

75 Questions to Ask When Hiring a Church Architect

Excerpted from the book, "Before You Build", by Stephen Anderson

The design and construction of church facilities may very well be one of the most important activities in your organization's history. One of the many critical components of your building success is hiring the right architect. Your church should consider *at least* 3-4 architects or design/build firms who have a good reputation for building the type and style of structures you are considering and are familiar with designing within the budget range you can afford.

General Background Questions

1. How long has the architect been in business?
2. What percentage of the firm's business is designing church facilities?
3. How many people does the architect's firm employ?
4. Does the architect have a valid license for the state in which you intend to build?
5. Does the architect commonly do church projects of the style, size and budget that you anticipate building?
6. Is the architect familiar with the nuances of your denomination and worship style and what this may mean in building design?
7. Does the architect have a specific design style and how well does their design style match what you are looking to build?
8. Does the architect intend to use consultants for this project and if so, how are they paid?
9. Does the architect carry insurance?
10. What are the policy limits for each type of insurance carried?
11. Will the architect provide proof of insurance should the church decide to hire the firm?
12. When and what was the architect's most recent project?
13. When and where was the architect's most current project like yours?
14. May the church see examples of the architect's previous projects that are similar to your proposed project, including sketches, photos, plans and budgets?
15. Should the church decide to hire their firm, may the church get the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the clients for these previous similar projects?
16. What services did the architect provide for those church clients during the design, bidding, and construction phases?
17. Who will provide each of these services for the church: the architect, the architect's employees, or outside professionals?
18. What was the actual construction cost versus the architect's estimated cost for each of these projects, and how do they account for the variance?
19. Who from the firm will the church be directly dealing with? Is it the same person who will be designing the project? If not, who will be designing it and what direct interaction will the church have with this person?

20. What is the proposed mediation process for resolving disputes and will the architect agree to binding arbitration?

Proposed Project Questions

1. What are the most significant challenges of the proposed project and how does the architect anticipate dealing with them?
2. How well does the architect understand the church's goals and constraints? (Ask the architect to reiterate back to you the overall goals, design and budget constraints and evaluate how well they understand them.)
3. How confident is the architect of meeting the church's proposed schedule?
4. What experience does the architect have translating ministry needs into space requirements?
5. What is the objective process that the architect will use to gather information to help evaluate the needs & goals of the ministry to provide the optimum design solution?
6. What sort of information will the church need to provide, and when?
7. What services does the architect propose to provide during construction?
8. Which of the proposed services are optional?
9. What are the steps, or phases, in the design process and how long should each take?
10. What does the architect show to explain and present the project? (Models, computer 3D models, color renderings, line sketches, etc.)
11. What are the options and price differences for each option?
12. How viable does the architect believe your proposed project is with respect to timeline, budget and land constraints?

Fees & Contractual Issues

1. How does the architect establish fees and when will payments be expected?
2. How does the architect tie fee payments to milestones or phases in the scope of work?
3. What are the architectural and engineering fees for each phase of this project?
4. What specific services do the fees cover?
5. How does the architect establish fees for additional services?
6. How does the architect establish fees for reimbursable expenses?
7. What additional costs (e.g. permit, impact and other governmental fees) or services (e.g. time spent obtaining permits and approvals) does the architect anticipate for your project in addition to architectural and engineering fees?
8. If consultants or engineers (civil, structural, mechanical, electrical, geotechnical, testing and inspection, etc.) are necessary, are their fees included in the architects quoted fee or are they separate services?
9. How might the church structure the contract so that the church has the ability to "walk away" from the agreement at the conclusion of any phase without additional cost or penalty?

10. How does the church insure they own and have the right to use the intellectual property (drawings, research findings, etc.) from each phase if they should decide to terminate their relationship with the architect?
11. What engineering work will the architect sub-contract, will it be sent out for bid and will the church be able to see these bids?
12. What is the architect's markup on 3rd party services if they sub-contract out the work?
13. Will the architect provide construction cost estimates for the project?
14. What happens if the architect's construction estimates are not in line with construction quotes?
15. Who is liable for the cost of redesign if it is necessary to meet the construction budget?
16. Will there be additional charges for changes required by the building department or other government agency? If so, how are these charges calculated?
17. How are additional charges computed for design changes requested by the church after working drawings are already completed?
18. How are additional charges computed for design changes requested by the contractor?
19. Who is financially responsible for correcting errors and omissions in design and bids?
20. Will the architect provide a fixed price agreement for each phase instead of a percentage-based fee? (Fixed price is usually better.)

Making the Final Decision

Don't go by your feelings, check the references! Call or visit each reference that each architect gives you and ask and evaluate the answers to the following questions:

1. How well did the architect adhere to schedules?
2. How well did the architect live up to the expectation they set during the sales phase?
3. Did the project complete within budget? If not, why not?
4. Were you pleased with the architect's services and your working relationship with the architect? (Compare to the architect's explanation to the same question)
5. Did the architect listen to your concerns and attempt to resolve them to your satisfaction?
6. Would you hire the architect again? Why or why not?
7. What problems surfaced during the project?
8. What were the architect's strong points?
9. What were the architect's weak points?
10. What would you do different the next time?
11. Ask each reference about other projects they know the architect was involved with. This will give you some additional references to check.

Remember no one will knowingly hand out references that won't give a glowing report. Seeking other "off list" references may give you a more balanced viewpoint.

Subjective Issues To Evaluate And Consider When Hiring An Architect

These are questions that you may not always directly ask, but may evaluate from the responses to other questions and actions.

1. How interested is the architect in your project?
2. How much time and effort has the architect put into winning your business and earning your confidence?
3. How busy is the architect?
4. What do you feel sets this architect apart from the rest?
5. How well does the architect respond to being asked why you should hire them over someone else?
6. How well do your thoughts on why this architect may be the best fit for your church line up with their answer on why you should hire them?
7. How well has the architect performed in bringing projects to completion within the proposed budget on other projects?
8. How well does the architect understand your goals, priorities and constraints?
9. How good of a personality fit do you feel you have with the architect?
10. Does the architect have an "all or nothing" attitude towards the proposed services, or are they willing to offer services "a la carte" to help you meet your budget?
11. Are the agreements and pricing for services straightforward and easy to understand?
12. How well has the architect responded to your questions and communications in a timely and accurate fashion?

It is recommended you create a form (or several) with all the questions allowing each person on the evaluation team to rank each respondent's response on a scale of 1-10. If possible, visit the projects the architect has used as references for their services. This will provide an objective valuation for each applicant that should weigh heavily in the final decision and help eliminate personal feelings and preferences.

As you may notice, many of the questions assume you have a good idea of what you want to build, why you need to build and what you can afford. *If you cannot definitively answer these questions, it is premature to solicit the services of an architect or design/build firm.*

Mistakes are easy to make. For more information on how to address critical church building issues, read "*Before You Build: Practical Tips & Experienced Advice to Prepare Your Church for a Building Program*" available for [immediate free download](#).

In addition to leading his church through a building and capital stewardship campaign, Steve Anderson is a church building consultant, seminar speaker, past contributing editor for Church & Worship Technology

Magazine and author of the eBook, "Before you Build": Practical Tips & Experienced Advice to Prepare Your Church for a Building Program.

To download the book, or for more information on church building and construction financing, visit www.ChurchBizOnline.com