

FAMILY LIFE CENTERS AND CONGREGATIONS

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

Congregations across Indiana are excited about their ministries. Some envision a bustling facility that not only brings the congregational family together, but openly welcomes the community for youth sporting events, cultural activities, recreational pursuits and outreach interests.

To meet these needs, many congregations put their energies into building Family Life Centers. Some of these centers attract large crowds and host a myriad of activities throughout the week. Others seem to sit empty until Sunday morning. We, at the Center for Congregations, found this to be an interesting and curious observation.

What are the differences between the busy, active Family Life Center and the often-deserted Family Life Center? What are the unique purposes for which these structures are built by congregations? How are those purposes lived out through the use of the facility? Why the name “Family Life Center”? Is there something happening in these Centers that bring together today’s often fractured families?

We decided to explore these questions and find folks who could help us understand the realities behind what we were observing. We interviewed leaders from six Indiana congregations with Family Life Centers. We also talked to those with extensive experience and expertise in congregational building projects – a local architect with a focus on religious properties and two denominational leaders who advise congregations about building projects within their denominations.

Although each story is different and each congregation is unique, there are common threads, relevant information and solid ideas and advice for those considering building Family Life Centers or for those contemplating the use of such structures.

FINDINGS FROM THE SPECIALISTS

From our specialists, we learned that there is no common model for Family Life Centers. A big gym is a



typical feature in virtually all of these kinds of facilities. The Family Life Center is commonly used for activities such as meal gatherings, recreation, disaster relief, community ministry, after-school programming, day care, alternative worship centers and more. Although host to many important ministries, the name Family Life Center isn’t entirely accurate. Families are not usually brought together with these facilities, which can also bear the name Discipleship Center, Family Celebration Center, Recreational Outreach Center and more.

We found that congregations rarely make use of outside resources to assist them in planning and building a Family Life Center. Our sources indicate very few use denominational resources or report talking to leaders of other congregations who have experience with a Family Life Center.

Congregations are motivated to build Family Life Centers for a variety of reasons. Their leaders and members want to host large, successful events, such as a health fair or major social event. Leaders anticipate that the building can be used as an activity center for congregational endeavors and large meals together. The centers are seen as a way to reach out to neighbors by hosting community events.

Ethnicity and age of a congregation reflects different reasons for wanting to build a Family Life Center. Young and/or ethnic congregations tend to be



FAMILY LIFE CENTER is defined as (for purposes of the Center’s exploration reported here) a facility a congregation builds, renovates or purchases for activities, other than worship or Sunday school, for their members and/or community. The Family Life Center may or may not be physically connected to other facilities of the congregation.

motivated by a desire to serve their communities, while older and Caucasian congregations tend to want to serve their congregations.

Regardless of intent, most Family Life Centers are utilized primarily by the congregation, not the community. Many Family Life Centers are underutilized.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Our specialists offered advice on common mistakes to avoid when building a Family Life Center:

- Building for one kind of event and/or one specific age group
- Failure to plan and budget for staff to run and maintain the center
- Over-building
- Building a single office space in the facility (for abuse avoidance more than one office is imperative)
- Failure to consider acoustics for all potential uses of the building
- Not having a clear ministry statement
- Overlooking logistics
- Starting the project before congregational leaders really know what they want

A congregation considering building a Family Life Center should have a detailed ministry plan for use of the facility before it is built. Success requires a pre-planned budget for use of the Center, including activity, maintenance and staffing costs. If the facility is intended for community use, the first three months are crucial for having all programming up and running in the new facility.

Congregations with average worship attendance of 250-400 with multiple staff and regularly scheduled programming typically have the capacity to build and successfully sustain use of Family Life Centers.

Often important issues are over-looked when planning a Family Life Center. Congregational leaders should be sure to consider security, lighting, landscaping, entrances, opening or closing access between buildings, vandalism and emergency exits.

CONGREGATIONAL STORIES

Leaders from six Indiana congregations shared with us their experiences planning, building and utilizing their Family Life Centers. We talked to them about pre-build planning, facility management and programming, congregational/community impact, and post-build evaluation. Following are their stories.

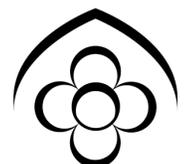
MEMBER SUPPORT NEEDED

One small, suburban congregation (average worship attendance of 190) built its space in 1997. Although the original motivation was growth happening within the congregation, leaders envisioned using the space for family-oriented community events and community athletics, as well as for congregational dinners, programs and activities.

The vision for the Family Life Center was the pastor’s. The response from the congregation was “less than resounding.” Due to lackluster support from the congregation, they were not able to raise enough funds to afford the size and scope originally proposed.

Plans for the use of the building were derailed by the reduction of the scope of the project. It has never been used for its envisioned purpose. Currently it is being used for worship. Since there are now pews in the space, it is not conducive to many other uses.

The predominant learning, according to the person interviewed, is the importance





of congregational buy-in. It is important to get more people involved in the decision-making process.

PRE-PLANNING IS KEY

This healthy, 140-year-old congregation is located in a struggling urban community. After much thought, prayer and research, the leaders and members decided to stay in their landlocked location and to create a community space to provide youth activities that would help bring peace to the neighborhood.

FRESH IDEAS, including leasing a portion of the space to an independent daycare agency, have also helped to generate needed income.

The inspiration of the senior pastor resulted in the design of a structure of such great scale that it overwhelmed the capacity of its members. After several lagging months while the project stalled, church leaders were able to rally the support of various other local congregations to renew interest and financial backing to complete the build. A scaled-back version of the project was constructed and opened for use. Maintenance and utility costs have taken a toll on the congregation's operating budget, but other local congregations have contributed financial support.

Fresh ideas, including leasing space to a daycare, have also helped to generate needed income. In addition to the daycare, the facility is used for a weekly tutoring program, a dance class, senior programming and a large community basketball league. Eighty-five percent of the building's use is by the community. While many of the programs initially proposed are still in the process of being instituted, use of the space is frequent and consistent.

Leaders from this congregation offer suggestions for others considering a similar building project. Include as much as you can in your plan and talk with others about it.

Discover available lending opportunities from your own denomination before considering a loan from a bank. Don't accept any contract on use of the space prior to completion of the facility.

FINDING YOUR NICHE

A suburban congregation with an average worship attendance of 400 built a unique Family Life Center. The facility was constructed in multiple phases and has an assortment of separate-but-attached buildings. This was the brainchild of the pastor, but was supported by the congregation.

The space includes a Pre-K-10th grade school with plans to expand to the 12th grade within the next few years; a cafeteria and full commercial kitchen; full court and ½ gym with locker rooms and showers and multiple office spaces. Since the original edifice was completed in 2000, there have been four expansions, due in large part to the rapidly increasing enrollment in the school.

Although their motivation for building the Family Life Center was to serve their growing congregation and school (more than 60% of the students come from outside the congregation), they also desired to generate more community interaction. After the gym was completed, the congregation began sports programs, such as a seasonal volleyball league and 3-on-3 basketball offered to the community as a ministry of the congregation.

The pastor offers these recommendations to congregations wanting to build similar facilities: Be sure that your congregation can afford to do what is planned; and build as big as you can afford the first time so that you don't out-grow the space too fast.

GROWING INTO YOUR SPACE

Although recent growth at this rural congregation has more than doubled the size



LEADERS of the congregation stepped out in faith, confident that their numbers would increase. The small nearby city was experiencing expansion and the congregation wanted to reach out to the community and make connections with the families that had begun to move into the area.

of its membership, there was little growth at the time of planning for the Family Life Center. Leaders stepped out in faith, confident that their numbers would increase. The small nearby city was experiencing expansion and the congregation wanted to reach out to the community and make connections with the families that had begun to move into the area.

In the first several months after opening, the Family Life Center was used by the community more than 80% of the time. The space is such a welcome addition to their blossoming community that the congregation was forced to look more closely at limiting community use of the building in order to accommodate church services and ministries. Most of the congregational programs offered now at this church are new since the Family Life Center was completed. The addition of space has allowed them to be more creative in their ministries, including a sports ministry and open basketball and volleyball for families.

Congregation leaders' advice for others is to be wary of cutting corners financially. Five or six years down the road, those decisions could end up limiting potential future uses or changes. They further note "the building did not bring the people in. It was the attitude and actions of the leadership and the changes in their connection to the community that made the difference."

WISDOM AND EXPERIENCE

With more than 2,700 average worship attendance, this congregation represents a suburban megachurch. The building of their Family Life Center was driven, in part, by space constraints for their ministries.

The congregation's existing facility included a Family Life Center, which they decided to keep with new uses directed specifically at their congregational family members. They

wanted to "allow the new space to function as an evangelical opportunity in order to bring the community together within the space."

The new center is an example of a highly effective planning process, strong congregational buy-in and an abundance of community support. The facility itself, which includes a fitness center and wellness classes, is expansive and offers a broad variety of activity options to both congregation members and non-members in the community. There are youth and adult sports leagues, a preschool, and childcare for parents who are utilizing the fitness center or taking classes. Use of the space is membership-based, with more than 2,000 memberships generated and better than 60% of those from non-members. Even in the current economic setting, this congregation's Family Life Center operates with a financial surplus.

"Dream big and make good use of the wisdom and experience from other congregations that have done this kind of build," advise leaders of this successful Family Life Center.

KNOWING THE COSTS

This large, active congregation with a school planned its Family Life Center primarily for membership use from the very beginning, with little to no intention of use for the community. With an average worship attendance of 900, members planned the facility to be used as an extension of the school space and to offer a gym, as well as a stage and kitchen.

Some office and meeting areas were constructed along with a general use open space which connects the new structure with the original building. Primary use of the new facility is for the school and related activities. Other than a youth basketball league, a weight watchers group and some community events hosted throughout the year, there are few community uses of the building.



CONGREGATIONAL INTERVIEWS confirmed what the experts had initially iterated — success, to a large degree, is directly related to the effective discernment and planning which took place before the build.

This Family Life Center was well crafted and includes several artistic features. The overall cost, including the increase in utilities and basic operational expenses, has created a large debt for the congregation and has strapped the operating budget to such an extent that plans to renovate the previously existing office space are put on hold indefinitely. However, the congregation is very happy with the Family Life Center and has, for the most part, been forthcoming with financial support.

Congregational leaders advise other congregations considering such a build to “make sure you know what it really costs and the amount of the actual monthly debt, so that proper preparation can be made.”

FINDINGS FROM CONGREGATIONS

From these congregational stories, we learned that Family Life Centers often house a wide range of activities, such as organized sports, community meetings, fitness training, tutoring, recreation and formal or informal education. We learned that unanticipated operating costs can create a financial burden on a congregation, and that the change of clergy can impact the usage of a new facility.

When building a Family Life Center, congregational leaders tend to lean more toward either community use or congregational use of the facility. While the facilities often house activities for both uses, typically the driving focus is one or the other. The congregation may envision its facility and programs for use by members of the congregation and/or the congregation’s school. Or congregational leaders may foresee a space that is regularly open to the general public, therefore building and maintaining a connection to the community.

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Reasons for building a Family Life Center are as varied as the congregations which build them – shortage of existing space, evangelistic outreach, congregational growth goals, a desire to impact a neighborhood, the need for school facilities, and more. When planning a Family Life Center, congregational leaders often dream of growth in the faith community, but that dream is commonly not supported by any data or real activity. Other congregations choose to build such facilities because of real growth that is actively occurring in the congregation and/or the community. Sometimes a project is pastor driven – the senior pastor has a vision which he or she expects the congregation to subscribe to and fully support.

Family Life Centers and Congregations is intended to provide insight and guidance to congregations seeking to build “Family Life Centers” for serving their congregations and/or communities. The Center for Congregations hopes that you will find this information useful in your work as a congregation.

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