The Narthex –



Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Fayetteville, NC.

WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A narthex, simply stated, is a place for congregation members to enter and gather together in preparation for worship. Depending on tradition or denomination, other terms may be used, such as “foyer,” “vestibule,” “gathering space,” or “lobby.” Whatever the term, the need for a place where people can arrive, interact, and transition from the outside world into a spiritual place is common to nearly all buildings that serve a religious community. Given the need for such a space, how should a narthex function? What other activities may be expected to take place in the narthex, or should be easily accessible from it? If a congregation is planning an update, renovation, or new construction, how important is the narthex and how should it be designed?

TERMINOLOGY

The word “narthex,” is generally associated with traditional Christian liturgical churches, though the use of the term for a modern gathering and preparation space is relatively new. For early Christians, the narthex was a porch or ante-chamber near the entry of a church where those who aspired to join the church would wait until they became fully initiated members. Today, the term suggests not a place of exclusion, but rather one of welcome and hospitality.

In the publication, Built of Living Stones, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops note the importance of a space for spiritual gathering. “The narthex is a place of welcome—a threshold…. between the congregation’s space and the outside environment... [it] helps believers to make the transition from everyday life to the celebration of the liturgy, and after the liturgy, it helps them return to daily life to live out the mystery that has been celebrated.”

Other denominations may use other terms but envision similar functions.The Baptist General Convention of Texas refers to the space as a foyer, and suggest there be at a minimum 2 square feet of space for each seat in the assembly, or approximately ¼ of the size of the worship center. They recommend the space should also connect to education spaces.

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In this discussion, we will use the term narthex to describe that special space particular to Christian churches and worship communities in every denomination.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

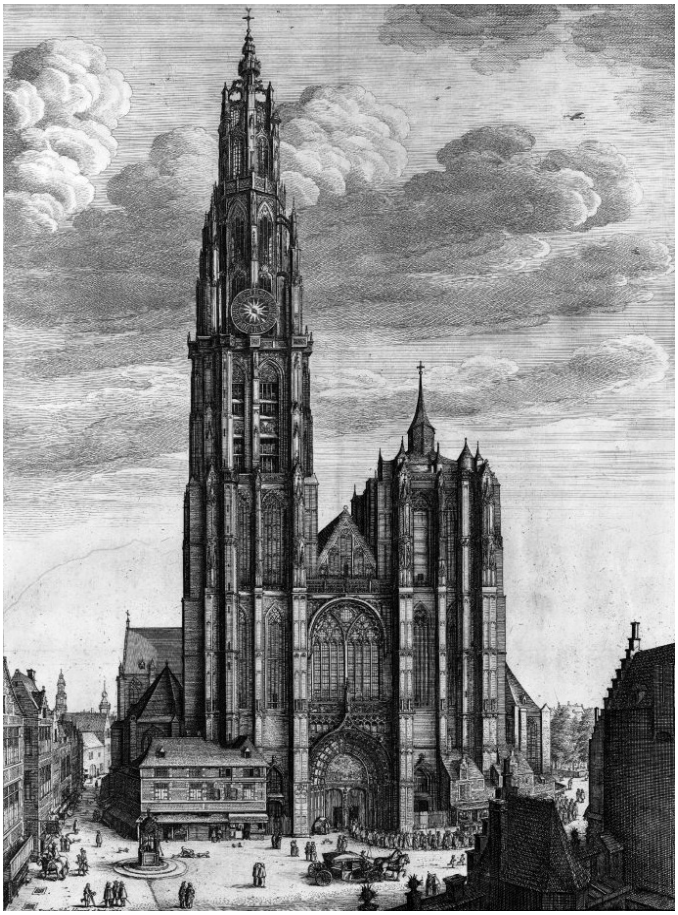
In Medieval and Renaissance Europe, church builders had no concept of gathering and preparing a community for worship. Now, visitors and worshippers alike approach most historic European cathedrals through open plazas or courtyards. However, when many of these Gothic and Romanesque churches were originally constructed, their secular neighbors often built up very close to the church building. Later, as needs and attitudes changed, large areas were cleared to give these landmarks some breathing room.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American church builders based their designs on churches from Europe. Since those patterns didn't include much of a gathering space, very few churches in America had them. In many ways, that also suited the needs of the traditional ministry of the day. Think about the experience of attending church 150 - 200 years ago. Members lived in the neighborhood and all knew each other. Most, if not all, walked to church. When they entered through the narrow doorway, an usher was there to hand out prayer books or hymnals.

People didn't work on Sunday. They prepared at home to go to church. They dressed in their Sunday best. They washed and groomed and used the facilities long before they got to their place of worship. After the service, the minister parked himself outside the front door. Parishioners cued up in the center aisle, waiting their turn for a handshake or quick comment. Once niceties were exchanged families went home for Sunday dinner. Social time after church meant company coming over. Church members took turns having the minister and his family as guests at their homes.

Now think about modern ministries and the number of ways a central gathering space functions when the members of the congregation are not drawn from small, close-knit neighborhoods. People need a place to visit with each other, not just to greet the minister. They expect easy access to support spaces like bathrooms and nurseries. They need a place to learn about the other activities that the church provides, since the life of a modern faith community extends far beyond Sunday mornings.

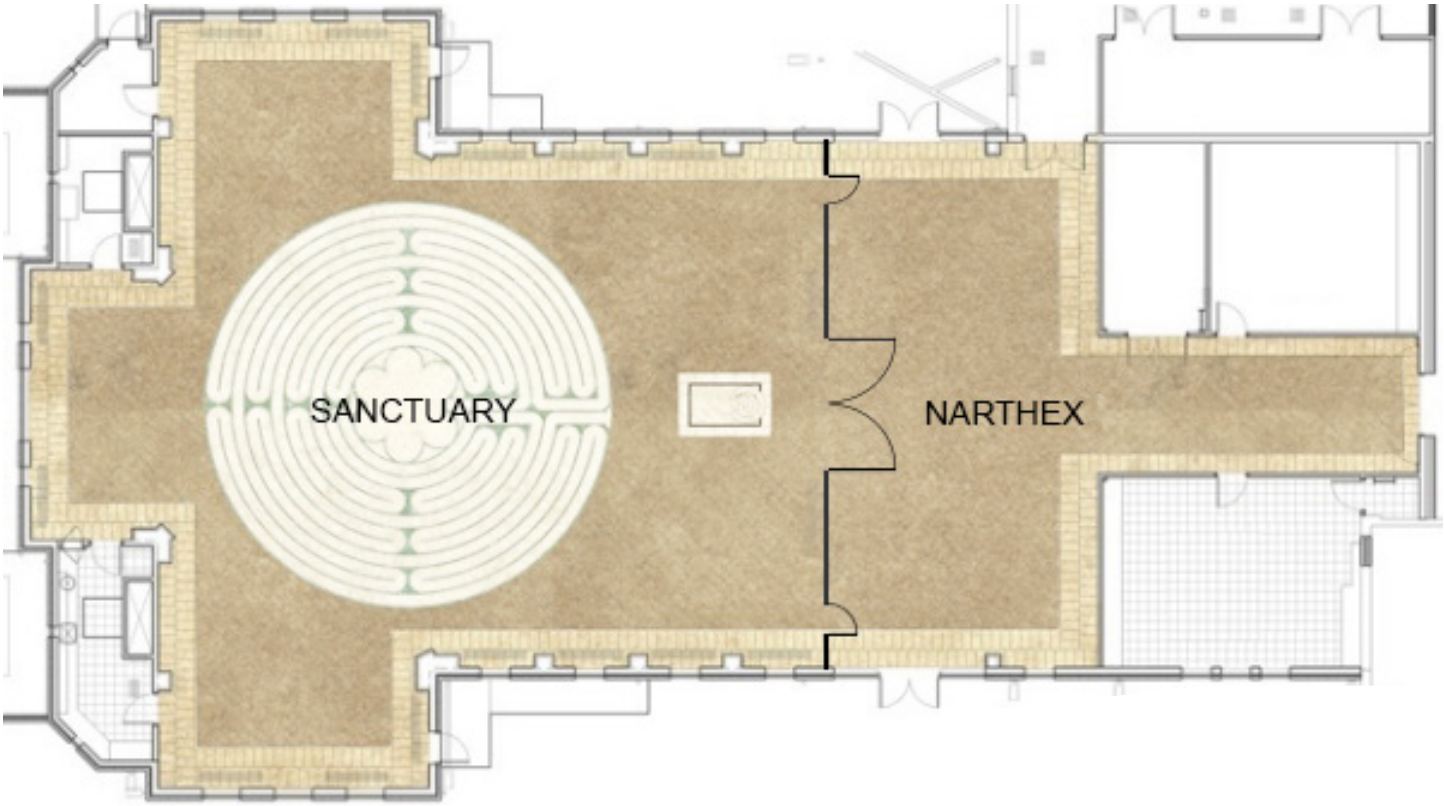
And finally, think about a place to transition from the distractions of modern life in order to focus on the spiritual



Etching of Antwerp Cathedral by Wenceslaus Hollar, 1649. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



This restoration project at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Ellinger, TX preserved the narrow entryway of the original structure but provided an elevated terrace for gathering outside.



The narthex of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church provides a space to transition to worship in the sanctuary.

life. How a transition space is configured may have an impact on nearly all ministry activities. If anyone suggests that a narthex is not important, or somehow not legitimate, they must be planning for ministries in the past century, not for ones to come. A special space like this deserves special care, consideration, and planning.

FUNCTION

In order to work optimally, a narthex should be designed to serve multiple functions. The primary function is as a place of emotional and spiritual transition. As believers gather into community they prepare and move into the assembly or sanctuary with a focus on their spiritual lives. The narthex must also serve an array of secondary functions as a physical transition space. Obviously it needs to provide easy access to worship space, but it should have other practical connections as well. The narthex should be an obvious place to arrive, to enter the building or to connect to other exterior circulation. A visitor may expect connections to service spaces such as restrooms, or a children's nursery.

Other areas with important ministry functions may be expected to connect with or be close by the narthex.



Visual cues indicate the sacred nature of the narthex of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Fayetteville, NC.



Information displays in the narthex of St. Elizabeth Catholic University Parish in Lubbock, TX.

Many gathering spaces are adjacent to areas used in preparation for worship. An effective narthex may have a connection to a sacristy, flower room, green room, or choir room. It may provide access to the administrative offices or an education wing. Even if there isn't a direct connection, the path to social spaces, a fellowship hall, or a social hall may also be an inviting feature of the narthex.

Ideally, a well-designed narthex can also contribute to the overall function of the ministry. It may be a place for display and exchange of information. It may be a place for informal meeting or a place for greeters to welcome new visitors. Quite aside from just being the place to pick up a bulletin, the narthex can function as a central hub with information exchanged or events originating in the space. A narthex is the ideal place to display and celebrate the diversity of ministry activities. This is a great location for posters or personal recruiting for forthcoming events – a blood drive, a school fundraiser, or service activity.

It should be clear by now that a narthex is much more than just a big empty space. Though some social activities may be important, an effective narthex isn't a bank lobby, a waiting room, or a coffee shop. The narthex should have a clear visual focus on the worship space and discernible cues that point to worship related gatherings. With organization, materials, lighting, artwork and signage, the space should include elements that convey a sense of the spiritual and prepare a visitor for gathering with others in a faith environment.

There's no simple formula for designing an effective narthex. For a more traditional church, the forms used for the narthex may overtly reflect the worship design, with a major focus toward gathering, preparing, and transitioning to worship. Visual cues, such as traditional building details or stained glass windows, may reflect the congregation's history or the liturgical traditions of the church. For a more contemporary church, the narthex may be a destination and gathering place for a range of activities. An open, flexible space with images of members or displays with information about activities might be more suitable in this case. Whatever you consider to be the essential character of your community and spiritual practice, the narthex should be designed to reflect them.

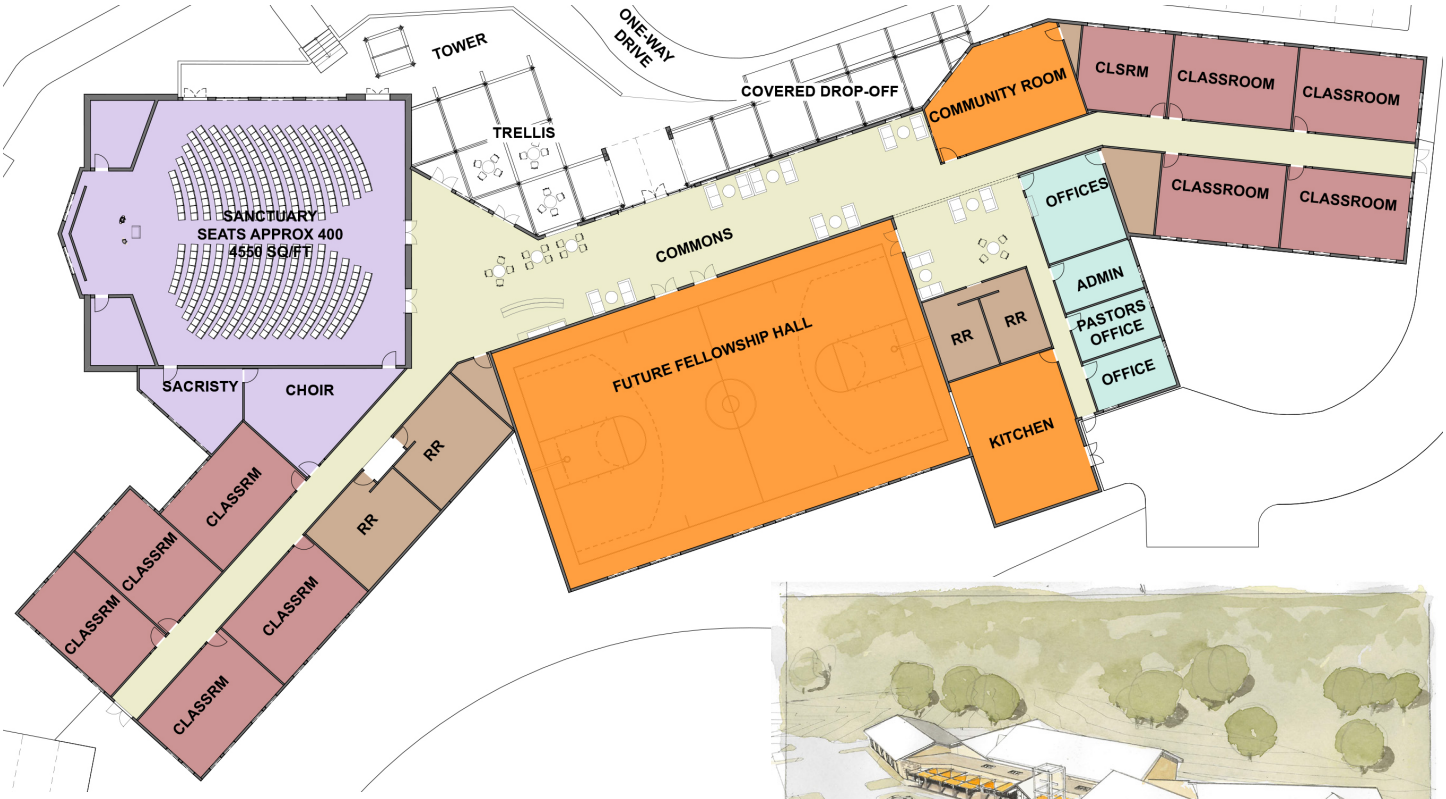
BUILDING CHALLENGES and PRACTICAL CONCERNS

When planning for new construction, a congregation or worshipping community should make the design of the narthex a high priority. It is far too common that the gathering or circulation spaces become an afterthought.

One of the biggest problems we see are plans with woefully undersized spaces for gathering and transitioning to and from worship. Building committees should work closely with their architects or designers to think through the size and types of groups that will be using the space. For example, if the worship space accommodates 400 people, where will they go at the end of the services? Where should the doors be located? If a small group wants to socialize, will that create a bottleneck?

The best designs locate the narthex at or near the center so it can readily connect with all major activity spaces, including worship. Far too often, a designer will think only of the worship space and provide no connection, or only a long narrow corridor, to access other spaces. The master plan for Word of Life Lutheran Church envisions a space they called "the Commons." It will function during the week as an informal meeting place adjacent to the church offices. In the evenings, or on Sunday, the Commons becomes the lobby for large groups to assemble for social and worship activities.

When considering renovations or additions to existing facilities, the design of the narthex can raise big challenges. The congregation should have serious



The Word of Life Lutheran Commons, designed to accomodate a variety of activities.

conversations to evaluate the effectiveness of the spaces that currently serve the functions of a narthex. Are these spaces large enough? Are they in the right locations? Is the entry visible or obvious from the main street or parking lot? Does the image and feeling of the space adequately reflect the ministry? Are the spaces fully accessible for the mobility impaired? How will new programs or new spaces impact the existing narthex?

We've seen too many churches ignore or overlook the narthex as they planned for their expansions or additions. Sometimes this oversight not only results in missed opportunities, but also can make a bad situation worse. Many churches come to us with serious circulation problems that we can trace to poorly planned additions. Several of these included new access to service kitchens, but the result was to inadvertently direct circulation away from the narthex and through the kitchen! Our plan for Christ Lutheran Church in Georgetown extended an existing narthex to connect with the new Fellowship Hall. Now anyone arriving for worship or recreational activities goes through the same doors and arrives in a large space that links the sanctuary, the education building, and the new fellowship hall. The plan included a new kitchen and we were sure to place the service entry away from the main parking lot.

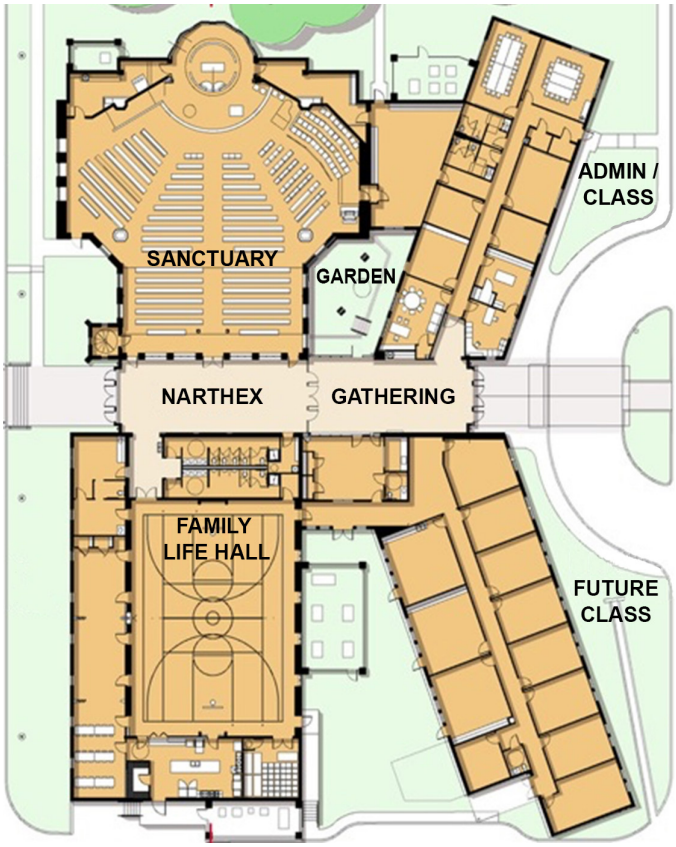


Access to the Commons is clearly indicated on the exterior, adjacent to parking and drop-off areas.



Christ Lutheran Church in Georgetown, TX.





The narthex at St. John Lutheran connects all of the major functions of the building, provides informal meeting areas, brings in daylight, and links to parking areas on both sides.

Poor connection between parking and the narthex is, sadly, all too common. Often the Narthex is placed in the front of the church, facing the street, while cars are directed to the back of the lot where there's plenty of room for parking. The fact is, no one wants to park in back and then walk the full length of the church outside just to enter the narthex in the front. A more innovative approach can solve this problem, as we did at St. John Lutheran Church in Boerne Texas. Because the new building had to be placed close to the street, and the parking had to be in back, we designed the narthex as a link space. Doorways located at both the street and the parking lot open into a light-filled narthex that extends from one entry to the other. Along the way, the narthex also provides access to the new worship space and all other ministry spaces as well.

St. Albert of Trapani in Houston had a large existing foyer, but they needed a way to create a clear transition. To heighten the transition to worship, an arch form recalling the 13th Century world of St. Albert of Trapani transitions parishioners from the foyer into the sanctuary. The plan is also designed to connect the back parking area and the



A transition space at St. Albert Trapani.



Epiphany Lutheran in Richmond, VA.





An outdoor narthex at All Saints Episcopal Church, Southern Shores, NC.

street frontage, serving a secondary function as well. Even "impossible" circulation challenges can be fixed by focusing attention on the narthex and working creatively to find good solutions. Many years ago, we worked with a church in Richmond, Virginia to provide an expansion and to fix major circulation problems. We came up with an "L" shaped narthex that connected to the front of the existing sanctuary and wrapped around the side to link up with an existing education building located behind it. The long portion of the narthex was built up against the side of the old church building. We added generous skylights in the narthex space to make sure the stained glass windows still got natural light.

Another church on the barrier islands in North Carolina had circulation problems and an undersized narthex space. With a tight budget, they didn't have enough funds to create an enlarged space for gathering, so we made one outdoors! Through careful placement of the new building, we were able to activate an existing covered pavilion to serve as an open-air gathering and connecting space.

CONCLUSION - IT CAN BE DONE!

You might be wondering what you can do to make the narthex in your church work better. Perhaps you already have one, but it doesn't work as well as you would like in helping people to gather, encounter the ministry, and transition to worship. Maybe you need to improve the circulation of your facility and you wonder if redesigned spaces or additions would help solve the problem. If your building doesn't have a narthex at all, you might be thinking about adding one. In all of these situations, there are ways to develop good solutions for logical gathering, transition, and circulation spaces, even in the most convoluted floor plans.

Heimsath Architects is your resource for any issues concerning church design and construction. If you have a question, please reach out, e-mail or give us a call.