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Design & Construction

## Discerning The Reasons for A Building Project



Generally, a building project is birthed out of growth that is happening in the ministry. However, that excitement can lead to a desire to rush the process and, perhaps, a failure to take necessary time to ensure these three important things are covered.

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Gary Zandstra · December 20, 2017

EMBARKING ON a building project should be an exciting time in the life of a church.

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### Understand the Why

Growth may seem like it's "the why" to a building project, but it's possible it might just be "the why" for something else. For example, a crowded worship space could be "the why" for adding an additional service; a bursting youth ministry could be "the why" for repurposing and renovating some existing space; and a full parking lot could be "the why" for adjusting service times and programs so crunch-time does not come all at once.

When consulting with church leadership who are looking at a building project one of the first questions I always ask is, "What is the unique thing that God has for this church, at this time, in this location to accomplish?" You would be surprised at how many times I get blank stares or awkward silence from the group who I'm meeting with. Sometimes I will get a quick reply that is something like, "To reach the lost, of course!" I follow up by asking them to define "the lost" in more concrete terms to get them to state who they are trying to reach. Again, often I get vague answers like, "Everyone!"

My goal in asking these questions is to try to understand the DNA of the church. What is their unique calling that God has placed on their fellowship? To me that is "the real why." From that conversation and answer, we can then start to put a framework around what type of building would support their calling.

For example, for a church who is called to feed and care for the homeless, hungry and hurting in their neighborhood, a commercial kitchen might be one of the most important things that they need. Whereas a workout area and gym, probably would not make it to the top of the list. Another question I like to ask is, "Are these needs being met elsewhere by someone in the community?"

Again, if your calling is to help the homeless and there is a soup kitchen a few blocks away, does it make sense to build so that you can start another one? Find a unique need that you can specifically meet, and partner with the other ministries that are serving the same population. I'm familiar with a church that embarked on a building project to install a commercial kitchen.

Why? So that members could hold wedding and other receptions at the church. I don't think there is anything wrong with that. However, this church had recently funded and launched a ministry — just down the road — that housed a hospital grade kitchen that could be used for events. My question to them is why not get a "shuttle vehicle" with racks for the food to be brought from the ministry center, one block away, to cater events that are taking place in the churches existing conference space?

The shuttle vehicle, while a bit of an inconvenience, would cost \$20,000 - \$30,000 vs the \$2,000,000-plus to build the kitchen facility. Again, I am not saying that what the church was doing was wrong. I just want them to fully understand the purpose for taking on a building project. An additional question that I will usually ask is, "Will the building you are proposing meet the needs of the community?" I know a church that put in a beautiful park — with ball fields and a playground — because the nearest park was miles away, and their calling was to reach those within walking distance of their facility.

They used prime (read expensive) real estate to better their community, rather than building something for direct use by their church members. The bottom line for me is always fully understand "the why" of a building project and how it fits into the unique DNA and purpose of a church. Who are the Players Often in the rush to get a building project going, key players are left out. This might be staff or ministry leaders who are kept out of the project. It could be local city officials and authorities who could be of valuable help as the church tries to get the proper zoning and permits to take on a project. The members of the church themselves sometimes are left out.

The senior pastor has a vision, so he just plows forward figuring people will get on board. Members that have specific knowledge and could be very helpful in the building process are overlooked. Many times, the bank or another financing agency is not consulted until the process is too far down the road. The church leadership can then be put in the embarrassing situation of not counting the costs before getting started,

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bringing the process to a halt. Too often, key contractors are not brought on board early enough. Things like budgets for acoustics, and audio visual and lighting are either left out, or are woefully inadequate to meet the needs. It seems like the neighbors, those who live around the church building, are always forgotten.

Rather than consult and get valuable input and buy-in from those around the building, many churches plow ahead without giving consideration to what impact an addition or new building will on those who live right there. Getting the right people onboard right away — and building consensus — is one of the most important aspects of a building project.

## How Do We Start?

I always recommend that the church partner with an architect or design/build firm to do what I call a, “phase 1 project overview.”

### The phase one process should involve:

1. A needs assessment
2. A programming/discovery meeting with ministry teams.
3. A feasibility study and code review (a quick look at the site and local zoning and construction laws) Can we build at this location?
4. Floorplan layout and site plan showing where the building fits into the site and a general layout of the building.
5. Rendering, 3D sketches or model that show the exterior elevation of the building.
6. Budget estimate for the entire project.
7. Proposed building schedule With this information, a church has an idea of cost, timeframe and scope of the project, along with some rendering perspectives of the proposed building for people to see what is being proposed.

A phase 1 is an investment (usually \$10,000 to \$30,000), but well worth it. Additionally, this needs to be done if the project moves forward. So, by doing phase 1 upfront you are not spending additional dollars. You are, however, potentially saving yourself from getting pretty far down the road and discovering something that could stop or delay your project. It's painful to find out after you have construction documents underway that the site is not buildable, or that the project is going to cost way more than you anticipated. Invest up front and save yourself the grief. In Short Understand why you want to build.

Get the right people involved in your process. Take the time, resources and money to do the upfront work of ensuring you can accomplish what you believe God has called you to build.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gary Zandstra

Gary's newest venture The Experience gives him the opportunity to help the local church using his vast experience in facilities and production.

Contact Gary Zandstra: [gary@nemosyn.com](mailto:gary@nemosyn.com) (<mailto:gary@nemosyn.com>) · [View More by Gary Zandstra \(/search/results/search&author=Garyzandstra\)](#)

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