

a place for worship

Article 4
March, 2020

This is the fourth article in our series called A Place for Worship. Through this series, drawing on our experience with hundreds of church projects, we hope to provide a resource for churches who want to create facilities that help support their ministry goals.

We will explore important principles of how to create excellent spaces that inspire worship, encourage community, and facilitate spiritual growth. We look forward to sharing this journey with you. - Steve Hammer, BPH Architects



Alternate Venues

So if the church is not the building, what is the purpose of a place for worship? It really is a place where believers gather to worship the Creator of the universe, and to grow spiritually and be prepared to go out into the world to share the Christian faith through word and action. It is also a place for building relationships with other believers and for building families on a strong foundation. While the church is not a building, buildings can be an important part of the church's ministry and a tool for meeting ministry goals.

In this edition of our newsletter, we want to explore the subject of alternate venues for the church to gather. Since it is about the gathering and not the building, it seems logical that the gathering could happen in a wide variety of types of spaces. And today, we are seeing that the gathering can even happen in a virtual environment on line. More about this later.

As property for new development becomes more scarce, and as planning and building regulations become more strict, many churches are looking into alternatives to traditional church buildings. It is actually a pretty exciting trend where churches can make a home out of almost any type of building. We have had the privilege of working on some interesting structures, from a 100-year-old barn to a high tech fabric tensile structure and everything in between.

Pictured at the right is New Community Church. They remodeled the barn on their property into a worship center, they used the mansion for offices, and they erected a high quality insulated tent for children's chapel.

“...upon this rock I will build My church...”

The Church is not the building. There, I said it. When people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them I design churches. I've been a church architect for over 35 years and have worked on hundreds of church projects. But I'm the first to admit that the Church is not the building. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus was not talking about a literal physical foundation stone as on a building, but about His Church.

The word church in the Bible comes from the Greek word ecclesia or ekklesia, which means a called out company or assembly. Wherever it is used in the Bible, it refers to people. I like how it is stated in 1 Peter 2:5 "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house."



The Olson Mansion Barn

[Click the photo above for an article on the barn history](#)



The Pavilion

Some other examples of alternate venues we have worked on;

First Baptist Church Salem, converted an existing car dealership into a family life center.

Centro Palabra Viviente in Everett is converting an existing vehicle emissions testing facility into a church.

Sonrise Christian Center Everett started by leasing space in an existing tilt up concrete office building. Over time they expanded through series of tenant improvements and they eventually bought the building.

New Life Church opened their new Kent campus in a retail center right next to Planet Fitness.

If you are just starting the process of looking for a new home for your church body, we would recommend partnering with a good church real estate consultant and architect.

Over the last several years, we have been evaluating dozens of possible buildings for various

church groups, and we have found it is critical to do a feasibility study before committing to the lease or purchase.

This study should look at programming (will the building function for the intended purpose), regulatory issues (are there code requirements that could impact the project) and the budget (can the cost of the project meet the project budget).

Programmatically, we must determine if there is enough parking, if there is a room with high enough ceilings and minimal columns that don't block sight lines in the worship center, etc.

Although there are some advantages to remodeling an existing building rather than building new, there are a number of code-related issues that may need to be addressed when creating a place for worship in an alternate venue.

Among these are land use issues (including parking, drainage, landscaping), fire protection

(including sprinklers and alarms), handicap access (including the main entrance and elevator access to upper floors), seismic structural upgrades, energy code upgrades (insulation values of walls, roofs and windows), historic landmarks issues, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing system upgrades, etc.

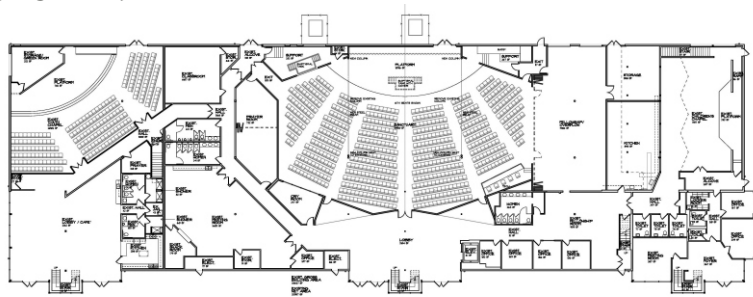
Even an existing church building can be impacted. If there is a remodel of more than 50% of the existing area or more than 50% of the existing value, it could trigger many of the upgrades listed above.

Finally, if you want to see the alternate venue taken to the next level, look around. What are we supposed to do now if we can't meet in large groups due to health concerns?

Many churches have already implemented a virtual church service where anyone can access remotely on line. This still requires planning, like integration of technology into the facility, but it can be a successful solution to a difficult situation.



Salem First Baptist



Proposed Layout for Sonrise Christian Center

Watch out for the upgrades

While it may seem like a very economical approach to move a church into an office building or similar structure, there is something important to be aware of. A church building is considered an A, or assembly occupancy in the building code, but an office is a B, or business occupancy. Each occupancy type has different code requirements, and an A occupancy tends to be much more restrictive. For example, an A occupancy would likely require fire sprinklers when a B occupancy may not. The change of occupancy could trigger this and other code requirements that can be very extensive and costly.

Years ago, we had a church approach us to remodel an existing storage warehouse (that they had recently purchased) and convert it into a church. We did a preliminary feasibility study and concept sketch, and approached the City to see if there were any issues we should watch out for. We also got a structural engineer involved. It turns out the warehouse building was designed for the most economical structure possible to keep costs down. But a church has a higher factor of safety required in the code for the structural design. It turned out to be technically infeasible to change the occupancy of this building and they had to sell it. We wish they would have come to us before they made the purchase.

case study



Before Renovation



After Renovation



Interior of Meeting Room

The Community Christian Fellowship project has an interesting back story. The building was originally the library for the local school district. It was built in the mid 20th century with dead flat roofs, and it covered the entire lot, right up to all property lines.

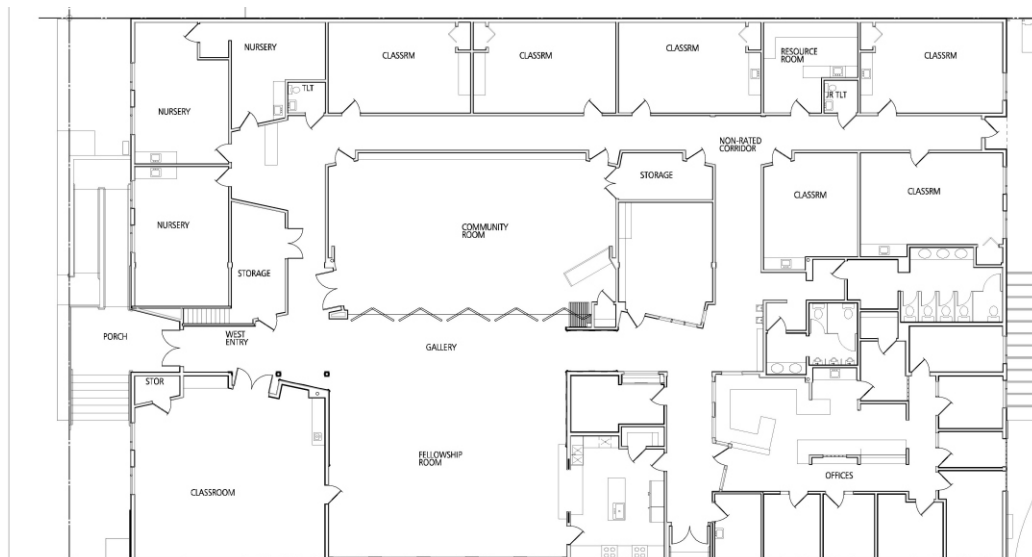
Because of the location right across the street from the performing arts center that the church leases for their services, they decided to purchase the property and build a new multipurpose facility with classrooms, offices, and a fellowship / meeting room for up to 300 people.

In the time since the library was originally built, the zoning code changed and required a setback from all property lines. If the church were to tear down and rebuild from scratch, they would have had to follow the new code restriction and they could only build a narrow strip of building about 6 feet wide.

However, we found out that if we kept the existing structure, we would be grandfathered in to the original zero setbacks and we could rebuild the project to the full lot area.

Costs were kept down through a Team Build approach and with volunteer labor to demolish the existing building elements right down to the steel frame.

As you can see from the before and after photos, the result was a complete transformation of the building. It turned out to be a beautiful building inside and out and it meets the ministry goals of the church.



Floor Plan



about bpharchitects

A leader in church planning and design in the Northwest, BPH Architects has worked on over 700 church projects since 1979.

We are a small business providing highly individualized service to our clients. Our principals, Bart Shorack and Steve Hammer have direct hands-on involvement in, and they are committed to success for every project.

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Bart Shorack



Steve Hammer

Planning a project?

If you are planning a project, or if you would like further explanation of concepts introduced in this article, we would like to be a resource for you.

Please call or email us to schedule a free 45-minute phone consultation. You can send us a PDF of your current floor plan and any ideas you may be considering, and we can discuss the process, provide information on feasibility issues, and brainstorm the project with you.

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