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Falling Short on a Building Fund? Consider It a Blessing

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by Lee Walker and Jeff Bercaw

Regardless of the economic climate, churches are continually faced with difficult choices when it comes to a building project. When do we build? What do we build? Do we build at all?

Today, those choices become even more difficult because in many cases building fund drives are coming up short, leaving churches with some money in reserve, but perhaps not enough to complete the project under the original guidelines. So, the question becomes, "Do we build, risking delayed completion or a debt load that wasn't originally projected?"

If congregations acknowledge that building projects happen for the sole purpose of glorifying God and expanding ministries – not to showcase an ornate sanctuary – then they will accept this delay as part of his plan. So, while this situation may be disappointing, church leaders should view the temporary setback as a blessing, a time to re-group and perhaps more closely analyze this endeavor.

There is plenty of Scripture to justify this position. For example, "To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

That short verse clearly points congregations in the proper direction. Church leaders shouldn't view the temporary lack of funds as a sign that God doesn't want them to build. It could very well be a sign that God doesn't want them to build now – or he may not want them to build what was originally planned. He may want us to re-evaluate the direction. For example, we may not need a fancy worship center. A gym or youth building may be more appropriate. As children of God, we, too, must realize that we can't rely on our own understanding of situations. We must rely on God's guidance as stated in Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding."

In many of our projects, we have seen church leaders take time to re-evaluate their motivations for building and to step back to realize that their original project may not have been in line with expanding ministries. Many congregations, for example, have scaled back their plans, recognizing that a project may have been inflated as a way to satisfy the egos of a pastor or large donors. Once that phenomenon is acknowledged, these congregations may move forward with existing funds – or completely change direction, once approved by the church body.

This is often a humbling time for church leaders, but once accepted it becomes a significant turning point if we seek guidance through the Bible. "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time," it says in 1 Peter 4:17. It is also written, "And this we will do, if God permits." Hebrews 6:3.

If congregations acknowledge that God controls everything, then it's easy – albeit initially disappointing – to accept that the timing or direction may not be right at this time.

Once church leaders embrace that concept, then it is time to go back to the congregation and explain the situation:

1. We have not reached our fundraising goals.
2. As a result, we're re-evaluating the project.
3. The funds will be kept in place and will not be used to finance other projects.

That last point is important because we have seen instances when funds originally ear-marked for a construction project have been used to purchase a new sound system or hire a new staff member. When this happens, church leaders lose their credibility and ability to approach the congregation for future projects. The importance of church leadership is prominent throughout Scripture. Pastors, elders and deacons are continually challenged to be Christ-like examples in all walks of their lives. For example, in 1 Timothy: "Likewise (must) the deacons be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre ... holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."

The message is clear and conveys that while church leaders may be disappointed in temporary setbacks, they must understand how God works and then explain the situation to the congregation.

At this time, leadership must stay in touch with the congregation so as not to lose its trust. They must explain that one alternative is to scale back the project to avoid debt the church can't support. In many cases, after a period of re-evaluation, many congregations have a renewed confidence in the leadership and appreciate the honesty. They also appreciate moving forward with a less-costly facility designed from purpose and not pulchritude, a facility that more focally glorifies God by using the gifts of the congregation and not just the pastorate. The church is made up of many members who are the primary means of growth; it is not dependent on a charismatic personality or gifted orator.

In Acts 7:48, it is written, "Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made of hands." This concept is very clear. Bricks and mortar in and of themselves do not build ministries. People following God's path are the one's who build ministries. New facilities often open doors to creating new ways to reach out to non-believers, but again, congregations should not build just for the sake of building. This often creates confusion among church communities. In Psalms 71:1, we are warned to trust God as a way to avoid confusion: "In thee, O Lord, I do put my trust; let me never be put to confusion."

So, the fact that fundraising has come up short should not be viewed as a failure. It should merely be viewed as

God giving churches reason to slow down, re-asses their needs move ahead with a revised endeavor. Keep in mind that "God's grace burns brightest in the furnace of affliction." View financial adversity as a blessing and a message from God to be patient. The Bible is filled with this theme:

"For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:36).

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

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