Chapter 2

Before You Start

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What major project is your congregation considering? Is it building a new structure, purchasing a building, starting a major renovation, constructing a new church school building, or creating a funded scholarship program for your school? For any project to be a success, though, the congregation must be united. Experience shows that major projects will either unite or, unfortunately, in some instances, divide the congregation.

What can the leadership do to unite the congregation so that members will support the project? In this chapter, we will discuss points to consider before you begin a project. Often when a project idea is born, there is positive response among many, but that initial support will not have enough momentum to bring the project to a successful conclusion. So then, what needs to be considered to continue the positive momentum throughout the project? By following these steps, you will not only start the project on a positive note, but there should also be a helpful spirit throughout and after completion.

A number of individuals, both ministers and lay leaders, were asked to share their input in order to compile these steps. Each has been involved in numerous projects, and thus their input is invaluable and your congregation will benefit greatly.

Spiritual and theological implications

If you are building (or buying) a new church or school building, you are not building a monument to an individual or group. Likewise, if you are raising funds for a scholarship program, your goal is not to raise significant amounts of money so that others will be impressed at the financial strength of your congregation. There has to be a spiritual reason for the project, otherwise your congregation should not enter into it.

How do you determine the spiritual reason for the project? Study Scripture and ask yourself how the project will help your congregation fulfill the mission God has given you. Jesus’ ministry is a good example of how we can determine our mission. Jesus tells us that the mission of the church is to proclaim the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20) and the proclamation includes teaching and bringing individuals into the church through baptism. Jesus also spent much of His ministry healing people. How can we implement that ministry in our church and school buildings? The church should also ask how the project will meet the needs in your community. You may have unique needs and opportunities in your community, so it is important to ask how the building project will help with these needs and opportunities.
In the Old Testament, for example, temples were built so that God's people had a focal point of worship. Later, synagogues were built so that God's people had a place to assemble on the Sabbath. Early Christians did not have the opportunity of building large worship places, but often a room in a house was dedicated to worship. That practice has continued in various parts of the world where these rooms become special gathering places for the believers. All of these building projects were focused on the worship of God and meeting the needs of God's people and the community they served. There is another very helpful study source. Look at some of the building projects described in the writings of Ellen G. White. You will not get advice as to the kind of material to use and other technical help, but you will find she always emphasized the spiritual nature of the projects. In a letter, she describes the property that eventually became the health complex at Loma Linda. While she speaks positively about the property, she also points out what the church could do there to fulfill the God-given mission. She reminds us that we do not build or buy buildings for the sake of just having buildings—we build in order carry out the work. Encourage your congregation to study both the biblical examples of major building projects and those described in the writings of Ellen G. White and reflect on the spiritual purpose for your project.

Throughout this process of determining the spiritual reasons for the project, the congregation needs to pray for God's guidance and do serious research as to the needs and options available. No matter how many projects you study, you will never find another project that is identical to yours. Thus, do not attempt to copy another project. Your situation is different, so through prayer, the congregation needs to ask God to lead them in their project.

By focusing on the spiritual aspect of the project, you will be open to God's leading. Listening to God must be done by all leaders, members, and constituent members of the churches and schools. By traveling together on a spiritual journey, you will as a group accept God's response. God's response may be "yes," "not yet," or even "no."

I recall a situation in which the church board studied the facility needs and came to a consensus that there should be an addition to the main building and a new Community Services center should be built. There was a positive attitude on the board and the signals from the congregation were positive. An engineer prepared a preliminary study and it was well received. While there was no controversy, the leadership soon realized that, for whatever reason, the project was not moving forward. In fact, while the leadership could not determine the reasons why it was not moving forward, they accepted the fact that the project would not happen.

About two years later, the leadership realized why the project did not move forward; a major addition to the school was urgently needed instead. That project moved fast through the planning stages, fundraising, and building. There was such enthusiastic support for it that within less than two years from the start, the head elder and pastor stood before the congregation and announced the project was paid for. There was no debt and the school's needs were met. The congregation rejoiced. The leadership understood that God knew something else was needed in the very near future. Incidentally, the congregation returned later to the first project and then God's response was "yes."
Before you start any major project, lead the congregation on a spiritual journey to seek guidance from God. God will respond and take you on a path that will avoid unnecessary pitfalls and difficulties.

**Boards or committees**

In the midst of a major building project, the spirit in the church was not positive. The pastor asked outside advisers for input on the matter. “What about the building committee?” he was asked. There was no building committee, the pastor responded. And why not? He stated that the church did not have enough qualified individuals to make up a building committee. If that was really so (which I doubt), they probably should not be building a new church. A building committee or board is central for a successful project.

Early on, it is important to form a competent building committee. How is such a committee formed? All too often at a business meeting or church board, a decision is made regarding how many are needed to serve and then the floor is open for nominations. When a sufficient number is nominated, the nominations are closed and the committee is formed. Except for small congregations, that may be an efficient way, but it is most likely not the best way. Please keep in mind that a building committee will function for a significant period of time and carries major responsibilities. Its decisions will impact the congregation for years to come.

A more effective way to constitute a building committee would be to set up a small committee that will nominate the building committee. For good reasons, in our denomination we use a similar method for setting up a nominating committee. This small committee would have only one task—nominate a building committee. In doing that, it should keep in mind several important points as to who should serve. Individuals who:

- represent various categories of the congregation.
- know the congregation, its programs, and its buildings.
- will most likely remain in the congregation for the duration of the project.
- are known to be consensus builders.
- will actively seek and enlist input from the congregation and various ministries (Sabbath School, Pathfinders, young adults, youth, seniors, long-term members, etc.) in the church.
- will promote an atmosphere of transparency.
- have expertise in building projects or fundraising. (If you do not have such individuals, the committee needs to be open to getting input from such experts. Often the local conference knows individuals who have significant experience in building projects. Your committee needs to be open to their input.)
- have good communication skills.
Using these and other points, the small committee will be able to recommend a quality building committee to oversee the project. The makeup of the building committee is central for a successful project.

**Planning**

Before a project is started, the congregation must go through various planning stages. All too often, the planning process is done hurriedly. It is not unusual that a small group in a church has a vision as to what they would like to see happen and soon their focus is on how to make these dreams become a reality. Such an approach may be expedient, but it will most likely not create unity in the congregation.

One effective way of planning is to think of a funnel—wide at the top and narrow at the bottom. Assume that in your church there has been general discussion about the need for a larger fellowship hall. In the early stages, it is important to welcome all ideas and understand what is being proposed without dismissing any because of cost or other reasons. It is wise to not only welcome all ideas but solicit ideas from the whole congregation. All the ideas submitted should be recorded so that no input is lost. Wide input will generate wide support. A church is not like a business owned by one or two people who make all the decisions. Every member wants to and should have opportunity for input. Once the members have been given ample opportunity to share their ideas, a natural reduction will take place—just as water moves from the wide part of the funnel to the narrow part, the number of ideas will be reduced. If the church is patient, this process will happen without controversy or any one individual feeling they were ignored.

Trust the congregation and the process of how congregations function. Welcome all ideas and, through patience and prayer, a consensus will develop.

In the planning process, there are several valuable points to keep before the congregation:

- Have definite goals in mind and a prospective timeline for different stages.

- Identify the items that may be changed or revised later, but remember that changes usually add to the cost of the project.

- Keep in mind that costs usually increase over time.

- If you are purchasing a property, plan to have qualified professionals evaluate and inspect the property and determine if the property can be used for your purposes.

- Be realistic. One individual stated that, "White elephants are not pleasant to live with."

- Make sure future needs are considered.

- Research to determine what is actually needed.
• Consider what the maintenance and operating costs will be once the project is completed.

Effective advance planning will create a strong base of support and, in a church setting all successful projects need such support.

**Borrowing**

Some projects are fully funded before they start, but that is the exception. Most of the time, churches or church-sponsored schools need to borrow funds in order to purchase a building, do major renovation, or construct a new building. Early in the process, it is important to discuss with the membership the idea of borrowing funds. How does the membership feel? There may be some who are opposed to any borrowing, while others would feel comfortable borrowing most of the funds. During such discussions, keep in mind that our denomination has very helpful guidelines on how much should be borrowed. It does not mean that a church must borrow the maximum allowed by policy, but it should never plan to borrow more. In addition to the amount of the loan, the church needs to discuss the length of the loan. Long-term loans sometimes are more appealing because the monthly payments are less, but is the congregation ready to pay the extra interest expenses and will the extra years become burdensome? The sooner you discuss these issues the more unified the congregation will become.

In most parts of North America, the denomination has a very helpful source of borrowing. Some union conferences manage a fund that accepts deposits from members, churches, and church entities and then loans the money for major building projects. The rates are usually very competitive and the processing fees are much less than if you borrow from a bank. Before you start the project, you should find out from your conference representatives if such a fund exists in your area.

**Creating a giving atmosphere**

Before the members are asked to contribute for a building project, church leadership needs to create a positive atmosphere for giving. In other words, if the members have a desire to participate in the project, they will contribute. Creation of such an atmosphere does not start just before the project begins. It is a long-term and ongoing process.

One colleague stated that fundraising success depends on the vision members have of the completed project. That means that if you’re adding on to your church school, you are doing much more than adding to a building—you are expanding the mission of your congregation. If the members realize that the project has a spiritual outcome, they will give from a spiritual motive. Members will give sacrificially if they are convinced that God’s work will be enhanced through the project.

The spiritual aspect of giving does not mean that you move forward without considering the response of the members. Every building project is a faith project and yet faith must not be used as a weapon. Some may want to go forward even though the congregation as a whole is not ready to move—that is usually a formula for disaster. It is not sufficient to say, “We have to believe that God will provide in the future.” Yes, we have to have that faith, but faith should not lead us into taking debt that will burden the congregation. All too often these “faith” statements are forgotten when the mortgage payments become an ongoing yoke.
The leadership needs to plan in advance to involve various groups within the congregation—long-term members, newcomers, children, youth—every group that makes up the congregation. Children, for example, do not have major financial resources, but their involvement generates enthusiasm throughout the membership and if children are involved, they will be more apt to treat the property with respect.

Finally, how will you express appreciation to the donors? All too often, once the funds are given, the donor is forgotten. Some leaders assume that giving is a membership responsibility and thus plans are not made on how to thank the donors. Decide in advance to send personal Thank-you notes to donors and, when appropriate, give public recognition. It is the right thing to do and then, most likely, donors will be encouraged to give more.

**Record keeping**

Early in the process, the church needs to develop a system of careful record keeping. Good minutes of committees and boards create confidence in the group; poor minutes are a source of conflict. It is not helpful if the minutes read (as some do), “Voted to accept Mike’s proposal.” Those types of minutes invite debate and confrontations, something you do not need in a major campaign. Describe the proposal so that a person who was not at the meeting will understand it.

Before you start raising funds, the church must develop a good record keeping system. Unless your congregation is very small, you should consider using appropriate software that will aid you in your record keeping. Whether you develop a paper or electronic system is not the most important point—it needs to be accurate and useable. It needs to address points such as, How much has a person promised to give? How much has been given? Who is the contact person? etc.

**Communicate**

You may have a need (for a building or other project) and good plans, but if you do not communicate with the congregation, there is a high probability that the project may divide the congregation or even fail. Communication does not just happen—you have to plan. If the project is to be successful, there must be transparency which must exist from the earliest stages of the project.

How do you communicate with the congregation? There is no one method. In an age of electronic communication, some congregations have stopped mailing newsletters to the membership. Electronic communication by itself is not sufficient, since not everyone has a computer. Some congregations hand out a newsletter or a report on the building project on Sabbath mornings, but that approach misses those who do not come every Sabbath. The bottom line is that a variety of communication methods must be employed and communication is an ongoing activity.

In order to effectively communicate with the congregation, it is vital that the church has an up-to-date directory of members and others who attend but are not official members. Throughout the project the directory needs to be updated so that the reports will be received by all.

Who will do all this communicating? An often underused group is the youth of the church. They are especially capable of using video and similar methods of communication. Ask them to produce short
programs and they will usually respond with enthusiasm. Recently, a graduate of a junior academy produced a video about a school. It was well done and the congregation responded with enthusiasm because this was one of their young people.

In planning your communication strategy, there two other groups to remember—local government officials and neighbors. Talk with the government officials early on so that they feel they are a part of your project. We usually turn to them if we have difficulty with a regulatory agency of the government, but it is best to involve them before you have any problems. Once the project is started, your neighbors—and the community in general—will wonder what is going on, but if you let them know in the early stages of the project, you will most likely get more support.

**Before you start**

Before you start your project, focus on these critical areas so that once the project starts you will not face as many emergencies or controversies. There will always be emergencies and, no matter how well you plan, some controversy may come. But the leadership can create a positive attitude by carefully looking at these and other areas before the project starts.

And remember—communicate, communicate, communicate!

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1 SpTB03b-Letters From Ellen G. White to Sanitarium Workers in Southern California (1905).