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Consensus-Building in Church Construction Projects

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We've all heard stories of expansion projects that divide a church congregation. The failure to achieve consensus on a project can also occur within a church building committee. In either case, the resulting strong feelings often linger for years, undermining the very mission that brought congregants together in the first place.

Specializing in church facility design since 1992, we've completed many successful projects. Beyond our ability to provide cost-effective, functional and beautiful buildings, clients tell us they value our ability — as a neutral outside interest — to help build consensus.

Most church projects are complex. Often, the need for a project is based upon a goal of a new or expanded ministry. The associated building project may, therefore, enhance the building for those who are not yet members!

It is common for those with a "vision" for the potential of church ministries to meet resistance when those goals are presented to the congregation. Many ministry plans stall as members voice concerns related to negative perceptions or drawbacks, whether centered around cost, maintaining the status quo, fear of failure, surprise, or uncertainty.

Building consensus for a church project begins by sharing the potential of the church with members. You can start by taking the following steps:

- 1) Develop a "vision statement" with congregation input that addresses how the church will meet its mission in the next three, five and 10 years.
- 2) Assemble a small, diverse building committee of, ideally, no more than 10 members.
- 3) Solve problems collaboratively. Open discussion within the committee is vital.
- 4) Ask each building committee member to chair a specific sub-committee so that more of the congregation has input. The sub-committees should focus on a single ministerial component — such as worship, fellowship, education. This step is important; members of the congregation need to see their opinions reflected in the initial planning phase.

- 5) Plan for the building committee to evaluate the congregations' input at the sub-committee meetings and deliver this information to the architect. This information becomes the basis of the building "program."
- 6) Provide the information to the architect for evaluation, then schedule subsequent meetings with the building committee to address follow-up questions.
- 7) Expect your architect to provide multiple design solutions that meet the requirements of the building program.
- 8) With your architect, evaluate each design solution, listing positive and negative attributes.
- 9) Ask your architect to focus on a new design solution that incorporates the previous committee feedback.

Throughout the planning and information-gathering process, the building committee becomes intimately familiar with the design and can explain the design to other members of the congregation who have not taken part. Congregants who attended the sub-committee meetings will know their ideas and concerns have been heard and respected.

This process creates and maintains a logical flow of consistent information relating the building project to a common vision for the church's future — helping to put everyone on the same page in bringing the vision to reality.

Charles Reifsteck earned a master of architecture degree and a bachelor of science in architectural studies, both from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is a principal in **Gorski Reifsteck Architects**, an architectural and construction management firm that provides professional services on a regional basis. In 2000, we acquired Church Planning Associates and in 2007 we further augmented our base of expertise by acquiring the rights to projects developed by ABRIS, an internationally known firm focused on campus master planning. You can contact Chuck at chuckr@gr-arch.com.