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THE POWER OF SPACE: THE OVERLOOKED INFLUENCER

“Why is the early service so...what? Dull? Bland?” Pastor Jack was deep into his Monday morning debrief—a rehash of the weekend services. “The other two services on Sunday seem to be more alive...and that early service seems...I don’t know, dead,” he thought. “Maybe it’s because it’s early—and people aren’t awake....”

This is not the first time Jack wondered about that early service. “You know,” he thought further, “it’s not that way for the Easter sunrise service—and that’s *really* early.” He began to think about the Saturday service: “That service on Saturday is a little better, but not much. I just wish I could put a little more life into Saturday and that early Sunday service.”

Jack is not the issue. By now, you probably have already figured out that the two latter services on Sunday have more people. Guess what? That is not the issue either. Many small churches—some in store fronts—have exciting worship services with thirty to forty people.

The issue is space: how much of it is filled, and the influence generated by a “full house” or...empty seats—regardless of the size of the crowd, in numbers. This is just one of several issues of space. It is called the *science of propinquity*: the study of physical or psychological influence. Space is related to the influence of physical surroundings.

Kent Hunter is founder of Church Doctor Ministries and the author of several books and numerous articles. Kent’s passion is to help churches become more effective. This has led to the development of a pilgrimage focused on spiritual health and vitality for congregations. He sees evidence of God moving in new ways and is encouraged about the future of the Christian movement in this generation. Hunter says he resonates with the words of Robert Frost: “I am not a teacher, but an awakener.”



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MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

- ▶ The *Church Doctor® Report* is provided at no cost. Forward it to those in your network of influence and add value to their lives!
- ▶ Forward it to staff and leaders in your church, denomination, network, or fellowship.

How much effort do you put into intentionally thinking about space when it comes to the effectiveness of your church? Think about Jack and that early service. He could hold that service in a smaller room, like the church's chapel. The result? More excitement, engagement, and yes, more impact for the Kingdom. Winston Churchill once said, "We shape our buildings and then they shape us."

WORSHIP AND SPACE

Did you know that when your worship service is 80% full (on a regular basis), it gives the subtle communication to first time guests, "there is no room for me here"? That "80% rule" has been around a long time. But what about this? When the worship space is 20% full (80% empty) it has an equally debilitating subconscious impact on lifelong members. The subtle message is, "we worship in a sinking ship."

The distance between the preacher and the people is another factor of influence by space. The power of God's Word well preached is not the issue. It is always powerful. But a large distance between the preacher and the people serves as an invisible filter.

Not long ago, my colleague, Tracee, and I presented an *Outreach Clinic* on a Saturday. This workshop gets high level response wherever we go. But this church didn't follow our directions to set up the workshop. Their first mistake was wrong thinking: they were more interested in a big show with lots of people—typical program thinking. We told them to approach it as a movement by inviting people who are already interested in outreach—people in whom God is already moving. Second, they did not ask for a financial commitment beforehand. Therefore, people were not invested in the project. The church got a grant so the workshop would be "free," and, in their thinking, bring in a big crowd. They forgot that people value what they pay for. The morning of the workshop, the area was covered with a few inches of snow. This, along with their poor tactics, resulted in a crowd that was half of what they expected. They had set up tables and chairs for 250 people. Instead of a symbol of extraordinary attendance—125—it *felt* like a dismal failure, with 125 empty seats. How foolish! The large crowd of 125 was a victory for the momentum of that church, and their amateur approach produced a subconscious feeling of failure!

Back to worship: if you have a pulpit that is intentionally separated by space from the crowd, and, worse yet, elevated, get out of it and walk the floor as you preach. If the crowd begins in the tenth row from the front, go down to row nine and preach. You will feel the difference. Everyone will. This is the power of space!

If you don't have pews or chairs bolted to the floor, reduce the number of seats so that the room is comfortably full. What excites you on Christmas Eve? What inspires you to be moved about God's impact in this world? The ushers frantically setting up more chairs just before the worship begins! Momentum breeds momentum. Space issues have impact!

STAFF

We work with many churches that have some issues among staff. They call us in to conduct a *Staffing Consultation*, which is preceded by every staff member taking spiritual gifts surveys and personality inventories. Those surveys are helpful. But what is not so clear to many is the influence of space.

TEN WAYS TO INCREASE THE POWER OF SPACE

1. Move staff closer together.
2. Spatially connect ministries that cooperate.
3. Reduce the gulf between the preacher and the congregation.
4. Name your space with words that communicate.
5. Recognize the power of first impressions.
6. Think of your lobby like Starbucks.
7. Impact newcomers: parking, reception, bathrooms, nursery.
8. Focus on unspoken, visual messages in the worship space.
9. Move, as much as possible, to a marketplace setting.
10. The pastor's best ministry occurs out of the office.

“So, Pastor Russell, tell me about your office setup. Where are your staff located?” asked the Church Doctor during an interview.

“Well, the Associate Pastor and I are in the front office, where you come in, just inside the main entrance. The Youth Pastor has an office on the other side of the wall behind the altar over in the church. The Principal of our school has an office in the school, at the other end of the facility. The Children’s Minister is upstairs in the little office in the northeast corner.” The Pastor thought for a moment: “Yea, that’s it. Now, can we focus on some of our communication issues?”

“You just did,” the Church Doctor replied.

The space proximity between staff has significant influence for clear communication. It is called “water cooler spontaneous communication.”

“But they can shoot each other an email,” the pastor replied. An email exchange is not a normal conversation. It is two conversations without spontaneous interaction. Emails have no eye contact. Face to face time is space time, and space time is powerful for team work. That’s the power of space!

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

“When does the service begin?” asked the first-time guest to the greeter at the door. The answer was, “at 10:00.” It could have been: “When you entered the parking lot.”

For guests and members alike, the space they occupy anywhere at church is influential. Do you have parking attendants, traffic directors, and greeters out where people park? If so, you are meeting people at the real “front door” of their journey to church—their journey into the presence of God at worship.

For guests, one of the top space influencers is the lobby. Some churches still call it a “narthex”. (One pastor actually had an unchurched guest wonder out loud if that had something to do with feminine hygiene!) Consider calling your narthex or lobby a “gathering area,” and make it look and feel like a cross between your living room and a coffee shop.

The Christian movement thrives on relationships, and the more you can foster personal contact and reduce the institutional feel of the church, the better.

Other areas of spatial influence that are key for first-time guests (and many members) are clean restrooms and a well-run, safe nursery. Space matters!

OUTBOUND MINISTRY

When we conduct a *Diagnostic Consultation*, our Church Doctors meet a cross section of the congregation in confidential interviews one on one. This comment is more common than you might think: “I’m not sure what our pastor does. He is never in his office, it seems. He keeps regular office hours, except for emergencies, of course. But he’s not there, I guess, more than ten hours total in a week. The church I used to go to back home—that pastor was always in the office.” Our Church Doctors listen and take notes, but we have a different worldview.

Not much high end or effective ministry occurs in an office. Those pastors who are full-time counselors or church administrators are exceptions. But for most pastors, the best work is out meeting people.

Pastors should have an office in their home or somewhere that is quiet, to prepare messages or Bible classes. An office at the church is prone to interruptions and provides the worst management of time for high level content preparation. Space matters!

When a pastor is in the office constantly, it signals a “y’all come” philosophy of ministry. It communicates that the church building is the centerpiece of ministry. The message is, “If you want to see the pastor, you have to come to the office.” On the secular mission field where most churches exist, real mission occurs away from the church building. Unchurched people rarely just “show up” at the church building.

Our Church Doctors increasingly recommend churches move their office space into a shopping center or a strip mall. Where do you think you would find Jesus? He visited the temple, but spent most of His time out with people. The office in the marketplace communicates that the church is outward bound, going to the world, as the Great Commission says: “Go!” If you expect the world to come to you, you may have a long wait. Jesus said, John 20:21, “As the Father has sent Me, I send you.” Sometimes ministry works better away from the church. This mentality changes the evangelistic space.

Many think outreach is inviting people to church. Instead, outreach is taking church to people. Instead of inviting someone to church, it is often more productive to invite them to meet for coffee. A coffee shop may be a better environment to introduce them to Christ, through your relationship. John Wesley once said, “The world is my parish.” Space matters!

To schedule a phone appointment to discuss this topic further with Kent, call Terry Atz at 1-800-626-8515.

KEY RESOURCES

Church Doctor Ministries. *Asset Analysis Special Focus Consultation* (service). www.churchdoctor.org.

Church Doctor Ministries. *Facility Planning Consultation* (service). www.churchdoctor.org.

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