



Sprucing Up AN Old Church

ROB HALL

After almost 115 years of ministry, Evanston Covenant Church was faced with the prospect of closing. Membership and attendance had declined, and the church's future was uncertain.

Still, there was room for hope. The church was having success in reaching international students who attended Northwestern University. And the church's location—in downtown Evanston, Illinois, near the Northwestern campus—allowed for many opportunities to serve the community.

So, beginning in 2004, the church reinvented itself. This included changing the congregation's name (to Sojourners Covenant Church), hiring a diverse pastoral team (Nils Peterson and Ben Gong), and working with the Central Conference and the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism to develop a plan to re-start the ministry.

What became clear throughout this process was that the church's current building had some drawbacks.

"During the assessment of what would be necessary to bring the church into a new season of ministry, we recognized that, while building upgrades would not create growth, the facility as a whole presented some barriers to growth," Peterson says.

Sojourners evaluated their facility and decided that with a limited budget they needed to focus on improving the sanctuary, nursery, bathrooms, and overall décor, to make their facility more compatible with their ministry vision. While some of the changes were simply cosmetic, they helped people get a sense that a new day was dawning at Sojourners.

Like Sojourners, many Covenant churches cannot afford to undertake a major renovation or to relocate and build a new facility. Instead, they must work with what they have. Churches in this situation must focus on making changes that will have the greatest ministry impact.

"It was always important to keep mission in the center of our minds as we made decisions about changes. We had to remember the changes were not for ourselves, but for the community we are called to serve. Changes were made to create a flexible and hospi-

table space for the purpose of effective outreach to the community," says Peterson.

Architect Todd Carlson worked with Sojourners to identify changes that would be affordable while at the same time increasing Sojourners' ability to do ministry. They developed a list of possible improvements to the building.

"Because the church wanted to attract newcomers, and specifically younger families, our recommendations were based on improving those spaces that would serve that segment of the congregation," Carlson says.

"For example, we suggested updating the appearance and finishes in the nursery. In any church, it is unlikely that young parents will return to the church a second time if they don't feel

that the nursery environment is clean, safe, inviting, and easily accessible. We also suggested replacing worn carpeting and applying a fresh coat of different color paint throughout the building. And finally, the existing restroom facilities needed modernization."

Churches involved in any kind of building or remodeling project will likely experience sticker shock. According to architect John Maurer, the construction industry has experienced double-digit inflation in recent years. This means that churches with limited budgets and space need detailed and careful planning at the inception of the project. That way, all parties involved—the congregation, church leaders, architect, and contractor—can make informed decisions.

"Churches need to understand costs in a more programmatic way—what is the cost of supporting the needs of each church ministry rather than the cost per square foot of space," Maurer says. "This requires the leadership to prioritize and balance needs against cost."

Churches considering a remodeling project have to be prepared for the unexpected. Opening up walls can expose hidden problems, says Tim Schneiderwind of Aldgate Construction Company.

"In about 90 percent of remodeling projections you find a surprise when you begin work," Schneiderwind says. "In most cases you will want to add a percentage of the contract to the bottom line to create a contingency fund to help with potential issues that will arise." Some of the surprises can be mitigated by using a contractor who

SETTING PRIORITIES

When options are limited, church architects and builders suggest that churches focus on improving the following areas:

- Nursery
- Restrooms
- Sanctuary
- Parking

Changes to the décor can also have a big impact at a smaller cost. "Less costly changes, like fresh paint, wall coverings, and better lighting, can do wonders for improving the spirit and interest of a church community," says John Maurer of Ruck Pate Architecture.

Todd Carlson of Carlson Architecture, Ltd., agrees: "A tired or worn looking building or interior sends a message of defeat and/or neglect. An updated look can communicate a fresh or relevant message, a message of hope and promise." □

Rob Hall is associate director for legal and technical services for the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism.

specializes in remodeling existing buildings, he adds.

Maurer suggests that planning for any remodeling project should begin with a condition assessment of the building's structure and mechanical systems. During a remodeling project, congregations may be required to bring their facilities up to code. Some of the more costly examples of building code requirements include fire suppression systems or elevators. Assessing the building's systems ahead of time can help avoid costly surprises.

The land, facility, and finance division of the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism and the staff of National Covenant Properties can consult with churches when planning for a renovation project. They can assist churches in identifying an architect to work with, and in assessing financial viability of renovation projects.

Just as a carpenter needs the right

tools to build a home, a church needs the right tools to build a ministry. A renovation of an existing facility can be a good way to refocus the congregation on ministry vision and to bring people together to work for a common goal.

Peterson says that the remodeling project has played an important part in renewal at Sojourners. At least one aspect of the project has been put to good use. Four babies recently born in the congregation are enjoying the new nursery.

The church also received a helping hand from another congregation, Peterson says. "Northbrook Covenant Church held a shower at their church to outfit our nursery with supplies and toys," he says. "It has been experiences like these that have brought new life into our church." □

Do It Yourself?

Churches can sometimes save money by doing parts of the remodeling themselves.

However, there are some important questions to consider before using volunteers in a remodeling project.

Do the volunteers have the right skill level to do the job? Painting a room in a home is a lot different than painting a sanctuary. A church's appearance makes a significant impression, so it's important that volunteer tasks are done well.

Can the volunteers keep pace with the construction schedule? Delays in the schedule cost money. "There rarely is a cost or time savings when the church tries to get the work done on its own," says Tim Schneiderwind of Aldgate Construction Company. "It is better to hire a professional contractor to set the schedule, hire the subcontractors, and then push those subcontractors if they are not getting the work done."

Will people be energized or worn-out by the project? With volunteer-driven projects people are often tired and want to take a break after the dedication instead of being energized and excited about inviting their friends or interacting with visitors.

Volunteers work best when they can use their specific skills or professional experience—drywall, painting, electrical—and donate their time to the project. It's the best of both worlds—a quality job at little or no cost. □

Ministry in a New Era

Many Covenant churches were designed and built for a different era. Since churches were built in neighborhoods and people walked to church, parking was minimal. Christian education curriculums were designed so that the children stayed in one spot during the entire lesson, so classrooms were small. Fellowship, before and after the service, did not occur in the area immediately adjacent to the sanctuary/worship area. Instead, coffee was served in a fellowship hall or other space, often on another level.

Today church architects design very different facilities. Parking is a major factor. Floor plans are designed so that a majority of church activities occur on one level and are accessible to everyone. Classrooms are larger, to accommodate the more active children's programs.

John Maurer, an architect who specializes in churches, has seen other changes as well.

"Perhaps the greatest change in church design has been the influence of the music ministry," he says. "We find that many congregations offer a variety of services and accompanying musical styles ranging from traditional organ music and congregational singing to highly contemporary styles. In a renovation of a more traditional building it can be difficult finding ways to conceal audiovisual equipment and to darken a space with a lot of windows."

Another major change in church design is the amount of space that is needed for gathering and fellowship. In older churches there is often an imbalance between the size of the narthex and the size of the worship space.

"The narthex is a place where relationships among members are strengthened and enhanced," says architect Todd Carlson. "It is common for a church built in the 1950s and 1960s to have little to no gathering space. . . . Today we are designing gathering areas that are over half—and sometimes equaling—the amount of space in worship." □

