



A Church Has Different Kinds of Space

Growth space includes parking, the education building, and the worship center (sanctuary). In the education building, there are different kinds of space. There are rooms for preschoolers (birth through kindergarten), children (grades 1-6), youth (grades 7-12), and adults.

There are other important kinds of space in a church facility. There is fellowship space, office space, and storage. These types of space are important too, in their different ways. However, they won't help your church grow.

Your Church Needs Balanced Space

Balanced space means the capacity in each kind of space properly complements the capacity in the others.

Balanced space means:

- In a church which has Sunday School for all ages, your worship center should have a capacity of 110-120% of your education space.
- Your education space supports the capacity of your worship center. Flipping the above rule of thumb around, your education space should have a capacity of 80 to 83% of your worship capacity.
- Your preschool space supports the preschoolers for both the Sunday School hour and the worship hour. You might say, you are using this space twice.
- Your parking lot supports the maximum capacity of your worship center.
- Your education building has the right mix of spaces for the various age groups.

More people attend worship services than Sunday School. First, people looking for a new church home will usually visit a worship service before visiting a Sunday School class. Some members are elderly or have health concerns which means they can attend for only one hour, and they elect to attend the worship service. Some members simply don't want to attend Sunday School. Some churches fail to emphasize small group Bible Study. So, worship attendance is generally 110-120% of your Sunday School attendance.

You don't want to get below that. If you get too far above that, then you could have a half-filled room and it would impact morale.

Your Parking Lot Should Support the Maximum Capacity of Your Worship Center.

Here's how it works... Those who attend Sunday School get the first pick of the parking spaces. Those who arrive later for worship must settle for what's left over. If there isn't a good space – or a space people can easily locate – they will often give up and go home. They simply will not drive around your parking lot seeking the very last remaining parking space.

Remember, Wal-Mart builds their parking lots to support the crowd on Christmas Eve. They don't expect their customers to park out on the road somewhere.

In most churches, a fraction less than 2 people come to church in one car or truck, around 1.9. Teenagers often take their own cars. Sometimes, it may almost seem that a family of four will come to church in five cars. So, churches have to provide more parking than we used to.

To calculate how much parking your church needs: Count the cars for several Sundays. Then, take the attendance and divide it by the number of cars – that's your average number of people per vehicle. Then, take your largest attendance for the past year and divide by the average number of people per vehicle. That's the number of spaces you will need. Don't forget to add extra parking spaces for growth.

Education Space Should Support the Capacity of the Worship Center

While more people attend worship services than Sunday School, most of the people who attend Sunday School stay for worship.

If your education building has a capacity of 60, that would not be enough to fill a worship center with a capacity of 120. Most congregations won't have enough people attending the worship service only to make up the difference. Certainly, special occasions in the worship services, such as homecoming, will be exceptions. However, a church with unbalanced space, as this is, will not fill its worship center on a week-in, week-out basis.

Your Education Building Should Have a Balanced Mix for the Various Age Divisions

In rough numbers, a church will often have 15% of its Sunday School attendance in preschool classes, 15% in children's classes, 13% in youth classes, and 57% in adult classes (exact percentages vary somewhat).

Adjusting for Different Age-Grading Plans: Some churches age-grade their children to match the local schools. For example, sometimes the Youth Division is Grades 6-12, instead of 7-12. Sometimes, we will see the K5 Class included with the Children's Division, resulting in K5-Grades 6, instead of Grades 1-6. If you move a class out of a division, then subtract 2.5% from that division. For example, if K5 is counted as part of the Children's Division, then add the 2.5% to the 15% to arrive at 17.5% for the Children's Division. Then, subtract 2.5% from the Preschool Division to arrive at 12.5%.

Space Needed by Each Age Group

The different age divisions require varying amounts of space per person and each age group has its own needs in relation to their rooms. Preschoolers need 35 square feet per person, Children need 25 square feet, and Youth and Adults need 12 square feet per person.

Preschool Space (Bed Babies to K5): Preschoolers need *almost* as much space as all your adults! Say you have a church that averages 100 people in Sunday School. Say the preschoolers average 15 in attendance. By comparison, the adult division averages 57. That doesn't mean the preschoolers need 15% of the total floor space in your education building. Preschoolers need more square feet per person. 15 preschoolers with 35 square feet per person adds up to a total of 525 square feet. At 12 square feet per person, the Adult Division will need a total of 684 square feet. So, the preschoolers need almost as much space as all of the adults put together, even though there are far fewer of them. Yet, in many churches, preschoolers are assigned the smallest rooms in the church.

It surprises some that the younger the person, the more space they need. However, as we think about it, it makes sense. Adults go into a classroom, sit in a chair, and won't move until the class is over. Little ones would find that to be a form of torture. Preschoolers learn by playing and need room to move around.

In younger preschool rooms, changing tables and baby beds are needed. We could put three adults in the space taken up by one baby bed.

The older preschool rooms need kitchen sets, tables, bookshelves, toys, etc. For preschoolers, 35 square feet per child is the standard. In our state, 32 square feet is the minimum required by law in day care facilities. This is what parents are used to seeing provided for their children. When they consider joining your church, this is what they will be looking for.

To get a picture of what this amount of space looks like, imagine each child getting his or her own playpen. That's the amount of space you need in your preschool rooms.

Children's Space (Grades 1-6): Children need a little less space than preschoolers – 25 square feet per child. Like preschoolers, they need room for tables, equipment, and learning activities.

Some may say, "But the children don't care what kind of space they are in!" The size and quality of the room impacts the learning environment in ways

neither we nor the children may realize. At our church, a class of preschoolers were in rooms that were much too small. We were in a building program, and just had to live with the inadequate space until the new building was completed. It was noticed that immediately after we moved into the new space the preschoolers seemed happier and cried less frequently.

And even if the children don't care, parents do care... a lot! Moms and dads are more particular than ever about the quality of space their children are in. If it's not clean, fresh-smelling, attractive, and roomy enough, the parents will not bring them back. The preschool class will not be the only class that is hurt by this; the young married class loses the parents as potential members also. One of keys for reaching young families is quality preschool and children's space.

Youth (Grades 7-12): Youth need at least 12 feet per person in their classrooms. Adult rooms work fine for youth classes.

If you have a dual use room for youth, one that serves as an opening assembly area and as a classroom, then you will want to provide a little extra room. To allow room for fellowship before everything gets started, the ideal is 15-18 square feet per person in dual-use areas. Be sure to take this in consideration if this is the room used for Wednesday night youth Bible studies, or something similar.

Adults: Adults need 12 square feet per person in their classrooms. However, if a classroom has a table for a coffee pot, decorative furniture, a piano, etc., you have to deduct the space they take up from the total square feet in the room. There is nothing wrong with those things, but naturally, we can't sit on top of the piano. If adults sit around a table, then the capacity of the room is the number of chairs you can fit around the table, regardless of the number of square feet in the room.

Unless There is Ample Room, There isn't Room

The “80% Rule” is a “rule of thumb” which states that when any space is averaging 80% of its capacity, it is full, and growth will stop. Some who serve more contemporary churches place this percentage in the mid-70-percentiles.

During summer vacations and holiday weekends, your attendance will be lower than 80%. Easter Sunday will fill the room to capacity. But over the course of the year, 80% is pretty much the best you can hope to average. Now, there are exceptions — if revival has broken out in your church or you are in a building program and there is “light at the end of the tunnel.”

This rule of thumb applies to every Sunday School class, the worship center, the parking lot, and even the choir loft. In fact, let's consider the choir loft (if your church doesn't have a choir, this still makes the point). If you were a new member of a church, enjoyed singing, and saw empty seats in the choir loft, you might consider it an opportunity. On the other hand, if all the seats were already filled with choir members, you might not feel needed. Our space is telling people if we've been expecting them... or not.

People don't like to pack in like sardines. A full classroom (or choir loft) communicates to prospects that another person isn't needed. If a visiting family of four walks into a worship center they will all want to sit together. However, if they can't find four seats together, for all practical purposes they consider the room to be full.

Put another way: If you are looking for a new classroom for a class to average eight, you need to find them a room that will hold ten, or more.

If you are planning a building, build for where you are trying to go, not for where you are now. Prayerfully establish what you think you can average in attendance. Then, using the 80% rule, build 125% of the space needed for that average. For example, if your church expects to average 80, build enough space for 100—multiply 80 by 125% and you get 100. Because, if you build for 80 people, you will end up averaging only 64.

Is there a “space choke-point” for your church's growth? If any one kind of space is too small for your church, then it can serve as a choke point for your

entire church's capacity. Sometimes things get to going really well in the life of the church. Attendance may rise above this ceiling for a while. But then attendance settles back down to the "old normal" level. No one seems to be able explain what happened. It is a subconscious thing, but the people are adjusting the crowd size to fit the building.

One kind of space can hold back the entire church. This could be the parking lot, or a particular age group in Sunday School, or the worship center. ***But if your space is out of balance, growth will stop when the smallest space has reached its capacity.***

Recommended Action Steps

1. Study your space. Measure to learn the capacity for each classroom. Know how many adults, youth, children, or preschoolers you could put in each classroom. Do you have room to grow?
2. Decide whether your space is presently in balance. Consider parking, the worship center, and each age group in Sunday School.
3. Consider whether you need to reassign classrooms to overcome a "growth choke-point" to get space back into balance. Would simply reassigning some classrooms do the trick? Determine if unused rooms could be converted to classrooms to provide room for growth.
4. Consider whether you need to build new space or expand your parking lot.