

A few years ago, a CBFNC-sponsored research project identified the greatest challenge facing our local congregations as *Aging Membership*. This was certainly no surprise to most people involved in congregational life over the past few years. Yet, a less publicized trend has recently bubbled to the surface that is equally concerning for many churches across North Carolina (and across the country). That is, *Aging Church Facilities*. It is only logical to assume that as our local congregations age, so too do the buildings that house them.

Many CBFNC congregations across our state are blessed to have a beautiful sanctuary, an abundance of education space, and possibly even a large recreation center. Church facilities frequently parallel the historical mission of the local church (worship, outreach, ministry, etc.) through the decades.

Current worshippers, who may not have a historical connection to their local congregation, can often gauge what the church's priorities were in a given generation by the construction dates of the campus facilities. At best, these facilities reflect the unique calling of a particular congregation to a particular mission. At worst, a hodge-podge of various church facilities simply reflects the ministry trends of the times.

However, when considering the current challenge of aging facilities, we must not overlook the faithfulness of the people who followed God's leadership to build them in years past. The construction of these facilities was often the result of visionary fundraising campaigns that required significant financial sacrifice on the part of church members.

A few common refrains are easily heard in 2018 among local congregations (beyond Baptist): failing HVAC units; leaking roofs; outdated children and youth spaces; cracking parking lot concrete; new building codes; and the general rising costs of facility maintenance. When these challenges are coupled with decreasing attendance, it can put a significant strain on a church budget.

CBFNC congregations are responding in creative ways. A high percentage of local congregations in our Fellowship are big steeple or "First Church" congregations, often located in the center of their community. Innovative ministry has been birthed in many of these congregations because of the accessibility of their facilities. The development of Weekday School Programs, Food Pantries, ESL classes, After-School Programs, AA meetings, and community gardens have all been created by traditional

congregations responding to community needs. Community needs, however, vary greatly in each different setting.

Churches in smaller communities across our state like Edenton, Edenton, and First, North Wilkesboro, host community events like Baccalaureate services, dinners for hospital or school employees, local athletic team banquets, and blood drives, among other events. These churches leverage the location and size of their facilities to meet community needs. First, Jamestown, has also recently begun a local farmers market that draws people from the community to their church parking lot on Wednesday evenings. The goodwill created in the community through these local endeavors may or may not ever lead to new members, but is certainly in keeping with the mission of the local church to serve its community.

In a large city like Charlotte, St. John's utilizes its facility to benefit faith-based non-profits. St. John's has set aside office space in their church facility for organizations like Crop Walk and Baptist Peace Fellowship, among others. Churches in college

communities like First, Elon, and First, Boone, regularly host meals and other events for college students in their community.

However, some church facilities have simply outlived their usefulness. Perhaps a building is no longer functional for current and/or future ministries, or the building has become too expensive to renovate. Whether it is a historic sanctuary, a large unused educational building, or a recreational facility that no longer serves the needs of the community, many local congregations are forced to ask tough questions about their specific calling and mission. The difficulty of these congregational conversations is heightened by the deep-seated emotional connections to decades of effective ministries. Pressure can also come from local municipalities or nearby organizations (businesses, colleges, etc.) to sell or re-purpose church facilities for other uses. First on Fifth, Winston Salem, has recently made the difficult decision to tear down a portion of their facility for the sake of future ministry opportunities.

Since church buildings are often the biggest financial investment made by a community of faith, this topic requires intentional prayer, honest dialogue, and faith family discussions. Poised for future ministry opportunities, CBFNC congregations across our state are thinking imaginatively about their church buildings. As faithful Baptists, the decisions are ours to make.

We want to hear from you! Given the wide variety of congregational settings of CBFNC churches, let us know how your community of faith creatively utilizes your current facilities. E-mail me at seth.bix@cbfnc.org with your church's story.

