

Car Troubles

Practical ways to deal with too many automobiles.

Carol Stratton | posted 2/16/2009



With only 115 parking spaces and an average of 2,000 worshipers each week, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (MPPC), in the crowded San Francisco Bay area, has an obvious parking shortage. Things got even worse when neighbors petitioned for—and received—a parking ban on the streets around the church on Sundays. Members complained when people they invited to visit the church had to park several blocks away.

Crowded Out

While MPPC's situation may be extreme, many churches face difficult parking challenges. Churches that actively reach out to their communities and invite new people every week should be aware that visitors may not stay if the parking lot is 80 percent full. Even casual church attendees may hesitate to park in a crowded lot and to walk into a packed sanctuary.

How many parking spaces will you need, and how many can you fit on your property? It depends on local ordinances, so always check to make sure your parking lot plans are in compliance.

For example, Bryce Carroll of Carroll Engineering in San Jose, California, cites his local ordinance that requires one parking space for every four seats in the sanctuary, and one additional parking space for each staff member. Typically, a church can fit 100 parking slots on an acre.

MPPC has 12 parking spots labeled as preschool-only parking, so every Sunday it uses portable signs to re-label those spots as "first-time guest" spaces. If a first-time visitor needs directions or help out of a car, a member of the church's welcoming committee stands ready and available at curbside. When staff members presented the idea of converting the dozen slots, they downplayed how members themselves had less parking, and stressed how invited guests would now have parking places when they visit.

Katharine Sherwin, the church's connection director, says keeping a positive presence in the community while working out parking and traffic problems helps the church. When the local school ran out of space for the school district's after-school program, MPPC volunteered to be the host. And when the annual art festival spills over the sidewalks in front of the church on Sunday, the congregation sees this as an opportunity to invite neighbors into the facility, rather than as an annoyance. Church leaders are also engaged in ongoing discussions with the city about more parking, including considerations for a parking garage that could solve problems for both area businesses and MPPC.

Mass Transit

Church vehicles are a staple for group transportation. Many churches own or use 15-passenger vans for transporting people. Those who do so must take extra precautions. In 2005, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration classified 15-passenger vans as dangerous. From 1990 to 2002, the NHTSA determined that 1,576 of these vans were involved in fatal crashes.

The problem with the vans is their high center of gravity and the related instability in emergency maneuvers. These vans are prone to fishtailing and rollovers. In addition, the vans were designed for carrying cargo, not passengers, so some safety features like a reinforced roof and safety glass are often lacking. The dangers are well documented, and federal law prohibits the sale of 15-passenger vans for the school-related transport of students high school-age and younger.

According to Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company spokeswoman Mitzi Thomas, insurance is still available for these vans. If your church uses a 15-passenger van, she suggests you take the following actions:

- Allow no more than 10 passengers in the van at a time.
- Put most of the passengers near the front.
- Make sure all tires are properly inflated.
- Have only experienced drivers operate these vehicles.

With all the warnings issued, and the publicity given this hazard, church leaders face charges of gross negligence if an accident should occur involving a 15-passenger van and these safety precautions were not followed.

A better alternative is to purchase a safer, and more comfortable, small bus. It will cost more (typically starting around \$50,000), but ultimately will be a wise purchase. Church bus purchases have risen in the last few years, increasing by as much as 20 percent. Gerrit Gustafson, marketing manager for Carpenter Bus Sales in Franklin, Tennessee, says churches are trading in their 15-passenger vans for buses, mostly because of the safety issues associated with the vans.

An additional motivation is the comfort of small buses, and the greater ease of getting in and out of a bus compared to a van. This is especially welcomed by older people in the congregation, a group that will continue to grow. Churches often upgrade their vehicles by including options like DVD players and wheelchair lifts. Manufacturers continue to research "hybrid" buses (powered by fuel and batteries), but a commercial product may be a few years away from hitting the showroom floor.

Carpool to Church

Biltmore Baptist Church, located in the mountainous community of Arden, North Carolina, is a regional church with members living many miles away. For a good number of people, getting to and from church on Sundays is a problem. Church leaders wanted to find a way to help members get to church.

One obvious, but largely unused, option is carpooling. The challenge with carpooling is the constant effort required to match willing drivers with wanting riders. The challenge is addressed with ChurchRides.com, the brainchild of Andy Ivankovich of UpperRoom Technologies.

ChurchRides.com is web-based software that allows church members looking for rides to find other church members in their area looking for riders. Members must log-in to the service to either offer a ride or advertise their need for a ride. A map displays flags where drivers and riders can come together to share trips. Ride-sharing not only saves gas but allows the opportunity for two or more parishioners to share in fellowship.

Ron Setran, the business manager at Biltmore Baptist Church, has used the program for a couple of months. He feels the program has been successful, even though he has had to work out a few kinks along the way. His team learned to route all contact information for rides through the church office to make sure the system is used properly.

Traffic Control

For mega churches, traffic and parking problems can spiral out of control. Fighting traffic on the way to church tends to irritate people—a real deterrent to a positive worship experience. With 25,000 attendees each weekend, Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, needs to address traffic and parking issues similar to those of a small city.

To counteract this effect, Saddleback put a lot of thought into welcoming first-time visitors. Long-time attendees are asked to park in an adjacent parking lot to free up spaces for visitors. One hundred volunteers work every weekend to direct traffic in the parking lots, greet people, and help visitors get to their desired seats.

The church is located near a large business district, so it worked out agreements to use empty business parking lots on weekends as places for regular members to park. The church uses a dozen buses and three trams to shuttle members from the neighboring parking lots to the church. Worshipers are treated to coffee and donuts before being dropped off in front of the worship center. A special "diamond lane" is reserved for bus traffic only to keep things moving.

The system works so smoothly that parking for last year's forum between Senators John McCain and Barack Obama operated without a hitch. The church easily maneuvered 3,500 people who came to watch the interview. According to Michael Hilgen, fleet and transportation manager for the church, federal law enforcement and protection personnel and the local police were amazed at how easily traffic was controlled—a testimony to a great system already in place.

Saddleback also has a program to help those who don't own a car. Hilgen, who is also the church's manager of donations, says that cars donated to the church are fixed up to give away to needy church members. In the freeway-laden suburbs of Los Angeles, where public transportation is limited, a car gives a single mother or young person an opportunity to get their life on track.

Parking Tips

Kathy Means, pastor of administration at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, offers these practical tips for alleviating parking lot stress:

- Help senior citizens develop relationships with other members who can give them a ride. If no ride is available, the church pays for senior rides in the local area. In this case, all riders must contact the agency 24 hours ahead to arrange a pick up.
- Church employees are encouraged to park away from the church, either off the street or in a borrowed parking lot.
- Look for a nearby church that might have services at different times and investigate sharing parking facilities.
- Check with nearby public schools about using their parking lots on Sunday. Peninsula Bible Church worked out such an agreement with a nearby school.
- Use bulletin inserts twice a year to remind church members to be good neighbors when parking. Blocked driveways and car horns irritate local residents and present a poor testimony about your church.
- Use shuttle buses to transport local college students to your church. Peninsula Bible Church serves four colleges in their area. They also provide close drop-off service for those with disabilities.
- If parking is a huge problem, it might be time to consider planting a sister church.

Parking and transportation problems will continue to plague churches. Leaders in growing churches will need to find creative alternatives for dealing with more people and more cars. With good planning, some creativity, an eye to the future, and a few sacrifices, many of these issues can be overcome.

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