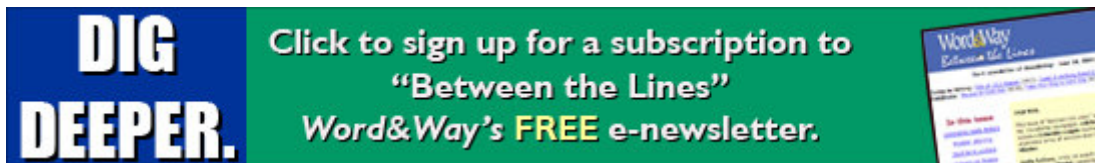




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Children must be safe

By Vicki Brown

Word&Way Correspondent

Imagine you are seven months pregnant with a 2 1/2-year-old in tow. You're juggling a bag of toddler needs, your Bible, Bible study material and today's bulletin. And you are trying to get to the preschool area on the church's second floor.

Or imagine your wife is ill, and you decide to take your 3-month-old and 4-year-old to church with you to allow her to rest. How will you manage the two children, a diaper bag, a toddler bag, your Bible and church paraphernalia from one end of the building to the other?

As congregations target young families with the gospel, they must "keep mothers and fathers in mind," St. Louis architect John Littlefield emphasized. He calls the nursery and preschool areas "the most important part" of the building when trying to attract families to worship services.

Nursery and preschool areas not only must be accessible. They also must be safe places for children.

"Years ago we didn't give very much thought to safety.... We assumed churches were the safest places we could be," noted Springfield architect Larry Phillips of Pellham Phillips Architects and Engineers. "But times have changed."

Both architects agree that a preschool area should be located near the church's narthex or sanctuary to allow parents to easily get children to and from the nursery. But the area also should have some safeguards to limit access to outsiders.

Littlefield believes the preschool area should not be placed upstairs, nor should parents find it difficult to navigate from entrances to the nursery. "Don't make it remote or inaccessible," he said. "If you locate it close to the sanctuary, mothers and fathers feel better."

A security checkpoint of some kind also should be in place, both architects added. Littlefield suggests using a Dutch door in the hallway or corridor leading to the preschool area. The door should be locked at the bottom, and a responsible leader should be on hand to accept and release children to the assigned parent or caregiver.

Pellham Phillips includes nursery/preschool security when designing church facilities. A good design should include a locked gate or other security checkpoint, Phillips said.

He added that some churches now use video monitoring and often provide a room from which concerned parents can view their children.

Some new building designs call for lots of glass, rather than solid interior walls, so that parents and guardians can see children from hallways, Phillips noted.

Pager systems remain a popular way for workers to maintain contact with parents during services, Littlefield added.

Both architects remind churches to provide back exits that can be opened from the inside, in case of fire or other emergency, but that cannot be accessed from the outside.

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