An excerpt from...

WHEN NOT TO BUILD

by Ray Bowman with Eddy Hall

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When a suburban Philadelphia congregation asked me (Ray) to design a thousand-seat sanctuary, that's exactly what I intended to do. They had called for the usual reasons: their sanctuary was full and they were running out of educational space. It was time to build.

To determine how best to design their facility, I first met with the church board for four hours on a Saturday morning. Next I spent several days studying the church's ministries, finances, and use of facilities. Finally, I felt like I had the facts I needed to draft my proposal.

I met with the board again the following Saturday. "What you really need to build," I announced, "is a storage shed."

Had the church invited me a year and a half earlier, I would have designed a thousand-seat sanctuary and cheered them on. "The building will bring more people to Christ," I'd have said. "Its beauty will draw you closer to God. People will notice you're here and that you're an important part of the community.

During 30 years of designing church buildings, I'd heard all these claims from pastors and church boards. I'd seen no reason not to accept their assumption that bigger buildings translated into greater ministry. But then I began church consulting work. It was this new hat I was wearing—consultant rather than architect—that made the difference.

As an architect my job had been to design the kind of building the church people expected. As a consultant, I had studied this fast-growing congregation through new eyes and come to a startling conclusion: 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 went on to consult with scores of churches and learned from each of them. Because I was asking facility questions from a new perspective, the perspective of ministry and outreach, time after time I was forced to rethink some point of conventional wisdom I had embraced as an architect. Most churches, I realized, build too big, build too soon, or build the wrong kind of building. It was painful for me to admit that I had encourage these misguided practices, and that for thirty years much of my well-intentioned advice had actually hurt the churches I had worked with.

These hard 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.

First, a church should not build if its reasons for building are wrong. 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 25 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 sanctuary. Now I know that this pastor was trying to do something that never works—solve non-building problems with a building. That church built for the wrong reasons.

Seek Other Alternatives

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 their 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.

But the wrong one. “I found a room filled with missionary boxes,” I told the board. “Now those boxes don’t need heat. They don’t need lighting. They don’t need windows or carpet, do they?” I recommended a low-cost storage and maintenance building to free up existing space for educational use.

“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 their worship area. A modest addition could provide them with a new, larger foyer, one that would make it practical to hold two Sunday morning services, immediately doubling 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 eating. 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 adopted the suggestions, completing their remodeling and modest construction projects within a couple of years. They continued to reach out to the unchurched and within six years grew from 300 to 850.

What would have happened if the church had moved ahead with their original building plans? The growth histories of other churches suggest the answer.

A fast-growing church launches a major building program to create space for more growth, taking on

heavy debt. Though not by design, the building program becomes the congregation's focus. People give correspondingly less attention to the outreach ministries that have been producing growth. Church attendance peaks, drops slightly, and levels off. Their mindset now changed from growth to maintenance, the church may continue for decades with no significant growth. Whenever the church seeks creative alternatives to building prematurely, however, "people ministry" can go on uninterrupted and growth can continue.

It was at the Philadelphia church that I first began to realize that of the many churches that had hired me to design new buildings, few actually needed them. What most needed was to find ways to use their existing buildings more effectively. What seems obvious to me now came then as a fresh revelation: until a church is fully using the space it has, it doesn't need more.

Minimize Debt

Third, a church should not build when building would increase the risk of financial bondage. When the Philadelphia church commissioned our study, it was still indebted for the existing building. The congregation planned to borrow most of the money for their new one, but the loan payment would have been larger than their existing congregation could have met. Their ability to repay the loan depended on future growth.

I recommended that this congregation convert their finances onto a provision plan, living within the income God provided. This meant they would first pay off their existing mortgage. Then they would do the necessary remodeling and build their modest additions on a cash basis.

Operating on provision would mean setting aside regularly for future building needs so the congregation could pay cash for most or all of their next building. The many thousands of dollars saved on interest would be freed up for the church's true work—ministering to people.

The church followed this plan, paying off their debt and expanding the facilities on a cash basis. Then they began setting aside funds regularly so they could pay cash for an anticipated building program in five years.

Because they are not saddled with debt, they have been free to invest more and more money in minstry to people including their Christian school and a multi- faceted inner-city mission in a nearby neighborhood.

When to Build

But there is a time to build. When pastor and people have come to see buildings merely as tools and nothing more, the church passes the motivation test.

When a church is so fully utilizing its facilities that it can find no alternative to building less costly in time, energy, and money, it passes the need test.

And when a church is living withing the income God has provided and can build without resorting to borrowing or dipping into funds needed for ministry to people, the church passes the financial readiness test.

When a church wants to build for the right reasons, has no less costly alternatives, and has the funds to build without borrowing or taking funds from ministry—then and only then is it time to build.