

CONSTRUCTION PRE-FLIGHT CHECKLIST

Before embarking on your next building project take in collective wisdom from church architects and facility management experts. **BY DEBORAH IKE**

BEFORE YOU BREAK GROUND or even start applying for building permits, there are several key things to consider when beginning a building project. Constructing a new church facility, or even renovating an existing one, is a significant undertaking; Prepare to have your time and resources stretched.

To help you get started off on the right foot, we pulled together the collective wisdom of experienced architects and church facility management experts. Read ahead before embarking on your next building project:

#1 Get clarity. Why are you building?

"As you're considering a major building program, think about preparing to go on a long road trip. You wouldn't jump in the car with your whole family, start backing out of the driveway, and then ask 'Oh, so where are we going?'"

That's the analogy Ben Heimsath of Heimsath Architects, based in Austin, Texas, likes to use when starting this conversation with churches.

As he puts it, "Anything you're doing with the facility is secondary. The first key to preparation is asking a few questions: Who are we as a church? What is our ministry now? Where are we aspiring to go? What's driving the idea to change or add to our facilities?"

Try a simple experiment. Ask a few people who are aware of the potential building project, why the church is thinking about undertaking it. This group may include the senior pastor, church business administrator, a few elders, etc. Do you hear the same response from each person? If not, you don't yet have clarity on the vision.

As Don Mahoney, partner architect with Ogden, Utah's BGW Services, tells "If you don't really need to build, this can cause a great deal of stress for your congregation. Sometimes building projects come about for the wrong reasons. Maybe a church is struggling and instead of dealing with the real reasons for those issues, they look to a new facility to correct the problem in an area



other than facilities. Facility changes and additions should be in response to a facility need and not a rally point for a congregation that is struggling."

#2 What you can afford?

While it's important to dream big and trust God to provide, we also need to be excellent stewards of the resources that He's entrusted to us. That includes not overextending your church's finances with an over-the-top building project.

"We've found that the dream always exceeds the budget. We urge our clients to start with the dream to ensure they capture as much of their vision as possible, within their budget. Budget is always a driving force in any project, but by starting with the dream, you can ensure the items you're cutting back for budget purposes won't compromise the future," says Aubrey Garrison III, Architect and Principal of LIVE Design Group, based in Birmingham, Ala.

Heimsath mentioned that when facing the reality of a dream that's bigger than the budget, "this may mean you'll need a phased construction program (that will be done in steps) over time. Share this information with

the congregation to level-set expectations."

This money conversation requires your team to face some challenging facts. As Tim Cool of Cool Solutions Group, based in Charlotte, N.C., puts it, "Do not start drawing pretty pictures until you face the following realities," and determine:

- What can we afford?
- How much space do we think we need?
- What is the real cost of construction?
- What is the total project's budget and not just the building budget?
- Can we afford what we want?
- If not, what compromises need to be made?"

#3 Carefully select your building team

For building committees, our experts recommend having a diverse group and not putting the senior pastor in the proverbial "hot seat."

"Include demographic and multiethnic diversity that aligns with your congregation. Gather opinions from a variety of people. Also, pastors usually end up taking the lead on building projects. It's better to have someone else as the lead for this project to

protect the pastor," notes Mahoney.

Ravi Waldon, President of Waldon Studio Architects, based in Columbia, Md., echoed this recommendation, "The senior pastor is the shepherd for the flock. Our goal is to not burn out the pastor, or put him in the middle of construction pressures."

It's also important to gather a team who can work well together, who fully embrace the vision of the church, and who will collaborate effectively with vendors.

"Early on, establish a small, dedicated team of individuals who truly understand and support the mission and DNA of the church. The vision for the building project must align and support the overall vision and mission of the church, as the facility is an important tool for ministry. It's important to select individuals with varying backgrounds and insights, who are able to sift through information and make sound decisions," adds Garrison III.

"As you decide who to include on your building committee, make sure each person

knows how to work collaboratively and have a healthy relationship with others on the committee. Remember that the people you're working with, from the president of the company to the workers who actually build your facility, are people you're witnessing to by how you treat them." —Don Mahoney

"When establishing a building committee, make sure there is a good cross representation of ministry minded leaders of all phases of the ministry and also age and genders. It is more important to have ministry-focused people than tapping in on your technical people that know construction. The people with vision are important in the beginning to set the direction and the technical people can follow when in the later phases." —Ravi Waldon

#4 Realize the implications of each decision

A building project involves hundreds of decisions, from square footage, flooring, to A/V

equipment and much more. What complicates this even further is how many of these choices are interrelated.

"Understand the relationship between worship seating capacity as it relates to everything else. As worship seating grows, so does the need for support spaces such as educational space, offices, parking, commons, restrooms, etc. Do an initial check to determine if the expected size of the new facility will fit on the available land with ample parking. It's important to know if you're in the ballpark, and what is feasible within the site constraints, before taking any further steps," says Garrison III.

Also, consider the potential implications of purchasing land. Waldon recommends using due diligence with an architect and civil engineer. "If the deal sounds too good to be true, it just may be. I have seen churches get a 'great deal,' only to find they are on a covered-over dump or former orchard with toxic waste. Watch for easements and other site constraints. Likely, that \$3,000 or so could save you tens/hundreds of thousands in unanticipated site development costs," notes Waldon.

#5 Count the cost of ongoing upkeep

The money outflow certainly doesn't stop the day you move into the new building. Even after you pay off the mortgage, a facility will still incur costs. It's best to consider the ongoing maintenance expenditures before you finalize building plans. When decisions are being made about size and configuration of your facility, consider the costs. You could save your congregation money in the long run.

"What is our plan for maintaining the building after we move in? This is almost always forgotten, but in reality over the next 40 years, almost 80 percent of the cost of owning a building will be allocated to operational costs and not construction," says Cool.

Heimsath comments "This is a ministerial journey, not just a bricks-and-mortar journey."

As you embark on a building project, keep the vision first in-mind at all times. You'll have a ton of details and decisions to handle along the way. By keeping the long-term view in focus, you're more likely to have a successful building effort with your congregation ready to move forward together. **WF**



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