planning for a better church landscape

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History reveals that man has always put the best of his resources and skills into the creation of his religious surroundings. Today, as in the past, the greatest church architecture is that which functions physically and esthetically to meet the needs of the congregation. A modern church should be planned to serve the needs of its congregation for worship, study, work, or play and should add to the beauty and character of the community.

This publication deals mainly with considerations in planning for a new church and developing the site. However, existing churches that are interested in further development of their sites will also find useful information.

Evaluating Your Congregation's Needs

Before beginning to plan a religious environment, a congregation must take stock of its needs. A committee representing a cross-section of the congregation (and possibly including professional architectural and landscape architectural consultants) should be selected to determine the congregation’s social needs, site development requirements, financial resources, and the extent of development needed.

In evaluating social needs, remember to consider the socio-economic conditions to which the majority of the congregation are accustomed and in which they feel at ease. How formally do they dress for church? What sort of church activities do they participate in? What style of life are they accustomed to? While a church should be inviting, well designed, and well kept, it need not be opulent or stiffly traditional. On the other hand, while in your planning you may want to explore many new trends in architecture and landscape architecture, you will want to keep the tastes of the majority of the congregation in mind.

Considering Factors That Influence Development

The church site includes not only the area occupied by the church structure but all surrounding property owned by the church as well. Therefore, the term "church site" in this circular refers to the total property. Assessing the congregation's site development needs and determining the extent of development needed should be the evaluation

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committee’s next area of concern. Emphasis placed on church activities will vary, but all churches perform some of the following functions.

The most important function which takes place in a church is worship. While worship services are normally conducted in the sanctuary, if space exists it might be well to plan an outside area for summer services or sunrise services. This space should have a natural setting and be screened from outside distractions.

Outdoor study areas might also be considered. Sunday-school classes and summer Bible schools could make good use of small spaces in the out-of-doors for study and worship. These areas should be located close to church classrooms, but, because of the noise that might come from them, they should be separated from the sanctuary. If space permits, a recreation area should be provided for church nurseries, scout troops, and church picnics. A space for softball or running games could be instrumental in keeping youngsters interested in church-oriented organizations. Another use of outdoor areas might include space for annual bazaars, picnics, or ice cream socials. However, these functions require easy access to the church kitchen.

Keep in mind that many of the areas of your church site may serve several functions. For example, the area for recreation and games might also be used for special outdoor services, and an outdoor study area might also function well as a social setting.

 Properly planned church landscape areas will adapt flexibly to many uses. The illustration at the left shows a sunken court area which provides meeting, classroom, and play space. The drop in elevation from ground level permits privacy unique for a street exposure. The illustration at the right shows a play area which is used for day-nursery play, Bible-school recreation, and outdoor Sunday-school classes. The chain-link fence is not the most attractive screen, but fencing of some kind is usually a must for safety reasons.
A field site analysis for use in preliminary site planning. Such a survey shows existing physical features such as views, buildings, utilities, roads, and the wind direction, and has a sun diagram.
A schematic land use design based on fitting church needs to the natural site. Note how the existing land contours were utilized in placing the various elements and how these elements were placed in relation to one another. Pedestrian circulation flows naturally from parking lot to church to outdoor recreation areas. The church is easily seen but set back enough so as not to interfere with traffic views.
A special feature of the land use design is this amphitheater to be used for outdoor services and special programs. It is placed in a natural bowl taking full advantage of the topography and is directed toward a pleasant view. The existing stone wall could possibly be incorporated into the plan. As is illustrated below, either turf terraces or benches can be constructed, depending on how permanent a seating arrangement is desired.
Occasionally someone wishes to contribute a memorial garden, bench, plant, or tree. These gifts should be selected with the degree of future maintenance in mind and they should be established as part of the initial plan. All elements selected for use should have minimum maintenance requirements. Adding elements independent of the initial plan will later result in disorganization and confusion.

Plantings can be used to accent an architectural feature, to screen unsightly areas, and to create areas of privacy. Contemporary church architecture is often so striking in appearance that too many plantings can detract from the total effect of the structure. In such cases it is wise to acquire the services of a landscape architect to determine where plant materials might be placed to accent and enhance this architecture instead of hiding it. He will select slower-growing, longer-enduring varieties of plants that will be a part of your church development and that won't have to be replaced soon. He will also recommend sizes of plants most appropriate to the total budget.

In choosing trees to accent church architecture an important consideration is their expected mature size. These trees enframe the church without interfering with its architectural lines. They also provide shade for conversation areas.
Contemporary church architecture, like traditional church architecture, can often be enhanced by plantings. Natural shapes and asymmetrical groupings are the most effective. The upper illustration shows evergreens used to accent a striking church entrance. Notice the care that has been taken to save the tree at the right. The landscape for the religious development in the lower picture features planters, shade trees, hedges, and pleasant lawn areas, all properly maintained.
Plant materials are not the only possible solution when screening is desired. As is shown in these examples of side door entrance screens, structural materials can be used effectively as screens and this repetition can have a very pleasing effect. Similar devices could be used to screen drives, play areas, and parking lots.
Types of plant materials that might be used vary widely, but main­tenance is the main consideration in choosing them. If a janitor or congregation member is going to maintain the grounds, low-maintenance plants should be used. On the other hand, if a professional gardener will be caring for the grounds it is possible to use many ornamental varieties of plants. Your committee may even decide to use Biblical plant materials, such as redbud (Judas Tree—Cercis sp.) and flowering dogwood (Cornus florida), as a part of your total plan, providing they are suited to your climate.

It is important to remember that walks are simply a means by which people move from one area to another. As elementary as this statement is, we tend not to respect it. Determine where your main traffic routes are going to be, and put your walks there. A path worn between walks is the result of poor planning, but it is no worse a mistake than providing unused walks. Plan carefully and try not to cut up your open spaces with too involved a walk system. In your congregation there are likely to be people who cannot get around very easily and elderly persons in wheelchairs. For these reasons, it is better when possible to make elevation changes with ramps instead of stairs. It is well to plan a large, paved, shaded entrance landing to provide space for the conversation groups that often gather after church.

Your congregation may be in a position to acquire an appropriate religious work of art. In your planning see if it would be feasible to provide a site on your property master plan for an art form such as a piece of sculpture. This would benefit not only your congregation but the citizens of your town as well.

This masonry bell tower provides a dramatic call to worship.
These examples of religious art show how churches can share beauty with the community by using their resources wisely to commission works of art.
A church needs a bulletin board or announcement board on its grounds. It is also to a congregation's advantage to place a sign at the edge of town announcing the church's existence. In both cases, it is important to use taste in choosing and maintaining the display. The on-property bulletin board should be placed so that it can be read easily, while not cutting off any important architectural view or obstructing any passing traffic from the sight of drivers leaving church property. Care should be taken to give the bulletin board the same character as the church architecture. The highway sign can easily add to the confusion of the city entrance unless churches in the community cooperate in erecting a common display designed to serve the community and to give each equal display opportunity. Try to discourage homemade signs or amateurish signs that bear religious messages.

This well-designed church sign is also a pleasant sitting area with built-in benches conveniently located on the corner.

Another simple but effective display gives information about services and is conservative in appearance.
It is important to use taste in choosing and in maintaining either the on-grounds announcement board or the roadside sign. Evidently a good deal of time and money went into planning the announcement sign shown at the top, but unfortunately the end result is over-scaled and overly commercial, and detracts from the church's attractiveness. The two roadside signs shown below probably get more negative than positive response from those who see them because of their poor design and lack of maintenance. (Note the broken arm of the cross at the lower left.)
You should attempt to provide off-street parking for your congregation. A good ratio is one parking space for every three seats in your sanctuary. Be sure to provide an area for dropping off and picking up worshipers and for wedding and funeral processions to form. Both your parking lot and loading zone must have safe access to the highway, and the loading zone should be near the entrance of your church but should not screen or block it in any way. A service drive ought to be planned for access to the kitchen area.

Many churches have cemeteries on their property or on adjoining property. These are often unsightly, and their appearance can be improved by employing the following methods.

- Level graves to aid in maintenance and to create a spacious, more unobstructed expanse.
- Remove grave curbs to make maintenance easier and eliminate the elements that cut up your open space.
- Remove scattered and unsightly shrubs; plant materials should all be kept healthy and should be grown in masses big enough to appear significant in the large open space.
- Enclose the cemetery with a fence or hedge or, if a fence or hedge already exists, be certain that it is properly maintained.
- Improve walks and driveways.

In planning a new cemetery, once again it is important to establish a master plan with the aid of a professional landscape architect and to follow this plan. Several steps that should be taken are:

- Survey and map the proposed site.
- Lay out adequate sections and drives.
- Divide the sections into plots and number the plots.
- Give deeds as plots are sold.
- Keep a permanent record of all deeds and all plot locations.
- Establish a maintenance plan.
- Depend primarily on grass and trees for planting.
- Reserve shrubs for use at boundary lines and walk intersections.
- Keep plantings in masses.
- Enclose the entire area.
- Prohibit tombstones or restrict their size and use markers rather than tombstones if possible.
- Set up restrictions for the land, and create a governing board to see that it is maintained in the future.
Two means of parking lot screening are illustrated here, planting and structural screening. The fine maintenance of both developments should be noted. The intense shrub trimming shown in the bottom picture, however, is not necessary.
Locating the Church

If you are building a new church, the location within the community will probably be determined by economics. In other words, you will probably build on the site that you can afford. Even so, the following considerations may be helpful. In locating your church, you must decide whether it is to serve a neighborhood or a region. Since most people have cars, a central location is not as important a consideration as it used to be. However, if the congregation is from a specific neighborhood, it would be desirable to locate the church so that its members could walk to church.

Remember, your church will stand on the same site for quite some time, and the location that you select will be an element by which people associate the church — for example, the white church on the hill, or the big brick church by the school, or the church on the square. For this reason, the church location should be as attractive and as prominent as possible. If the site is open on all sides or is on a corner, all the better. The Midwest is known for its towering church steeples that can be seen from great distances. This tradition need not influence your church location or design, but it might be well to keep this heritage in mind during your planning and site selection.

Before any property is acquired or a plan developed, the planning committee should conduct a thorough investigation of local zoning regulations and have a complete understanding of their influence on your proposed development. For example, you should find out if you can use the proposed property for a church; if the set-back requirements and easements are restrictive; and if the zoning ordinances restrict undesirable commercial enterprises from building adjacent to your property.

Determining the Site Size

It is not easy to determine what size site your congregation might require. A very general rule of thumb is one acre for every 200 seats in your sanctuary. This figure, however, will vary considerably depending upon economic factors and availability of land. It is best not to build on more than 20 to 25 percent of your site to allow plenty of open space. Most existing churches today have already expanded or are feeling the need for expansion. This is an important factor to keep in mind in church planning. Land is a good investment, so, if you can afford it, it is better to acquire a little extra land now than to have that problem to face in the future. By acquiring extra land, churches can help in the conservation drive to preserve natural open areas.
Carrying Out the Plan

When starting on a church project it is easy to envision bigger plans than can be completed realistically. You have to estimate the scope that you can handle and the scope that will spur your congregation into action. Big plans often offer only small results, while little plans may provide but small incentive for your congregation. However, this is not to discourage positive future planning.

While planning for your congregation’s needs it is important to keep in mind your economic strength in order to determine a realistic goal. In determining this goal, don’t just plan for land acquisition and building costs. It is very important to set up a budget for landscape costs, future maintenance costs, and some replacement expenses. If possible, get young, responsible members of your church involved in this phase. If they are aware of the problems now and have a hand in planning the budget for the future, when the time comes to carry out these plans they are more likely to follow through with them.

After determining your congregation’s needs and resources as accurately as possible, you may find that the plan you have formulated is still too big to be handled all at once. If this happens, consider programming your construction over a period of years. Plan what is needed most and start there; then set up a plan for adding other elements at a later date. In every way possible try to follow the original plan.

When landscape development work begins, well-meaning members of the congregation will arrive daily with plants of their own as gifts. Explain that the plan has been carefully designed to provide an attractive, unified composition; therefore, only those materials specified in the plan can be accepted. If work is done by the congregation, be sure that a contractor, nurseryman, or someone experienced in the field of landscape construction oversees the work. It is expensive and inefficient to have to redo what has already been done.

Your church deserves the most attractive setting you can give it. To achieve this goal, you must give careful consideration to the needs and activities of the congregation. Through skillful and sensitive design you can properly develop the space surrounding your church so that it will not only serve the needs of the congregation but it will also be an asset to the community. The planning processes outlined in this publication will help you to achieve the most efficient use of your site and at the same time will effect a savings in the costs of development.