CHOOSING THE RIGHT FACILITY FOR YOUR PORTABLE CHURCH
HELLO!

I have the pleasure of working personally with many new church plants and multi-site churches as a portable church consultant. I hear their vision for church in their community, and it’s my job to translate that vision into an optimized system which includes an equipment list, trailer pack and storage solution.

But before we can get to any of that, the church has to be in the right facility. Finding the right facility takes patience, knowledge and intuition.

In this resource, my goal is to share with you several practical steps you can take to search and assess different facilities for your church. In these pages, I cover everything from the right questions to ask yourself to the right questions to ask potential landlords.

One thing I hear frequently is that portability gives the body of a church the chance to be “a people who” instead of a “place that.” I love that mantra because I believe that portability can literally change the way you engage with your community and how you are perceived within it.

I hope this is a valuable resource for you and your team. If you have any questions or feedback after reading it, I’d love to hear from you. Shoot me your thoughts at the email below.

God Bless,

Curt Banter

CONSULTING DIRECTOR
curt@portablechurch.com
800-939-7722 ext 317
In 1943, Winston Churchill made an interesting observation about architecture & humanity, “We shape our buildings…and then our buildings shape us.” While church is never only about the building, renting a building for your new church or campus that works with your vision is an integral part of your first steps.

We know that finding the right facility is one of the biggest challenges you’ll face as a new church plant or multi-site. Choosing to have church in a rented space, rather than build a permanent building, allows churches to engage with the community in a recognizable building and begin church in a space that can be leveraged differently as growth occurs.

A record number of new churches are launching across North America. Many of these new launches will choose a lifetime of portability and others may eventually build after years of being a portable church. Whatever you choose to do, you may spend several years as a portable church, so finding the right facility is important.

You want your facility to be recognizable, navigable, relevant and affordable. You know that environment and attendee experience matters and you want the site to capture your church’s DNA and personality. We believe it is worth waiting for the right facility that will flex with you as you grow, rather than a venue that could cap or limit your growth.

It’s no secret we love portability. Portable churches have an incredible opportunity to leverage empty, multi-million dollar facilities on Sunday mornings for the purpose of worship. Here is a guide to help you properly assess your facility.
When setting out to find the new home for your church or campus, concentrate first on the practical. Aesthetics are definitely important, but focus on the logistics first.

### Facility Location, Curb Appeal, and Layout
Ideally, the facility is in the heart of your target area, easy to find, with adequate parking (1.7 adults per car is an average). Here are some additional questions to get you started…

- Is there ample space for the number of children we anticipate? How clean is it?
- Does the facility have seating?
- Is this facility accessible for families, single parents, visitors?
- Is there more than one meeting space for adults & children in the event of building problems or maintenance?
- Is there any time of the year that your main adult space wouldn’t be available on a Sunday? If so, what is the landlord’s proposed back-up space?
- Are you able to section off the entry to the children’s areas (for security purposes)?
- Does this facility allow for a children-only restroom?
- What is the “fire code” capacity for the spaces? Are there codes against signage?
- What is the distance between the children’s areas and the worship area? Is this an acceptable distance to a new family?
- Are there on-site storage options? If not, are there easy locations for trailer load/unloading?
- Is there a kitchen available to use for hospitality?
- If you are in a cold weather climate, is the space all together or in separate buildings, requiring you to walk outside? Is snow removal on Sundays included?
- Are there school plays/dramas/events that have stage props that will be in the way any or all of the time?
- How many seats are there in the main room? (Too many seats is easy to work around; too many might send the wrong message to a newbie.)
- How many parking spots are there? Are there too few, too many?
- How do you feel as you walk through the building? How do you think a new attendee will feel walking through the building?
- Is there air-conditioning? (Never assume there is)
- Can you bring beverages into the auditorium?
- How high is the ceiling? This is especially important if you want to use trussing.
- What is the situation with ambient light and what is the impact it will have on your service (or your budget)? Some venues have windows so high you aren’t able to block the light without a lift.
- What is the access to the main floor? Can it be only accessed via stairs or an elevator? How will the available access affect people and material flow?
Electricity
The next very important, practical area to consider is the electrical capacity. Depending on the type of rental facility, age of facility and accessibility of the facility, the electrical capacity varies and, in some cases, can be very limited. Older electricity may not be grounded leading to audio and wireless interference.

Count the electrical outlets. Are there enough outlets to do what you wish? If you are running several screens of video, a full worship band and lighting in a cafetorium that only has two outlets, chances are you don’t have enough. If that’s the case, you can always ask the landlord if he would allow your church to pay for an electrical upgrade. If the answer is no, don’t worry, because there are plenty of ways to bring in portable power.

Remember that certain electrical equipment, especially coffee makers, can use a lot of power and have a tendency to trip the circuit breakers.

Landlord Relationships and Contracts
The perfect location and facilities will only be as good as the contract terms and relationship with the landlord. Below are some of the questions to keep mind as you negotiate the rental agreement. After the agreements are signed, the more attention you put to seeking the goodwill of the landlord and facility, the better your relationship will be when it comes to working through issues that arise.

• How much does the landlord want you in their location?
• How professional will you and they be in negotiating the agreement, terms, and renewal details?
• How much does the facility cost and do they require their personnel to be paid to be present also?
• Can you sign the agreement now for a future launch? Will the facility allow onsite storage or coffee in their auditorium?

Whole Ministry Space
Your church is made up of many parts and each part should be taken into consideration when choosing a facility. As you continue your walk around the building, try to avoid concentrating on only one value. For example, don’t look at the space only in terms of the café or children’s spaces or main worship areas. It’s tempting to do this based upon your personal passions, but you must assess the building as a whole ministry space for the whole church.

It’s important to know what values will naturally compete against each other when assessing a space. It’s also important to know which items are non-negotiable. For instance, you can walk into a facility assessment knowing that you are not willing to sacrifice the worship experience even if the children’s space is incredible.

During your first facility assessment, the most important thing you can do is see the building as a whole.
EXISTING EQUIPMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Assessing your building from an equipment standpoint is also very important and should be done before you plan for or purchase even one piece of equipment.

At some point, your potential (or new) landlord may offer you the chance to use some of the equipment already on site. For instance, if you’re renting a high school auditorium, they may offer you the use of the school’s mixing console. If you’re renting a movie theatre, they may offer you the use of the speakers or projector. This may be a very tempting offer, but it’s important not to get swept away by the words “free” or “easy” without first assessing the impact of accepting the offer.

Here are some questions to consider when thinking through the offer...

- What is the notification process if the equipment is broken or unavailable for your Sunday needs? (In other words, is the landlord obligated to let you know that certain things aren’t working prior to Sunday?)
- What are the replacement costs and expectations if a piece of equipment is unresponsive on after use on a Sunday? What is expected of you?
- If you are asked to use another part of their facility on a Sunday, are you able to take their equipment into another part of the facility?
- Are you planning for a mid-week service or a mid-week band practice? If so, and you take advantage of the free equipment, will you own what you need to host services and/or practices in another space?
- If you break a piece of equipment that was donated for Sunday use by your landlord, do you have a plan in place (both monetary & personnel) to make sure that the equipment is replaced and re-installed for your landlord straightaway? What are the landlord’s expectations in this scenario?
- If they have plays/dramas, are you able to change aiming of lights, are they ok with you changing their mixing board settings?

While there are good reasons to utilize permanently installed equipment, still work your way through those questions and your own “what-if” scenarios before you make your final determination. For example, one of the perks of being a portable church is having equipment ready to go to run outreach events, concerts in the park, youth events or large Super Bowl parties. Depending on permanently installed equipment could hinder this type of mobility.

You may find that it is a better decision to invest in your own equipment rather than run the risks of being without equipment, being tasked with the responsibility of a landlord’s investment or losing access to the equipment should it be re-allocated or permanently removed.

Don’t make a decision today that will impact or hinder your growth tomorrow.
THE QUALITATIVE CHECKLIST

The culture of your facility is just as important as the logistics and equipment capabilities. As you walk through a facility, pay attention to the aesthetics as well as some of the more subtle things about the facility.

Here are some good questions to get you started...

• What is the atmosphere like (what does it smell like, look like, feel like)?
• Am I comfortable here?
• Does this building have good history within my community?
• Is this building conducive to my vision?
• Is this building conducive to building community? To growth?
• Would I be comfortable inviting people into this space?
• Am I excited about advertising this space as the home of my new church or campus?
• Does the building match the vision of what you are hoping to accomplish?
• Is this facility in the area of our target demographic?

Answering “no” to any of the questions above shouldn’t completely derail you from the space you are assessing. There may be a way to work around your initial discontent. Consider the story of a new church plant we worked with in Michigan (let’s call them First Community Church).

First Community Church (FCC) was interested in utilizing a Saturday-Night-Only-Dance Club for Sunday services. The historical venue was well known, was close to their office space, had plenty of parking and had an incredible vibe. Unfortunately, the stench of cigarettes, liquor and body odor lingered in the air fiercely on Sunday mornings.

Since the pastor loved the venue so much, he decided to see what would happen to the stench after an hour of cleaning and heavy candle/incense burning. Before he signed the lease, he arranged for he and a few friends to do just that. The difference was amazing. The spot-cleaning took less than an hour and within two hours, the smell of the cleaners, incense and candles transformed the smell from malodorous to fresh and clean. The pastor knew if he could get a rotating group of five people to come in with the set-up crew on Sundays to light candles and spot-clean, they had a great facility to leverage. That’s just what he did.

Impressively, the pastor of FCC didn’t allow the atmosphere to dissuade him from the facility. Instead, he figured out how to make it better with the minimal efforts of willing volunteers.

If you can make a facility better with minimal effort, it can turn a “no” facility into a “yes” facility.
RESTROOM CONSIDERATIONS

When you bring together a large number of adults and kids, having thought through the quantity, location, and size of restroom facilities is important.

First, how many stalls are available near the potential adult and children’s areas? Believe it or not, there are actually international standards stating the minimum number of toilets per attendees for places of worship. The recommended ratios are 1:75 women and 1:150 men.

Second, where are the restrooms in relation to where the sermon will be given? You may walk into a gymnasium and be thrilled that there are bathrooms right inside the gym. However, bathrooms can be noisy places and you don’t want to hear the sound of a toilet flushing during your sermon, and no one wants to be the one who just flushed the toilet in front of the entire congregation. Make sure the bathrooms are far enough away from the “sanctuary” so that you avoid the acoustic disruption, but close enough so that anyone who visits during the service won’t have to be gone for too long.

Third, note the size of the plumbing fixtures. The available restrooms in a Preschool, Day Care or Elementary School may only have small, child-size fixtures. You may find that you don’t mind because the other positives of the building outweigh this inconvenience, but it is a question your team should thoughtfully consider. It may be an important consideration as you evaluate the facility for the comfort (and privacy) of those who attending church for the first time.

Fourth, are the restrooms shared with others using the facility on Sundays? Many facilities, especially high schools, have many activities going on even on Sundays. Keep this in mind as you negotiate with the landlord. For example, we worked with one church in a Los Angeles high school that negotiated this into their agreement so that school officials would direct the people attending the outdoor sporting events to other designated outdoor restroom areas instead of the auditorium or children’s area restrooms.

Consider even the restrooms in your assessment to ensure the comfort level of everyone.
REMAINING ASSESSMENTS

As you walk through the building, try your hardest to put yourself into the position of someone who is disenchanted with church or attending church for the first time as an adult. You may even consider the church experience from the point of view of a young family. It’s important to put yourself in their position because even the tiniest thing can quell the momentum of a newcomer.

Here are some questions to help you get in the mindset...

- Will visitors be able to navigate the building easily using signs?
- Can visitors get their kids to registration?
- Can visitors find their way to the restroom?
- Can visitors figure out what they’re supposed to do?
- Do visitors know where to get a cup of coffee?
- How far is the walk from entrance to drop-off children?
- How far is the walk from the children’s drop-off to the worship area?
- Do/can the children’s areas reflect cleanliness?
- Do visitors feel like your children’s area is secure?

It’s questions like this that help you, as a team, determine the building’s viability as it pertains to your overall vision.

Distances and navigation are important. There are a couple of reasons for this: 1) Some parents may have anxiety about leaving their children in a “strange” space (like a church). Knowing their children are close makes a first-time church separation easier; 2) Sometimes, first-timers do not want to talk to people in order to find their way around a facility. In this case, their self-sufficiency is an important part of their first experience.

If the layout of the building is confusing, and it can only be navigated by repeat attendees or by the use of building hosts, it probably isn’t the right place to start a new church. If the building layout is confusing, but can be navigated easily with the use of signs, this may be a great place to start a new church.

Confusion should never be the reason people don’t come back to church. Working through the navigation from these perspectives will help you meet the unspoken needs of newcomers.

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SURPRISE COSTS

On a consultation, I often uncover many costs that were missed in the facility assessment. Sometimes a landlord requires a certain piece of equipment (like gym floor covers, for instance) or there is another unforeseen circumstance – the solution to which is very expensive. Often, these surprises can lead to a venue no longer being within your budget.

Here’s shortlist of the most common things that add costs to your facility.

- Do you need to bring in your own chairs? If so, will you store them in the trailer on chair carts or in the facility on chair carts?
- Does the landlord require gym floor covers?
- Do you need staging, stage carts or storage for the staging?
- Does the landlord require that a member of their staff be in the building during your rental times? If so, is this an additional cost or is it built into the rental agreement?
- Are there blackout dates that will force you to rent a different facility during those dates?

YOUR FINAL QUESTION

Perhaps the most important question to ask is, “Do I like this space?” If you are not comfortable, excited or willing to get excited about that facility, it’s probably not the place for you to launch your inaugural ministry.

Your excitement about your facility will trickle down to everyone on your team and every one of your volunteers. The same is true of your disappointment. If you are caught saying things like “I can’t wait until we find a new facility,” your team will not be as engaged on Sundays with your space. Their engagement is critical to creating the welcoming atmosphere, creative environments and overall experience of a facility on Sundays.

Make sure your team understands your vision, buys into it and will work to support it. Your excitement or disappointment is one of your most important considerations, as it will feed your own buy-in, engagement and passion. You communicate how valuable your visitors are by the experience you give them on a Sunday morning.

Church isn’t about your building, but your building can help or hinder your ministry.
LAUNCH ON

Keep these practical tips in mind as you move forward and we are confident you will find a facility that’s right for your ministry. I’d love to chat with you, offer further advice or even an on-site facility assessment.

Feel free to reach out anytime. With our experience helping over 2,000 churches launch portably, I’m confident that, regardless of your circumstance, we can be a great sounding board, resource and partner for your launch.

SPECIAL BONUS CONTENT FOR YOU

Call our Church Relations manager and ask for the comprehensive list of facilities in which we’ve helped churches launch. It’s an expansive list with some surprising options! Call today at 1-800-939-7722.
WE PROVIDE PEACE OF MIND
Our streamlined systems ensure that set-up and tear-down isn’t the biggest experience people have on a Sunday.

WE’VE GOT GREAT PEOPLE
Our team has worked with over 2,000 churches just like yours. We have great ideas and great hearts. You’ll be glad we met.

WE ARE GRATEFUL for the opportunity to serve and enrich the local church as well as the lives of pastors and volunteers worldwide.

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/portablechurch
@portablechurch
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/portablechurch
info@portablechurch.com
800.939.7722