

Should Our Church Remodel or Relocate

"What factors should we consider as we decide whether to relocate our church to a new site or remodel our existing building?" the pastor asked via fax.

The consultant's answer: As you begin gathering information to address that complex issue, ask your leaders to discuss the following questions:

1. During the last two or three decades, how many of your long-term members moved to homes more than fifteen minutes' driving distance from your building?

When your membership's center of gravity shifts too far, demographic factors outside your control begin determining your church's destiny. If more than 50 percent of the worship attenders live outside the immediate community, your leaders should strongly consider relocation.

2. Are the new residents in your community who build new homes (or young adults who move in and remodel older homes) more than fifteen minutes' driving distance from your building?

Since approximately 85 percent of American church attenders drive less than 15 minutes to attend worship, twenty years of history outside this fifteen-minute radius can begin an irrevocable end to a great church's ministry.

3. Is your present building easy to access via an interstate highway or some other rapid-travel artery from the section of town where young adults are building homes?

A church is advantaged or disadvantaged by its community's road system. A pin map of worship visitors' addresses for the last three months, compared to a pin map of the present members' addresses, will tell you how nonmembers answer this travel question.

4. Do the demographic trends in your nearby neighborhoods indicate a shifting population makeup that is less likely to respond to your congregation's theological perspective and worship style?

If the answer is yes, you have three choices: (a) shift your worship style to meet those emerging needs, (b) relocate, or (c) commit slow ecclesiastical suicide by resisting the necessary changes.

5. Do you have sufficient parking spaces in your present location, and if not, are you "landlocked" in such a way that you cannot add the parking spaces you need?

Generally speaking, churches need one off-street parking space for every two worship attenders in the largest service. People with post-1945 birthdates will not put up with inconvenient parking to attend an otherwise fine church. Many pre-1945-birthdate church leaders believe that kind of thinking makes no sense, but their convictions will not change the behavior of people with post-1945 birthdates.

6. If your current property cannot accommodate your present and anticipated future range of programming for children, teenagers, and adults, is sufficient space available in your present location to remodel and/or build to meet those needs?

Some church properties, no matter how historic or loved, strangle their congregation's ministry future. Ask your newest members what they think about this. Many of your long-term members will answer this question more sentimentally than rationally.

7. In what ways is the present facility user-unfriendly for contemporary ministry (lack of wheelchair access, etc.), even though its floor space is technically sufficient?

Fifteen steps up to the sanctuary door and three different floor levels for classrooms, fellowship hall, and sanctuary seemed quite acceptable four decades ago. That was four decades ago.

8. Is the perimeter of your present property so hemmed in and "unpurchaseable" that the governing board one or two decades from now probably could not expand to accommodate a larger number of members?

When leaders assume that God will never at some point in the future add increased ministry opportunities, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

9. In addition to the architectural issues, have you reviewed the ministry by-products likely to result from each of your two options—remodeling and relocating?

One study of seventy-three relocated congregations listed the following positive results:

- Revitalization of the congregation's life
- More opportunities for ministering to the community
- A larger facility
- Redefinition of the congregation's mission
- Additional parking
- A more attractive, modern facility
- A safer neighborhood
- Better accessibility
- Greater involvement of younger people
- Improvement of the congregation's self-image
- More visibility
- More versatility in worship style

The congregations' levels of financial giving usually increased following relocation. Seventy-two percent of the congregations reported increases, 19 percent reported that the giving levels had not changed, 3 percent indicated that giving had decreased, and 6 percent of the respondents did not know.

The number of new-member additions usually increased following relocation.¹

Another study indicated that 70 percent of relocated churches experience some measure of numerical growth, 20 percent of the churches remain the same size, and 10 percent of the churches experience some decline. The distance of the move to some extent influences whether growth occurs. As a general rule, relocation that helps to produce membership growth spans a minimum of three miles and a maximum of 10 miles from the old location.²

Could your leaders reasonably expect those kinds of by-products from remodeling? An honest, objective answer to that question usually provides strong evidence for either remodeling or relocating.

10. Have you secured comparative financial cost-estimates on the two options—remodeling and relocating?

Assumptions are dangerous. Many churches discover to their amazement that long-term financial costs of staying and moving are not that different.

11. Can you finance the remodeling or the relocation without strangling your ability to pay for sufficient program staff to utilize the new facility?

A common pitfall is the tendency to finance a new building out of the salaries not paid to program staff who were not hired as part of an economy move. The end result can be an attractive, but empty, building. Expanding programs should be concurrent with new facility construction. That inevitably means additional staff members.³

12. What emotional issues might override the selection of one of your two options (to go or to stay)—even though that choice is obviously the more rational of the two?

Churches always lose a few members when they relocate, sometimes up to 20 percent. The farther the move from the present site, the greater the losses of present members. Closer than three miles may mean you lose almost no one, but it also predicts that you will gain very few new members as a result of the relocation. Moving more than ten miles predicts sizeable membership losses. Consider a loss of 10 percent or less an excellent experience.

If the emotional pressure to stay predicts membership losses of 50 percent, reconsider. Better still, add three to five more years to the decision-making process, so people can get used to the idea. Another option: go and stay. Buy property and conduct part of your ministry in a family life center at the new location, nearer to where many of the community's new young families live.

13. In addition to your two options of "go or stay," have you examined other alternatives?

Merger with one or more other churches is generally not advisable (one plus one usually equals three-fourths or one-half the total membership within three years). However, careful planning has produced a few exceptions to those well-known merger mathematics. Consulting judicatory leaders may be helpful as you discuss this question.

14. If you decide to stay in this location and remodel, think of your governing board in the year 2026, discussing "what we should have done" in 2010 or 2011?

What do your present leaders predict those future leaders will think about your decision? Predicting the future is rarely successful, but demographic trends can provide reliable clues.

15. Have you increased your objectivity by obtaining an outside opinion?

Leaders who do that can look back five or ten years later—whether they decide to go or stay—feeling that they have surfaced every possible piece of data by getting opinions from outside the limits of their personal perspectives. Then, too, an outside opinion often lessens whatever conflict happens within the church following whatever decision is made. Dissidents do less damage when they can blame part of the decision on a "outside authority figure" instead of placing all their criticism on personalities within the

congregation.

16. Have you given people sufficient time to process the new idea of remodeling or relocating so that they can emotionally own and affirm it?

Whichever decision you make, take time to (a) create the vision, (b) help people understand the need, and (c) start saying, "We need to get on with it; we have talked about it long enough!" Whichever decision you make, repeatedly articulate how the new direction will continue the vision of your church's founders. Americans love to move forward into the future while linking it to the past.

The Bottom Line

Whether a church decides to remodel or relocate, its leaders should recognize that neither option substitutes for a list of other factors, such as the following:

1. A strong focus on taking advantage of future mission and ministry opportunities.
2. A willingness to reach out to and warmly include unchurched persons and members who did not grow up in the denomination.
3. A determination to elect to lay leadership roles persons who want to pioneer the new rather than reinvent yesteryear.
4. A friendly, caring, enthusiastic fellowship atmosphere among the members.
5. An upbeat, inspirational worship service that includes contemporary music.
6. A high commitment to financial stewardship, with an openness to special offerings.
7. A willingness to organize new groups and ministries.
8. A strong spiritual focus that encourages and creates opportunities for Bible study and prayer development.
9. A desire to help hurting people in the community outside the church.
10. A conviction that offering Christ to people can spiritually transform their lives.

Neither remodeling nor relocating creates mission and ministry renewal. Both options can be tools for renewal (under the right circumstances), but neither can substitute for renewal. Building or remodeling a building to put a church in is simple. Building a church to put in the building is far more complicated. Wise leaders avoid attempting to do one without the other.

Notes

1. "Looking at Relocation Results" by Gary W. Kidwell, Cutting Edge, 4th Quarter 1992, Board of Church Extension of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), P.O. Box 7030, Indianapolis, IN 46207.
2. "Relocating Your Church: Part 1" by Gary L. McIntosh, Church Growth Network, October 1992, Church Growth Network, 3630 Camellia Drive, San Bernardino, CA 92404.
3. "Should We Relocate?" by Lyle Schaller, the second of two articles, Net Results, 1988.
4. Church Architecture staff can assist Texas Baptist congregations in evaluating their options. Call 214.828.5125 for details.

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