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Architect Looks to Churches' Functions, Missions 'What do you do here, and how can we support it through architecture?'

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by Lee Walker and Jeff Bercau

Church leaders and pastors must realize that there's a significant difference between the design of a church and the design of an office building -- or any other building for that matter.

While all buildings must be pleasing to the eye and functional from a working standpoint, Don Mahoney, partner architect for Daniel Cook & Associates of Building God's Way, says there is a key difference. "A church has to be ministry-driven, while a business is typically profit-driven. As architects we must understand where ministries are derived from -- profit for a church is measured in different terms than that of a business."

The answer is clear. Church builders must operate under the biblical approach that ministries are derived from God. Congregations must prayerfully take note of where God is directing them and respond with appropriate missions and ministries, and eventually work with the architect and contractor to provide facilities that respond to and enhance all of these activities.

"Too often, architects focus too much on their own art," Mahoney asserts. "But as a church designer, it isn't about my art. It is a betrayal to think that my designs are about personal fulfillment. Our goal in working with churches is to distance ourselves from this secular view of architecture. That does not negate the importance of providing buildings that achieve aesthetic goals as well. God created us with the ability to appreciate things from a visual standpoint but he gave us free tools such as color and proportion, scale and form that are important to consider as designs come together."

For Mahoney, the question he poses to church leaders is this: "What do you do here and how can we support it through architectural function and aesthetics?"

This basic first question to elders and pastors is firmly grounded in Scripture: "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon" (1 Corinthians 3:10).

This is, of course, not talking about building foundations but about laying our foundations upon Christ. But the concept also applies to buildings in that our "foundation" for design of facilities begins with an understanding of the ministry and outreach opportunities that the church has been given by the Lord. At times this is a difficult concept to convey to building and design committees. At times, too, we all have tendencies to avoid hard discussions about ministry and about buildings that respond to those ministries and instead operate under the belief that a building can solve issues for the church by casting a strong impression on the community. Our impressions are certainly affected by facilities but that is secondary to the impressions left on people's hearts by allowing the love of God to shine through our lives -- buildings are a response to that relationship we have as the body of Christ.

The singular reason for moving forward with design and then construction should be to expand ministries. Frequently, we see congregations moving forward with a project because they may have problems and believe that a massive building project will unify a church and solve problems. When this is the case, the focus is creating a panacea and not building God's ministry. Here, we discourage starting the process and encourage leaders to focus on their ministries.

Again, this is supported by Scripture in many cases: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto thy own understanding (Proverbs 3:5) and "Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity, and quicken thou me in thy way" (Psalms 37).

But how are these verses practically applied?

Mahoney cited several examples. One involved a large church in one of the mid-Atlantic states. The plan was to build a 58,000-square-foot structure that would include a worship center, administrative facilities and a school. The church leaders were distraught when the initial costs came in at \$250 a square foot, a number that far exceeded their budget. The problem wasn't with the design; the problem was that the original architect didn't understand the difference between designing a church and designing a building that paid homage to a portfolio. In short, the architecture reflected that designer's personal preferences and not the goals of the church ministries. ...

"When we took over the project, we determined with the church leaders that the focus of this facility should be the worship center," explained Mahoney. "Significant funds were spent on acoustics, design elements and other features because they felt that the showcase worship center was the centerpiece of how they wanted to build their ministry."

On a per-square-footage basis, the 8,000-square-foot worship center portion was the most expensive to design and build. The remaining 50,000 square feet were designed more efficiently. While attractive, these sections didn't feature the same expensive design elements as the worship center. Ministry that could function well was the focus and reflected through a variety of design features.

The bottom line is that the project came in under budget because the focus was on building a ministry and not on building a monument. "Another church told us that its largest outreach effort was a theatrical program produced during the Christmas season that hosted more than 6,000 people," Mahoney recalls. "It was clear that they needed a theatrically oriented worship center."

It's important to design common areas that encourage interaction among members. But at times, church leaders may get carried away.

"One of our client's major fellowship activities was an annual dinner program for more than 500 people," Mahoney explains. "Initially they wanted to build an elaborate dining facility to accommodate this one event. Our recommendation was to spend less, design smaller fellowship areas and rent a hotel facility for that once-a-year event and to concentrate their limited resources on things that would serve the church body on a more frequent basis."

The key is to focus on church ministries and how the bricks and mortar can fulfill his goals. And this comes back to Christians being good stewards.

"As every man hath received the gift, minister the same to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10).

It's also important for all of us – architects, church leaders, pastors – to realize that we all have been given a gift and it's a privilege that God has chosen us to promote his ministry. "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry" (1 Titus 1:12).

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