

church

SOLUTIONS

March 2009 Volume 14 Issue 3

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Ministry & Money

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Ministry & Vision First

Even if the funds are in place, pursue building projects with caution

Despite the challenging economic times, there are churches with the financial resources to start a building project. However, quickly jumping at the opportunity to build can prove to be catastrophic to a congregation. Far too many churches are under the mistaken impression that a new building will magically increase membership, solve internal problems and lead to a successful future.

While those benefits can occur, Scripture continually points to the dangers of building for the sake of building. The first priorities are to build the ministry and spread the Gospel – and if a new sanctuary, school or playground lends itself to this objective, then it's time to proceed. With that in mind, church leaders ought to approach the building process with patience, always guarding against the idea of construction as a panacea – rather than a way to bring Christ more fame. They must also realize that having access to a cash gift or even a parcel of land is a provision from God and should be used accordingly.

The most well-known example in Scripture is the Tower of Babel and the punishment God gave to the community. Genesis 11:4 states, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

As we know, God didn't look favorably on this endeavor and scattered these people all over the earth. The problem with the Tower of Babel – and other contemporary construction projects – is that they are simply examples of great human achievement, monuments to the people rather than methods to glorify God.

As designers and builders, obviously we want churches to move forward with construction, but we want them to move forward for the right reasons. That is, when a new building promotes the vision of the church: to bring forth the Gospel by leading members to take an outwardly focused view of the role of the church as an organization.

All churches should have a unique vision. Some components of a vision can include:

- Reaching out to the poor
- Helping the elderly
- Building youth programs
- Education (Did you know that in early American history, the Bible was the main book used for reading lessons?)

A building project should only move forward if it can help a church pursue its vision. Besides which, there may be better uses for excess resources, such as getting the church out of debt. As a church focuses on its vision, God will direct its leaders to make the proper decisions at the proper times. This concept is repeated many times throughout Scripture, such as in Luke 12:29-31, "And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his Kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

The message is clear. Seek the Kingdom first, and God will guide our decision-making processes (Proverbs 3:5-6), leading us down the proper roads.

MORE CONSIDERATIONS

So, with adequate resources in hand, why should a church take a step back and avoid the knee-jerk reaction to use existing funds to build? For starters, church leadership may not be in place to undertake a massive project. While the pastor must lead the overall effort, his major goal involves ministering. A pastor can't become the general contractor. The church must have members to assist with these activities. Other issues include:

- Considering areas of greater immediate importance that could lead to promoting the Gospel (i.e., feeding the poor, educating members on evangelism).

- Anticipating the additional costs associated with building. For example, in a 10-year period, a completed \$1 million building will cost about \$2 million to maintain.

- Evaluating alternate building options. For example, instead of building a new sanctuary, the church might better spend the money by building a gymnasium for kids in the neighborhood – another way of opening doors to nonbelievers.

- Ensuring that the building fits the vision of the church. Despite having funds in place to build, one church in southern Florida followed a radically different path in order to pursue its vision of ministering to the immediate community. Rather than building, the elders decided to reach out to a largely underprivileged minority community by offering to pay utility bills of those in need. This attracted new members

and brought the current members together with a specific plan as to how they could extend the church's vision. With an increased membership and a newfound enthusiasm among members for spreading the Gospel, this church then proceeded with an aggressive building program that more closely reflected its needs.

This church clearly followed one of many Scriptural references regarding building a house of worship: "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matthew 12:6). In this passage, Jesus tells his followers that the Pharisees missed the purpose of the temple because they were too concerned with rituals. God-honoring churches are not monuments to people; rather, they are places that should attract people to God. In fact, an effective temple can be anything from a small room in a strip center to someone's living room.

A number of megachurches are taking the Tower of Babel approach – building massive structures, but not necessarily deepening and edifying their disciples' walks with Christ. While many of them are doing great work in terms of building national ministries, some are not focused on spreading the Gospel and building godly vision and hands-on ministries.

It seems more important to God that our faith – not necessarily our buildings – be huge. In 2 Samuel 7, God downplayed the importance of an elaborate temple, opting for the Israelites to live in tents: "Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel – 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'"

Monuments have no value in God's eyes. Churches must avoid quickly building solely based on the hope that a structure will promote the Gospel and glorify God. With proper direction from God and an understanding of their unique vision, a church can move forward with confidence, building the right project at the right time.

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