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## YOUR CHURCH

### Draft the Right Architect

*How to choose one to build, not break, your church*  
by Gary A. De Bois

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Is your church sensing the need to expand? Bursting at the seams? Ready to settle down after meeting in temporary quarters for a couple of years?

You aren't alone. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, churches spent \$6 billion on construction and renovation in 1997. That was up from \$4 billion in 1994. At this rate, by the end of the year 2000, the figure will top \$9 billion.

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Yet, according to Earl Myler, author of *Myler: The Church-Building People*, 97 percent of churches have no growth goals or even a clear mission of where they're headed in the future.

What's more, Myler says, there are fewer churches today per capita than there were at the beginning of the 20th century. "That means doing more with less," he says.

Before doing any renovation or construction, most churches will probably seek the services of an architect. What should they look for in such a person, and what, exactly, can that person do for them?

#### Look Before You Leap

Messiah Lutheran Church in Mountain Iron, Minnesota, found itself shopping for an architect when its building was destroyed by a fire that started with a lightning strike to the steeple. Faced with the possibility of rebuilding or relocating to previously purchased property, Cindy Jindra, president of the church council, jumped onto the Internet to find out what she could about church design.

Jindra discovered an architect who specialized in church design and master plans. After some quick discussions with Pastor Kristen Foster and prayer with church members, the congregation met to bring its needs into focus.

Prior to that meeting, church leaders consulted with Bruce Wardell, an architect from Charlottesville, Virginia, who offered some ideas about what to expect from the building project. For example, Wardell said that after a building project was complete, a church could expect as much as a 25 percent increase in attendance. Factor that in with people's perception that a

church is full when it's operating at 80 percent of its capacity, and a congregation must determine answers to such questions as: What is the primary mission of the church within the community? And how will this be reflected in the design, size, and construction of the church?

Those are difficult questions for any church to answer, no matter what its size. Even a small body of believers (less than 150) can benefit from the help of an architect who is equipped with the latest church designs and the knowledge of how to apply them.

What does your church want to say to its community? John Menzano, pastor of Christ Community Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, says not enough pastors answer this before starting a building program. "It's possible they're suffering from people blindness and not really aware of the community they're trying to reach," Menzano says. "Basically they're trying to make the community like themselves instead of communicating in an idiom that community people can understand."

A congregation must also decide what type of liturgy it will have, since liturgy will affect church design, says Wardell. A congregation should ask: What is the makeup of worshipers—present and future—and what are their expectations for worship as well as church programs? Are the people conservative or liberal? Traditional or contemporary?

These concerns should be addressed by a church's building committee prior to drawing up plans for building or expansion. An architect can help a congregation find answers that will help it identify what it really is and where it intends to go.

#### Write a Master Plan

If you already have a master plan for church expansion, then half of your job is done. If you haven't—even if you already have a church campus—seek the services of a master planner. Any additions or alterations you make in building plans will benefit from such a plan. "Many costly pitfalls can be avoided simply by having a road map," says Dan Kinnion, principal architect for The Planning Collaborative in Citrus Heights, California.

#### Find an Architect

If you aren't already working with an architect, now is the time to find one. Before selecting a firm, understand exactly what an architect can do for you. According to David Turner, real-estate developer, consultant to several church building committees, and member of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, here's a working definition: "An architect is a person who gives physical expression to the church's understanding of its particular call and expression."

Not just any firm will do. A congregation should focus on finding an architectural firm that can relate specifically to the liturgical requirements of a church. "One must not only understand the philosophy of the church but also understand the practical needs for operating and creating a facility that is both a symbol and a tool," says Wardell. "It will involve articulating the most eternal and spiritual aspects of faith as well as the most practical and down-to-earth details of how the church functions."

In addition to finding an architect who can help a congregation plan for renovation or new construction, a church should look for someone who will help with:

*Initial planning.* In this stage, an architect helps a congregation determine the type and size of space needed for its program; the project budget and financial constraints of the church; quality of finishes, amenities, and architectural details; special requirements for music equipment, sound systems, visual projections, auxiliary storage, kitchens, and so on; and a tentative schedule of construction from start to finish.

*Schematic-design phase.* This is the stage at which an architect's help is critical. The scope of the project is analyzed in relation to the church's estimated budget and current marketing costs. Working out specific parameters is crucial before the architect can proceed with drawings and other documents.

The architect then comes up with preliminary drawings that show interior floor plans and exterior elevations. The specialist may provide more than one set of schematic drawings to meet the church's specs. In addition, the architect will include cost estimates. (Incidentally, the fee for the architect's services might be based on the cost of construction, running 6 to 10 percent of that figure. You could also offer a fixed fee, or a combination of fixed fee plus percentage of cost.)

*Design-development phase.* An architect's work is on the line in this phase. Final drawings are presented to the congregation for approval. The architect who has a clear understanding of how to work with churches will know how to handle dissension or opposition at this stage. Lack of experience in this could jeopardize the entire building program.

According to Myler, if the program fails at this point, it could take five to seven years for a congregation to recuperate enough to consider another effort. In addition, the church could suffer fallout, such as change of pastoral leadership or a split in the congregation.

*Construction-development phase.* Once the drawings are approved, the architect can put together construction documents that spell out every detail of construction, including which materials, components, and systems are to be used.

A building committee should be keenly aware of the importance of these construction documents. Well-prepared documents leave little room for error and assure that costs will be under control. Poorly prepared construction documents leave room for unexpected changes and can potentially cost thousands of dollars.

*Bidding phase.* Many churches fail to complete their building programs because of inaccurate cost estimates. An architect who has a good working knowledge of construction law can help ensure a smooth bidding process that results in finding quality contractors to do the best work at the right prices.

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*Construction-administration phase.* By this time, the church's building committee will have completed 90 percent of its work, and the architect, 80 percent of his. The contractor will be just starting.

While site work is in progress, the architect's job is to guard the church against defects or deficiencies in construction. The architect also must authorize payments to the contractor based upon the percentage of work completed. Fairness is critical here, especially because the architect is the direct representative of the church. An unfair dealing is a direct hit on the church's reputation and integrity.

### Final Approval

The completed construction project will prove whether or not a church chose the right architect. If the choice was right, the new facility will serve as a tool for ministry, a symbol of faith, and the best expression of the vision of the church.

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