



“Actually, You Did Go to Seminary to Deal with Parking!”

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“I didn’t go to seminary to deal with parking!” I (Pam) have uttered these words, but they are not true. Parking, as mundane and remote from the gospel as it may seem, is part of ministry in the modern United States.¹

This issue of *Word & World* is dedicated to the car, and each car requires a parking space. In fact, each car turns out to require roughly eight parking spaces—not only at home, at work, the store, the park, the school, but for many, many congregations, a spot at church. Parking at church is not just about where you and your parishioners put your cars. It is about how a Christian community determines who gets the easiest access from the outside of the building to the inside. It is about relationships with neighbors, often including some who would prefer the church not to be there at all. It is about how we care for the two-thirds of people in the United States who are most vulnerable and least able-bodied and

¹Indeed, parking is the responsibility of leaders of nearly any institution in the United States, public or private. One college president remarked, “The job of the college president is to provide sex for the students, parking for the faculty, and athletics for the alumni.” At least parish pastors only have one out of three to worry about, although they may feel common cause with the same president’s other remark: “A university is a group of otherwise unrelated faculty bound together by a common grievance over parking.”

Churches value community and bringing people together, which means they inevitably have issues related to transportation and parking that require thought and planning. Such planning must be practical, of course, but it should also have theological and ethical dimensions.

don't drive: children and the elderly. It is about how we care for God's creation, and what we do about the pollutants produced by all those cars driving to church.

Parking is also about culture and cultural assumptions, and whether the church works with worldly trends or seeks a different path. While some urban parishes may still have a membership that lives close enough to take transit or walk to church, most U.S. communities simply do not make it easy for people to get to church—or anywhere else—without a car. In our community, a bus line runs right in front of our first-ring suburban church, but the Sunday schedule is infrequent and the route misses much of the residential area from which our membership comes. Add to that the association of the bus with people of little economic means and you have several reasons why someone might not take transit to church even if, strictly speaking, they *could*.

Thus we use in this article “parking” as a point of departure for talking about the much larger topic of how we have let the car affect us over the past one hundred years. And while we will talk about parking, about the car, and about parking's effect on the whole community, we also bring the discussion back to the church as a place in the community. A church parking problem is really a transportation and land use problem. Any need for parking derives from the assumption that nearly everyone will drive to church; the assumption that this is the only feasible way to get there derives from choices made about how and where we build: build houses, build churches, and build (or don't build) highways and transit.

Churches are part of these land use decisions. A crucial question for congregations is how they will react to decisions they did not necessarily shape—zoning laws, road construction, transit planning (or lack thereof), and suburban flight. Again, will congregations simply work with these decisions, or will they engage them? Our argument is that the gospel calls us to engage them, to change them, and as much as possible to walk a different path.

Paying attention to transportation and land use may sound like a matter of public policy and politics, the sorts of matters many churches avoid unless they are in the midst of obtaining a building permit or purchasing land. But these matters of city and county regulation shape not only the lives of our members and how they spend their days—surely the province of congregations—but also where we put our church properties, what they look like, and how we spend our congregational budgets.

HOW WE GOT HERE

We have three main challenges in designing a building site these days: First, how do we solve the parking? Second, how do we solve the parking? And third, how do we solve the parking?

—Rick Williams, architect/planner

Wait a minute, someone is sure to ask. Aren't we talking about social engineering? Are policy folks, let alone congregations, really going to tell people where to live and how to get from point A to point B?

The reality, of course, is that policy has already done a great deal to influence where you live, how you work, and how you and your children live. In most American cities, zoning has already determined that you will live in an area called “residential,” while your place of business or worship (the church building) will be somewhere else, most likely not in walking distance of your home. And if you live in a suburban community, it is almost certain that zoning laws make it illegal for you to live in walking distance of a grocery store, a pharmacy, a post office, or really anything else you need for a full life, except perhaps a park. And if you are close enough, you may not feel safe walking there, because by policy there are no sidewalks. Many people may not see this relationship as restricting them at all, but only because after fifty years of single-use zoning they have never imagined living in any other way.

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How did we get here? The zoning that separates you from where you want to go is known as “Euclidian zoning,” not after the Greek mathematician, but after the case of *Village of Euclid, Ohio v. Ambler* (1926), in which the Supreme Court ruled that cities may zone property for one use or another and prohibit other uses. Such zoning is rooted in the desire to separate incompatible uses—in the classic example, to separate a meatpacking plant and its smell and possible disease from a residential area.

Similarly, federal, state, local, and community decisions already tell us how we can and cannot travel. The road regulations, design standards, and public funding mechanisms that have grown up—not entirely coincidentally—next to areas of Euclidian zoning tend to plan for, fund, and provide a transportation system that puts first the needs of people traveling by car. After World War II, federal funding for highway construction opened vast areas of land for development. A survey of experts by the Federal National Mortgage Association declared: “More than any other single measure, the 1956 [highway] act created the decentralized, automobile-dependent metropolis we know today.”²

And at the end of the trip, policies already tell us that, in most cases, we will be met with a parking lot, and how big that parking lot will be. Most cities set parking minimums for a wide range of uses, and the relationship between those minimums and the use is remarkably tenuous in most cases:

²Robert Fishman, *The American Metropolis at Century's End: Past and Future Influences* (Washington, DC: Fannie Mae Foundation, 1999). Dr. Fishman's survey included a list of twenty-five possible influences on the American city over the past century and a list of nineteen potential future influences. Fishman surveyed 149 urban and regional historians, planners, and practitioners and asked them to rank the ten most powerful influences—looking at the past fifty years and into the next century.

A mausoleum must provide 10 parking spaces per maximum number of interments in a one-hour period. Why? Nobody knows. The requirements rarely make any intrinsic sense, but parking spaces must be provided exactly as required.³

This is the case whether the funeral home is suburban, where everyone will drive, or in an established neighborhood near a church, where many will walk to the home. Most cities apply these standards without adapting them to local conditions or goals. Donald Shoup, America’s leading thinker about parking, observes that because parking standards are specified so exactly, they have the air of science, and people hesitate to question them. Shoup reminds us that medieval medicine also specified quite exactly how many leeches to apply for different maladies.

The need to tell meatpacking plants where they can and cannot locate is, for the most part, not relevant to most communities today. Nevertheless, the zoning remains, as do the road standards and the parking minimums, and these three sets of policies fundamentally determine how our communities look and operate. The broader questions remain, more hotly debated than ever: What do we want our communities to look like, and how do we think they can and should work? We think that there is a Christian answer to that question, and that churches therefore have an important role to play in helping communities answer that question and in modeling the answer.

WHERE DOES THE CHURCH FIT INTO THIS CONVERSATION?

As in so many other areas of life, the church can both preach and lead.

Help ensure that Christian values are part of the conversation

The values that a congregation would bring to a planning conversation are not uniquely Christian, but are often forgotten as an integral part of what many consider to be a Christian vision of a healthy community with healthy members. We claim that we are flesh and bone enlivened by God’s breath. Because we are physical beings, we care about our surroundings. Especially in urban areas, those surroundings include buildings, streets, and the things in between. The automobile age has transformed these surroundings, and many have argued that that transformation was necessary and inevitable. But cars do nothing on their own; it is the decisions that we have made about how to accommodate cars and travel by cars that has given us the environment we live in today. A congregation may—and we believe should—ask, “Does the environment in which our members spend their lives and raise their children embody and support our members’ values?” In too many cases, the way that we have decided to accommodate the car means that those values are neither embodied nor supported. Put simply, the cit-

³Donald Shoup, *The High Cost of Free Parking* (Chicago: Planners Press, American Planning Association, 2005) 11. Shoup’s studies attend to the question of how and why parking so deeply shapes American communities.

ies that our churches are part of are spending a lot of time and money building places that are hostile to abundant life.

It is difficult to talk about communities without thinking about *specific* places. Think about a “place” that you love. That “place” should include both a road and the buildings and properties reached by the road, because no place exists apart from how you get there. Then think about your local shopping strip. It may be as small as a single Quikmart at the exit, or it may be a miles-long stretch of drive-thrus, big-box stores, stoplights, turn lanes, and parking lots. Almost every town has one. The strip is not the only thing wrong with how we have adapted our world to the car, but it stands for most of the important ways, and we will use it as the exemplar. The strip is the result—the culmination—of fifty years of changes to zoning and transportation planning. The strip is legal, planned for, and in many communities, expected.

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On the other hand, that place you love could most likely not be built today. It would either be outright illegal, or it could only be built after struggling through a difficult and expensive variance process. Today, the places we love are defined ever more narrowly. We may love the inside of the mall, but hate the parking lot we have to use to get to it. Or love the cul-de-sac but hate the traffic on the way there. This division is artificial. The suburb includes its roads and does not exist without them. The mall includes its parking lot. And our experiences of the places we live include the whole day, including the time in the parking lot and on the roads.

My (Will’s) consulting job is in ways quite similar to Pam’s pastoral job: to help a community decide what it wants to be and to help it get there. The first thing I do in most cases is ask people to react to some version of the two pictures—the place they love and the shopping strip—if possible from their own community. Most people, visualizing the two pictures, instinctively understand that something is deeply wrong with the strip. The reason that people will spend ten minutes looking for a parking spot close to the mall entrance is that they know how unpleasant it is to walk across the parking lot. Yet most people also have a sense that the strip and the parking lot are now, somehow, necessary, and that there are no real alternatives to it in “today’s world.”

The good news is that many, many communities around the country understand that they have accommodated the car in ways that do not work. Ironically, over-accommodating the car turns out not to work very well even for the car. A place that requires driving everywhere turns out inevitably to produce more traffic than it can handle. Most of the planning profession has come to realize (some parts

more reluctantly than others) that we cannot build our way out of congestion. The traffic just does not work.

As a result, communities across the country are talking about how they want to envision their surroundings and what kinds of lives they want to enable. Churches can and should help start and then participate in those conversations—help people understand why they react the way they do to the strip with reference to values that the congregations support. The strip and the auto-oriented community it represents is:

De-creating human community. The church is one of the few places that tries to bring together the generations. A place accessible only by car leaves out two-thirds of them. It is easy to understand how the strip isolates seniors who cannot drive and have difficulty walking, and similarly, how it isolates children. It is a little less clear how it also isolates adults, but upon reflection most people understand. The dilemma of moms who do nothing but drive kids around has become a cliché. “Running into someone” while driving is bad, while running into someone while walking is good. Eric Jacobsen, formerly a pastor in Missoula, Montana, tells the story of always running into parishioners walking in downtown Missoula, and never running into them in strip Missoula.⁴

De-creating the natural environment. The impact of the auto on the human and natural environments is detailed elsewhere in this issue.⁵ For this discussion, it is enough to observe that, by one estimate, at least a third of most city land is dedicated to the car. The resulting impacts on water quality and water supply (rain and snow that fall on roads and parking lots flows quickly into streams rather than filtering through the earth), on urban temperatures (think about a parking lot on a sunny day), and on the general appetite for land are enormous.⁶

Harmful to human health—especially that of children. A community designed around the car visits its worst effects on children. The gradual disappearance of the freer, more outdoor-oriented American childhood has many roots, but there can be no doubt that as children spend ever more time in cars, they walk and bike less, and their health suffers as a result. To take a narrow example on which there is very good data, less than fifteen percent of students between the ages of five and fifteen walk to or from school, and only one percent bike. In 1969, forty-eight percent of students walked or biked to school. Ever-less-dense urban growth plays a large role here, as do larger schools. But even when children live close to school, they walk there less. A recent survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

⁴Eric Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003). To our knowledge, this is the only book-length treatment of the intersection of urban planning and theology—an accessible, thorough introduction to the principles of new urbanism considered from the perspective of Christian faith. For pastors wanting to provoke conversations about the built environment, this book would make a good study resource.

⁵James B. Martin-Schramm, “The Automobile and Its Threats to Our Planetary Welfare,” *Word & World* 28/3 (2008) 260–272.

⁶U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Our Built and Natural Environments: A Technical Review of the Interactions between Land Use, Transportation, and Environmental Quality* (Washington, DC: USEPA, 2001) (publication 123-R-01-002); online at www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/built.htm (accessed 13 May 2008).

(CDC) found that only thirty-one percent of children five to fifteen years old who lived within one mile of school walked or biked. In 1969, the figure approached ninety percent. The CDC survey found that danger from traffic was the second most important barrier to walking and biking to school.⁷

Accompanying the decline in walking or biking to school has been a general decline in physical activity and a rise in childhood obesity. Nearly one-third of all American youth do not engage in sufficient amounts of physical activity. Since the 1960s, overweight and obesity rates have nearly tripled for adolescents and quadrupled for six- to eleven-year-olds.⁸ Similar trends are evident in rates of childhood asthma, linked to auto pollution among other causes.

Perhaps the broadest impact of the auto-oriented community on children is its effect on their sense of what the world is and their place in it. The recent book *Last Child in the Woods* makes this case persuasively for children's need for, but declining contact with, the natural world, the creation.⁹ We believe the loss of sense of physical community is just as strong.

“What changed? We did. We decided we’d rather drive.”

Of course, the car and urban planning are not the only factors in our loss of public community. Our own neighborhood was built in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. The streets are narrow, there are plenty of sidewalks, and shopping, schools, and churches are nearby. People walk here more than they do elsewhere, but not nearly as much as they used to. Physically, the neighborhood has not changed much, and we cannot in this case blame the highway department. What changed? We did. We decided we'd rather drive.

The city is the community and its values made visible. And the picture of today's city, from downtown through old streetcar suburbs to new auto-only suburbs tells a remarkably consistent story about our community's values. We like to drive, and so we make sure that the car has room—on the road, and close to the door of everywhere we want to go.

Engage communities in pursuing a better way

If a congregation wanted to think about pursuing a different path, where would it start? One set of principles for growing a better community is called Smart Growth. A Smart Growth community:

1. Mixes land uses. For example, it allows apartments over stores.
2. Takes advantage of compact building design. One-story buildings sur-

⁷Reid Ewing, Christopher Forinash, and William Schroeer, “Neighborhood Schools and Sidewalk Connections,” *Transportation Research News*, March-April 2005.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005).

rounded by parking practically require one to drive. Compact design allows for more “human-scale” communities.

3. Creates a range of housing opportunities and choices. Fewer and fewer people require a three-bedroom home with yard and garage. And no one needs such a house at every stage in their lives. Creating choices in a community makes intergenerational interaction more likely.
4. Creates walkable neighborhoods.
5. Fosters distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place. Why adopt everyone else’s standards?
6. Preserves open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
7. Strengthens and directs development toward existing communities.
8. Provides a variety of transportation choices.
9. Makes development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective.
10. Encourages community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.¹⁰

Communities following these principles are increasingly popular. Not everyone agrees with these principles, but we find that most people instinctively understand their goals and are eager to engage in discussions about them. If a congregation and/or its members want to get engaged in community planning and visioning, the Smart Growth principles are a useful place to start, and come with a wealth of useful resources.

WHAT THEN SHALL WE DO?

As embodied beings, we cannot avoid the practicalities of our lives together. As long as we value real community and the gathering of human bodies together in one room and around Jesus’ table, we will have transportation issues. And as long as churches own buildings, purchase land, and periodically remodel or rebuild their properties, we have choices to make about how to intersect with the prevailing culture around us.

Theologically, think that cars equal culture

Automobiles, and the vast built environments we have created around them, are part of human culture. To approach them as such forces us to interact with them in the same way we might address other parts of human culture that we must judge. Are they helpful to the spread of the gospel? Does conforming ourselves to the cultural assumptions cause us to compromise some core part of our proclamation? Are they a regrettable but necessary evil?

¹⁰See www.smartgrowth.org.

When it comes to racism and sexism, we see the church as a necessary witness to another way of being, a place where God's kingdom is glimpsed, if even only briefly around the table. Why would we not apply the same standard to the church and transportation? Around Jesus' table, we might say, we are embodied beings who gather to share in Christ's body, each one receiving the same, each one forgiven and sent to bear witness. What if our witness to another way of being begins as we set out from our homes to gather in community that day? What if that witness continues as we return home again "by another way," using our limbs instead of a motorized vehicle, or at least sharing rides with those who are unable to transport themselves?

Start with congregational life

Even better, what if we set up our congregational life in such a way as to encourage earth-caring decisions? Many churches take pains to provide transit for seniors who can no longer drive themselves to church, and see to it that meetings and worship are accessible to those who cannot get out at night. Why not, for the sake of the creation, support ride-sharing, cycling, walking, and public transit for all who gather in the assembly? What if parking for bicycles and sidewalks for pedestrians were as carefully thought out as the spaces for cars? What if safety for small children and older citizens were a top priority for how we design our outdoor spaces as well as the indoor ones?

“What if parking for bicycles and sidewalks for pedestrians were as carefully thought out as the spaces for cars?”

Engage the community in conversation about the public good

Best of all, what if churches were active in the creation and re-creation of community transit systems, recognizing that the same issues that face our institutions are faced on a much larger scale by every other business, school, hospital, and park in our cities? What if churches, as a place where the public and private regularly intersect, were a strong voice for accessible, environmentally friendly public spaces throughout our cities? Such public work would certainly not be easy but neither would it be political work in today's partisan sense. Indeed, at this level of government, the most important officials are often not elected, and even elected officials are usually nonpartisan.

Of course, as long as we live in the real world, there will still be difficult decisions to make. We may work to change zoning laws in our community but find that when *our* institution needs to build, the old laws are still in place. We may not always find the right balance between making congregational life accessible to all and challenging the able-bodied to respect creation. Members may have to choose sometimes between the environmentally friendly choice of a virtual meeting and

the community-building choice of a face-to-face gathering. In all these things, we must sin boldly, knowing that while our choices have real-life consequences, they are not, in the end, salvific. What they are, however, is a wealth of opportunities visibly and publicly to give witness to a God who intends wholeness for human community, for people of all ages and abilities, and the earth itself.¹¹ ⊕

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¹¹For further study, see Linda Bailey, *Aging Americans: Stranded without Options* (Surface Transportation Policy Project, 2004), online at www.transact.org/library/reports_html/seniors/aging.pdf (accessed 13 May 2008); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961)—the classic on the elements of a healthy, functioning city; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).