

The Changing Church: *Finances and Facilities*

Finances and facilities are closely related in the local church, so I have chosen to address these in the same installment of *The Changing Church* series. Here are the important changes I see that are well underway.

1. *Multi is the word.* Multiuse, multiservice, multivenue, and multisite are the trends regarding church facilities. The driving force is the cost of building larger buildings and larger campuses. Is it good stewardship to build bigger spaces so you can then use them fewer times each week? More and more churches are answering no to that question. They are creating spaces that are not dedicated to one purpose only, but can be used for a variety of purposes. This means moveable seating and, in some cases, moveable walls. It means having more services and small group options within the present facilities footprint. It means looking at additional smaller sites rather than building larger facilities on one site. It also means church architecture is weighted more toward affordable functionality than the classic church look. Another driving force is the Millennial generation and their preference for smaller and more personal expressions of ministry. Thom Rainer cites this generation as the reason “worship centers will be smaller” in the future (www.thomrainer.com, Dec. 11, 2013, “Six Ways Millennials are Shaping the Church”).

2. *Per capita giving challenges, especially in newer churches.* The last figure I saw for average weekly giving per person was \$26. That means that for each adult and child in attendance, the typical long-established church will receive \$26 per week in offerings. However, what we see in church plants and in other churches that are effective in reaching the unchurched is more like \$15 per person each week. Of course, the socio-economics of a particular community will affect these figures, but the gap tells us something important: Making large numbers of new disciples increases the financial challenges of a church. This in turn will affect staffing, facilities, and ministry decisions. Newer churches tend to do more with less out of necessity. In particular, they must zealously control facilities and personnel costs in order to have adequate resources for outreach and ministry.

3. *Bivocational ministry leaders.* In the small to medium size church, more and more senior pastors will be bivocational, meaning they earn some portion of their livelihood in work outside of the church. The trend is even more pronounced in church staff positions. It is simply a matter of economics. Bivocational ministry is driven by the stretched finances of the church and the need for the ministry leader to provide for a household. Many who are presently preparing for ministry leadership now will ultimately find themselves in bivocational church positions. Among other things, this means that incurring great amounts of student debt in preparing for ministry is a bad plan. It also means that future ministry leaders should plan their education so that they have a marketable secular skill as well as ministry expertise.

4. *Paperless offerings.* Fewer people write checks or carry large sums of cash. We use cards and electronic means for all kinds of payments. Churches are learning how to provide these options for

members. Do you still expect most of your contributions to come in by cash or check? If so, why? It could be a generational issue in your church. But consider how a bias toward paper might be inhibiting the development of stewardship among church members who are used to paperless transactions.

5. *Restrictive local government policies.* Local governments tend not to like additional land being removed from their tax base. An increasing number of them are becoming philosophically hostile to churches, especially large churches. Sometimes they just don't like the added traffic congestion a church brings to a particular area. What all this adds up to is more frustration for congregations in acquiring and developing real estate for the church's ministry. Managing the relationship with the local governing authority is a big part of a facilities project today. Don't underestimate this.

6. *Stewardship taught straightforwardly, starting in the Membership Class.* Honestly, many churches in the "seeker friendly" days of the recent past just didn't teach biblical stewardship. New members have been routinely received into the church without any commitment to or discussion of giving. Churches are beginning to correct this underdeveloped part of discipleship. A required new members class and a membership covenant are common ways that churches are teaching stewardship responsibilities and raising the bar for membership.

7. *Security is a big deal, especially in children's facilities.* Spaces with controlled access and unbroken internal sight lines are important for protecting children and reassuring parents. Churches are designing spaces with these issues in mind. Especially among Millennials who are parents, security is an important consideration.

8. *Mergers fuel multisite.* Many small congregations are finding it hard to survive financially. The costs of personnel and maintaining facilities are big challenges. So what is happening is that smaller congregations are merging into larger churches at an increasing rate. They would rather become a new location of a multisite church than fall into further disrepair and just die off. They would rather surrender control and autonomy than surrender their ministry presence in a community. One survey found that 37% of multisite churches became multisite through a merger (as reported at www.religionnews.com, 2014/03/11, "survey-finds-growth-vitality-multisite-church-model").

9. *The increased importance of integrity and transparency.* A church that is keeping secrets about their financial management and health is a church that will eventually forfeit their credibility. Often ministry leaders consider mere "administrative" issues as unspiritual and unimportant. They could not be more wrong. People are inherently skeptical now days about churches and money. Don't give them any reason to be. And if your congregation loves you and trusts you, don't abuse that trust with slipshod administration and spotty reporting. You will eventually undermine your credibility as a ministry leader.

Church leaders, be aware of the trends related to finances and facilities. Help your church make good decisions in these areas, decisions based on present realities rather than past practices.