

# Is Your Church User-friendly?

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What does the phrase “user-friendly” mean to you? Just a few years ago it was not a term that was commonly used. Since the proliferation of the personal computer in the office and at home the phrase has begun to permeate our daily lives.

Perhaps you think of “user-friendly” when you think of computer software or business applications. Or maybe you a tool or appliance comes to mind. In each of these instances the term refers to a process which is easily understood and applied to the task at hand, easily accessible, flexible and adaptable to needs of the user, and is non-intimidating to the novice.

Let’s consider how we might apply the term to the church, and specifically to the church as expressed through its facilities. User friendly church facilities will be characterized by the following:

## ◆ FRIENDLY

A friendly church facility will be attractive, inviting, and oriented toward the people the church seeks to reach. It will have curb appeal. The exterior design statement will effectively communicate the attitude and style of the congregation and will relate to the surrounding community in a positive manner. The community will begin to develop perceptions about the church as it views the exterior building and landscaping.

Parking will be plentiful and visible from the road or on the approach to the facility. As the key facilities determinant to any church’s ability to sustain attendance on a given site, the church can expect that parking will occupy two thirds to three fourths of the usable area of that site on a Sunday morning. Other facilities must be planned and designed with attention to that site capacity defined by parking.

Open and clearly defined building entrances will connect directly to the parking areas and will often be equipped with covered arrival canopies. These entrances will lead to spacious and pleasant welcome lobby areas. This is where important first impressions are likely to be made.

Facilities will be arranged in an understandable manner. People are uncomfortable when they are disoriented. Spaces will be grouped according to major function and these groupings will be connected by generously proportioned and understandable circulation elements with large lobby spaces at areas prone to congestion. In larger churches these circulation elements may begin to resemble atrium spaces and shopping mall or airport concourses. All public spaces will be handicapped accessible.

## ◆ FUNCTIONAL

Facilities will be designed to effectively support the five major functions of the church, appropriate to the chosen styles and methodology of the individual congregation. The five

essential functions of the church are worship, discipleship, evangelism, ministry/missions, and fellowship.

Worship is sometimes described as the heartbeat of the church life and will take on a variety of styles and expressions. It is also frequently a “front door” where first impressions are established. It is therefore critical that the worship space be designed to fit the style of worship that is supported in the space.

While there is often variety from one church to another there may also be variety in style between multiple services in one church. This creates particular challenges as architectural treatments that support one style can actually undermine another style. For example, a space that supports a traditional worship style may be more formal and acoustically live while a space for a contemporary service will often be more informal and acoustically absorptive. Solutions can involve compromise, planned architectural flexibility, or different venues for the two styles.

If worship is the heartbeat, then discipleship must be considered the backbone of the church. This essential function requires spaces designed for age appropriate learning in quantity proportionate to the demographics of the congregation. Significant planning is required to keep the church in balanced proportion as the congregation grows.

Further, the discipleship balance will affect worship attendance, church finance and overall church health in some manner. Space planning and master planning in this area is highly specialized and the church should seek help to insure that stated ministry and growth objectives can actually be achieved.

Facilities will have less impact on the essential church functions of evangelism and ministry / missions. Facilities can have a great impact on fellowship in the church and will be addressed in the following section.

While not listed among the essential functions, administrative and support space is certainly essential for today’s church. Offices will be located and zoned for convenient weekday access and security. Heating and air conditioning will be zoned for flexibility of use in a variety of configurations corresponding to church activities throughout the week. Building access and security will be zoned in a similar manner. Toilets will be strategically located, attractively appointed, and generously sized.

#### ◆ FELLOWSHIP ORIENTED

While fellowship in the church is more than eating it is important that the church be equipped with adequate space for dining in a variety of configurations for large and small banquets, receptions, showers, fellowship meals, and similar recreational occasions. More specialized recreation space can also enhance fellowship activities. At times even athletic facilities will be an appropriate expression of the fellowship function.

Beside these spaces for structured fellowship and event activities the user-friendly church will provide spaces for intentional spontaneous fellowship within the congregation. These spaces will be incorporated into building circulation and lobby spaces as well as in outdoor spaces such as garden courtyards or terraces, children’s playgrounds, and landscaped entry areas.

## **FLEXIBLE**

Facilities for the user-friendly church of the twenty-first century church will be flexible and adaptable. They will employ multi-use and multi-purpose techniques.

Multi-use involves using a space more than once and may include multiple scheduling of the same function (such as worship services) or similar functions (such as Sunday school and weekday childcare). Multi-purpose involves spaces designed for multiple functions such as worship / fellowship, discipleship / fellowship or (less successfully) fellowship and athletics.

Just as the user-friendly church will not occur by accident, neither will user-friendly facilities. Consider ways your church can become more user-friendly and consult with a qualified professional to seek ways to apply these principles in adapting existing or planning new facilities.