

# Insights on Achieving a Positive Church Construction Experience

*An Analysis of Select Findings from the Facility Impact Research Study (FIRSt Report)*

---

In 2005, the Rainer Group was commissioned by The Cornerstone Knowledge Network to study the impact of building programs on churches. From the resulting study of 321 churches came several interesting facts that need to be taken into consideration for any church that is contemplating a building program.

While an exhausting analysis of the study is beyond the scope of this article, there are three points that warrant special consideration and application by the church.

- Many church leaders expressed concern after their building program, feeling that their builder had encouraged or guided them to build facilities that were too small.

The report cites the disappointment of church leadership in that they felt the builders guided them to build too small. Quoting from the FIRSt study, “...*the single greatest regret expressed was that the expenditures were too low and the projects too small.*”

Later in the report this thought was repeated, “*We consistently heard that church leaders felt that church builders encouraged them to build too small. There is a sense that church builders are erring on the side of caution while church leaders would like to take greater steps of faith.*”

While one must be careful not to infer too much from too few comments, these quotes seem to point to an underlying problem of understanding who is responsible for which issues in a building program. While the input of the builder is important, it would appear from these statements that many churches might have relied on the builder for financial expertise outside of their core competency. Seeking counsel from a builder on construction issues is wise, but how many builders (or architects) have the financial expertise and in-depth understanding of the church’s financial situation to direct a church on how much building they can afford? First of all, it’s just not part of their core competency. Secondly, the maximum budget should have been set before serious discussions regarding project scope with the builder were begun.

Further, to fault builders for erring on the side of caution when providing advice outside of their area of core expertise (if that was the case), is grossly unfair. Would the church instead prefer to find itself in financial hot water to the detriment or even demise of the ministry? It would seem infinitely better for the church to build additional facilities at a later date, than to go “belly-up” sooner. To be honest, in church building programs it is much more common that the builders and architects have to be “reigned in” to stay within the budget than to recommend too small of space. After all, the more they design or build, the more money they make.

The church may realize in hindsight that they may have been able to afford a bigger building program because of giving or growth that could not have been forecasted with any accuracy before the building program began. Hindsight is 20-20, and it is reasonable to assume that in most cases the church, lender, and builder probably pushed the financial envelope as far as they could, based on the financial information available at the time. On the flip side of that is the danger of churches “betting the ministry” on future numerical growth in order to finance the building. If 80% of the churches experience growth from building, it means that 1 out of 5 did not, and would have financially collapsed had they built beyond their demonstrable means.

What a church constructs must be based on ministry needs and placed in context of what it can afford. The responsibility for knowing what the church can afford, and how it will pay for it, is the responsibility of the church, not the builder. It would appear that the builder, being the last person in the chain of events, is getting an unfair criticism in that they are getting the blame for something of which they were not responsible. The building budget and prevailing construction cost determines the size of the building, and with careful design and bid processes the church can minimize construction costs. This then leaves the budget as the single largest variable in determining the scope of the church's building program.

A conservative budget formula that implements good stewardship principles is fairly straightforward: it is the money you have on hand, plus the money you can borrow, plus the money the church can raise from the sale of assets, such as land. Others, perhaps less conservative, would add to this amount, the money the church could raise during and after the building program through a capital campaign. This, however, may be arguable from a stewardship point of view in that the money raised through a capital stewardship campaign might be better applied to becoming debt free rather than increasing the size and financial liability of a building program. Since there is no one-size-fits-all solution, this needs to be carefully thought through early in the planning process. Bringing needs, desires and budget into balance is a key goal of wise preparation, which is highlighted as the final point in this article.

- The church's level of satisfaction was much higher with multi-purpose buildings or multi-building solutions and lowest with dedicated fellowship halls.

Quoting from the FIRSt study, *"The lowest level of satisfaction tended to be the result of building a fellowship hall that did not have function beyond fellowship gatherings and meals. The highest level of satisfaction surprisingly took place in multi-building projects in a total church relocation."*

This concept was presented again later in the report; *"Multi-purpose buildings bring the greatest satisfaction to church clients after the fact. Before the fact, many churches may lean toward single-use facilities."*

From a recent historical perspective, single use facilities have been the approach of most churches. Single use facilities are "the way we've always done it" when it comes to most church building programs. Parenthetically speaking, "the way we've always done it" are 6 deadly words in today's dynamic church environment. Multi-use buildings are being driven by two factors: changes in how churches "do church", and rising building costs.

Multi-purpose space is coming to the forefront as the solution of choice as churches adapt to changing styles of worship and new ministry approaches while trying to get the most building for the money spent. Multi-phase building programs comprised of more than one building (multi-building) are common solutions to larger and growing churches whose needs are greater than their current budget.

This is not to say that some churches should not build just a fellowship hall or education building to bring the total church campus into balance. The dissatisfaction of many churches in building may often be due to a lack of understanding of the true building requirements (both long and short term) and the possible solutions that may be implemented to meet those needs. A simple fellowship hall that seats 150 people might be 2,200 square feet with a building cost of between \$150,000 and \$250,000, depending on location and stylistic issues. Some people in the church may have misgivings about the value proposition of

spending \$200,000 for a building they will use on an infrequent basis. However, if a fellowship hall can be shown to help achieve the mission and goals of the church, and the congregation understands and accepts the value proposition, then the church can be assured of a higher degree of satisfaction with its project.

In the final analysis, this issue, like the preceding one, comes down to understanding what must be built, why it must to be built, what it will cost, and how it will be paid for...all before the church starts to build. This is the fundamental purpose and goal of a feasibility study. Regardless of whether the church calls it a feasibility study, a needs analysis, or some other name, it is a critical step in *any* church building program, which leads up to this final point.

- Feasibility studies tend to make for better building programs and happier outcomes.

Quoting from the FIRSt study, “*We did find a strong correlation in overall satisfaction with the building project if a feasibility study was conducted. The disappointment, however, is that only one-third of the churches conducted a feasibility study.*”

When a consultant says there is a strong correlation, the implication is that of cause and effect. In this case, the operative phrase is “if a feasibility study was conducted.” This then squarely identifies the context of a causal relationship. They *were* satisfied *because* they conducted a feasibility study. According to the study, 33% of the churches conducted feasibility studies, which correlates closely to the 35% that considered the building process as “excellent” and 40% that indicated the building program created no conflict in the church. Herein lies the key to maximizing the church’s satisfaction while minimizing the risk in building. A feasibility study provides a plan for execution, brings unity to the church, and becomes the foundation for the design and construction process.

A significant difficulty with feasibility studies is that most churches are not equipped to perform them. Despite their best intentions, most church members are lacking two important qualifications: experience and objectivity. With isolated exceptions, most committees do not have the across the board experience in needs analysis, financial analysis, church design or construction to be effective in performing a feasibility study. While some members may have some needed skills, as a whole the church is lacking the skills and experience to come to an accurate and objective analysis. Additionally, one person with some experience and/or force of personality can unduly influence the process, especially when there is little or no other experience in the church.

As an active member in the church, objectivity is often hard to accomplish when you are part of the church building committee. Said another way, seeing the big picture is hard when you are *in* the picture. It is hard to set aside our personal preferences and needs and to be objective about the needs of the church when those needs do not coincide with our own. Moreover, churches, and particularly churches that have been in operation for a long time, have cultures and ways of doing things that can make it difficult to think “outside the box”. Unless motivated by a significant outside influence, churches tend to continue to think and do things they way they always have.

In summary, a church considering building should invest in a formal feasibility study to help maximize the church’s satisfaction with the building program, to insure they get the most building they need (and can afford), and to get the best building to meet the needs of the ministry, the members and the community they

serve. Planning is an investment that will pay large dividends, including savings in cost and time. An outside church building consultant can help objectively guide the church through this process.

In the final analysis, the investment cost for this planning should be more than offset by the hard dollar savings the church experiences in time and effort. Added to this is the non-monetary value of increasing satisfaction, maintaining unity and reducing stress and effort on the part of the church leadership.

The fundamental concept of getting some outside help was summed up in scripture long ago... *“Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is strong, yes, a man of knowledge increases strength; for by wise counsel you will wage your own war, and in a multitude of counselors there is safety.”* Proverbs 24:3-6 NKJV

---

In addition to leading his church through a building and capital stewardship campaign, Steve Anderson is a church building consultant, seminar speaker, past contributing editor for Church & Worship Technology Magazine and author of the eBook, "Before you Build": Practical Tips & Experienced Advice to Prepare Your Church for a Building Program. For more information on feasibility studies and related articles by the author, visit [www.churchbizonline.com](http://www.churchbizonline.com)