

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

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"Parking angel, bless me." So prays Rick, a close friend of mine, each and every time he enters a parking lot. Whether our families are going to the movies, or shopping, or to a restaurant, the words are uttered. Of course, the blessing being sought is to find a parking spot right near the door.

Let's confess. All of us have our own prayer for this same thing. We drive up to the parking spot closest to the door and then work our way down the row to the far end of the lot. Sometimes we circle back in the faint hope that someone has left an empty space since the last go-round.

Most research tells us that people consider being within 100 metres of the door as acceptable. After that, the lack of parking moves into the realm of psychological barrier and in the minds of most people it becomes an inconvenience requiring a decision to stay, return later, or go somewhere else.

Church attendees expect the same convenience of parking and consider the same options when it's not there.

People drive everywhere for everything and sometimes households have two or more cars heading off for the same destination. In the 1960s, vehicles carried on average 3.4 people. With affluent, multi-vehicle households, that number now is as low as 1.9. Most municipalities recognize this reality and are adjusting their parking codes accordingly. In the Town of Markham, the new *Places of Worship* bylaw will provide for one of the toughest church parking requirements in the province. One parking space will be needed for every four seats in the worship area. Can other municipalities be far behind?

When asked at a public meeting why they so enthusiastically supported such a tough code, Markham Town Councillors replied in unison that they were being "hounded" by local residents complaining about constant heavy traffic and blocked driveways caused by neighbourhood church attendees. Weekday programs, Saturday weddings, tenant congregations, and Sunday morning worship brought cars to the neighbourhood seven days a week. With this pressure from ratepayers, existing churches are finding their traditional on-street parking being taken away and new churches are being required to build mammoth parking lots.

Churches are discovering their traditional side-street parking posted with new “no parking” signs installed by the municipality. In such cases, church leaders confess that there is some unintentional insensitivity to the needs of neighbours. One person interviewed said, “Some of us would park across driveways, thinking we would just run into the church. A two minute visit often turned out to be a half-hour.” At other churches, neighbours are putting up homemade “no parking” signs. One would suspect that municipal politicians have noticed.

Unfortunately, most church leaders do not give high priority to the needs of parking around their building. They seldom see their parking problems because they arrive early and leave late. But visitors wanting to “check-out” the church usually arrive just in time. When they get there, they cannot help noticing that the minister has a reserved prime spot and members of the early-bird choir have laid claim to the rest of the good parking. With worship starting in minutes, there is little time to even guess where parking might be found. They circle the church in a failed attempt to park, they get turned off, they give up, and they go home. This once-around-the-block routine may not even be attempted if there is a pouring rain or the streets are snow bound.

A lack of parking can definitely be a deterrent to church growth. To help, what follows are some tips from church development literature and personal experiences that might give your congregation both the reality and the appearance of being a welcoming place.

Have a clearly marked drop off area at the curbside or in the parking lot as close to the church door as possible. If people realize they’re going to have to park a distance from the church, there is comfort knowing that passengers can be dropped off before they search for a spot. This is especially true when passengers are elderly, very young, pregnant, arthritic, or have their leg in a cast. And it makes sense for everyone during a rain or snow storm.

Have greeters stationed outside the building (how about in red vests with a church logo on the shoulder). What will these greeters do? They will welcome people and direct first time visitors to their designated parking and give guidance to others as to where additional parking can be found if needed. They will help elderly and handicapped people from cars at the drop-off area and give them an arm to the door. They will ensure the safety of children. They will help the parent or parents with an infant carry in the diaper bags and other things that are needed for the new family addition. They will have a giant umbrella to take people from the car to the door when it rains. Outdoor greeters have a positive and lasting impact on everyone they have an opportunity to serve.

Encourage active members and staff to “park and hike”. The practice of first come, first served does not apply in a welcoming church. Expecting newcomers means doing everything possible to have parking spaces available for them when they arrive. For churches with only street parking, begin a tradition that designates specific curbside spaces close to the church for first time visitor and handicapped parking. If you have a parking lot, buy signs showing visitor parking, put visitor spots near the door, and honour them as you would your handicapped parking.

Let people know where to park. Newcomers finding full church lots or no street parking are obviously going to need an alternative space or they'll head home. Have several sandwich-board signs made up and strategically located around the church and neighbourhood giving specific detail about where additional street or lot parking can be found. If you have made arrangements with a local merchant or school to use their lot, do not keep it a secret. If you rent the lot, make sure obligations and insurance arrangements are clearly spelled out in a lease. If the use of the lot is a gift, thank and acknowledge the donor often and remember to inform your insurer of the parking agreement.

Respect your neighbours' homes and driveways. As more and more municipalities find it necessary to turn streets around churches into "no parking zones", it is prudent for churches to do their absolute best to be a very good and thankful neighbour. Make sure every church member, every tenant, and every wedding guest understands the "code of conduct" that is expected. Thou shalt not park across thy neighbour's driveway (not even a little bit). Thou shalt not litter or trample thy neighbour's property. Thou shalt not hold church meetings and discussion groups on thy neighbour's front lawn.

Finally, it is important to recognize that there are some situations where parking relief may not be possible no matter how attentive you are. Traffic congestion, the virtual disappearance of convenient parking and little hope for expansion because of adjoining land values or zoning have led some congregations to relocate their building to a larger site or to adopt alternatives that are extraordinary in nature.

When Northridge Church in Plymouth, Michigan ran out of room in its lot, the congregation made parking arrangements with a manufacturing company two kilometres away and provided a shuttle bus service. Active members use the distant lot, newcomers park at the church. From the Northridge Church website:

Courtesy, convenience, comfort. That's what you will experience when you use our shuttle service. We encourage our regular attendees and members to park at Johnson Controls. It's door-to-door service! Shuttle hours 8:15 am. to 1:30 pm. every Sunday.

Expecting newcomers is a big part of who we are and why we gather. For every 100 new attendees, 57 more parking spaces are needed. If those spaces are not there when they arrive, then your lack of parking is a barrier to progress and the message is conveyed that the church is unwelcoming. It is important to design and cultivate creative worship and excellent programming, but it is equally important to take a good long look at your parking needs and parking solutions as a first step in your planning for growth.

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