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An Early Definition of Vision

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There are too many churches who own completed sets of plans for facilities they never did and never will build. They worked with architects to define and delineate their vision for the future of their ministries, only to find after considerable effort and expenditure, that the dream was either unsustainable or unobtainable. Obstacles included neighborhood opposition, regulatory barriers, budgetary constraints, and failure of the congregation to rally in support of the vision. When the dream came to an end, for whatever reason, these churches were left with reduced finances, plans that had become meaningless, and a vast sense of disappointment.

No one is pointing fingers. Everyone involved did what they felt was right, but not many are interested in repeating the process. A good deal of disappointment could have been avoided by defining the vision at an early point in the process and using those defined goals to assess the seriousness of obstacles to be faced.

Defining the vision is the purpose of the preliminary design for any project. With design drawings and outline specifications in hand, answers to community concerns, regulatory issues, financial barriers, and congregational concerns can be sought. These documents are usually sufficient to present to planning commissions, neighborhood groups, and architectural review boards to determine the concerns of outside community groups. This information can also be used by builders to supply a church with solid initial cost estimates and possible ideas for value engineering. The preliminary design documents, along with the cost estimates, can determine availability of monies for the project from savings, pledges, existing assets, and local or denominational lenders. None of these concerns require a complete set of construction documents to determine whether they have the potential of undermining the project. For this reason, it is sometimes valuable to engage in a two part contract with design professionals. The first part covers the preliminary design of the project to meet the needs established in programming. The second part covers the creation of documents fleshing out this design for bidding, permitting, and construction purposes. A brief description of the processes involved in designing a project may further understanding of why stopping at one particular point can be helpful.

The process normally begins with a decision by the church that renovated, expanded, or new facilities would be helpful in better ministering the gospel to their communities. An exploratory committee by various names is usually convened to define what the needs are currently and will be in the future. The services of a design professional are then usually engaged. This professional takes the input from the committee and combines it with other determining factors, such as community concerns and needs, regulatory issues of codes and zoning restrictions, building material availability, local trade skills, site restrictions, and budget concerns, to arrive at a list of parameters affecting the design. This is called the programming phase. A workable solution addressing these parameters is developed and defined in preliminary drawings and/or outline specifications in the preliminary design phase. These documents may also represent the first phase of a master plan for growth, were master planning services part of the contract. At this point, the first part of a two part contract is normally complete and twenty to thirty percent of a normal total design fee has been utilized.

Once the vision is defined, if a decision is made to move forward with the project, the second part of the contract comes into play. The design development stage incorporates solutions for systems in the building such as plumbing, HVAC, electrical, theatrical lighting, sound systems, structural systems, audio-visual concerns, etc., that address needs of the church and fit the preliminary design concept. The final stage of drawing services fleshes out drawings from the design development stage with details, dimensions, and notes, making them usable in obtaining permits, contracts, and governing the construction process. This is the working document phase. These last two drawing phases, along with bidding and construction phase services, form the second part of a typical two part contract.

The viability of a project to impact the world outside the congregation can and should be determined once preliminary design documents have been produced. There is another powerful reason, internal to the purpose of the church, to stop at the preliminary design stage for a while. I touched earlier on the use of preliminary documents to gauge, and possibly even obtain preliminary approvals, from community groups, regulatory groups, and lending agencies. The most important group though, from whom preliminary approval should be sought, would have to be the congregation who will shoulder the burden. Scripture abounds with examples of congregations that gave and worked unselfishly when asked to do so for the work of the Lord. They had a mind to work. They had also caught the vision. The Bible tells us without a vision, the people perish. If only the leaders catch the vision, but the people do not, churches can also perish.

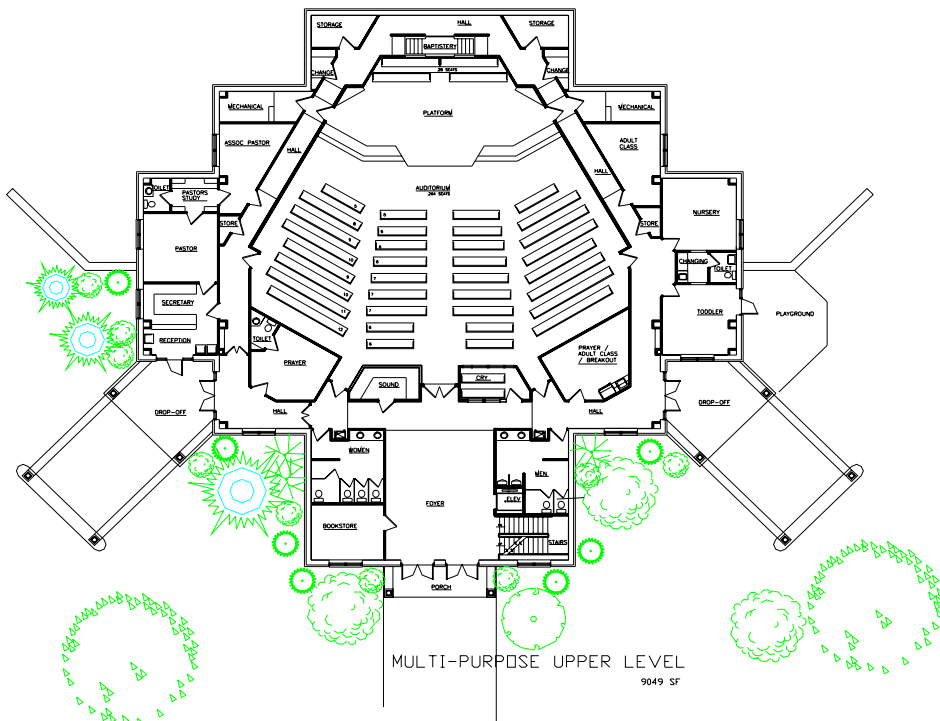
The responsibility of leadership in building projects is three fold. Competent leaders, seeing a need, will first establish a vision for a solution reflecting their concern for both the people and the work. They are then responsible to communicate that vision to those in their care and make sure people are following before they attempt to move on. The final responsibility is to lead, not with words, but by example. We have already discussed defining the needs. Leading by example is a function of actions and is not accomplished by discussion. That leaves us the communication of the vision to explore. This involves both communication of the need and salesmanship in regards to the solution.

Promoting any product or solution is made easier by the availability of marketing materials. In the case of church building projects, these commonly take the form of some type of presentation product. Such products are used to assist the viewers to grasp the concept they are being presented. They are useful in presenting the vision for which approval is being sought to those within the church and without. The purpose of these products is to cast the dream in a form understandable to those being asked to approve or support that vision. These materials may be, but are not usually part of, the package of services purchased from the design professional. They can be obtained in several levels of complexity, described below with examples where possible. As with any other product, cost tends to increase with the amount of time, equipment, and expertise needed to produce them. Whether the cost is outweighed by the benefits each product provides must be weighed by the leadership. All of these presentation products can be produced by the design professionals or outside providers from the completed preliminary design documents.

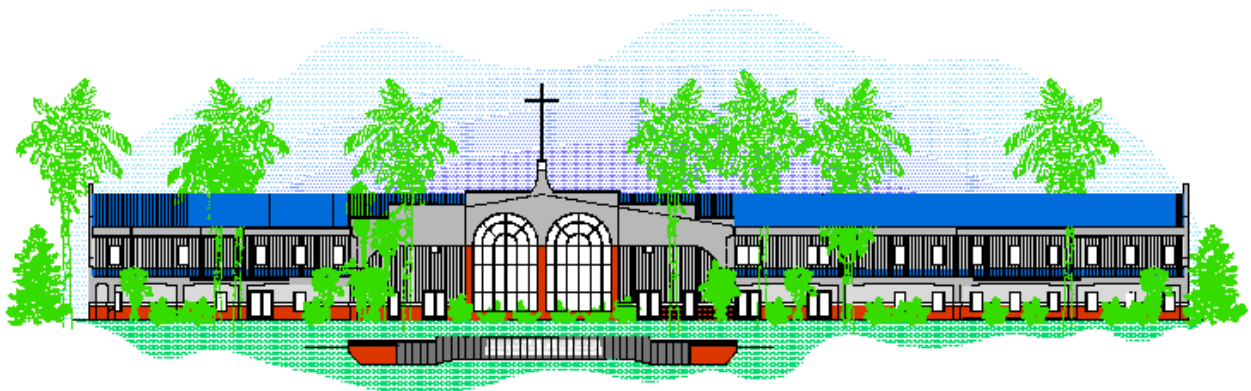
The simplest form of presentation products involves “rendering” the preliminary design drawings. This involves dressing up a site plan, floor plans, and exterior elevations with trees, people, furniture, textures, finish materials, etc. to add a depth of reality to what is delineated. These details add a sense of scale to the project. They are simple pictures to help the project become more real to the viewer. Examples of “renderings” are shown below.



MULTI-PURPOSE ELEVATION



MULTI-PURPOSE UPPER LEVEL
9049 SF



MULTI-PURPOSE EXTERIOR ELEVATION

The next step up in complexity involves computer generated renderings. There are a number of companies providing these services. Each need preliminary design documents, along with color and material choices, to produce the product. There is normally a base fee to input this data into a computer and create a three dimensional wire frame model of the project. Once this has been accomplished, the model can be rotated in space and multiple views rendered realistically at a cost per view. The churches shown above purchased this outside service. The products they received are shown below.



Included with permission from JSO Services, Springfield, MO



Included with permission from Tyler Creative, Nashville, TN

Many companies offering computer generated renderings, also offer computer generated fly-through movies and power point presentations. Once data has been inputted for the project, a virtual tour can be generated simulating the viewer flying around and through the facility. These are also done with various degrees of complexity, up to and including, peopling the virtual project with images of members of the congregation. Most providers of this service offer examples on their web sites.

The last level of marketing materials for church projects might be one of the oldest utilized. This involves building a scale model of the project. While many still feel this is the most effective method available to help visualize a project, it is very time consuming. There are few remaining providers who will construct them. With a little effort though, if such services are deemed appropriate, such providers can still be found. One such model, of a project shown earlier, is found below. This model was used to launch a very successful capital campaign.



With any of the presentation products described above, the end goal is to assist those being asked to fund or approve the vision, to visualize the end product. The best efforts to produce the best solution to best meet the needs will be wasted if the users cannot understand what they are being asked to purchase. The pictured must be focused. The dream must become tangible and real.

Is the expense of obtaining marketing products worthwhile? Engaging the imagination of the audience is the first and most important step in any presentation. The materials described above can breathe life into a presentation and transport the viewer into the project. I have been involved with a number of churches who viewed the expense as having worth, and with a number who did not. Overwhelmingly, those who opted to help their congregation grasp the vision being cast have enjoyed far stronger support for the projects.

People will rarely support dreams which are vague, nebulous, or confusing to them. They want to know exactly to what they are being asked to lend support, resources, or approval. The more real the project becomes to the viewer, regardless of who they are, the more comfortable they become with what is asked of them. Whether an early definition of vision will help accomplish this must be determined by those charged with leading the people.