

Frequently Asked Questions about Building Projects, Facility Repairs, and Maintenance

“For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’” Luke 14: 28-30.

The Church Architecture Commission has prepared this list of “frequently asked questions” to provide early guidance for congregations contemplating major building projects or significant repairs of existing facilities where building permits are required and where architects and other professionals will be hired to complete the project. This is not a comprehensive or exhaustive list of questions; it is intended to be illustrative. All congregations must consult with professionals and must abide by all relevant and applicable building codes. Additional materials regarding the obligations and requirements of congregations proposing to build or modify or repair or renovate their buildings may be found on the diocesan website.

1. **How do we know what we need?** Most projects begin with a sensed need on the part of the congregation. Advice may have come from building inspections or from clear awareness that the existing building is inadequate, does not meet current building codes, or has major problems that require upgrades and repairs. Congregations should spend adequate time determining what facilities are necessary for the mission, vision, and goals of the congregation. Who one wants to be should dictate the facilities necessary to live into that vision. Professional building inspections can set the baseline for what is. Discernment about mission – especially long-term mission is critical. Sustainability over time is also critical. Right-sizing the building is essential. Wise stewardship of the environment suggests attention to energy usage. Washington State has high standards for energy conservation but congregations may wish to exceed these standards.
2. **Once we know what we want, what comes next?** Hiring an architect for major building projects or hiring a construction firm to assist in major renovations is critical. Consider a design-build approach where both elements – design and construction - are done together. This is particularly helpful if the project is about an ancillary building or some structure not deemed critical to the aesthetics of the congregation and its campus. Preliminary work will enable the congregation to know what the likely project costs will be and assist in determining if the congregation has sufficient resources to complete its desired project.
3. **What is the difference between construction costs and project costs?** Many congregations run afoul of not remembering the costs are always more than the cost of the new or renovated building. There will be planning costs to determine feasibility of the project and to meeting all codes. There will be the costs of moving people and programs out of existing buildings, storage costs, upgrades to the campus or other buildings as required by changes in building codes since the last project. Alternative worship spaces may need to be set up. Rentals from buildings under renovation will be lost during construction. Thus, it is critical for congregations to plan for all costs involved in their project. Moreover, costs can escalate from the time of first plans to the moment of signing construction contracts. Renovating existing buildings can become much more expensive when structures are opened up and internal deficiencies discovered or the building must be improved to meet current building codes.

4. **What are change orders and why is it important to avoid them?** Change orders are authorized changes to the building plans or materials or other construction decisions that increase the project cost above the original bid. They can occur when surprises are discovered in renovating a building or when the congregation decides to add to or modify existing plans after construction commences. They can be very expensive and should be avoided wherever possible.
5. **What happens when the amount of money raised or pledged will not cover costs?** This is the nightmare for most congregations – falling just short in fund-raising. Sometimes, building plans can be reduced or altered to fit the amount of funds available. Sometimes, congregations can arrange for “bridge loans” to pay costs and then try to raise funds to cover the loans. Sometimes, a second “ask” can close the gap in funding. Sometimes, the diocese can loan funds on more generous terms than commercial lenders. Sometimes, projects are stopped temporarily or abandoned altogether. Regardless of the option chosen, these moments can be devastating for a congregation. Failed building campaigns are very hard to stomach. This is why careful advance planning is critical to avoiding the problem noted in our text from the Gospel of Luke.
6. **Does the diocese have a list of good architects or contractors to recommend?** The diocese does not have such a list. It can tell interested congregations which congregations have completed projects but given that the diocese covers all of Western Washington, it is not possible to provide that level of advice. Checking with other congregations, checking with recently completed building projects in one’s region, and asking construction professionals in your community for recommendations is more likely to provide useful information to your congregation.
7. **What do we tell the congregation and when do we tell them?** This is a difficult question because it all depends on the size and complexity of the proposed project and the local history of the congregation. In general, transparency is key to success and being as clear and as forthright as possible will help. That said, rumors are endemic to congregational life so leadership should expect rumors to abound during the planning process. Holding design charrettes on multiple occasions, providing regular email and printed handouts during the planning phase and during the construction phase, inviting the architects and construction staff to present and answer questions are all critical elements of reducing rumors and maintaining confidence on the part of the congregation.
8. **Is it important to celebrate the conclusion of the project?** You bet it is. And there should be a liturgical celebration as well as a social gathering. Inviting the construction team, other vendors, local officials, and neighbors can be an excellent means of advertising, welcoming, and simply offering gratitude. There is a long history of dedicatory ceremonies in the church and congregations should use them as appropriate. It can also be a great tool for evangelism.
9. **Are there pitfalls to avoid?** There are many possible pitfalls. Any major project should have “buy-in” from most of the congregation. It should never be thought of as “the clergy’s project” or “the vestry or bishop’s committee’s project.” Any major project has to be firmly rooted in the clear and sustained mission of the congregation. If it is not, it will fail or end up as wasted money. There should be sustained leadership from both clergy and lay leadership during the life of the project. There should be a committee of committed and interested lay people who will provide oversight to the project. Construction expertise and/or construction experience can be very helpful to such a

committee. Projects that are perceived as controversial or ones that divide a congregation should be avoided if possible. A major building project should unite and invigorate a congregation not divide it.