

What The Outside Of Your Church Suggests About What's Inside

by Jennifer Schuchmann

You may be proud of the historic building you worship in. But what that ancient facade may be saying to passersby is that your congregation is too old to have a great youth group.

Likewise, your congregation may be meeting in a shopping mall to improve access to the community. But the location may suggest to some people that your congregation is too unconventional for their tastes.

The point is, the exterior of your church can influence a community's perception of what is inside—not always in the way you intend. That's an important issue, according to Davis Byrd, director of church architecture for the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. "Inevitably, the question is whether it communicates the message accurately or not," Byrd says.

Architectural Signals

A church's exterior can signal a congregation's denominational affiliation. "Stained-glass windows, icons, crosses, and cathedral elements suggest liturgical denominations," says Jerry Maxfield, business administrator of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia. Maxfield, who has a degree in architecture, notes that while the buildings of liturgical and nonliturgical churches both serve the purpose of worship, nonliturgical church exteriors exhibit a "more marketplace approach."

Buildings can send mixed messages. For example, a church built like a stone fortress can suggest a place of security and shelter from the world. "It is a solid, stable place in a time of flux, suggesting the church will be there for a long time," Byrd says. However, the rocklike front can also communicate that the church isn't very receptive to visitors, he says.

In fast-growing metro areas, some churches meet in strip malls. The location is good, and the rent is reasonable. The meeting place suggests that the congregation consists of unpretentious people with limited means and a deep conviction to meet people where they are. However, the storefront can also communicate that what this church offers is of no greater value than anything else in the shopping center. In one stop, you can get your hair cut, buy groceries, and get religion.

If your congregation isn't getting as many visitors as you'd like, perhaps you ought to take a closer look at your church. Are you meeting in an old A-frame building or in another gimmicky design leftover from the 1950s? "It might be communicating a message that is antithetical to what your church really is," says Brewster Ward, an architect in Waynesville, North Carolina.

What a Church Should Look Like

A church should fit within its community yet look distinctly different from a residence or business establishment. "A church plays a significant role in the social fabric; it needs to have a distinctive identity," says Byrd.

The appearance of your building should also reinforce what's going on inside. For example, if you have a very open, visitor-friendly congregation, that's the kind of look your building should have.

Before constructing a new building or changing the exterior of your existing structure, though, Byrd suggests spending time with an architect, talking about your congregation, its purpose for being, its style of worship, and the community in which it is located. The architect can then incorporate those ideas into a design.

"The more a congregation can reflect on the meaning of its ministry, acknowledge that meaning to itself, then communicate it to others, the easier it is for a talented designer to express that in a building," Byrd says.

Ideally, the entire congregation should be an integral part of this design process. "We don't go to a church—we are a church," Ward says. "Buildings need to reflect that change. Our current crisis in church architecture is our inability to change designs." All too often, building committees are made up of the oldest, wealthiest parishioners who tend to favor traditional church buildings. That kind of construction may no longer be appropriate today, Ward says.

For example, a Gothic-revival building with large spaces and ornate decorations can overwhelm contemporary worshippers. It can also impose a style of worship that encourages spectators rather than participants. The long, narrow worship space forces people to watch the backs of people's heads, Ward says.

To encourage better participation in worship, we need to design structures that allow for it, Ward says. "When you invite people to your home for a meal, you don't line them up and sit staring at the backs of their heads," he says. "You sit around the table. Likewise, we need to pay attention to the liturgical renewal and rethink our ideas for a new model."

The liturgical renewal Ward refers to was ushered in by Vatican II during the early 1960s. Since that time, the Roman Catholic Church has consciously tried to design buildings that encourage participation in worship.

According to Byrd, a purposeful approach to design is quite indicative of liturgical churches. "Generally speaking, liturgical denominations tend to be more reflective about the significance of space and design in relation to theology and doctrine," he says. Some of those ideas are now filtering out to other denominations. "More round or fan-shaped churches with double balconies are being built rather than the long nave/narthex setup," Maxfield says. "This allows worshipers to become more intimate with participants on stage."

A Purposeful Approach

A church should choose a structure that demonstrates its approach to worship and ministry, says Maxfield. The Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, is a good example of a building that matches its intention. The building was dedicated "to the glory of man for the greater glory of God."

With more than 10,000 windows of silver-colored tempered glass in a framework of steel trusses, the building can't help reflecting the glory of man, who fashioned it. But when the two 90-foot-tall doors electronically open and the morning sun flows into the sanctuary, the greater glory of God is revealed.

With that in mind, study the outside of your building and ask: What does it communicate? How true is the outside message to what's going on inside the church? Then ask what can be done to bring those in harmony with each other.

Architectural impressions can be modified in many ways. Some suggestions include: Adding a tall steeple or bell tower, or spotlighting a cross to help direct people's eyes toward heaven.

Creating a more timeless look for a contemporary church by adding a brick facade to part of the building.

Constructing a church in a meaningful shape, such as a ship, to signify steering a congregation through the rough seas of life toward heaven.

Short of rebuilding or remodeling, Ward suggests that one way fortress-like churches can present a less forbidding exterior is to hang colorful, festive banners around the outside. Likewise, signs can make a difference in the perceived message of a storefront church. Instead of trying to outdo the signs of surrounding businesses, a church should announce itself simply, humbly, and in good taste, Ward suggests.

Another way your church can warm up its exterior is to keep its grounds attractive and well-tended. A neatly edged, smooth green lawn plus attractive flower beds is inviting to neighbors as well as visitors.

If budget restrictions or other factors prevent you from altering the exterior of your building, don't lose heart. As Ward says, "It is certainly possible to overcome these visual interpretations with strong ministry and missions programs."

In other words, if you don't like what your building says, make sure your ministry speaks louder!

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