

Staying Focused During a Building Campaign

Blueprints and bricks, fundraising and fears can tempt you to forget why you're here.

by David G. Berube

During my first year in this church, certain conversations kept recurring: "We're glad you're here, Pastor. We're excited about the ministry opportunities before us." (So far, so good.) Then: "This church is very active and growing, so we're just about out of space." (I can see that.) "We'll need to build soon . . ." (Uh-oh.)

". . . for the preschool we're starting, our expanding Sunday school, a bigger sanctuary, and a gym. We really need a gym!"

Gulp.

To these expressions of enthusiasm, my standard response would be a noncommittal "When the time is right." I could clearly see what more square footage could do for our ministry, but I wasn't ready to trade my robe and commentaries for blueprints and a nail apron. (I confess, however, that I once caught myself dreaming of a day 50 years hence when a grandmother would say, "Yes, child, that's the magnificent building Pastor Berube led us to put up when I was your age.")

I'd heard stories from other pastors about out-of-control building projects that diverted energy and distracted their congregations from ministry. I could see how easily that might happen—we weren't even seriously discussing building plans and I was already distracted.

So I started a file for ideas, and we began a long journey that resulted in a positive building experience five years later.

Ushers incoming!

Our space was cramped. Our Sunday school swapped spaces with the adult choir each week. They performed this maneuver in the middle of the adult study room at the designated time, as the person taking worship bulletins to the vestibule passed through the middle of them.

Our office, really a hallway with an office jammed in, looked like O'Hare Airport late on a Friday afternoon. Financial officers, teachers, and I vied for the copier and bumped into one another coming and going.

Sunday mornings left me feeling as if air traffic controller school might have been a better choice than seminary.

Weeknights weren't much better. One lucky group would meet in the adult study space. Others had to sit on the child-sized chairs in the preschool or Sunday school rooms. Still others perched on office counters. Sometimes additional groups wandered like the Israelites in the desert, searching for a home.

I was willing to build in order to address this space problem, as long as we could keep ministry as our number-one priority. I just wasn't sure how to do that.

What does the Lord require?

That first year, a group of key leaders went on retreat to begin seeking God's vision for us. We began with the scriptural warning, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18, KJV), and talked about the importance of finding and following God's specific plan for us. We prayerfully sought to answer one question: Why is there a First Baptist Church of Hanson?

As we left that weekend, we committed to pray about what we learned, and we began to formulate a single-sentence picture of the vision we sensed underneath it all.

After subsequent discussion, this emerged as our foundational statement: “Sharing Christ’s Love, Reaching Out with Joy.” The congregation later adopted this vision that now guides our ministry.

It also gave us a framework to make tough decisions during the building process.

The greatest point of debate centered on whether our addition should have one or two stories. The sticking point was the cost and work involved in making basement-level space accessible to people with physical challenges. For us, an elevator was a budget-buster. Yet without one, a basement would not be appropriately accessible.

Our research of the Americans with Disabilities Act and related state law indicated that churches might request exemption from portions of the accessibility requirements. There were those in our congregation who advocated this on a cost-versus-use basis.

In the end, though, we decided that “sharing love and reaching out” meant being accommodating no matter what. We opted to keep all our new people-space at ground level, making it accessible for everyone. Along with that demonstration of hospitality, we also avoided the cost of an elevator.

Keeping God’s vision before us gives us the parameters of our task in the Lord’s vineyard. I believe that’s a better way to make choices than a battle of personal opinions, cost analyses, or simple majority votes.

Do we really need a cathedral?

At another leaders’ retreat early in the process, we discussed the pros and cons of a building program. We weren’t yet at the bursting-at-the-seams point that dictates major expansion, yet we dreamed big. We envisioned a big building with a big plan for increasing income and attendance through rentals of the big gym. The pictures we sketched were of an addition almost equal in size to our current facility. Our immediate sense was that we really needed all that space; all I could see was a really big price tag and a change in my title to Pastor-Facilities Manager.

Inevitably, of course, we had to bring the dream in line with reality. In this we were helped greatly by the book *When Not to Build*, by Ray Bowman (Baker, 1992). Bowman, a Christian architect, provides several checklists for assessing building needs, motivations for construction, and openness to the community. He also analyzes the relationships between church people, church buildings, and ministry. He points out, most significantly, that buildings only meet building needs—not people needs or outreach needs or any other kind of need. If we expect a building to stimulate growth or increase giving, we will be disappointed: a building only provides space where people might do ministry.

As we applied Bowman’s guidelines, we realized that redefining current space would address classroom needs now and in the future. We discovered that the open parlor area where adults met could become an enclosed room, which would be more functional and insulate them from the Sunday-morning traffic. The choir could practice in a room that was exclusively theirs for rehearsal, but used for other purposes at other times. And we didn’t need a gym.

Knowing that our real needs were more modest than our original dream made the project more manageable. I, for one, was relieved that we did not really need a combination of the Crystal Cathedral and Madison Square Garden.

Nuts-and-bolts leadership

I led the initial work of the task force. This involved evaluating our current space usage; assessing our ministries and their space needs; looking at our community's needs; and coming up with a building plan to address priority areas.

This required a lot of my time, which was a good investment for that step of the process. I was comfortable leading others in that discovery process and felt good about the results. It fit very well with my calling as pastor-teacher.

Once we settled on a building design and it came time to tighten the nuts and bolts of fundraising and construction plans, I moved to a support role.

A team of our laypeople, many of whom were part of the teaching phase, capably led the financial campaign, made blueprint decisions, and recruited others to work with them. I met with them and participated in the process, but I didn't do a lot of the detail work. I reallocated my time and energy to other areas of ministry.

I was fortunate enough to follow a pastor who allowed lay leaders to lead. As a result, these people had developed the strength and the maturity to do significant ministry. Because of them, I did not have to choose between ministry tasks and building tasks.

If we had it to do over . . . What would I do differently?

I wish we had found a better way to keep the church family updated.

I think we did a good job coming to the whole body after each step of the process, yet there were times in between when people lost track of what was happening.

While the task force was evaluating, analyzing, measuring and projecting, the congregation couldn't see progress. People would ask what was taking so long, what we were planning, how come we hadn't started building yet, or were we doing anything at all.

We needed to show our progress more clearly. Presentations to ministry groups at regular intervals would have helped, as would a very visible bulletin board with weekly updates for the whole congregation to follow. People simply needed to see an ongoing connection from start to finish.

I wish we had communicated better that our early proposal was not a concrete plan.

I walked to the back of the sanctuary following worship the day after we chose "the plan." We prominently displayed the architect's color sketch so those who weren't able to make the previous night's presentation could see what the assembled congregation had approved.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"Where's my choir room?" our director wondered.

"Over here is the room where we'll keep a piano and have storage space for music and robes. That will be a place where you can practice," said I.

"But I thought we were getting a place that would be just ours so we could lock it when we're not using it," said he.

“Remember how we said that most of the space would be shared space?” I said, knowing he did not remember and neither did anyone else.

I had thought everyone understood the assumptions behind the campaign. We had talked about it, but we did not do a good job of communicating either the philosophy of shared space or the tentative nature of anything up to the formal choice of a plan.

If I could go back, I would tell people more clearly that everything prior to our adoption of a final plan was not set in stone. I also would not share any financial figures that were preliminary, and I would avoid attaching the name of any group to a particular space, even tentatively.

The final hurdles

It took about six years from those early, unconnected conversations to a groundbreaking ceremony.

For all its shortcomings, this building process was good for our church. It allowed us to find a solution to our space problem and stay focused on ministry. We tried to discern God’s plan for us in a prayerful and deliberate way. This process allowed us time to clearly define, evaluate, articulate, and adjust the plan before lifting a shovelful of dirt.

The most hectic phase of the process came near the end of planning, during the financial campaign, which coincided with the season of Lent.

Problems arose over the details of home visitation, and I found myself drawn in at a time when my attention needed to be elsewhere.

It soon became clear that it would take more than a few minutes to solve the problems. Though I felt the burden of the problems, once I remembered that I didn’t have responsibility for that solution, I was able to reorient myself to a pastoral, rather than a task-related role. It was the job of the lay leaders to work out these details, and within a couple of days they did. I was free to concentrate on interpreting the larger issues of rebirth, resurrection, and growth for our congregation.

In the wake of that ripple, the leader in charge of home visits called me. We offered our personal takes on what happened.

“I realized,” he reflected, “that it isn’t our time frame or deadlines that matter. It’s going to happen in the Lord’s time.”

His words sparked a memory for me, and I realized that “the right time” is more than a noncommittal expression—it is a real moment, and our congregation found it.

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