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Consult Civil Engineers Before Buying, Developing Property

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by Lee Walker and Jeff Bercaw

One of the most difficult and potentially costly stages in the development of a church is the site selection and preparation of the property for construction. Over the years, we've seen many congregations purchase land without any consideration as to God's will regarding the project. In most cases, this is the result of building committees becoming enamored with an individual parcel of land and not understanding what's under the ground and what it will take to prepare the property for building. These committees also often do not adhere to a vision projecting what the congregation will look like in 10-20 years.

The most effective way to bypass these problems is to first seek God's counsel. From a spiritual standpoint, this should result in understanding that a construction project should be undertaken as a way to build God's ministry. Church leaders must realize this property is the Lord's, who has allowed the authorities governance over how it is to be developed. Therefore, the committees need an expert on the land's condition (part of "counting the cost," as Christ said) and how the authorities deem its application. The expert is a civil engineer who is trained to analyze a site and give objective opinions on issues such as local codes, drainage, site preparation, sewage and road access. Many congregations have bypassed this step simply because they think they have a building team volunteer with "expert knowledge," or they do not want to spend the money, or they have fallen in love with a piece of property. That piece of property may be located on a beautiful wooded site. But after it is purchased, they find that it is too expensive to develop. These are clear examples of churches either not wanting to count the cost of the property or worshipping a "sacred cow." When church leaders hire civil engineers, they know about pitfalls prior to the purchase. Without engineers, churches can be faced with going over budget and losing credibility among members.

When considering purchasing property, leaders must keep in mind that there are "natural laws" that govern how to build, keeping in mind that the property and the completed project must be reflective of God's plan. With that in mind, it is important that congregations don't just look at the physical attributes of the property, such as trees, waterfront location, etc. The following are several criteria they should consider:

- Is the property a "stepping stone" to a larger project that can build the ministry?
- Is the planned building expandable to eventually include a chapel, school, youth center, etc.?
- Is the property sellable should the congregation decide it wants to move locations or purchase a larger parcel?
- Is the parcel under consideration "developable" without hidden costs?

These are all factors that will force congregations to view development as an organic part of the vision, leading it to see the project as a tool for God's glory.

There are many examples in Scripture that point to following God's will and teachings and it is particularly applicable when it comes to building a house of worship. ...

"Listen my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding; I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching" (Proverbs 4:1). Scriptures are very specific when advising us to follow governmental authorities, who can be particularly difficult. Keep these passages in mind when dealing with local governments: "Everyone must submit themselves to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Romans 13:1).

God also tells us to seek and accept advice from those who have more knowledge: "My son, keep your father's commands, fasten them around your neck. When you walk they will guide you; when you sleep they will watch over you; when you are awake, they will speak to you. For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life" (Proverbs 6:20-23).

This verse clearly instructs us to follow God's will, which can be pursued by taking advantage of knowledgeable professionals – in this case civil engineers – who can advise congregations about the feasibility of building on a certain piece of property.

Civil engineers will provide analyses on a wide range of issues that affect the cost and practicality of developing. For example, they will understand city and county government regulations, and advise clients on issues related to impact fees. Engineers can highlight the need for building additional roads/lanes to accommodate projected increased traffic. They will also be able to determine the infrastructure costs associated with bringing utilities and sewage systems to the property. Without exception, the experts must determine how the land is suited for water disposal as well as water retention. And most important, civil engineers will advise if the land is polluted and has to be cleaned up through any number of costly procedures. For example, have tires been disposed and buried on the property? Are there underground gasoline tanks left from a previous service station? By understanding these issues congregations will understand the specific costs related to buying and then developing. While the property may appear to be perfect above the land, there may be hidden problems underground.

Again, it is clear through Scripture that as God's stewards of the land, we must respect his creation as we develop and build. The Scriptures point out time and again that we must glorify God in all we do, including building his house. "If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the Lord's land, where the tabernacle stands and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the Lord or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the Lord our God" (Jos 22:19).

God's guidance in this particular area is very clear. Congregations must know the property and must guard against being naïve. In short, they must be patient and build altars for God's glory, not to satisfy egos. This will point church leaders toward purchasing and developing the right piece of property. Scripture is filled with verses advising us to

be patient and wise in all of our decisions:

"But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).

"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Church leaders must realize that God has provided the proper methods for building. He has provided a vision and a biblically sound way to reach goals. They must see the authorities not as enemies but as God's provident instruments to either properly take dominion over the land or properly deflect them from purchasing the property. Part of this involves seeking proper guidance from Scripture and professionals. It also entails being patient and understanding that research in the Scriptures can help us avoid costly and embarrassing mistakes.

"As for the temple you are building, if you follow my decrees, carry out my regulations and keep all of my commandments and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to David, your father" (1 Kings 6:12).

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