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## Stewardship-Driven Church Design: Eyes on Christ

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by Lee Walker and Jeff Bercaw

When congregations come to agreement that a new church facility is in order, one of the biggest – and most important – issues to address is what it should look like.

For many people, this question conjures images of Notre Dame, St. Patrick's Cathedral, St. Peter's Basilica and Westminster Abbey, to name a few. These ornate monuments to man's creativity unfortunately taint the plans of many congregations, which hope to emulate these edifices and build facilities not in God's vision or in the vision of the church community.

As in all stages of development, the appearance and functionality of the facility must be conceived and planned as a way to further the Gospel of Christ. Does the facility do this from a financial standpoint? Does it meet this objective as a way to encourage membership and not simply attract visitors hoping to see a beautiful building? Does the appearance foster a good – and Godly – relationship with the surrounding community? And does it reflect the God-given gifts of the congregation?

Time and again, we've seen God's opposition when man has insisted on building monuments to wealth and ostentation. When left to his own devices, man deludes himself into thinking that the display of wealth somehow pleases God. We've seen the results with the construction of the Tower of Babel and the idol worship at the foot of Mount Sinai. In each case, God rejected idolatrous people.

We must use these examples and others when planning church facilities, keeping in mind that Scripture provides very practical and contemporary guidance. The lesson is simple: Christ will build the church – and it won't necessarily be based on a fancy and expensive design.

For example, look at Scripture:

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2: 19-21).

Bringing this lesson to the 21st century, we must realize that every facility built in the name of God must fulfill his will of furthering his mission, not our goals. With today's construction techniques, the process can be cost-effective and result in an attractive structure. The first step involves properly organizing the site with some of the following considerations: ...

1. Situate the building(s) so that the surrounding community is pleased to have the church as a neighbor. This can be accomplished through proper setbacks, landscaping, berms and access roads to minimize traffic congestion.
2. If there's a school eventually planned for the site, it should be set back from main roads so as to provide safety for the children.
3. Because the vision is for growth, in gifts as well as people, the buildings should be flexible. For example, a gymnasium could be used, initially as the worship center until a formal one can be built.
4. Congregations must also consider the resale value of the property.

Scripture also teaches us to be good stewards of money. With that in mind, congregations should always be mindful of not creating a facility that creates economic hardship – or disaster – resulting from the facility's operations, maintenance and debt service.

Several studies indicate that maintenance and operational costs over 25 years typically total enough to pay for the building twice over. Essentially, the building becomes a subtle idol, with the church body slowly starting to pay more attention and money to keep up the building and not the ministries.

The key is to design a building with higher-end materials that have low life-cycle costing, which means they are known to be less maintenance-intensive and more energy-efficient. Also, design a building that does not force a congregation to sacrifice money needed for ministry for the sake of visual effect. When this happens, the care of the building takes more time and money away from glorifying God, thus the created takes away from the Creator.

This message about proper stewardship is loud and clear throughout the Bible:

"For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17); and, "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2).

We also encourage congregations to plan facilities that reflect the God-given talents and personality of the congregation. For example, churches that place a premium on music and drama ministries might consider building a theatre-like worship center with good acoustics. To reach this goal, Scriptures teach us that a church facility should be a place where gifts are used wisely to minister to one another. This involves wise stewardship of gifts. "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its

various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). Scriptures also instruct us to keep "our eyes" on God, and this certainly applies to building a house of worship.

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12).

"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ... Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself" (John 15).

Make no mistake about the fact that God takes the construction of a church/temple very seriously. This is a consistent theme and he is clear about the purpose, style, and function of his house.

This was apparent when Nehemiah prayed for guidance after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Nehemiah prayed for favor and submitted his request to the king: "If it pleases the king ... let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

Nehemiah presented God's vision to the people who would do the work. He shared his vision, reaching out to those with a stake in the project. Each of the gates and wall sections were repaired by families or townspeople living nearby. The distribution of work enabled these workers to take ownership in the building process. The entire construction project was completed in 52 days. In this instance, God directed Nehemiah and gave instructions regarding the design, gifts in kind, and how to engage people in the process.

The temple was planned, designed and constructed on God's terms, and this is an important lesson for all congregations.

*Lee Walker is president of Boca Raton, Fla.-based Walker Design & Construction, which has a strategic alliance with Building God's Way ([www.bgwservices.com](http://www.bgwservices.com)) and has built dozens of churches in the past decade alone. Walker Design & Construction has been building quality, energy-efficient buildings for more than 35 years. For more information, please call Jeff Bercaw, director of development, Building God's Way, South Florida at 561.998.0001, ext.131 or 561.441.0078, or e-mail him: [jeffwdc@bellsouth.net](mailto:jeffwdc@bellsouth.net).*