

# Your Ministry's Blueprint

## SITE SELECTION FOR A NEW CHURCH

by Bob Adams



Good visibility of your church facilities will make a positive statement to your community

Photo courtesy of J H Batten Inc.

New churches face a number of decisions during their early years, but the decision to purchase land with an eye toward building facilities on it remains one of the most crucial steps a young congregation can take. Let's take a look at some principles of site selection that churches need to consider before they "sign on the dotted line."

### Blueprint for People

Before a church considers acquiring land with the intention of moving into a permanent facility, it should have a set of blueprints in hand—but not the kind architects use. Your church should have already developed a mission action plan—a roadmap for focusing your strengths and talents in the mission that you know God has given you. Though it is beyond the scope of this article, your mission action plan should build on the strengths, gifts and life of your congregation as you seek to live out God's calling in your community. With this plan firmly in place and serving as your guide for the future, you are in the best position to look for a permanent site.

### Ground Your Search in Prayer

The act of prayer—as individuals and as a congregation—should be your constant action throughout the process.

Start early, pray consistently and specifically, and don't stop until you have the Lord's answer. In the busyness that often accompanies God's work, don't forget to make it a regular habit to talk to Him about this most important decision. After all, the decision to locate on a specific parcel of property will have decades of implication following it. One of the most significant factors throughout this process is praying for God's guidance and timing as you make decisions.

### The Secret of the Obvious

It has been said that the secret to a successful business venture is location, location, location. Locate your business in the right place, and everything else can fall in place for success. Locate the same business with the same people and actions in the wrong place, and no matter what you try, success seems to slip away. The same line of thought is true for a new church location. Wise churches will utilize the same tools successful businesses use when they are scouting out a new place. It all starts with knowing your target audience.

### Demographics Show the Way

New churches have usually done extensive research and study to determine the people they are trying to reach. Strategic ministry plans are developed from these target groups. It's a logical next step to use this same kind of

information and project it geographically to determine possible locations that “fit” your target profile. In doing so, you need to consider questions like:

- ▶ Where does our target group live, work, and play now?
- ▶ Where will they be doing the same things in three, five and 10 years from now?
- ▶ What is the overall community growth trend like?
- ▶ What plans are in the works for retail, institutional, and infrastructure development?
- ▶ How are current and future traffic plans (both vehicle and people) developing?

Once you begin to understand the big picture from 30,000 feet, it’s time to start flying low and get a close-up view!

### Characteristics of a Good Church Site

Gwenn McCormick, author of *Planning and Building Church Facilities*, has developed a concise list of five characteristics of a good church site that will serve as a good guide as you begin looking at specific sites within your identified target area.

#### Community Viability

The church is people, and a good location will have a large concentration of people or will be one that is easily accessible to a large number of people. A growing residential development with years of potential development ahead is an ideal location. As the area develops both residentially and commercially, it takes on a life of its own, and a church location in the midst of this viability is in a great location to grow along with it.

#### Visibility

An ideal location for church facilities is one in which large numbers of people pass by on their normal daily routine. Church facilities should be in the public view. Good visibility of your church facilities will make a positive statement to your community. Beautiful landscaping, an appealing and inviting campus layout, and welcoming buildings come together to make a powerful statement to your community. As your congregation comes to the location for various ministry activities, the campus comes alive with people—signifying to the community that your church is alive and serving people at their point of need.

#### Accessibility

Sometimes a location may be visible but not readily accessible. In most cases, accessibility must

take the lead. I recently had the occasion to travel to a church which was very visible from a major highway—but not accessible from that same highway! It took a few wrong turns until I made it on to a street that took me to the church. In cases like this, the difficulty in getting to the church will outweigh its visible location. Divided highways can often have the same effect, restricting access to traffic coming from the “wrong” direction. A property location that restricts access (for whatever reason) should not be considered unless it has many other merits that overcome this significant liability.

#### Capability

The location of your church site should have real capability for development. The “lay of the land” should lend itself to logical development without having to overcome significant limitations. For example, a corner location has better long-term potential than a wide, narrow, or irregular one. Generally speaking, odd shapes are more difficult to effectively utilize because the angles limit building location and traffic circulation. They also limit access and egress, which in today’s multi-car families is a vital consideration. In addition to the physical shape of the land, other considerations should be taken into account:

- ▶ Are there utility easements that would restrict development?
- ▶ Will topographical elements interfere with development?
- ▶ Will building setbacks and code restrictions be a problem?
- ▶ Are there other special site considerations that should be taken into account?
- ▶ What are the off-street parking requirements?

Questions like these need to be asked ahead of time, so that the answers are not a surprise after closing on the property!

#### Long-Term Suitability

Having addressed “quality” characteristics, now it is time to turn to a final, “quantitative” one: How much property does a church need? The simple answer is as much as it takes to fulfill and live out the ministry action plans you have developed and are putting in place. If you are developing a ministry centered around “gathering” for worship but “scattering” for discipleship, then the answer is one thing. But if your ministry plans involve multiple worship services and on-site discipleship activities, the answer is something else. If you plan on having a preschool or similar program, the answer is entirely different. And the list can go on and on! A long-standing rule of thumb has been that a church needs one acre for every 100 to 125 people it expects to reach. Assuming that there are not any restrictive physical limitations, this ratio has historically proven to be adequate for parking, building footprint and green space.

Recent trends are indicating that new churches are looking for greater amounts of acreage in order to provide expanded

ministry efforts which require property. There are no hard and fast rules, but when looking for land, consider buying as much as you can afford to buy. Don't just look at land as it exists today, but consider what it will be like (in use and value) 10 years from today. There are many creative ways of acquiring an amount of land that you would initially think is too much. Again, your ministry action plan should be your guide.

### **Who Does the Searching?**

In order to effectively work through all the actions listed above, create a land study task force and authorize them to search out the best possible locations in view of your mission action plan. Three to five people are sufficient for the task force. They should bathe the process in prayer and utilize wisdom, common sense and practicality as they conduct their work. Their goal is to take a complete, specific, reasonable and clear proposal to the appropriate body of the congregation for its consideration.

The location of your future ministry site has implications that will carry forward for decades and generations, both in your

church and your community. It's never too early for a new church to keep an eye open for a strategic location, but it can easily become too late if you don't look ahead and anticipate building needs. Be diligent in prayer and thoughtful in hard work as you seek God's place for His people! ❖

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*Bob Adams, church consultant at J H Batten Inc., is a new "old hand" in church facility design and management. After serving in church administrative and ministry positions for more than 23 years, Adams joined the J H Batten team in 2004 in order to further his passion: helping churches make the most of ministry opportunities through effective use of all their resources. This passion, along with J H Batten's strong construction background, makes a strong team for churches seeking to expand their ministries. For more information, contact Adams at badams@jhbatten.com, call 336.595.8917 or visit the J H Batten Website at www.jhbatten.com.*