

## **So, You're Planning to Build**

*One Pastor's Insights on the Construction Process*

One could write an entire book (*and I am sure they have*) on the process of building a new church facility from the ground up. As Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church on Marco Island, I have recently lead our teams through this very process. Following are a few of my thoughts surrounding a few very important steps that may help your project be successful.

### ***"Why you are doing this?" "What is your purpose?"***

If you have not thoroughly considered *and answered* these two questions yet – honestly, STOP THE SHOVELS.

The only way to achieve success with your final product is to have very specific goals when you start. At FBC Marco, we had a growing congregation and a small, outdated facility. In addition to our needs for a new 500-seat sanctuary, we realized our congregation was ready to use today's technology and a state-of-the-art facility as a tool to help us fulfill the vision we were already working towards. For us, this was an important distinction. The building wasn't the vision. The building was the tool *for* the vision.

With the desire to spread our message globally and to appeal to ALL generations, our team realized that multi-media elements were going to be a crucial part of this new venture. We live on an island with both a large number of retirees and many younger families that have made Marco their full time home. Our challenge was to create a multi-generational space. A place that was comfortable for the children and the families, while still honoring the older members. We certainly didn't want to leave them with a feeling of culture shock when the project was done. It can't just become a brand new, hip, contemporary facility without addressing the needs of everyone. It was a tall order, but the designers would have to satisfy traditional and contemporary tastes and understand the make up of *our* church.

I felt our demographic would be calling for a first class auditorium. I was looking for the ambience and warm feel that the Island's Marriott Hotel has accomplished. This is an up-scale hotel, with traditional décor, dark wood accents, heavy trim and tall ceilings. I knew we needed a way to alter the space for our varied event needs. In one word, it had to be flexible. We focused a lot of energy on making sure we had the technical capabilities that would allow for concerts, theatrical productions, and even television all in the same space.

At the outset, I didn't know how we were going to do it, but we were determined. We felt called by God to minister to this demographic in this geographic area at this time in history. With clear aspirations, we proceeded with the first round of decision-making. This process started by considering and choosing the teams necessary to accomplish our goal. That leads to the next question.



### ***Who has the say in your worship center design, architects or consultants?***

Ultimately, the architects, but it's really about relationship between the teams. As a senior pastor, I had confidence in my chosen architect for the design of the over-all facility. However, I also knew the technical requirements of this space were going to be critical to this transformation. It was essential to have the experience of a designer who understood the essentials necessary to meet our goals. This job would not only require technical knowledge, but it would take a special team to also understand the church and our big picture goals. This technology team would work in concert with the rest of the assembled teams to bring these intentions to reality.

After much research, we commissioned the theatrical design firm, Brawner & Associates for our technology team. In those first discussions, President Donnie Brawner shared with me his desire to create an environment that would contribute to an inspirational audience experience, rather than detract from it. In hindsight, I can say that this is exactly what they did. We basically turned the design of the whole sanctuary over to them. Brawner & Associates started the design process in spring 2006 from their Springfield, MO offices (one full year before even breaking ground). They were tasked with providing turnkey design and installation services for the project. This included the over-all worship center design; the ceilings, seating layout, acoustics, and scenic elements, plus all of the sound, video and lighting systems. In addition to the main sanctuary, systems were also designed for our children areas, youth rooms and fellowship spaces.

Donnie Brawner commented on the design process, "We had a unique opportunity on Marco. We had an open canvas to develop the space. It started as simply an empty square on a CAD drawing, and having that freedom really paid off in the end. We started the process by determining stage/platform layout, seating, sightline studies and ceiling configurations. We formed a grocery list of what the technical capabilities would be and how we would integrate those. Our approach does not start with designing ultimate systems individually but rather on how they fit together seamlessly as one unit. Lighting, audio and video need very different and sometimes conflicting prerequisites to be a success. We often use scenic elements as the vehicle to blend it together. At the end of the day in Marco Island, those scenic elements help define the space." Similar to an architect, Brawner creates a "master plan" similar to what an architect would do and then works diligently to fit everything into that plan. To me, their approach was fresh, new and in the end a great success.

***Don't hire the first architects, contractors or consultants you interview, regardless.***

Never settle for the first contractors, architects, consultants you interview just because they make a good presentation or talk a good talk. We had an incredible lineup and we could not have asked for better results. In my opinion, the results we reaped were specifically due to the committed and diligent efforts we sowed into building the right team to start with. Really dig



in and do your homework to know the right questions to ask. Then, after all of your interviews, study your options. You may come back to the first one you interviewed; but now you can do so with confidence that they're the best fit for your endeavor.

Some firms may specialize in churches, but that alone does not necessarily qualify them for your project. It honestly depends on your vision and predetermined goals. Do not be afraid to look outside of your local area. You are looking for the absolute best team you can get to make this a long-term success. You want the adventure of a major project like this to be a good one because it's a long road. It only takes one sub-par contractor to lead to wasted efforts and costly mistakes.



***Breaking ground:***

***The church needs a representative supervising the efforts EVERYDAY.***

As the leader of our church, I believe in being very involved in the construction process: meetings, weekly updates, design meetings and so on. But as the senior pastor, I knew I would not have the ability to be on the job site everyday to witness each and every item. One of the most valuable things we did was hire a Facilities Manager to over-see all of the construction elements from start to finish on a day-to-day basis. Shawn Hurlley understood, from the church's perspective, some of the rationale behind our designs. His daily presence on the job-site was a crucial element to us from day one. An added benefit is that he came away with invaluable information about the facility that will help us for years to come post-construction. Had he not been there solving issues or answering questions day in and day out, we would have ended up with a very different situation in the end. He made decisions daily that affect our future expansion because he was right there in the thick of it. The dividends of a dedicated facilities manager are priceless.

***Design/Build or Design/Bid/Build?***

We hired Brawner as the complete design/build technology team, although they came to us willing to work either way, which I thought was unique. In our observations, we found several advantages to the design/build style.

- 1) For starters, you typically won't be dealing with the dreaded "change-order" dilemma unless you just totally change your mind about your goals half way through the project. Basically, they are working *with you*, as a partner through the whole process and not *for you*. Therefore changes can be implemented much easier.
- 2) Design/build firms seem to have a better ability for real-world cost estimations on the front end and more mid-project control to keep from exceeding those estimations.
- 3) When a project of this scale is bid six to twelve months out there can be multiple errors in calculations, real-world measurements and judgments. In my experience, the amount of control during the project is maximized with a design/build direction. As the project comes to life and you make adjustments here and there, it was easy for our *partner* to adjust and move with us. A design/bid/build arrangement would have brought us re-design charges and then change-orders from the bidding contractors.
- 4) Design fees can be less with design/build as the profits from the firm can be split over design, equipment, and installation as opposed to having to make a living on design aspects only. In actuality, with a design/bid/build direction, you could end up paying more in the end because you pay the higher design fees in addition to the actual gear and installation.
- 5) In a design/bid situation, we have seen the designers pushing responsibility to the installing contractor and vice versa. This can be a very sticky situation for you as a pastor or a congregation. These issues don't typically surface until the install at the end of the job, yet the situation likely stemmed from a design that was settled on months or a year earlier.
- 6) The bottom line for us was that with design/build we had one contact and a very direct line of responsibility. We did not play the blame game and we did not have individual systems working on their own agendas. With Brawner, we had one goal, one mission, one purpose and one person with whom we talked.

Here's just one example. At FBC Marco, we'd planned to light our stage with standard conventional lighting fixtures. However, in the end we installed LED units, which are 80% more efficient with less annual maintenance cost. The change came about because over the course of the project, LED technology came down in price, so became more of an option for us. Due to the design/build nature of our agreement, the changes were made without additional cost to us. Brawner used the existing budget money to best figure out how to make the changes to the system so we could capitalize on the new technology without added design fees or change orders.



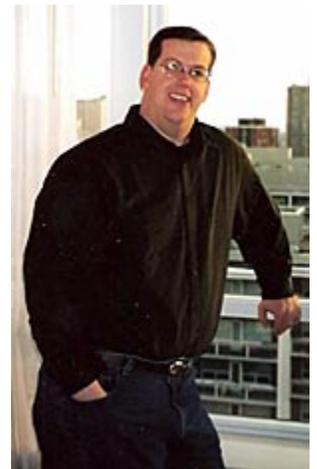
### **Who's necessary at the early meetings?**

There is a big misconception that the meetings should start primarily with architects. Commonly, no one else is really thought necessary until the facility gets designed. However, I believe that one of the biggest benefits we received came from getting the entire team involved when we did. Even my architect agreed, if your goal is to be using technology in anyway shape or form, this is an absolute necessity.

Our full team brought to light a myriad of concerns such as power, structure, ceilings, walls, HVAC, installation plans, specific needs for control rooms and equipment rooms and so on. Some architects will be more hip to some of this than others but we saved countless dollars by getting our technical team's input on the architect's drawings early. Brawner & Associates shared numerous experiences about clients that actually build a facility with intentions for the latest and greatest and then on day one, it's not possible. Maybe there was no power, or it's in the wrong place, or they don't have the steel to fly touring systems or they don't have provisions for scenic drops. It might be that they don't have the capability to add lighting or their lighting angles are not conducive to television. Of course, it can all be fixed later, but after the fact is much more expensive in both time and dollars than the cost of a few extra early planning meetings.

### **Pastor Neptune's Background & Wrap-up**

I was called to the First Baptist Church of Marco Island in June of 2003. Prior to our move, I'd been the Senior Pastor at Victory Baptist Church in Lodi, Ohio, a church we launched in 1996. People often ask why I'd leave a church I'd started. After sharing with them the very real fact that my wife and I felt the calling of God to move on, I will often finish with the thought, "because it's an Island in Florida with less snow!"



Standing at the pulpit, day one in the summer of 2003, it was evident that we were going to be embarking on a long road of transformation. This church of only 60 attendees was hungry for new direction under fresh leadership. I knew that I did not come here to lay dormant; we were going to make a big difference in Marco and around the world with this ministry.

I feel like we have achieved an awesome transformation on the island in that first five years. We have come along way from 60 people in attendance in 2003 to over 500 weekly now in a thriving ministry. Plus, we have planted multiple churches all across southwest Florida. We have two radio programs, *Classic Christian Gold*, and *Great Christian Country* that are produced in the studio at the church. These radio shows are distributed to more than 170 outlets worldwide. Our new technology also allows us to archive our services and special classes so they may be accessed in multiple formats online, both audio and video. This is an incredible benefit to our "snow-bird" members. It's great to see our older folks bringing laptops into our coffee shop (with wireless access) to get a bit of training to see our services from anywhere in the world. I have learned that the older generation isn't against the new technology at all; it's just a matter of how it's used. At FBC Marco's Family Church, we couldn't be happier.

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## **QUICK - LINKS**

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