

WHEN THE CHURCH BUILDING PROGRAM TAKES TOO LONG

By Marijean Stallings*

Whether you are the pastor, business administrator, or member of the church finance committee, you may have an impact to cause your church or Christian school building program to get on track and stay on track. When the pastor announces his vision for a new building program, **he has just mortgaged his leadership credibility among the members of his congregation.** If the building program falters, so does the pastor's credibility in leadership. We have identified five primary areas that lead to unnecessary and expensive delays in getting a church, Christian school, or ministry building project from the "vision" to the "reality" stages.

Setting Time Limits and Avoiding Procrastination

The first and most common error is that the decision-makers—generally a building or finance committee—fail to establish a meaningful and realistic timeline and overall parameters for its responsibilities. Depending on the size, sophistication and discipline of the committee and its leadership, most groups simply gather several times discussing the selection of architects, builders, mortgage funding sources, and so on. This process can take months and in not-so-rare cases even a year or more. With a proper timeline in place, delegation of duties to a few, and a plan to interview in place in a timely manner, the selection process can be reduced to one or two months at the longest. *Church and Ministry Finance International* in conjunction with *PFC Church Consultants, LLC* are an excellent starting point. Our team has 35 years hands-on experience with such matters and have led to hundreds of timely, cost-savings, and effective building programs that

seem to glide effortlessly throughout the process while the church selects the proper builders, architects and funding sources through a vigorous and competitive process that ensures the proper experts are in place for that church organization.

Ignorance of the Process

The second problem that often derails a timely and efficient building committee is the lack of knowledge, experience and business skills required for the tasks before the committee. Most building committee members are faithful members of the congregation, volunteers, and from a variety of walks of life that are not especially suited for the nature of the project. As a result, many bad decisions are made out of ignorance and even fear, thus compounding the problem by more bad decisions, and yet more bad decisions. The consequences are often devastating. Commonly, the first selection the church committee makes is the selection of the architect, to whom they describe the vision, and to whom the church pays tens of thousands of dollars on the plans. In reality, the least suited part of the overall building team has now set the budget and the agenda—the architect. No one has established the previously ascertained a realistic and affordable budget, established the target market, defined the space needs, but the costs of the architectural renderings presented for the church are a real cost. The builder is then selected (often times by the architect) and is told to "price" the construction. After a painful process of working through the drawings, the price is "established". Finally, it comes time to get the mortgage money. It is extremely common that the church budget is substantially less than the architectural renderings and the builder's price tag to build the church as "planned".

The fallout from this kind of approach can be devastating. The pastor is

frustrated and now losing credibility with the greater congregation.

- “Pastor, why is it taking so long?”
- “Pastor, why are there so many ‘cost overruns’”
- “Pastor, why didn’t you tell us we couldn’t afford to build at this time?”

and so on. All of these questions could easily be avoided if your church building committee educates itself on an effective process before it ever interviews a single architect, builder or mortgage company. You can learn much about the process by reading *Church Finances: Financing Your Church Building Project*, by Willis L. Kirk (*Excellence in Leadership*: Atlanta, Georgia) September 2004 [2 pp] [Available through www.CMFI.biz/Resources/Articles]. An excellent cost-effective and time-savings approach is to have a knowledgeable and effective church consulting firm come in at the front-end of the discussions and assist the church in defining its philosophy, vision, mission statement, and target community.

Armed with that knowledge, the space needs are established, and then the budget is determined through sound mortgage finance calculations. The following steps are taken (overly simplified for purposes here):

Step 1

- Ascertain the annual church gross revenues for each of the past three years
- For each of those three years deduct “designated funds” (specifically earmarked funds) that are not eligible for debt service
- Then add the net figures for each of the past three years together and divide by three to obtain the average “annual revenues

available” for debt service of a mortgage

- Divide that figure by 12 to establish approximately the monthly eligible church income
- Take 33% of the eligible church income to ascertain how much money the church can afford to service mortgage debt

Step 2

Go to

www.CMFI.biz/Resources/Calculators

and insert the amount you want to borrow, the prevailing rates, discount points, and other fees and see what amounts your church can afford to borrow and learn about the “true” Annual Percentage Rate (APR) that your organization would be paying under such rates, terms and conditions. When the church organization selects the builders and architects (overly simplified for purposes here), the builder establishes the budget and the architect designs to the actual space needs *within the pre-established budget*. No more wasted money on tens of thousands of dollars on incredible architectural plans that will never see “the light of day”.

Working in God’s Priorities

The third area of challenge in the church building program is the misunderstanding of priorities. In America (and in most of the Western industrialized world), our priorities are all mixed up. Many place God first, career second, spouse and kids third, church fourth (or even lower), friends and social last. God doesn’t “need” us to do anything—He’s God! And your kids must come after yourself. The proper hierarchy of priorities looks more like this:

- Acknowledgement of God as “Lord of your life”, requiring your servitude to His priorities, calling upon your life, and vision that He has given to you over the course of time through Bible

- reading, prayer, and meditation—listening to the still small voice in your inner spirit.
- Your spouse, the person for whom you have left your mother and father, and with whom you have become “one”.
 - Yourself. It is here that many get it wrong. When you are on a commercial jetliner, the initial safety instructions include something like, “If the facemask drops down, secure your facemask squarely on your face before assisting your children.” Why is that? Simple: if you have not ensured that everything is secured in your personal life, you are little use to others—including your children.
 - Career comes next as each of us has a stewardship obligation to provide financial to the security of our families. But work should never creep into priority over the others before it.

If you except the premise of the priorities set out above, then place the church building program in its proper context. God doesn’t need a building. He may establish a vision for such and wants it built with the same competence and enthusiasm as Nehemiah rebuilt the Temple wall. Is it your best in “servitude to the calling of God” (priority one), while keeping a proper balance of spouse, self, children and career? If the church committee members are too busy to meet in a timely and organized manner...they are simply too busy and need to defer to others who have the passion to “rebuild the wall” as Nehemiah enjoyed.

Fear and its Paralyzing Impact

The fourth area of difficulties is rooted in fear. When the church finance committee is ignorant of the true nature of the task before it, fear often sets in.

- Fear that it will make a serious mistake.

- Fear that it will get the wrong architect.
- Fear that it will select the wrong builder.
- Fear that it will not get sufficient funding.
- Fear that the building erected may not attract more worshippers.
- Fear that revenues will not increase (or worse, decrease) if the congregation is dissatisfied.
- Fear of failure.
- Fear of disappointing the pastor.
- Fear of looking ignorant, or worse—incompetent.

Fear inextricably leads to delay and “hand wringing”. The “what if’s” syndrome grabs hold. The best way not to make a wrong decision is to “delay” the decision. As long as the decision is not made, how can it be the wrong decision?

“Waiting on the Lord”

The fifth area of difficulty is called the “waiting on the Lord” excuse. The committee may suggest that it “waits until the first of the next year” to see how the annual giving went, the stewardship campaign is progressing, or some other artificial benchmark that will “illuminate” the direction the committee should go. Why should such artificial benchmarks have any place in God’s economy? God has outlined for us the principles upon which a building program should be conducted. Four verses tell the story.

Proverbs 29:18 (addresses vision); Luke 14:28-29 (addresses budget); I Chronicles 29:3 (addresses sacrificial giving); and John 6:9, 13 (addresses God’s abundance upon a faithful little boy). What more does the committee need to discuss and evaluate the proper program for the church? The financial benchmark may be important, but is not a legitimate excuse for understanding the task before the committee.

Stewardship demands active participation and decision-making as taught in Matthew 25:14-30. The profitable servant made investment decisions and doubled the value of the investment. The fear-ridden servant was “cast into the outer darkness” (NKJV, verse 30). By selecting an experienced and proven church consulting firm, your organization can enjoy the thoughtful and cost-savings plan that gets God’s house is built on time and within budget!

Proverbs 24:3-4 (NKJV)

Solutions

When selecting a church building committee, it is a good idea to select people who have a **good reputation** (Proverbs 22:1 and Proverbs 27:21b) for **dependability** (Proverbs 6:6-19; Proverbs 10:4; Proverbs 12:24, 28; and Proverbs 24:21), **wisdom** (Proverbs 1:5; Proverbs 2:10; Proverbs 8:11; Proverbs 9:10; Proverbs 21:25; and Proverbs 24:3-6), **candor** (Proverbs 13:18; Proverbs 24:28; Proverbs 25:2; and Proverbs 25:8-9), **integrity** (Proverbs 10:9a; Proverbs 11:3; and Proverbs 28:6), **leadership** (Proverbs 23:29), **boldness** (Proverbs 28:1), **faithfulness** (Psalms 119:90), **discretion** (Proverbs 2:11a; Proverbs 3:21b; Proverbs 6:2; Proverbs 10:18-21; Proverbs 11:13; Proverbs 12:15-16; Proverbs 17:9; and Proverbs 19:11), **courage** (Deuteronomy 31:7), **generosity** (Proverbs 3:9-10 and 27; Proverbs 11:25; Proverbs 14:21; and Proverbs 21:26), **humility** (Proverbs 15:33b and Proverbs 17:27), and a spirit of **cooperation** (Proverbs 17:14b). Avoid the contentious spirit (Proverbs 22:10) in such an important team. And God will bless **the team** (Proverbs 11:14; Proverbs 12:15; and Proverbs 15:22) and the building program that flows forth (Proverbs 4:10-12 and especially verse 12a; Proverbs 8:35; and 2 Corinthians 1:17a).

“Through wisdom a house is built,
And by understanding it is established;
By knowledge the rooms are filled
With all precious and pleasant riches.”

Plan of Action

- 1 Select the building or finance committee carefully, utilizing the characteristics identified immediately above. A committee of not less than seven or more than twelve members is generally recommended.
- 2 Select a committee leader and subcommittee chairpersons based upon personal skill sets, interest and personal experiences.
- 3 Identify the objective in a simple, clearly explained statement and permit the committee to establish the details.
- 4 Establish a realistic final target date for completion of the building project. Permit and encourage the committee to establish a routine meeting time (once per week, twice monthly, or other consistent meeting time), interim benchmark dates (e.g., select a church consulting firm with the experience to guide the process, and then target decision dates in accordance with a clear plan and within the deadline set at the outset of the process). Failure to set realistic and certain deadlines on a timeline often gives way to procrastination and loss of weeks and eventually months along the process.
- 5 Establish an oversight and accountability review. When the committee knows it is being reviewed by church leaders and will be held accountable for the schedule, performance tends to follow in a timely manner.
- 6 Ensure that the focus remains on “building the House of the Lord” and do not let the team forget this is “kingdom building” and not just another structure. A building program can be a very stressful

and contentious experience for a church and its leaders. Ensure a method of permitting every committee member to express his or her ideas and concerns without recrimination or embarrassment. Discuss ideas and explore new ideas with an open mind. That is not to say that the committee should let members “sidetrack” them, but it does mean to listen to thoughts with a thoughtful and deliberative mindset.

- 7 Complete the task before the committee. When giving instruction to build the Temple, King David said to his son, Solomon, “Be strong and of good courage, and do it; do not fear nor be dismayed, for the Lord God—my God—will be with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you, until you have finished all the work for the service of the house of the Lord.” I Chronicles 28:20.

Church and Ministry Finance International can provide your church building committee with the tools it takes to properly set up the committee, identify realistic benchmarks, establish the plan to go from vision to completion, and do so within your church philosophy, budget and target market. Together, we can properly build a House of the Lord within budget and on time. ■

About the Author

Marijean Stallings is founder and President of Church and Ministry Finance International, a division of the Platinum Finance Group, Ltd, a Wyoming corporation with its headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. CMFI has church consultants throughout the United States and has successfully worked with churches, Christian schools, ministries, and other nonprofit corporations in designing successful building programs, establishing growth-enhancing stewardship

campaigns, and securing proper mortgage financing that ensures that the debt service is easily affordable and the organization growth sustainable.

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