

ON BUILDING A CHURCH BUILDING

It's been over a decade now, but it seems like yesterday. My church decided to relocate a couple of miles away on a 15-acre site. We desperately needed a new location, and we'd finally found the land we needed.

The elders called a Sunday afternoon meeting to get organized for the project. My wife told me, in no uncertain terms, "Don't you dare go to that meeting! You've spent too much time working on buying that land, and I need you home with the children! If you go, you'll probably do something stupid, like volunteering to chair the whole thing. So just stay home!"

Well, this suited me just fine. I mean, I'd just spent a couple of years selling two church buildings (we'd just merged with another congregation) and buying the land. I'd done quite enough, and my partners were anxious to see me return my full attentions to work. I stayed home and watched football—and felt just fine about it.

Four hours later my wife returned. "It was nearly a disaster! You can't imagine how bad it was! They set up over a half-dozen committees with 20 or 30 people on each to design the building. No one was in charge. There was no organization! It just wasn't going to work, but I got them to let you chair the building program!"

And so, it happened. They made me a building chairman. And I learned a lot about how to build a church building, most of it the hard way. Here's the condensed version:

Everyone has a say, and no one has his way. Churches are political organizations. Everyone's a volunteer, and money has to be raised to build the building. Therefore, everyone needs to feel like he or she is part of the planning process.

Set a deadline for each committee to submit written recommendations on their part of the work and gladly accept the reports, some of which will be quite thoughtful and some of which will be somewhat (what's the word?) eccentric. But that's ok. Even the members with peculiar ideas should be heard.

Avoid a big committee. I think a building committee should be the chair, a co-chair, the architect, the facilities director (if you have one), and a decorator. Period.

However, as you work through different parts of the process, many, many people have to be involved. Sit down with the preschool directors to go over their space. Meet with the secretaries about the office, the librarian about the library. Just don't let the librarian tell you how to build the preschool.

Everybody has a say, but only in his or her area of expertise and special need. If someone's not involved in the preschool, then don't ask them about the preschool.

Visit lots of buildings. No matter what you think you know about church buildings, you'll learn much, much more by visiting other buildings, especially new buildings.

We visited buildings across the Southeast as part of selecting an architect and construction manager. We figured we needed to see their work product first hand—and see how they were received where they'd been. And this was very instructive.

But even more instructive was seeing all these new buildings and all the ideas that these congregations had poured into their church homes. We took pictures and notes and interviewed preachers and secretaries and janitors. And we learned a lot.

Do not empower multiple committees. We learned that some beautiful churches were ruined because one committee picked out the stained glass and another selected the carpet and upholstery. It was astounding how often the colors clashed!

We learned that the weekday preschools fought over space and storage with the Sunday morning preschool. The winner depended on who got their representative on the right committee! We decided to let neither on the committee, but to be sure both got what they needed—with separate keys to separate closets.

Don't overlook the women. Often we saw where one constituency, perhaps the teens, got what they wanted while another did not. Often, the women were the ones overlooked. Women were in tears telling us how desperately they needed more room for the nursery or cradle roll or preschool, but as only men had been on the building committee, the women's needs were overlooked. By the time they were asked for input, the budget had been set and the plans all drawn.

Remember Winston Churchill's saying: "First we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us." (Nov. 25, 1951). The building you build will affect the congregation you will become. Will the plans unify your church or segregate it?

Our old building had a foyer the size of a postage stamp. Before and after services, people had to leave the building because there was no room inside to mingle. We decided to build a HUGE foyer in the new building, and it's dramatically impacted the life of the congregation. Now people stay around for an hour after church, mingle, talk, share, and encourage one another.

Our old building had narrow hallways, which people passed through as quickly as possible, to avoid the unpleasantness of being pressed up against one another. The new building has WIDE halls, so people can stop and talk.

We have a place for a common coffee area, even though the classrooms have plenty of room for coffee inside. We want our members to mingle as one, not class by class.

Our teens and college students have separate areas, but they are part of the common building, because they are part of a common family. Sometimes we have a

youth or campus minister who wants to separate his part of the flock into a separate building, but so far we've insisted that separation will do more harm than good. Just as in my house, my children have their own rooms, but never their own house!

Hire carefully. Pick the architect first. Some members of our committee wanted to skip hiring an architect, but the best decision we made was to hire the best architect we could find.

We set up a committee just to find the right architect, and we began with a few stipulations—

- The architect has to have built some churches before.
- The architect can be from out of town.
- We have to visit the churches already built and interview the congregations that live there. Are they happy with the experience?
- The architect needs to understand the peculiarities of Churches of Christ. We don't need a choir loft or organ, but we have to have a baptistry. We have to have great acoustics for singing.

We traveled, interviewed, and traveled and interviewed. It took months. It was the best-spent time of the adventure.

Don't get in a hurry. Deciding what you want will take more time than you imagine. Don't let the elders or members or anyone else push you to make hurried decisions. Being a month or two late will be soon forgotten. You'll have to live with your design mistakes for decades!

Avoid ecclesiastical fashion. Do we need a bunch of small classrooms? Or a few big ones? Does the teen room need to look like a Starbucks? How much space should we dedicate to the preschool?

It's hard to make decisions that you'll have to live with for years, not knowing the future. I've learned that the classic ideas tend to survive. You'll never have too many big rooms. However, whatever you build for the teenagers will be torn out in five years—just accept it. Just be sure you build something that can easily be reconfigured as tastes change.

Go multi-purpose at every opportunity. Multipurpose space is always a compromise. It's never quite as good as specialized space, but it saves a ton of money—and space. And unless you have a rarely wealthy congregation, you have to make double and triple use of your space at every opportunity.

Make the foyer big enough to host receptions. Make the classrooms near the auditorium suitable for overflow space. Make at least one classroom suitable for dressing a bride. Make the library and elders' office suitable for meetings and small classes.

In our case, we made the auditorium convertible into a gym—a gym with Corinthian columns and a barrel ceiling—a gym people outside the church rent to host weddings! But five days a week, we play basketball and let the preschoolers ride tricycles in the auditorium. The space is used every day.

Use a construction manager rather than a contractor. A contractor bids the entire job for a fixed price. Sometimes he gets an incentive to shave costs. A construction manager works for a fixed price (or percentage) and bids each subcontract.

The experts (and my experience) tell me that a construction manager gets the best price, because every single specialty is bid, which pushes prices down. You don't accept any bids until you've bid them all, as a rule, so when you're done, you have a fixed price deal.

This requires someone who knows what he's doing. It's important that the manager work with likely bidders to get them interested in the job, to find out what saves money in your market, to get plenty of competition—and to reject bids from crooks.

We've done this twice, and it's doubtlessly saved us 10% or more of the total project cost. It gives the congregation a direct contract with each sub, and it lets us pick our subs carefully. In a few cases, we specified a sub, because a member agreed to do the work at no mark up or for free.

Pick the construction manager carefully. This is like picking the architect (and may well be the architect). Visit sites where he's built before, interview satisfied customers, check him out thoroughly. Travel as much as it takes. Take enough time.

Prepare a list of requirements. Now that you have reports from a bunch of committees, consolidate these into a master document for your architect. Add to it liberally from what you learned in visiting other churches.

You'll have learned a lot from interviewing architect and construction manager candidates. Put all those good ideas down in an organized format.

Decide on a look. We built a classic red-brick church with white columns. This is more expensive than a more modern look, but we'd moved from a very modern building and our members were desperate for something "pretty."

Columns and circle-head windows will cost a lot. Stained glass is expensive. Sit down with your construction manager and architect and discuss frankly what look you can afford and what look suits your community.

A red brick, white columned building looks great in Alabama. It may not look so good in Albuquerque.

Farm out good taste. Recognize that you are building chair because of some reason other than your good taste. You may be a leader, organizer, or just know

buildings. But it's unlikely you got this position because you know taupe from chartreuse.

Either find a couple of members with impeccable taste (and iron will) or else hire a decorator—and turn all color and tile and carpet selection over to the people with good taste. You get to watch out for costs, quality, durability, and such, but don't pretend you know how to decorate a woman's restroom area.

If you use members of your church, be sure they can stand the heat from the other members. Every woman with a dream of seeing her daughter married in the building will know exactly what color the auditorium carpet should be. There will be as many opinions as there are members, and they'll be strongly held. You're going to make some people unhappy—some *very* unhappy.

Back your decorating committee. Don't let them be pressured by loudmouthed discontents.

Insist that the architect approve their final decisions. Even though your committee may be highly skilled, a professional should make sure they aren't getting outside the overall look and feel of the building.

Build some space that's especially pretty. The sad truth is that costs will push you into some rather plain spaces. You just can't afford to deck out every hall and every classroom. But avoid the temptation to be utilitarian throughout. Instead, consciously pick two or three places that will be especially pretty.

We fixed up our library with stained glass windows and beautiful wooden bookcases. It's now the favorite place for committees to meet.

We also decorated a prayer room with very nice, donated furniture, wall hangings, and such. And it gets used. Let people know what's important to you by where you spend your extra effort.

Check the plans! This is my biggest failing as a building chair. I just don't have the patience to check the wiring drawings to be sure the light switches are in the right places. But I'm too much of a perfectionist to let them be in the wrong place. This leads to change orders.

Change orders are the bane of building projects. They always add costs, and often add a LOT of costs. If I'd caught the problem in the drawings, the change would likely have been free. Now that I'm telling the crews to tear out the wiring and move it, it'll cost thousands!

On the other hand, it's cheaper to fix it now than later. Accept the fact that you'll have some change orders, but minimize them by flyspecking the plans—every single page! And get some help. Have several people go over them.

Make sure the doors open the right way, that there are enough electrical outlets, that the ceilings aren't too low, that the halls are wide enough, that the classrooms face the right way, that sound is properly wired, etc., etc.

Make the architect draw the HVAC in. In many communities, it's customary for the HVAC people to fit their stuff in without benefit of plans. However, if you've carefully planned your building, there's no extra room for another return air or vent. Insist that the architect draw the entire HVAC system and that the subcontractor approve the drawings—that he agrees to install where the plans say to install.

Walk the site every day. During construction, things go up fast. Mistakes happen, get sheetrocked in, and can't be fixed except with long delays. Walk the site—even if you have to do so in the dark after hours.

You really need a minister or volunteer who can walk the site during the day, if you can't. Meticulously check the work.

Pay for a computer tour. This wasn't possible in our first phase, but when we expanded our space, our funding raising committee bought a computer-simulated tour of the building as it was to be built. The film, taken from the architect's AutoCad drawings, showed a camera moving around the outside of the building and then touring within the building.

It cost several thousand dollars, but it was perhaps our best investment of the project. First, it helped raise money, because members got excited to see the plans in such a vivid way. But from my standpoint, the big benefit was seeing what we'd drawn.

We made several improvements in the designs as we saw the videotape being developed. We caught mistakes we'd never have noticed until there was concrete on the ground and steel in the air. It saved us much more than it cost us.

Keep the offices the same size. We measured our ministers' offices to the square inch. They are all exactly the same size, although the dimensions vary. I can't tell you how this has simplified things. Don't let some preachers' egos create built in problems to fight over. The pulpit preacher's office is no bigger than the children's minister's.

Go over budget if you have to. I know this sounds terrible, but some of the biggest mistakes we made early on were for fear of spending too much money. But for \$10,000 spent over budget 10 years ago, we could have saved \$100,000 today.

Obviously, you can't go much over budget, but the last \$10,000 invested in the building may well be the most important. Don't let the fundraising committee and accountants keep you from building the right building. Better to be tight for a few years than to make mistakes you have to live with for 50 or more years.

Don't forget the rest of the budget. Your architect's budget may well not include landscaping, furnishings, pews, AV equipment, etc. Typically, the architect only gives you a budget for what he'll design, and these leaves a lot out.

And go ahead and decide to throw the old stuff away. When you move into a brand new educational wing, no one will want to sit in 30-year old, beat up folding chairs. Put someone in charge of finding a church that wants your old stuff, and leave it behind.

Stay away from the fundraising. Chairing a building program is plenty of stress. Don't get involved in raising funds except to keep the fundraising people informed of your plans and needs—and to know how you are doing against the budget.

Hire a great acoustical firm. This is a Church of Christ, and so congregational singing is important. It's unlikely that your sound engineers will fully appreciate this, and they'll want to design to make the speaker sound great. That's important, but not as important as the singing. Don't let the acoustical people mess up the singing by dampening the sound too much.

For the preacher to sound great, the audience should not hear his voice bounce back off the walls. For the congregation to sound great, their voices should fill the space. The two needs are completely incompatible. Start with a great hall for singing, and then if people have trouble hearing the speaker, dampen it just enough and no more.

Over-plan your AV needs. When we moved in to our building, we sang out of the hymnbooks. Fortunately, someone talked me into a large screen for behind the pulpit. Now we project sheet music onto three large screens.

We keep having to buy larger and better soundboards. We keep needing more and better microphones. Just be sure you have conduit and wiring in place to expand more than you can imagine!

Build more women's restrooms. It's not fair, I know, but they need more time to dress and undress. And they are more likely to have babies with them. Be realistic and eliminate lines for women's restrooms.

Plan for the disabled. Churches are largely exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act, but churches often have disabled members. Build ramps. Avoid steps. Install elevators. Put in plenty of handicapped spaces. Make it clear that you care about the disabled.

Plan for security. It's sad but churches are increasingly dangerous places. Meet with your preschool leaders and plan how you're going to be sure children are picked up by the correct parent. Meet with your secretaries and plan how they'll be kept safe from intruders. A modern church building will have an astonishing number of doors, due to the requirements of the fire code. How will you control entrance while your teenagers are having a Friday night lock in?

Light the exterior well. Use the latest technology in cameras and passkeys. You're going to have children there at all hours, and one tragic mistake will destroy a family and your church.

Protect your staff. Make sure all the office doors have windows. The same goes for children's classrooms. Child abuse or sexual misconduct should be impossible to hide.

You never have enough storage. This is no exaggeration. The more storage space you create, the more space will be taken. Church people can be surprisingly unwilling to throw things away. But storage will always be a problem when storage space can cost over \$150 per foot to build.

Nonetheless, you have to swallow hard and dedicate some of your very expensive space to storage. Every church needs it. Better to plan than to have fire hazards accumulate in the stairwells and HVAC rooms.

Preschool playgrounds require expertise. It used to be that you could just buy a Sears swing set and be done with the preschool playground, but not any more. Now, if you plan to run a Monday-Friday preschool, you'll have to meet state licensing standards for the playground. Even if not, for liability reasons, you have to design the playground for safety. Better to do it right than to see a child hurt. Get the advice of someone who knows the law.

Weddings. Be sure you've thought about how this space will work for weddings. Where will the bride dress? How about the rest of the bridal party? Where will the reception be?

Funerals. I'm embarrassed to say that our second floor chapel doesn't have an elevator large enough for a casket. It can't be fixed. Plan!

The move. When it's time to move in, you have to haul all your stuff from the old building to the new one. Be sure you have a plan. Don't waste time and money moving stuff you're going to throw away. In fact, the ugliest, rattiest, nastiest piece of furniture will mean something to someone. Try to have it gone before the move!

Know where everything goes. Set up a system to tag things. Have someone at the new building directing traffic. Have someone in each room who knows where the desk or lamp goes. Use your volunteers while they're there.

Pray. Pray that no one gets hurt or killed during construction. Pray that the community is benefited by your building. Pray that your children are always safe on your grounds. Pray that no one gets their feelings so hurt over a color choice that they change congregations. Pray for patience. Pray that God uses this space to fulfill his mission on earth.