

**Three Things Church Buildings Can Never Do**  
by Ray Bowman with Eddy Hall  
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If you had been eavesdropping on a phone conversation in my office some years ago, you might have heard something like this:

"I'd like you to come talk to my board about a new building," the pastor said.

"That sounds good," I answered. "What do you need?"

"The people need a challenge. They haven't done anything for years, and a building program will wake them up and unite them behind a cause."

"You're right," I said. "Nothing is more exciting than building."

"There's a lot of money in our church," the pastor went on, "but giving has been going downhill lately. A new building will increase stewardship. If we plan a project for a million dollars, I think that will be enough to really challenge the people. I've decided to hire a professional fund raiser to raise about a third of that amount through a three-year giving drive. We can borrow the rest."

"Will your regular income cover the payments?" I wanted to know.

"Not yet, but the new building should bring in new people and the increased giving will cover the payments."

"That's exciting! With that kind of money we can design an award-winning structure that will put your church on the map, one the people of your community will want to attend. What kind of building do you need?"

"Well, we haven't grown for years, so our sanctuary is old and should make a good Family Life Center. That should attract families. So I guess it's logical to build a new sanctuary."

"How many should we plan for?"

"We have around three hundred regular attenders, so we should plan for real growth--say eight hundred to a thousand."

"That should really give your people a vision of the possibilities and motivate them to reach out. When can we start?"

Though I'm not proud of it, I've had many conversations much like this one, passing along the same conventional wisdom I'd heard about building programs from countless pastors and church leaders. I now realize that the "conventional wisdom" includes many fallacies. When a church depends on these fallacies, disappointment, and sometimes disaster, result. Here are three of the most common--and costly--of the false expectations I've been guilty of promoting.

**False expectation #1: Building will stimulate growth.**

When I designed my dream sanctuary for Central Church (chapter 3), I fully expected the building to attract new people, to increase the church's rate of growth. It was

the most architecturally perfect building I had ever designed. The congregation was united behind the building program, there were no financial problems--nothing in the process that would hinder growth. If ever one of my buildings was going to create growth, this one would.

Ten years after the building was complete, I charted the church's growth history. Before the building program the church had been growing at a steady rate of three percent a year. Since the building program, the church had grown at . . .three percent a year.

It was humbling for this architect to finally admit that no church building, however perfectly designed, can make a church grow. The most a building can do is allow a church to grow.

In one church of 160, those who "wanted the church to grow" were promoting a plan to relocate to a business district centrally located among the communities the church served. Relocation, they claimed, would make the church grow. "Our church is in an out-of-the-way place," they said. "Our building is full. The basement smells bad and there's nothing we can do about it. And we don't have enough parking."

Actually, none of that was true. They could double parking capacity simply by paving and marking the parking lot. All the basement needed was a good ventilation system. With creative planning, their building would give the congregation room to double before needing to build. And their location was actually better than the one proposed for a new building.

It's true that unattractive or inadequate facilities can hinder growth, but in this case church facilities weren't the problem; they were an excuse. The real problem: the church was doing absolutely nothing to grow. They didn't advertise, they didn't have a yellow pages listing, they didn't even follow up on visitors.

When I visited their service, two stern, silent old men stood guard at the door. Though each wore a "GREETER" badge, they looked more like people you might recruit to frighten children at a Halloween haunted house. Not until I greeted the "greeters" did either speak to me.

Though this congregation didn't need a new building, some members preferred to promote a building program "to bring growth" rather than to do the work of outreach that really would have brought growth.

### **False expectation #2: Building will improve giving to ministry.**

The myth that building programs will motivate more giving to ministry is an especially dangerous one because it often appears to be true. Building programs usually do motivate people to give. Especially at the outset, large sums of money can be raised for a building program. Some members may even increase their giving for the duration of a long-term mortgage. So what's wrong with expecting a building program to increase giving to ministry?

The problem is that building buildings is not the same as ministry. Building buildings is not the work of the church. The work of the church is meeting people's needs. While a building program may motivate people to give more to pay for buildings, seldom is the increased giving enough to cover the cost of the building.

A rapidly growing church in Oklahoma earmarked five percent of all its income for local outreach. These funds were invested in various local ministries that members of the church were involved in. These included an inner city ministry, a ministry to pregnant teens, and several other ongoing projects.

When the congregation launched a multimillion dollar building program, the people

gave generously in response. However, when building costs exceeded estimates, the church began looking for places to cut expenses. They abandoned their earmarking of five percent of income for local outreach and redirected most of those funds to the building program. While total giving increased, funds directed to meeting the needs of people decreased.

This church's experience tends to be the rule, not the exception. While building may temporarily increase giving, it usually results in less, not more, money available for ministry.

### **False expectation #3: Building will motivate people to minister.**

One of the first churches I worked for was a congregation of fifty in a small Kansas town. The moment I saw their building I understood at once why they wanted to build. It was small, dark and dilapidated. The members were embarrassed to invite their friends. I would have been embarrassed too. If only they had a new, attractive building, the leaders thought, the people would no longer be embarrassed and would reach out to the community.

I helped them design a building that gave them room to grow. It had a bright nursery, attractive Sunday school rooms, and plenty of parking. They built that building and opened the doors.

That was thirty-five years ago. Though the church has grown some, today it still hasn't outgrown that building. Why not? After all, they did a lot of things right. They really did need a building, the building they built was right for them, and the cost of the building was reasonable.

This church's mistake was that they expected building to motivate people to minister. If during the building program church leaders had established an outreach plan and recruited and trained people so they would be ready to reach out once the building was complete, no doubt the church would have grown.

These three false expectations all have one thing in common: they all assume that buildings can meet non-building needs. To expect church buildings to stimulate growth, inspire healthy stewardship, or motivate outreach is to expect church buildings to do the impossible. Why? Because these are all ministry needs, not building needs, and buildings can't minister.

If buildings can't minister, what purpose do they serve? They are tools for ministry. A wrench can't repair a faucet and a word processor can't write a book, but they can help the plumber and writer do their jobs better. In the same way, an appropriate building--whether borrowed, rented, or owned--can provide space well-suited to the ministries it serves. It can help people feel more comfortable and welcome. It can provide workspace and equipment to increase efficiency. It can make the ministries of the church more accessible to the community. It can do all these and more.

But one thing a building can never do: it can never minister. Only people can do that.

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*This article is excerpted from **WHEN NOT TO BUILD: An Architect's Unconventional Wisdom for the Growing Church** by Ray Bowman and Eddy Hall who lead Living Stones Associates ([www.living-stones.com](http://www.living-stones.com)), a consulting team that works with churches to help them improve health and effectiveness. It may be downloaded for personal use or for free distribution within your local church. For any other use, **please contact us for reprint permission.***

