

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WON'T NECESSARILY COME: Random Observations about Building and Remodeling Programs

Tim Purcell

In 30 years of ministry I was privileged to lead the two churches I pastored through five major building and remodeling projects and eight different capital stewardship campaigns to fund those projects. Following are a few lessons that I picked up along the way:

- 1) **People support vision, not buildings.** There is a small percentage of folks who get amped up about adding square footage and improving the looks and functionality of a church facility. However, the only thing that will sustain construction projects (and paying for them after they are built) is a vision to see people come to Jesus. Church members have to be committed to that vision and convinced that the proposed project will position the church to be more effective in accomplishing that vision.
- 2) **Leaders must lead.** Pastors and lay leaders must be on board first if there is any hope of the congregation embracing a building expansion or remodeling project. Leaders must lead the way in two critical areas:
 - Helping the congregation focus on the big picture of why the building program is happening.
 - They must lead the way in giving. This is not optional. In fact, before you ask the congregation for pledges you should announce how much the leaders have already pledged toward the project. It's like the old adage says, "I'm not going to ask you to do something I am not willing to do myself."
- 3) **If you build it, they won't necessarily come.** I call this the "Field of Dreams myth." Certainly, a substandard building will be a hindrance to people coming (inadequate parking, poor or dirty children's ministry space, poor restrooms, etc.) but a nice building won't attract people, it simply houses them. It's ministry and relationship that attract people. The point is that a top-notch facility won't help if you don't also have top-notch ministries and a warm, welcoming congregation.
- 4) **Don't let the tail wag the dog.** Building programs exact a high price from both pastor and people and it's really easy to lose ministry momentum. Ministries can't be neglected while the church is going through the building program. Also, be sure not to rob missions giving and the outreach budget in order to help pay for the facility improvements. Keep your priorities in line.
- 5) **As much as possible, keep the pastor out of the line of fire.** The fact is that many pastors leave shortly after a building program is completed and there are a couple of reasons for that. First, he/she is exhausted. Secondly, he/she probably has a bunch of people angry because they don't like the paint or carpet.
- 6) **Be prepared for some fallout.** You will never have 100% of the people who catch the vision and you may even have some people leave the church because of the building program. Don't be afraid of that. You can never allow people who lack vision to control the direction of the church.

- 7) **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Statistics show that something needs to be communicated at least seven times before most people really catch it. Be sure to utilize a variety of communication mediums; spoken, mailings, web site, emails and videos. Be sure to sell the vision well and give regular updates during the fund-raising and construction.
- 8) **Don't be afraid to spend money to raise money.** There are a variety of companies who specialize in helping churches raise funds for construction programs and other ministry initiatives. I have used those companies on three different occasions and have found them to be incredibly helpful. They know what they are doing and the accountability that comes with hiring a fundraising consultant insures that you don't take any shortcuts. Be prepared; if you suggest hiring a fundraising consultant you will get some pushback. The chief objection will be, "Why should we spend money to raise money when we could spend those funds on the building itself?"
- 9) **Manage your debt load.** The Bible doesn't forbid debt, but it certainly contains many cautions about debt. Take into account that the members of the church are all over the map when it comes to the issue of debt. Some of them undoubtedly buy everything on credit and see no problem with the church racking up a large debt and making payments the next 30 years in order to pay it off. Others in your congregation pay cash for everything and believe that the church should never have any debt. I would encourage you to determine a maximum debt ceiling ahead of time. Also, consider using Wesleyan Investment Foundation. WIF believes in the ministry of the church. For them it's not just a business, it's about people coming to Jesus.
- 10) **The relationship between the church, the architect and the contractor is paramount.** Most architects and contractors don't understand churches. They typically don't get how we use our buildings and what it takes to make a church facility truly functional. Because of that, you need an architect and builder who will listen to you.
- 11) **Remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint.** It seems like building programs always take longer than you think they will and you always run into obstacles you didn't expect. Don't neglect to build a contingency fund into the construction budget because you will run into surprises. Also, remember that when you change anything there are early adopters, middle adopters, late adopters and never adopters. We get all excited about early adopters, but it's the middle adopters and late adopters who take us over the finish line.
- 12) **One last thing; remember that your new building is a tool, not a trophy.** This is about reaching people and if you reach people your beautiful new building will get messed up. That's okay. Walls can be repainted and carpet can be replaced. As you are constructing the facility, be sure to build that mindset into the DNA of your people so that when the new facility is completed they won't be overprotective.

Guiding a church through a building project is one of the biggest leadership challenges a pastor will ever face. But it's worth it because if we lead the project well, it can unite the congregation in our vision and give us a wonderful tool that will enable us to reach more people for Jesus. And it's always reaching more people for Jesus!