

“Building a Bridge of Faith in Northwest Houston”

The eye-catching facade of a church called Faithbridge commands a second look. The NW Houston church’s custom-tailored cross beams through the wall of skyward-reaching glass, beckons onlookers to come in.

This evangelism through architecture is no accident. It was a carefully planned part of a \$10-million building project to provide Faithbridge, averaging 1200 worshippers, with its first permanent home.

“We wanted people to be able to look inside and see what's going on,” said the Rev. Ken Werlein, Faithbridge's Senior Pastor. “We wanted them to see that there's nothing hidden or secretive going on here. There's nothing up on high shelves they could never reach. We're real people, with real lives, and we have a desire to meet folks where they are, wherever that may be, and take them to meet Jesus Christ.”

Faithbridge held its first service in the new 55,000-square-foot facility April 9, 2006. The congregation spent a year planning the project, followed by a year of construction. Werlein planted the church seven years ago with a handful of people who met in his apartment. As attendance grew, the congregation rented space for services in an intermediate school and leased administrative office space in a bank building.

“Even though the congregation had experienced tremendous growth, it was handcuffed in its ability to conduct programs and ministries throughout the week,” said Joani Williams, Faithbridge communications director.

“Some have thought of us as the church that wasn't really a church yet because we didn't have our own building,” Werlein said. “Having facilities gives the congregation a sense of presence, legitimacy, and permanence. After meeting seven years in a school with teams of men arriving at 4:30 a.m. to set up for services, no one questioned the need.”

To launch the project, the Senior Pastor wrote a facilities vision paper that gave clarity and focus in concept development and in interviewing architects. He also served as the primary “vision caster” to share his excitement and support with the congregation.

“The senior pastor has to be 100 percent behind the project, otherwise people think it's shaky,” Williams said. “He can't go in half-hearted or it won't work.”

The Senior Pastor also served as the chief fund raiser. “In this type of project, it is important to figure out how much debt you can take on responsibly; we did not want to extend ourselves beyond twice what we could pledge,” Werlein said. “With growth projections, we were comfortable we would not jeopardize ministry operations so long as we stayed within those parameters.

“You have to watch to make sure you don't get overextended. If all your money is going to debt reduction, you can't pay for staff, programs, and promotions necessary to reach people and fill the building.”

The process toward construction involved several steps. The congregation hired a site planner who helped them assess their long-term goals or “wish list,” determining how much land they needed in order to accomplish those goals. The planner determined they needed 65 acres. The congregation

searched, located the property with the help of their realtor, and staged prayer walks on the site for members. Eventually they purchased 73 acres that allowed space for extra frontage.

As the team considered design elements, a Faithbringer, who was a retired airline employee with time and unlimited travel privileges, traveled the country photographing church facilities and interviewing staff members at two dozen designated churches. After each trip, he created a slide show to report on the designs and features of interest to the Faithbridge team. “We learned so many things without ever having to transport our team,” Werlein said.

Laurel Burrin, Faithbridge's building team chair and congregation member, said church leaders considering building projects should determine the project details and budget early on in the process. The Faithbridge building team identified safety, connecting with the community, and the potential for future expansion as important features. They wanted to make sure they weren't landlocked and had plenty of room to grow. “People are more mobile than they were a few years ago, so parking was also a major consideration,” Burrin said.

The team wanted to build a “smart facility” – energy efficient, easy to expand, future oriented, and flexible to use. The team wanted the building to embody the “feel” of the congregation and be a place for everyone, with customized features geared toward the various types of people who would use it. They also wanted the latest audio-visual technology, a contemporary design, and easy access. They prioritized good signage to help make the facility welcoming and easily navigated for newcomers around the building. Prayer is essential to Faithbridge members, so the design also includes a prayer center with 24-hour access.

The church is “wired” for computers and multi-media throughout, including two large projection screens in the multi-purpose room. People, in general, are more technically capable than they were even a few years ago, Williams said. That is especially true of younger people. They are accustomed to instant messaging, good visual effects, and great sound. Approximately 10 percent of the total building cost is devoted to technology.

“Churches wanting to combat the stereotype of an aging, dwindling congregation have to communicate the world's most important message in a compelling way, and that means using the latest technology,” Werlein said.

To capture the feel of the congregation, planners were guided by the congregation's slogan, “Real People, Real Life,” as well as its mission statement – “To make more and stronger disciples of Jesus Christ” – and core values of fervent prayer, ministry excellence, life-changing community, authentic leadership, generational relevance, and intentional loyalty.

“We wanted the church to be inviting and user friendly so members would be comfortable and eager to bring unchurched neighbors and friends with them,” Werlein said. “The decisions weren't based on what would make us more comfortable, but what would help us bring new people in.”

For example, security is an important consideration, particularly for parents with small children. Parents want to know their children are safe, especially from sexual predators. To address safety concerns, the Faithbridge design includes a separate area for the children with a special computer software system for parents to check children in and out. The area has security cameras, windows in the doors, and a fenced play area with security gates. The staff and youth program workers are also required to receive safety training.

The Senior Pastor plays an important role in the design and construction process. However, unless he has prior hands-on experience building multi-million-dollar projects, he needs to be an effective builder of teams who can handle the project details. Werlein said about the time he realized he was trying to run something he didn't know how to run, Burrin stepped forward to lead the building team. She had experience running multi-million dollar projects and felt God's call to use her leadership skills on Faithbridge's building.

"To choose the architect and construction companies, the team solicited lots of input, looked at many candidates, visited offices, checked references, examined completed projects, and developed interview questions so they could compare companies equally," Burrin said. They interviewed local architects, looking for just the right "chemistry." They eventually broadened their search outside the local area and chose RNL in Denver to develop a master plan and the design of the project.

The architectural team conducted preliminary interviews with all key leaders and congregation members. Staff members were involved in designing portions of the building affecting them most. The architects also used a brainstorming process called a "charette," with several dozen key leaders brainstorming in the same room, with the architects, who then converted concepts into drawings on the spot for approval or disapproval.

"We were able to see the vision emerging right then, not two weeks later. It created a sense that we were designing it together," Werlein said. "A good benefit of that process is that everyone has a sense of ownership in the building."

Once the design was completed, the Faithbridge building team began looking for the right construction firm. They considered approximately 10 firms with church experience, checking out their work, and then narrowing the field to three whom they invited to make presentations.

"Again, chemistry was a big thing for us because we knew we were going to be working with them for 12 months or more," Werlein said. The ultimate choice was Tellepsen.

The building team also hired Fred Jenkins, founder of Reliable Construction Management, Inc., a major Houston real estate developer. Fred served as their independent owners' representative, managing the project and representing their interests with the architects and the construction firm.

"Without question, Fred has saved us all of what we've paid him through his years of experience and vast pool of knowledge," Werlein said. "I've seen churches who have tried to do it themselves and the results just aren't as strong. If you don't have an independent project manager, your project manager will be assigned by the architects or the construction firm. Someone will end up in charge, but the conflict of interest presented is obvious."

Selecting a non-local architect created a challenge, however. "If you hire a non-local design architect, you really need to plan on hiring a local production architect too," Werlein said. "The further the project moves from the design phase, the closer the architects need to be." RNL knew the church preferred a local architect and agreed to partnering with a local production architect to oversee design implementation. Faithbridge hired Houston-based Kendall/Heaton Associates as production architects, and both firms agreed to the hand-off approach. RNL designed the building and Kendall/Heaton developed and provided oversight to the construction details.

“We wanted the work to be high quality, not ostentatious, but attractive, warm and functional,” Werlein said. Some churches go to one extreme in terms of flash, and others go the opposite direction, considering only functionality. “We didn’t want either extreme,” Werlein said. “We wanted to make sure that anything we built in phase one never required an apology or demanded a second phase to feel complete.”

The Faithbridge project finished on time and under budget, which Werlein attributes to the skills of a committed building team with a sharp-minded chairperson and a vigilant independent owners’ representative.

“A key to success is praying for everyone involved and setting a precedent early on for open, honest, quick decision-making and feedback,” Burrin said.

Now that construction is complete, serving teams comprised of laity will handle most of the interior and exterior maintenance under the supervision of a Faithbridge staff property management director.

The completed project is phase one of a six-phase master plan designed to accommodate a six-fold increase in attendance to multiple thousands. Phase two will likely include more children’s classrooms and the addition of a fellowship hall, Burrin said.

“The church was built for growth with a 100-year mindset,” Werlein said. “We hope people will look back 100 years from now and thank us for the decisions we made on the front end.”

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