

## **An opportunity to build up the Body of Christ**

### **PART ONE: Considerations for Building Committees**

When the building committee of a Catholic parish sets out to build or renovate sacred space, they face a daunting task. At the same time, however, they face what can be a once in a lifetime opportunity to provide a potentially life changing experience for parishioners. Certainly, in terms of time, attention, and money, there is no greater undertaking in the life of a parish. The worship space that is built or renovated will form and shape the assembly and their life of prayer for many years to come. The building process includes prayer, history, tradition, liturgy, community, stewardship, teamwork and humility. It is a spiritual journey with the Holy Spirit to create sacred space in concert with THE Creator. Marking the places where we encounter the Divine is a deeply rooted human tradition.

Building and renovating sacred space is very expensive. A new church in particular usually involves large volume space, long span structural systems, high walls, custom openings, decorative elements, and complicated systems. The importance of honest, enduring materials, and the demand for appropriate lighting, special furnishings, and sacred art all add to the high cost. A church building project by its very nature is almost completely custom and out of the ordinary for most general contractors. This only adds more expense. The corollary to the high cost of construction is that mistakes can be very costly and hard to undo.

Major building projects are usually only possible with the generous support of the parishioners. Ownership, understanding, and trust lead to the necessary support. If the results of the fund raising effort are to be optimized, then the entire process should be designed to develop this ownership, understanding, and trust. Anything that stands in the way will be counterproductive. Because it is natural for obstacles to arise during any long-term project, it is only more important that the planned process be carefully considered and implemented by the committee with the help of the liturgical design consultant, architect, and other members of the professional support team.

The entire process of preparing for the capital campaign must be coordinated and lead to a crescendo at the public kick-off of the campaign. The movement from programming to design to fund raising should be seamless. Each step needs to support the next, and the project will only be realized if there is a realistic financial plan and successful capital campaign.

Everyone must be pulling in the same direction. There are many important players in the church building or renovation process: the bishop, the diocesan building and liturgical commissions, the pastor, the parish staff, the parishioners, the building committee, the parish pastoral and finance councils, the liturgical design consultant, the architect, the general contractor, artists and crafters, the acoustician, the professional fund raising consultant. Each makes a significant contribution to the success of the project. The expertise and needs of each must be considered in planning and implementing the building process. Strong leadership by the committee is critical.

Beginning with the pastor, and including the committee, the liturgical design consultant, the architect, other design consultants and finally the professional fund raising consultant - everyone must be on board with the plan and the schedule so there are no diversions or missteps, especially in the eyes of the parishioners. If everyone but the pastor is on-board with enthusiastic support for the process, the project will be a frustrating uphill battle that will fall short of expectations. If everyone but the fund-raising consultant is on-board with the vision of how the whole process fits together, the parishioners will experience the campaign as disjointed and confusing. This is most especially important when the time frame for the project is tight.

The typical fall or spring window for a capital campaign is usually a fixed component of the schedule. If the kick-off of the campaign is just months away, a delay of even a few weeks can create a significant obstacle to successful results. If a serious delay is encountered, the campaign can be moved to the following season if necessary. However, this should be avoided because it can undermine the efforts to build ownership, trust, and support.

A major building or renovation project is a marvelous, and for many, a once in a lifetime opportunity for adult faith formation, community building, and transformation. Many people are hungry for information and answers to their questions about faith and life in the church. Many are hungry for an experience of community and fellowship with others of faith. Certainly, the Lord is always calling each of us to grow and learn and live our Catholic Christian life more deeply. Because of the focus brought by the building project, parishioners are often very willing and interested in learning about the liturgy, history, tradition, and guidance of the Church. Through this process, already existing relationships can be strengthened and new relationships can be formed.

Every building committee must make informed decisions to avoid serious and costly mistakes. Shortsighted, emotional, personal agenda, personal opinion, or fear based decision making will limit the potential of the building, and squander hard to come by funds. If a new worship space or major renovation is to fully support the celebration of the liturgy of the Church, and to move the community forward in their experience of the liturgy, then the decisions must not be limited by past experiences or fears of a few people. The committee can benefit greatly by being surrounded by an informed, affirming, and supportive group of dedicated parishioners. The committee can also benefit from an open and trusting relationship with the liturgical design consultant and architect.

The Roman Catholic Church has handed down guidelines, regulations, and experience related to building sacred space. The Church also gives us the liturgy and the sacraments in all their power to transform when celebrated well, with style and grace, and with the rich use of our primary symbols. The building must support this liturgy. The sacred liturgy of the Church is a given, and it is the responsibility of those making building decisions not to limit the celebration of the liturgy or its full power to transform lives.

## **PART TWO: The Liturgical Design Consultant's Role in Assisting Building Committees**

In Part One of this article, I discussed generally the process of building sacred spaces and the work of a parish building committee. I mentioned that such a committee can benefit from an open and trusting relationship with a liturgical design consultant. So, the question is: **How does the liturgical design consultant work with a parish building committee during the construction or renovation of a sacred space?**

**PARTNERING:** The pastor, the committee and the parishioners will benefit from having an experienced partner throughout the process. The liturgical design consultant, hired by the parish as an ad-hoc in-house expert, can be a guide and a sounding board from initial process planning all the way to the celebration of the (re)dedication liturgy.

**EXPERIENCE:** The seasoned liturgical design consultant can bring to the table a treasure chest of previous building and renovation experiences from various parts of the region or country. Having access to the experiences of many parishes on building projects of various size, shape, and budget over many years will surely be of benefit to the committee and the project architect.

Most often, a building committee is comprised of people with invaluable expertise and great dedication. While some committees may be blessed with members who have previous church building experience, it is rare that anyone involved has built or renovated more than one sacred space in the recent past. The highly experienced liturgical design consultant can bring a very valuable voice to the discussions. There is truth in the old adage, "those who do not know history are doomed to repeat its mistakes." Major mistakes can be avoided by tapping into the broad experience of the consultant and the architect.

**PROCESS:** The liturgical design consultant can be a primary source to help the committee plan, organize and implement a building process. This happens best in close collaboration with the architect and the professional fund raising consultant. Over the last 30 years, a fairly standard approach and sequence of steps has emerged for the church building process. In 1992, at the national Form/Reform Conference on environment and art for Catholic worship, a colloquia of diocesan directors of liturgy and construction prepared a list of essential components of the building process. This list mirrored the recommendations of the liturgical design consulting community. This type of national wisdom is brought to the local parish by the consultant. Likewise, many dioceses offer a process outline in their building and renovation guidelines.

**PRINCIPLES:** The building or renovation of sacred space is holy work. If the outcome is expected to be holy, then the entire team must enter into the process with the commitment to participate in the holy work. The liturgical design consultant can recommend the countercultural principles involved in building sacred space. A building committee can operate like a corporate board, and be very efficient and business-like. However, the task of building sacred space, and building up the Body of Christ, needs to be guided by the Holy Spirit and countercultural principles. Gentleness, prayer,

peace, trust, collaboration, openness, humility, stewardship, justice, paschal mystery, and discernment are all at the core of this holy work.

**SCHEDULE:** Based on past experiences and the goals of the committee, the liturgical design consultant can recommend an appropriate schedule for the steps and events in the process. Working closely together, the architect, the professional fund raising consultant, and the liturgical design consultant can help develop an overall project schedule with the committee to accomplish the necessary work to meet the fund raising window. Likewise, the consultant can recommend techniques for involving parishioners in a meaningful way. In scheduling, it is always important to consider how the parishioners will receive and process the many aspects of the project as they unfold. If they feel like something is being forced on them too quickly, they may react negatively.

**COMMUNICATION:** Communication is vital throughout the process to the development of trust, understanding and support. As one parish building committee put it, “The parishioners need to know everything we know.” The consultant can assist the committee in the development of a communication plan and be a key spokesperson for the liturgical and artistic components of the project. The consultant can be involved in presentations to the parishioners along the way and also contribute written materials.

### **PART THREE: The Liturgical Design Consultant’s Role in Assisting Building Committees – Continued**

**INFORMATION:** When the American Bishops approved the new document *Built of Living Stones* in November of 2000, they recommended the involvement of the liturgical design consultant. In particular, the role of the consultant in providing continuing education is mentioned in the document:

**“The Liturgical Consultants:** The construction of a church building cannot be undertaken without proper professionals in a variety of fields. When a parish begins to undertake the building or renovation of a liturgical space, the parish building committee should obtain the services of specialists in liturgical design. It is the responsibility of the liturgical consultant to assist the pastor, the staff, and the entire parish with continuing education about the importance, role, and value of worship, and the impact of the church building upon worship.”

(#199 *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* - 2000)

There are many important factors to be considered in the design of space for liturgy and devotion. An understanding of the building process and its spirituality, the history of church architecture and liturgy, and the basic principles of liturgical spirituality are foundational. The greatest physical factor in the design of a place of worship is the arrangement of the assembly for worship. The seating for the people has a significant impact on the form of a new church, and takes up the greatest area of square footage. In a renovation project, changes in the seating arrangement must respect the architectural integrity of the existing building. The seating layout can also do the most to

support or hinder the unity of the assembly and the “full, conscious, and active participation” of the faithful in the celebration of the liturgy of the Church.

In addition to the seating, the other focus areas include approach, arrival, outdoor gathering, indoor gathering, support spaces, the baptismal font, the reconciliation chapel, the area around the sanctuary, the sanctuary itself, the altar, ambo and chairs for the presiding ministers, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, and shrines and sacred art. A process of education and information gathering around all of these components is vital to the success of the project.

By bringing knowledge and illustrations of various design examples, the liturgical design consultant can help the parish explore the options available. By creating an atmosphere where parishioners are comfortable to learn and share their ideas, the consultant can help the committee and the architect with the crucial task of developing the liturgical program. This work must take place before the detailed master planning and design process can begin or proceed successfully and efficiently.

Besides building community, ownership, and understanding, the process of liturgical education and programming will greatly support the work of the architect. Through this process, the committee and the parishioners develop a detailed articulation of their vision for their new or renovated facilities. As a result, it is not uncommon for them to respond favorably to the initial design ideas presented by the architect. This is especially important when the time frame for design is tight.

**DESIGN:** Once the vision for the place of worship has been articulated by the committee and parishioners, the next step is to translate that vision into a design response. The articulation of the parish vision to the architect, and the evaluation of the design as it unfolds, is one of the significant contributions of the liturgical design consultant. By speaking the language of both liturgy and architecture, the consultant can build a bridge between the design process and the parishioners. With a background in design, visual communication, and the architectural process, the consultant will continue to be a key member of the team.

**CONTINUITY:** Continuity of process, language, and vision throughout the project is another important aspect of the consultant’s service. A seamless process and experience for parishioners is critical in the ongoing effort of developing ownership, understanding, and support for the project. Beyond technical skills, the listening ear and the pastoral presence of the consultant can support the development of trust and enhance the overall positive feeling of the project for the parishioners.

### **When should the liturgical design consultant be hired?**

The general consensus among liturgical design consultants is the earlier the better. Why? Because the work of the consultant is so foundational to the entire building or renovation process, it is essential that they be involved in the planning as soon as possible. Missteps early in the process only create confusion and delays, and undermine the effort to build ownership, understanding, trust and support.

*Built of Living Stones* also advocates for the early participation of the liturgical design consultant. In paragraph #99 included above, the bishops state: “When a parish **begins** to undertake the building or renovation of a liturgical space, the parish building committee should obtain the services of specialists in liturgical design.” This suggests that the liturgical design consultant and the architect are the primary partners in preparing for the project.

It is actually very reasonable to invite the liturgical design consultant to the parish for an initial planning session on a paid consultation basis. With minimum risk to the parish, the committee can have an in-depth discussion with the consultant regarding the details of process, schedule, scope of work, and fees.

### **A Closing Thought**

In the *Rite of Laying the Foundation Stone or Beginning Work on the Building of a Church* we read: “When the building of a new church begins, it is desirable to celebrate a rite to ask God’s blessing for the success of the work and to remind the people that the structure built of stone will be a visible sign of the living Church, God’s building that is formed of the people themselves.”

The process of building or renovating sacred space is about both the church of brick & board and the church of flesh & bone. Every project is an opportunity to build up the Body of Christ.

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