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Study guide:

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Faith in spaces

How design welcomes children & families

By Robert C. Blezard

Does your congregation want to bring in more children and families? Most do, and some are simply desperate to attract them. Yet many congregational leaders don't understand how their buildings either fail to accommodate the needs of parents and children or how they actually repel them. How does your congregation fare on this issue?

Exercise 1: Bathrooms

True story: A friend whose family was “church shopping” in a new community passed on a congregation that met all their requirements and standards, except one. The bathrooms smelled. The teenagers pronounced them “totally gross.” We live in an age when people not only demand that public bathrooms look and smell clean, but they desire them to be spacious and modern too.

Have you noticed how much bigger bathrooms are in newer buildings than older ones? How do your congregation's bathrooms compare? How old are the tiles and fixtures? Is the lighting adequate? What would you recommend?

Exercise 2: Welcoming environment

Cleanliness of the bathrooms (above) contributes to an overall environment that may either welcome or repel people. Unkempt, cluttered, dusty or dirty spaces can create an overall atmosphere of unwelcome, as can peeling exterior paint, a littered parking lot or musty smells. How important is this? The “unwelcome” message of the environment can even override whatever positive signals you're trying to send through congregational hospitality to newcomers, good preaching or worship well-done. Since people can get used to these things after awhile, some congregational leaders may not be aware that their church environment sends a negative message.

Walk through each room of your space, noting for each the condition of the flooring, walls, ceiling, lights, windows, furnishings, doors, etc. What “message” of welcome or unwelcome does the space send? What needs cleaning, updating, replacing, modernizing or freshening to make it more welcoming? Make a list of suggestions for each space according to these categories: Things we can do now, things we can do without a lot of money, things we can plan for within a year, and big items that require money and planning. Rank the projects in each by priority. Give your list to the congregation council or property committee.

Walk the grounds around your church. Are the shrubs trimmed, the grass cut,



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Study guide: Faith in spaces

continued

the flower beds weeded? Are the windows clean, the paint fresh, the signs easy to read, the doors well-marked? Is the parking lot clean, free of litter and dirt (or sand), well-lit, free of cracks and weeds? Overall, what message does your building and grounds convey to visitors? Make a list, as above, and give it to congregation leaders.

Exercise 3: Guest critics

Invite several friends from outside the congregation to walk through the church space with you and give their honest opinion about the physical environment. What are their overall impressions? What seems inviting, happy, joyful or warm? What seems depressing, icky, cold or uninviting? What recommendations do they have?

Exercise 4: Artwork education

Part 1: Pictures, photos, drawings, stained-glass windows, tapestries and artifacts can say a lot. They can illustrate Christian stories of faith, express religious concepts or tell the story of the congregation's life. Room-by-room, walk through your church building and make a catalog of all the artwork (maybe different teams from your study group could catalog different rooms). Categorize them according to the point they teach (faith, religious concept or congregational life), and list what the teaching is. Looking at the list, how well does the artwork in your congregation support its educational mission? Which of the three categories is best represented? What recommendations might you make to improve the artwork?

Part 2: Art for kids. Salvador Dali's painting "Corpus Hypercubus" may offer art lovers keen insights into the crucifixion of Jesus, but it likely won't do much for children. Looking at the catalog of artwork from Part 1, determine which would be appealing and meaningful to children. Why? Which pieces could be better appreciated by children if they were presented differently? How many pieces are from child artists? What recommendations would you make?

Exercise 5: Kid-friendly space

News flash: Children in worship are different from adults. They tend not to sit still for more than 10 minutes, are easily distracted, may not follow a grown-up sermon, often have to use the bathroom more frequently than adults, and may not appreciate the hymns their parents and grandparents love so much. What other differences can you think of?

Discuss how your congregation takes each difference into account in worship planning (music, children's sermon, flow, bulletins, etc.), sanctuary furnishings and layout. Ask children and their parents about what changes would make it easier, more enjoyable or less stressful for them to attend your worship service.



About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds

degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

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Study guide: **Faith in spaces**

continued

Exercise 6: Space for kids

Examine your congregation's areas that are for children—Sunday school rooms, nursery, playgrounds, etc. Do they convey a fresh, lively, welcoming attitude? How? What needs to be updated, repainted, re-carpeted or replaced? Would you want your children or grandchildren to spend time there?

Ask parents of young children, especially those from outside the congregation, to look at the space and give you their honest opinion.

Exercise 7: Get out more

Check out how other congregations use their space to accommodate and welcome families and children, especially those that have thriving family and children's ministries. How is their space configured, decorated, painted, furnished, etc.? What artwork decorates the spaces? How does the overall physical environment send the message of welcome to families and children? What can your congregation do better? Make a list for your church leaders.

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Faith in the spaces

How design welcomes children & families

Text by Dawn Rundman Photos by Rick Riddle

Art from Bible stories adorns the walls of historical country churches in Sweden. A tour guide gives their history and explains that the artwork does more than beautify the space—the pictures once reinforced the Bible stories for illiterate members. Worshipers who couldn't read Scripture were reminded of them each time they sat in the sanctuary.

This emphasis on space—on surroundings and design—can also be used to update our older church buildings and plan new ones in a way that welcomes children and families.

If we only pay attention to how ministry activities extend hospitality and support learning, we're missing the chance to use physical space to do the same. Every church space conveys a theological point of view about our welcome and value of children—in planned and unplanned ways.

Following are several observations and strategies to help congregations

create and improve child-friendly spaces. Here's the good news: none of these takes a lot of money or big changes. But they do require using a different lens to deliberately look at space and some creativity to make tweaks and adjustments.

Find (and fix) invisible spaces

Most of us stop noticing things in our home that need repair or an upgrade—a dripping faucet, a clock that needs new batteries or outdated towels that should be banished to the pet bed.

When we become too familiar with a space, we stop tuning into what a newcomer would notice. The same can be true of church space designated for children—chewed board books on the library table or dingy changing tables in the nursery. Often the narthex offers little indication that children are part of the community.

When our church space becomes so lived in that we stop noticing what might be a clear signal to a

visiting family, it's time to make adjustments.

Try this: Do a quick audit of any potentially invisible spaces. Divide a piece of paper into four squares and write each of these words in each space: functions, features, flaws, fixes.

Then watch on a Sunday (or midweek) how the space is used. Record what you notice about how the space functions, the physical features you notice, evident flaws and ideas for fixing the space to better serve those using it.

Unlock the space's meaning

Church buildings are filled with furnishings, artwork and architecture that convey Bible stories, theological concepts and rich church traditions. But here's the problem: these meanings are often hidden from kids unless we show and tell about them multiple times.

A pulpit's carvings, the stained-glass windows, the cruciform shape of the sanctuary—all are visual





features that can be appreciated by even the youngest of children. Pointing them out enables kids to see how our Christian beliefs are embedded in our church surroundings. We help kids understand why our buildings look the way they do (plus, kids love learning about the secret meanings of things).

Try this: Walk through your church taking an inventory of the artwork. How could you help kids notice and understand the significance of these pieces? Use a children's sermon to focus on the artwork, or ask someone to make a photo book that has pictures and explanations of it.

Steal from the best

Your community has spaces that are already child-friendly. Recall the furnishings and layout of McDonald's, for instance—bright colors, play spaces and Happy Meal toys displayed at eye level.



Author bio:

Rundman, Edina, Minn., is director of congregational development at sparkhouse, the ecumenical division of Augsburg Fortress. She served on her congregation's

building design committee to make church more welcoming to children.

Or how about the family friendly features of Ikea stores—parking spots reserved for families with young children, kid-friendly menus and restaurant seating, and free child care that allows parents to shop uninterrupted?

Notice your library's children's section with books in easy-to-reach displays and comfy reading chairs.

Try this: Visit a child-friendly spot in your community and observe the ways that space is inviting for children. Seating, signage, artwork and color palette all beckon to the child: "Make yourself at

7 things you can do now

Place a kid-size table and chairs in your fellowship hall. Make sure there are also high chairs.

Reinforce the importance of fathers caring for their little ones by putting changing tables in the men's room(s).

Place bathroom signs with symbols *and* words at children's eye level. If that means two signs on each door, that's OK.

Reposition some of the church's artwork to a child's eye level.

Make sure signage at all entrances let families know exactly where their child should go when they arrive.

Liven up hallway walls by displaying kids' artwork (not just in the Sunday school area).

Include faith-based messages, music and images in the nursery so they convey that this is a place of faith, not just baby-sitting.

home. Stick around. You're welcome here." Strive to have your church's space offer the same kind of feel, but with a deeper, life-changing message about welcome and belonging. □

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