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## Is Now the Right Time to Build a Church? Consider many factors before forging ahead

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by Lee Walker

If we can take it as a given that the Scriptures encourage us to trust God to build His ministry in our churches, then it stands to reason that one way of following God's plan is to expand the physical aspects of our church campuses.

By the same token, we can't merely jump into an aggressive – and expensive – building project without seeking and then accepting God's guidance. Even the Lord tells us in Ecclesiastes that for everything there is a season, "a time to build up and a time to tear down." The question is when is it the proper season to build? Or a simpler question: Is He desiring us to build at all?

It's complicated when church communities are faced with many other challenges that can include providing more services, building membership and reaching out to the community. When congregations consider a major shift in activity – and construction projects certainly fall into that category – we believe they should continually look to Scripture for guidance.

### I can do all things through Christ, who strengthened me. (Phillipians 4:13)

As members of a congregation, it seems that we should also ask, "Am I really trusting in God or my self-sufficiency?" This is a barrier that Oswald Chambers said is our main block from becoming His disciple. The other question to pose: Is God a settler or a pioneer? Again, it's clear through Scripture that God wants us to emulate Him and His initiative in saving the lost sheep. This is clear through the actions of His own Son and the risk Jesus took in discipling. The conclusion, we believe, is that God wants us to be "pioneers" who bring others closer to Him. Pioneers frequently subject themselves to difficulties, discomfort and insecurity as opposed to settlers who are uncomfortable with change. Once again, God will give us guidance as to how we can be pioneers in Christ.

### I am the vine, ye are the branches; He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit, for without me ye can do nothing. (John 5:15)

The first question to ask is, "Why do we need to expand our church facility?" Some common answers include:

- We don't have enough room for our current members.
- We're anticipating growth in numbers and ministry diversity.
- We need a youth building as a way to reach out to the youth in our community.
- Our school enrollment is increasing, so we must add classrooms.

These are all valid reasons, but the leadership of the church must make sure that the reasons are accurate. For example, many times lay church leaders and pastors frequently want to build in order to attract more people or to use an elaborate building program as a way to raise money. These, obviously, are the wrong reasons.

The key thing to remember is that a building program is not about "sticks and bricks." Church leaders should view a building project as another way to build a ministry for Christ's fame and not the church's. With that in mind, church leaders should be in agreement in the Gospel mission, the timing and the vision for the ministry. All the talents of the leadership should be brought together in a unified vision, one that reflects the consensus of the congregation. The components of the program involve the vision of the congregation, leaders, builder and architect. They should all have a consistent vision based on direction from God's Word.

### A Building as Part of God's Will

There are many examples of how improved facilities can build, enhance or diversify a ministry. A number of years ago, we built a multipurpose room for a small church in Central Florida. The building includes a large kitchen and gymnasium used for sports, concerts and lectures. The church realized that the community needed a place for teenagers to go during the evenings and weekends. It proved to be successful.

As many of you know, in 2005 Hurricane Wilma tore through Florida. As a result, this facility was one of the few functioning places in the town. Hundreds of people slept there and were fed, and the congregation grew for reasons the church never anticipated. As we've seen many times, God often takes us on a convoluted path allowing us to fulfill his mission. What started as a way to build a teen ministry actually grew into becoming a ministry for people who lived and ate there for months after the hurricane.

The multipurpose room in Central Florida is an example of a successful building program that met – and exceeded – the expectations of the church community. Often God in His Grace does not reveal all the usages He has entailed for a church's imminent structure. Clearly, faith in His good providence is key. Yet, we must count the cost as our Lord has instructed. Like all other successful building endeavors, it's important to go through some of the following visioning and planning steps to determine if the time is right:

**Do you have a clear vision of timing?** Is this the right season? If we believe God is in charge, what is he telling us? By asking these questions, leaders should get a clear understanding of the process. We must have confidence

that God will guide us as stated in Acts 1:7: It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power.

**Avoid having one person in charge.** We believe that there should be a committee of people involved in all aspects of the process – liaison with the builder/architect, fundraising, construction ministry, communications, etc.

**Membership must be in agreement that it is time to grow.** If that's the decision, members must want to bring new people in and reach out. But even if there are some who are apprehensive, the pastor should disciple them and not avoid them. He can remind them that the church's "One Foundation" has taken us to the gates of Hell and has taught us not to bury our talents. Building should be a growing process, not a winnowing process.

We believe that the congregation should collectively realize that the purpose of the ministry will continue to be to care for existing members. But the role of the church will expand to involve bringing new people to God.

**There will be changes and hardships.** With this new focus come hardships. Members of the church will have to make sacrifices in terms of time and funds. They will have to deal with a construction site for years. They will be asked to take on tasks that are associated with a growing congregation. Are people willing to take on some hardships to reach out to the community? Are we prepared to get out of our comfort zones to bring the world here?

**Does the pastor want to be a pastor?** In many cases, the pastor takes on the role of land developer and loses touch with the congregation. Successful building programs recognize that pastors must continue to minister and not be distracted by activities associated with this type of expansion.

**The economics.** Is giving increasing or decreasing? What percentage of the congregation is giving? What can the church afford in terms of debt service? Is the population in the area large enough to sustain and support growth? Is their ministry relevant to the demographics of their area? Of course, there are certain aspects that are non-negotiable items, such as the pre-eminence of the Gospel and adherence to God's stewardship principles.

While it is a huge undertaking, both financially and emotionally, churches emulating Christ will view it as another way to minister to existing members, new members, construction workers, and the community. This message, too, is conveyed through Scripture in 1 Peter 4:10:

**As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another as good stewards for the manifest grace of God.**

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