPERATE A RENT-FREE OFFICE

When you launch your church you will be looking for ways to keep costs down. With this in mind, it is appropriate and useful

to ask questions that most new pastors would never have asked in past years. Do you need a centralized location? Are there ways you can organize, communicate, operate and lead your church without the traditional pastor office?

“The office” means different things to different people, but if you are creative you can meet your needs in other, low-cost ways.

An Office Full of Frills Often Kills

Office space can become a status symbol in any field. I once heard a stock analyst being interviewed on television. He suggested that the amount of money spent on office space is a predictor of success or failure in a start-up business. He said that the fancier the office, the more likely the failure. Lean operations do not include marble floors and carpeted walls. Many of the failed dotcoms of the 1990s underscored the stock analyst’s observation. Amazon.com, on the other hand, started in a garage using unframed doors as desktops. Hewlett-Packard also started in a garage. The same principle applies to a church plant.

A Virtual Office Keeps You Connected

Pastors, paid staff members and volunteer staff can better stay in touch if you create a virtual office.

Cell phones and e-mail are great communication tools. An unadvertised website with simple passwords for entry can provide centralized files for all but sensitive financial information. A coffee shop is a great place to do counseling. Large homes provide wonderful meeting spaces. You can collect mail through a commercial post-office box.

An office provides four basic functions: communications, storage, meeting space and a mailbox. Find a way to supply each function at no cost, and you have created a virtual office.

A Headquarters Gives You a Place to Gather

There is a fifth function an office provides, although it is not crucial at the beginning of your church life. I call it the “clubhouse effect.” Your people will eventually want a place that they can view as headquarters for your operation. The primary need served is the ability for them to drop by and see someone they know. At this point, the office begins to give a sense of permanence to a new congregation. Try to delay that fifth function as long as possible.

Helpful Hint: A well-developed and interactive website can function as a clubhouse for a while. Spend your money on technology rather than rent for as long as you can. The best technology is still cheaper than monthly payments to a landlord. It is also more flexible.

Someone Else’s Office Has a Desk You Can Fill

When you grow—which every successful church plant should do—you will eventually need rented office space. One pastor I know saves money by subletting space in an office belonging to a member of the church which launched him. He spends \$200 per month for a really nice setup. He has no secretary, but he enjoys the support of the owner’s receptionist who collects his mail and answers basic questions about his whereabouts. He is also able to take advantage of the supply network surrounding the owner’s business. The people he rents from already know the best places to buy goods and services. Finally, he has evangelized several of the people working in that office and thus has been growing his church.

There are many businesses with unused office space. Often the owners will welcome a few extra dollars each month. If I were planting a church, I would start with realtors. Real-estate offices *often* contain a few empty desks. This is because the real-estate

market fluctuates in fairly regular cycles. Brokers cannot afford to move between large and small quarters at every whim of the market. Real-estate offices are also designed around the needs of on-site interaction with clients. This translates into nice reception areas and small conference rooms.

Until you are forced into a relationship with a traditional landlord, look for every way to reduce or eliminate real estate costs. For most churches this is the second-highest expense after salaries.

LOCATION IS EVERYTHING

The three most important words you can memorize when renting meeting space are "location, location and location." Location is everything to the prospective church member. The place must help meet his or her needs. A church's location should be accessible, adequate in size, equipped with surplus parking and have a pleasant ambience.

Look for an Accessible Site

A pastor I know once told me that people will drive 50 miles to church, but they will not pass through more than 12 stoplights. I am not sure how scientific of an observation he made. However, I do know that most large churches are located near freeways. I also know that the big downtown churches of the last century lost many members even after they added adequate parking. They were too far from the suburbs. You must locate your church where it is easy to find and easy to access.

Consider the Size of Your Space

I once talked with a man in a rural community who wanted to move a congregation from a living room to an oversized double garage. He assured me that the church would remodel the garage

to make it feel as pleasant as the living room. His vision was simply too small.

First, it is always easy to add 100 percent more space to your facility by simply adding a second (or third) weekend service. I can still remember driving home from a meeting with Dr. Gene A. Getz when he described the early growth of the Fellowship Bible Churches in Texas. They held services on Friday evenings, Sunday mornings, Sunday afternoons and Sunday evenings. Each meeting was two hours long, and they held a coffee break between the worship and the teaching. As I drove I rejoiced that Getz had given me a \$2-million idea—that was the value of our building at that time. We could gain another full use of our facility simply by adding a Friday service to our schedule.

Eventually you have to move beyond adding meetings. You will truly *need* larger facilities. When you do, think as big as you can. Twice the size of your short-term needs should be a minimum if you have to sign a long-term lease. If you are renting public facilities on a short lease or month-to-month basis, you do not have to be so expansive—you can always move again as your needs overtake you.

As you grow, someone will introduce you to either the two-thirds or the 80-percent rule. These rules-of-thumb call for you to never consistently fill a meeting space to over two-thirds or 80 percent of its capacity—depending upon who states the rule. I stay away from these formulas because while I think they are true over the long term, I have seen them beautifully violated by the Holy Spirit during times of revival. Sometimes crammed space actually contributes to growth. I do not introduce these percentages to my church because I do not want to limit God.

Secure More Parking Than You Need

I constantly sneak out and prowl our parking lots during worship services. I want to be sure that people find it *easy* to locate a

parking spot. The emphasis here is on *ease* of parking. Our people come at a rate of 2.3 persons per car. This is partly because of the number of married couples and families in our congregation. When there were more single people in our church, there were 1.9 people per car. We know how many our auditorium and children's areas can accommodate. Simple math tells us how many parking spaces it takes to fill the meeting space to capacity. We also know that it takes about 15 percent *surplus* parking to allow us to consistently fill our interior spaces. Our people simply will not hunt that hard for a place. Therefore, we try to provide enough empty spaces so that parking is easy to find.

Your members will always discover places to park their cars. First-time guests will not. You have to make it easy for them. Hence, you should be sure a prospective location provides plenty of parking. If it does not, look elsewhere.

Find a Building with Soul

Buildings need soul. This is that elusive quality that makes a building special. Soul may reside in a quirky history. It may include a great view. Perhaps the building has great architecture. Maybe your building is so ugly that you can capitalize on its appearance. Church on the beach has obvious soul. So does our current facility with an ocean view so expansive that you think you can see all the way to Tahiti. When choosing between two locations, opt for the one that gets people talking.

Here Are Some Ideas for Locations

The earliest Christians met in many different places for worship and fellowship. We know they gathered in the Temple in Jerusalem and in homes (see Acts 2:41-47). In Philippi they worshiped in a place of prayer near a river (see Acts 16:13-16). At Berea they met in a synagogue (see Acts 17:10-11). Paul preached in the marketplace. Jesus held meetings on the seashore (see

Matt. 13:1-2) and on a mountaintop (see Matt. 5:1-2). We should find license in their actions to get out of our mental boxes and into whatever space is available.

Robert Schuller started the Crystal Cathedral in a drive-in theater. Mike MacIntosh of Harvest Christian Fellowship in San Diego used an old fixed-screen theater. John Osteen launched Lakewood Church in a Houston, Texas, feed store. Some have used restaurants, storefronts and nightclubs. In Hawaii we have a church in just about every public school. In Latin America, preachers hold meetings in great stadiums.

One Hope Chapel started an outreach church on a vacant lot in the skid-row of a large American city. A friend in Okinawa moved a baby church to a hotel ballroom. Daniel Brown's Coastlands Church in Aptos, California, started in an old estate house, moved to a community college lecture hall and now meets in what once was a convent.

Grace Church in Nashua, New Hampshire, bought a half-million-square-foot factory that once made blankets for the Union Army during the Civil War. Jim Reeve's Faith Community Church in West Covina, California, purchased the plant where the Stealth bomber was developed. I once held a large Sunday-morning Bible study in a town hall provided rent free by a local bank as a community center.

Hope Chapel in Hermosa Beach bought a bowling alley and a supermarket. Hope Chapel in Kihei, Maui, turned a warehouse into a beautiful church facility. New Hope Church on Oahu uses a high school with a video-feed into a beautifully remodeled overflow space in a nearby industrial complex. My Japanese friends recently discovered an oversupply of karaoke rooms quite rentable for church planting and small-group meetings.

We control the initial decision as to where we will meet. But from that point on, our location controls us. Be sure you are controlled in a manner that ensures rather than hinders growth.

CHURCH PLANTER'S CHECKLIST

1. Describe the functions you would assign to rented office space.
2. What technology would you need to serve a core staff of seven people without renting office space?
3. List 10 possible temporary office locations to ready yourself for the day when you need larger, more traditional office space.
4. List 15 potential meeting locations for a new church in the city or town where you intend to plant. Prioritize the list according to the planned growth of the new church.
5. Write out the pros and cons attached to the top seven locations on your list.
6. Begin to research the possibility of renting the facilities you have listed.