

## RETHINKING THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

By Thomas Greer

It has often been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. Churches need to consider this statement when they get ready to plan future building projects.

Churches typically think the sequence of a project should be to hire an architect who will design the facility, then go out to bid with various contractors, take the lowest bid and then construct the building. The problem is that it rarely works that smoothly. The Design/Bid/Build process usually turns into Design/Bid/We Can't Afford That/Redesign/Re-bid/Delay/And On and On process.

The primary problem is that churches do not put enough effort into front-end planning before turning the architect loose to design the facility. Architects always begin the project with programming which is an attempt to determine what the needs of the client are. The problem is that this type of programming is not much more than a wish list of the space the church would like to have. It does not take into account a myriad of other considerations that should be evaluated before design begins. I would like to suggest that we consider a different approach to managing construction projects.

First, we need to realize that these projects are spiritual projects and not just construction projects. Anytime a church is experiencing growth you can be certain that it will come under attack. Disunity will pop its ugly head, or those leading the project will face physical illness, or family members will begin to struggle with concerns, or any number of issues will come up to hinder the project. Therefore, it is important to cover the project in prayer and for the leaders to be aware of, and prepared for, the battle that faces them.

Also, it is a great opportunity for the church to model Christ to the men and women who will be working on the project. For instance, when unexpected change orders occur, how do we react? Do we become irrational and begin playing the blame game or do we approach the issue calmly and fairly? Oftentimes churches grind every penny they can from a contractor in the name of good stewardship. To me, that is not good stewardship. I believe good stewardship is using money in a way that brings honor and glory to God. If that is true, then I would much rather have a contractor feeling like he was treated fairly instead of feeling like the church took advantage of him.

Second, we should unlearn the Design/Bid/Build process and go to an Innovate/Unify/Define/Design/Build/Evaluate process. This new process puts more emphasis on the planning phase of the project where the greatest opportunity to control costs exists. Once the design process has begun, the opportunity to control costs decreases dramatically and when construction begins there is almost no opportunity to reduce costs. At that point, all the church can do is to manage the costs to which it has committed. But many church leaders will go through schematic design, realize they have a project that is too costly, and continue on with design development thinking that they

can cut costs in the process. It does not work. Once design development has begun it becomes very expensive to make significant changes that will reduce costs.

So, let's go through this new process, step-by-step:

### Innovate

A building project represents a great opportunity for the church to redefine itself. Unlike the human body where our DNA is a given, a church can change its DNA. Planning for a new facility allows us to dream about new ways to do ministry and reach out to our communities in relevant ways. It is an opportunity to reaffirm the vision of the past or perhaps cast a new and refreshing vision for the future. Logically, our vision and mission should determine the programs and activities of the church which should then shape the actual facilities. Unfortunately, many churches build their facility which defines the types of programs they conduct which indirectly shapes the mission of the church – the exact opposite of what it should be.

### Unify

Vision unifies the church. If leadership does a good job of communicating a compelling vision for the church, the congregation will rally behind them in support of the project. It is important for the congregation to take ownership of the project. In order for this to happen they need to be drawn in by a vision that excites them. Of course, this discussion assumes that leadership has formulated a vision that the people will support with their time and resources. The “if we build it they will come” strategy is rarely convincing and is a lazy approach to planning.

### Define

Defining the project is the core of the strategic plan for the project. It is driven by the following questions:

- How much will we grow?
- How large should our worship center be?
- How much total space will be required?
- How much will it cost?
- How should we phase the project?
- How much can we afford?

All of these questions are interrelated and interactive. A change in one results in a change in the others. For instance, a change in the growth projection changes the size of the facility and all other related education spaces which changes the cost and our ability to afford the project. Also, if we can defer construction to a later date, our future operating budgets will presumably be larger which increases the likelihood that we can afford the project.

It is important to be realistic with our growth projections. Many young churches that are experiencing 30% to 50% annual growth think they will sustain that in the future. That is

not realistic. As we get larger, the percentage growth tends to decline. Unrealistic growth expectations result in facilities that are much too large and too costly to build.

When it comes to estimating the cost of the project it is important to not fall into the trap of believing cost fables. The cost per square foot for a specific project is usually irrelevant to any other project. The construction costs are not the complete costs of the project. Be wary of what other churches say their project cost. That is why I recommend that the church engage a contractor early in the planning process so that realistic and complete project costs are developed.

If we have answered these questions and have realistic growth projections and cost estimates and a phasing plan that takes into account our ability to incur debt against future projected operating budgets in a way that will not adversely impact the ability of the church to conduct ministry, then we are prepared to begin design within the parameters of our plan.

### Design

The most important point here is to make sure that the design phase is not out of sequence in the process.

One of my horror stories goes back to my early days managing church construction projects. On that project we acquired land, got our entitlements, built our parking lots, roadways and stubbed utilities to the future building pads. During that time we had our architect develop construction documents for the first worship center to seat 2,000 people. Unfortunately, we lacked the funds to construct that building so we put up a tent and portable buildings. Three years later when we were ready to construct the first building, we had already outgrown the previously designed building and had to scrap those plans costing us \$1 million.

Remember, architects make their money by drawing. As a result they are motivated to get the church to commence design even if the church has not spent the proper amount of time in planning. It's up to the church to control the pace of the project. No one else is going to do it.

### Build

With rising costs, the church has to balance the desire to begin construction at the earliest date against the desire to have complete construction documents. By going "fast track" the church can lock in construction costs at earlier dates. Unfortunately, this means that construction documents may not be complete which results in unforeseen costs, change orders and coordination issues between architectural, structural, mechanical and electrical documents. Churches might not overpay, but they may pay more than what they thought it was going to cost.

I mentioned before that I encourage churches to get their general contractor on board early in the planning process. Usually churches wait until they go out to bid to select their contractor. In my mind, waiting to hire the contractor until after design is like

starting a baseball game with only 6 players and then adding 3 more in the seventh inning. I don't think you would have much of a chance to win. For me, a collaborative team with good chemistry is much more important to the success of the project than trying to get the lowest competitive bid. The contractor is an important part of the team and can add a lot of value in the planning process. Besides, I know that he is going to get bids from several subcontractors so that we still get the benefit of the bid process.

#### Evaluate

The project you just completed will probably not be your last building project if you are a growing church. It is important to learn from earlier projects so it makes sense to debrief with key personnel at the end of each project to review what worked and what could have been done better. Assessment and understanding are the beginning of future projects.

In conclusion, we need to rethink and relearn the process of church building projects. The ways we have done them in the past have usually led to frustration and cost overruns. We can ensure a more successful project by putting more effort into the planning process and using it as an opportunity to improve the way we do ministry and to instill vision into the church.

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