

Common Mistakes in Church Construction

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

Talking with hundreds of churches in building programs allows a church building consultant to develop a unique view; to realize the wisdom in Ecclesiastes when the author says, "*there is nothing new under the sun.*" While each church's challenges may seem unique to them, the reality is most churches face variations of the same challenges; and many make the same general mistakes simply because they don't know any better.

Church building projects cost hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars. Mistakes can have serious financial consequences. Mistakes in a building program can be very costly, not only in terms of money, but also with respect to functionality of the finished facility, loss of confidence in leadership, and unity in the body of Christ.

A large portion of mistakes made by churches can be summarized into a single category – failure to properly plan. The church often creates a vision committee or long-range planning committee and tasks it to present a plan to the congregation. Regrettably, even the best intentioned of committees generally do not have the experience to plan and execute a building program in a manner that best meets the needs and budget of the church. Nothing against our volunteers on the committees, it's unfair to expect these people to have the unique skill and know how that can only come by experience.

The Three Most Common Church Building Mistakes

Mistake #1 – Failure to Count the Cost

Before the church decides what it wants or needs, it must first determine what it can afford. A building program has two very real physical limitations imposed upon the program: the amount of land and the amount of money a church has available. *By far, the most common mistake in building programs is a church going into the design of a building without objectively understanding its needs and without having a firm budget.*

Before you start planning, you need to know what you can afford and how you will pay for it. The number of churches that end up with a set of million dollar plans with no concept of what the monthly payment would be or how they could pay for it would surprise you. In my experience, at least 4 out of 5 churches begin with plans from an architect that substantially exceed their financial ability. This is not only a waste of time, effort and money, but can erode the confidence and enthusiasm of the congregation in the building program. This is a serious and pervasive problem with churches in building programs today.

Mistake #2 – Failure to Get Outside Help

If the church does not have substantial experience at building, where should it turn? Whether to a denominational resource or independent consultant, the church often needs to look outside the walls of the church for wise counsel.

Through wisdom is a house built; and by understanding it is established...For by wise counsel thou shall make thy war: and in multitude of counselors there is safety. Proverbs 24:3,6

Once you go through a building program, you will have a better appreciation for the “war” reference in the preceding Proverb. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, realized wisdom alone was no replacement for experience, when he purposed to build the Temple, one of the first things he requested from the King of Tyre was for a man cunning or skillful (depending on translation) to do the work.

Skill birthed out of experience is a precious commodity. If you are as wise as Solomon, you too should seek experienced help. An outside consultant can provide a proven process and can help you *objectively* determine the best solution for your building program.

Mistake #3 – Contracting Issues

When considering a building program, many churches make it one of their first priorities to engage the services of an architect, design/build firm or contractor. As you will read in subsequent chapters, this may not be the best course, as the church most often has significant homework to do *before* they take this step. When the church does contract for these services, all too often the scope of the contract is too broad, too vague or includes items the church really did not need. Said another way, the church may be committing themselves for more than they need because *they don't yet know* what they *need* to build, what they can *afford*, what services they really *need*, and how to effectively *negotiate* the fees for those services. The end result is the church may find itself in a contractual agreement it needs to change or cancel. Both of which are situations that can be expensive. Proper contracting will reduce the long-term liability of the church, insure it only commits for what it needs, and help reduce cost and risk.

Many churches rely solely on legal review of contracts. While the attorney should be looking out for the church's best *legal* interests, they are seldom in a position to offer any help with the *business* aspects of the agreement. The attorney may not have substantial experience with construction agreements and some may not understand the nuances of church business. Standard agreements for architectural or contracting services contain options your church may not need and have ambiguous language that somehow always seems to resolve itself in favor of the vendor. Get outside help from someone experienced in negotiating these types of agreements to help minimize your cost and long-term liability.

An Important Point to Remember

Did you ever hear the saying; “*Never take a knife to a gunfight?*” It certainly paints a graphic word picture of being at the mercy of someone better “equipped”. Here is something to remember that I believe is true for about 95% of churches: When your church begins to build, just about everyone you talk to, including; banker, realtor, architect, builder, inspectors, planning department and zoning officials will all know more about what you are doing than you do. Some of them will try to help you...some will try to take advantage of you. Do whatever you can to even the odds.

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