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Use Bible To Resolve Church-Building Conflicts

Feeling lost during the building project? Turn to Scriptures for direction

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Sometimes, it's difficult to imagine how a book that is thousands of years old can give us practical and contemporary advice on how to run our daily lives, based on our walk with Jesus Christ.

It's even more amazing when we can apply specific passages to specific challenges. While we see verses on marriage, raising children and many other topics, who would have thought that the Bible would provide sound advice on building a church – truly one of the most stressful challenges a congregation can endure?

How stressful is this? One study indicates that 65-70 percent of pastors resign within five years of completing a new building. More and more churches even split following the arduous process. They happen for one reason: broken trust between the "sheep" and the "shepherds," who are thrust into complex bidding and building processes. A project that should have brought people together often results in mistrust and estrangement.

As with all stressful situations, we must turn to the Scriptures.

The Bible Calls for Vision

A very brief passage from Psalms 133 is a good start: *"How wonderful it is, how pleasant, when brothers live together in harmony."*

This passage clearly stresses the importance of people coming together with a clear vision of what the church is, what it can become and how to get there. This starts with developing a clear vision that combines the ideas of the dreamers and the more practical members.

Where does this "vision" come from? It comes from church members and leadership, but ultimately, it comes from God. That said, it's important for all involved in the process to continually pray, asking for guidance and patience.

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 the 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.

As with building projects today, Nehemiah, too, was faced with opposition, but his ability to get the church community involved was key to the success. It's equally important today, and the process starts with the vision of what the church is today and what it wants to become. Every church today needs a "Nehemiah" to spearhead the process.

With a clear, agreed-upon vision, the church can proceed with planning and building. It will understand why it may need a larger sanctuary, more office space, a school or even a playground.

The Bible and Planning Disagreements

Even with a vision, there will be conflicts, but again, turn to the Scriptures. Matthew 18 provides a solution for dealing with disagreements: *"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If that person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. If the church decides you are right, but the other person won't accept it, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector."*

These verses stress that disagreements must be addressed swiftly in order to prevent them from festering. Today's churches, as Nehemiah's did, must engage congregants in the "ministry of construction" through such activities as community outreach, job site ministry, prayer campaigns and recognizing milestones (i.e. ground-breakings, topping offs).

The Bible and Gossip

But even with that vision in place, there is still potential for distrust, gossip and alienation among church leaders and members. Once again, the Bible tells us the dangers of gossip in Psalms: *"Telling lies about others is as harmful as hitting them with an ax, wounding them with a sword or shooting them with a sharp arrow."*

Church leadership can halt the gossip mill and its consequences by continually opening up lines of communication. Perhaps the most important is having the pastor respond to complaints face-to-face. Other strategies include:

1. Updating membership at small Bible study groups
2. Addressing progress and changes at services

3. Posting updates online and making them available at the church office

The Bible and Project Leadership

The other important issue is for church leadership to always protect the integrity of the senior pastor, and this can only be done by marrying the vision to the work being done by the architect and the builder. At the end of the day, the pastor cannot continually go to the congregation for more money because the project is over budget. Remember that the pastor's job is to minister, not build. To distract him from his real purpose ultimately damages the church.

This is why the architect, builder and church must always be on the same page. The bidding process – if there is one – must be very specific, and the building committee must be aware of the pitfalls. One major problem stems from giving the job to the lowest responsible bidder. Inevitably, there will be change orders, and the low bid eventually becomes more expensive than what the higher-priced contractor was proposing.

To avoid this, it is advisable to have an architect and builder on the committee, but church members should not be enlisted to do the work. There are just too many potential conflicts. Members might give things away as favors to the congregation, thereby creating hardship for their businesses. Likewise, they may start out with good intentions, but then find the project can't be built for what was a low bid.

Once again, master builder Nehemiah comes to mind. He requested Gift in Kind donations and service from the king, who offered timber, safe passage and military escort to Nehemiah for the success of the project.

The Bible and Government

Another source of potential conflict is working with government agencies. Just as Nehemiah got approvals from King Artaxerxes thousands of years ago, we, too, must work with the government. And, once again the Scriptures guide us in this process through Romans 13: *"Obey the government, for God is the one who put it there ... So those who refuse to obey the laws of the land are refusing to obey God, and punishment will follow ... So you must obey the government for two reasons: to keep from being punished and to keep a clear conscience."*

When you're faced with bureaucratic red tape and delays, just refer to this passage and exercise such virtues as patience and understanding.

Church construction is unique in that it involves much more than just bricks and mortar. It should provide congregants with an opportunity to expand ministries and to strengthen spiritual walks among members and those outside of the church. As builders and church members, we can't forget this.

So, when dealing with the challenges associated with building, it's wise to refer to Scriptures which can guide us through the difficult spots in the process.

Again, the key is building a consensus as we see in Matthew 18:

"If two of you agree down here on Earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them."

Lee Walker is president of Walker Design & Construction in Boca Raton, Fla., which has a strategic alliance with Building God's Way (www.bgwservices.com) and has constructed dozens of churches in the past decade. 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 for Building God's Way – South Florida, at 561.998.0001, or e-mail him: jeffwdc@bellsouth.net.