

Chapter 13

Confessions of a Surprised Architect

Ray: A suburban Philadelphia congregation was bursting at the seams. To make room for continuing growth, they proposed building a thousand-seat sanctuary, classrooms, offices, and fellowship space. They asked me to advise them on the design. It seemed obvious: it was time to build.

To determine how best to design their facility, I immersed myself for days in conducting an in-depth study of the church's ministries, finances, staff, day school, building utilization, and site, along with jurisdictional requirements. When I was confident I had a thorough working understanding of the church's facility needs, I met with the board and presented my initial recommendation: "What you really need to build," I announced, "is a storage shed."

Had the church invited me a few years earlier when I was a practicing architect, my advice would have been far different: "Yes!" I would have told them. "The sanctuary will draw you and others closer to God. Your community will respond to this beautiful addition. No doubt, there will be financial growth to pay for the project. A bigger, well-designed building will translate into greater ministry."

I had heard all these claims from pastors and church boards and I believed them all. But then a surprising change in my life caused me to look at the church through new eyes and forced me to rethink the conventional wisdom that had guided my advice to churches for three decades.

Discovering the More-with-Less Church Building

If anyone had suggested I would soon change careers, I would probably have laughed. I had studied to be an architect, spent all my working life as an architect, and after building my own firm and spending twenty-six years as a principal had no intention of ever being anything but an architect.

Then one day as I was driving to our Twin Falls, Idaho, office to meet with one of my partners, a thought came to me as clearly as if someone had entered the car and spoken to me: “There’s going to be a big change in your life and it’s going to involve your profession.” I recognized the voice. When I got home, I told my wife, Sally, about it, then promptly forgot it.

Three weeks later I had a totally unexpected opportunity to leave my architectural firm when one of my partners, over lunch, offered to buy my stock. I had absolutely no idea what prompted his offer. When I told Sally about it, she said, “No way!” But as we prayed about it, both Sally and I felt we should accept.

“But, Lord,” I said, “then I’ll have no work and no income. What am I supposed to do?”

God’s answer was clear even if a bit sketchy on details: “I’ll show you what kind of work you are to do and give you all the work you can handle.” On the strength of that promise I accepted my partner’s offer and left behind an established career for an unknown future.

The day after I signed the papers dissolving my association with the firm, Sally and I were on our way to Canada for our first consulting job. A church in Red Deer, Alberta, had asked me to conduct a feasibility study to determine whether they should renovate their existing building or relocate to a larger site. Though it was just my first day to wear my consultant hat, I felt at once the difference it made. Even if the church were to decide to build, I knew I would not be their architect. I don’t suppose the possibility of advising a church *not* to build had ever crossed my mind before. But at Red Deer, for the first time, it was a live option.

As an architect, my job had been to follow instructions, to design whatever kind of building the church asked for. When I became a consultant, though, my job changed. I had to advise the church on what was best for the church and that meant looking at the big picture. I analyzed the

church's finances. I charted growth patterns. I studied utilization patterns of the existing building. At Red Deer I ended up advising the church to remodel and grow right where they were.

But the biggest surprise of that consultation came as I was about to leave. "Ray," the pastor said, "do you know what you are?"

"No," I answered, "I really don't."

"What you are," he said, "is a church-growth specialist."

And though that thought was totally new to me, it rang true. God had called me to invest the next chapter of my life in helping churches reach out more effectively.

That didn't mean, though, that I had the expertise my new role demanded, a point soon driven home when another church board peppered me with church-growth questions I couldn't answer. So for the next year I spent much of my time between consultations reading about ministry and church growth, learning from others, and asking the Holy Spirit to teach me. I began to relate what I was learning about church growth to what I already knew about architectural design. I studied church finance and was surprised to learn that the Bible clearly describes financial principles that can guide the work of the church, principles much different from those followed by the world—and most churches.

By the time the Philadelphia church asked for my help, I realized that a facility plan intended to maximize ministry could not be created in a vacuum. It had to be developed hand in hand with a ministry plan, a staffing plan, and a financial plan. All four had to work together. Because I had looked at the church's facility needs not in isolation but in light of ministry needs and finances, I had come to a startling conclusion that was startling, at least to me: A major building program at that time would in all likelihood stop the church's growth and create financial bondage for years to come.

Over the next ten years I consulted with scores of churches and learned from each of them. Because I asked facility questions from a new perspective, from the perspective of ministry and outreach, time after time I was forced to admit that some point of conventional wisdom I had

embraced as an architect was untrue. Much of this conventional wisdom encouraged churches to build too big, build too soon, or build the wrong kind of building.

After thirty years of designing and encouraging churches to build new church buildings, it was painful to admit how much of my well-intentioned advice had been misguided. I could see how some churches had actually been hurt by the building programs I had helped with. Some building programs had diverted attention from meeting peoples' needs. Other churches had taken on building debts that financially crippled their ministries. In many cases the building program had slowed or stopped the growth that had prompted the new building.

These painful lessons eventually pushed me to a conclusion so unconventional that it sounds like architectural heresy: Most churches thinking of building shouldn't, at least not yet. I became convinced, in fact, that the single most valuable lesson a church can learn about building is *when not to build*. And that lesson can be summarized in three parts—three situations in which a church should not build.

When the reasons for building are wrong

First, a church should not build if its reasons for building are wrong. Richard Foster describes a congregational meeting his church held to pray for God's guidance concerning a proposed building program. "I went into the meeting thinking that probably we should build, and left certain that we should not," Foster writes. "The crucial turning point came when I saw the driving force behind my desiring that building to be my unarticulated feeling that a building program was the sign of a successful pastor. Theologically and philosophically, I did not believe that, but as we worshiped the Lord, the true condition of my heart was revealed. Eventually, we decided against building, a decision now validated by hindsight."¹

Years ago a church of about 150 people in Arkansas hired me as an architect to design a new sanctuary for them. When I saw their building, I was puzzled. Though the building was older, its

location was good and the congregation had never filled it.

Finally, I asked the pastor, “Why do you want a new building?”

“The first reason,” he answered, “is that these people haven’t done anything significant for twenty-five years. This is a way to get them to do something significant. Second, the people aren’t giving at anywhere near the level they could or should be. A building program would motivate them to give more. Third, a building program will unite the people behind a common goal.”

I believed he was right on all three counts and designed the new sanctuary. Now I know that this pastor was trying to do something that never works—solve nonbuilding problems with a building. That church built for the wrong reasons.

When there is a better, less costly solution

Second, a church should not build when there is a better way to meet space needs. As I studied the Philadelphia church, I agreed at once that it had a space problem. At its rate of growth, the congregation would soon outgrow its worship space. Between Sunday school and their Christian school, their educational space was full. They had no room for additional staff offices. Building was the obvious solution, and I was tempted to lapse into my traditional architect role to produce the design.

But a thousand-seat sanctuary was the wrong answer. My recommendations startled them. “I found rooms with missionary boxes,” I told the board. “Now, those boxes don’t need heat. They don’t need windows or carpet, do they?” I suggested they build a low-cost storage and maintenance building to empty several rooms being used to store missionary boxes, program supplies, seasonal items, and maintenance equipment and supplies.

“This barn on your property is a historic structure,” I told them. “It’s worth preserving. But you’re not getting good use out of it.” Then we discussed how they could remodel it into a gymnasium, kitchen, and educational space at half the cost of a comparable new structure.

“You can meet your need for worship space for years to come,” I went on, “without the tremendous commitment of time, energy, and money involved in building a new sanctuary.” The wall between the existing sanctuary and foyer could be removed to enlarge the worship area. A modest addition could provide them with a new, larger foyer, making it practical to hold two Sunday morning services, which would double their worship seating capacity. The new addition could also house the office space they would soon need for their growing staff.

Finally, I suggested they replace the fixed worship seating with movable seating. For the comparatively low cost of new chairs, the church could use the largest single space in the building for a wide range of activities—space that would otherwise lie useless for all but a few hours a week.

The church accepted the suggestions and completed their remodeling and modest construction projects within a couple of years. The church continued to reach out to the unchurched and within six years grew from 300 to 850.

At this church I first began to realize that of the many churches that had hired me to design new buildings, few actually needed them. Most needed to find ways to use their existing buildings more effectively. While fully using space may sometimes require remodeling, refurnishing, or making modest additions, in many cases it requires no money at all, only a willingness to do things differently. What seems obvious to me now came then as a fresh revelation: Until a church is fully using the space it has, it does not need more.

When the Church Risks Financial Bondage

Third, a church should not build when building would increase the risk of financial bondage. A congregation of about 175 in the Seattle area brought me in as a consultant, but only after they had put up the shell of their new building. Someone had offered the church a piece of land visible from the interstate at a bargain price. The church had jumped at it.

Confident that an attractive, highly visible building would make a strong statement to the

community about the church's importance and would stimulate growth, they were building a luxurious thousand-seat sanctuary. "We didn't want the inconvenience of building in phases," the pastor explained, "so we decided to build it all at once. I believe that if we just have the faith and the vision, God will provide the money."

By the time I arrived on the scene, the church, for all practical purposes, was bankrupt. All I could do was empathize with them and sadly recommend that they board up the unfinished shell, keep on using their old building, and concentrate on growth until future developments enabled them to complete their move.

The Philadelphia church faced a similar risk. When they commissioned my study, they were still in debt for their existing building and planned to borrow most of the money for their new one. This would mean taking out a loan larger than the current congregation could repay on the assumption that future growth would enable them to make the payments.

I prepared a detailed financial analysis projecting the impact such a debt could have on the ministry and growth of the church. After extensive discussions the church leaders concluded such a large debt would risk not only the church's growth but even its existing ministries. They adopted a plan to pay off the debt and prepare to build future facilities debt free.

Three Principles for More-with-Less Building

These three situations in which it is a mistake to build—when a church's reason for building is wrong, when there is a better way to meet space needs, and when building would risk financial bondage—suggest three positive principles. These principles can guide churches decide when it is time to build and what alternatives they have when building is premature.

1. *The Principle of Focus.* A church should build only when it can do so without shifting its focus from ministering to people to building a building.

2. *The Principle of Use.* A church needs more space only when it is fully using the space it already has.
3. *The Principle of Provision.* A church should build only when it can do so within the income God has provided and without using funds needed for the church's present and future ministries to people.

For more than thirty years, these three principles have guided our work with growing churches. Each year we see more evidence of their power to unleash the church to do its real work. They have enabled congregations to leave behind limiting ways of thinking about, using, and paying for church buildings in favor of ways that free up most of the time, money, and energy traditionally spent on buildings and invest them in the work of the kingdom.

¹ Richard Foster, *The Freedom of Simplicity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 153-54.

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