



# We Built It. . . But. . . They Didn't Come

*Why some churches' dreams don't play out*

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The closing scene from "Field of Dreams" inspires us to believe our grandest dreams. The small town farmer obeyed the voice that said, "If you build it...they will come." Ignoring conventional wisdom he converted valuable farming acreage into a baseball field—following the instruction of the whispering voice. And the movie ends with cars arriving from all over that would cover the cost of building the baseball field—and they lived happily ever after.

Christians can tweak that theme to obeying the voice describing a grand vision of God's dramatic work. It's easy to convince ourselves that if we build a new ministry space, God will bring the people to pay for the inspiring step of faith. After all, we do believe God can work even greater miracles than Hollywood can conjure up. Don't we?

Of course we do. But it's also true that we can build new ministry spaces yet only experience plateaued, or even declining, attendance. Why is that? And what can we do about it? Pastors and church leaders react to such events with discouragement, inner turmoil, strife and even splits. Your inner voice may now be saying, "We built it...but...they didn't come." However, it's possible that the attendance hiccup is also part of God's plan to make you the church He wants you to be. Because if God has been involved in the process of your building project, His voice may be really saying, "As you build it, I'm building you."

If you've recently completed a building project, it may be time for an assessment—whether or not the people have flocked to your church. And if they have not come, a thoughtful review might uncover some of the reasons why.

**1. Does your facility "wag the dog"? (Assess your project's perspective)** We're all looking for spiritual growth and development in our congregations. I'd often suggested that I didn't want a large church, but I wanted a healthy church. The problem is those spiritual growth elements can be more difficult to identify. What is the measuring stick? Then because that is so subjective, we become susceptible to using the clichéd abc's of church success—attendance, buildings, and cash (for missions or ministry need). Without realizing it, facility growth, renovation, or redecorating provides us with a tangible sign of progress.

In response, honestly evaluate your perspective of your facility. Renovating the facility can provide a boost to a church. But that boost needs to be driven from a heart of ministry advancement, not as a symbol of success.

**2. Does your building project fit your ministry need? (Assess your project's purpose)** A trendy church addition is a cafe, third space, or coffee counter. Such an addition may be just what your church needs to provide environments for evangelism, mentoring, and discipleship. However, if your church is not developing a heart for fellowship or hospitality ministries, that new cafe may become a seldom utilized space.

Consider the connection between your active ministries and the facility project. Are they aligned? If not, look for ways to reuse your new space. If you built a cafe, but your ministry resources and people are focused on kids, maybe you develop a coffee hour respite for tired parents.

**3. Do you have Temple Trauma? (Assess your project's extravagance)** Many chapters of Scripture describe elaborate and detailed features of the temple and its furnishings. The ornate elements can motivate us toward quality and extravagance in our church facilities. Yes, God deserves our best, but the pursuit of "God's Best" can make us blind to unnecessary upgrades in finishes or details.

If you've committed to higher end furniture and finishes, it's possible for your facility to become out of balance. People naturally gravitate towards the nicer spaces so quality additions may simply replace parts of your existing facility rather than really adding to ministry space. Try rotating some of the nicer furniture to the older spaces so more of the facility feels the facelift.

**4. Do you have Change Freeze? (Assess your project's timing)** On a sweltering day a cherry slushy hits the spot. But too much slushy, too fast, and we lock up with brain freeze. Suddenly the slushy is not so appealing. The same is true regarding the changes in our lives. Change can be a beneficial and productive element of Christian living and church life. But too much change, too quickly, makes one feel overwhelmed. And when too many people are overwhelmed, changes—even if they're good—can lock up in "change freeze."

A period of plateaued attendance or stagnant ministry synergy may follow a period of intense changes as part of the normal return to stability. Since facility renovations are times of concentrated change, maybe people just need time to adjust and catch their footing. Perhaps take a brief break from new initiatives and allow people to enjoy the blessing of the renovated facility.

**5. Are Your Pillars in Place? (Assess your project's foundation)** The increased space provided by a building project needs to be accompanied by advances in other ministry pillars. Perhaps your plateau is not from the building project. Rather, it reflects weaknesses in other areas of church ministry infrastructure.

Try taking inventory of your church's functional pillars. Are you fully staffed and are employees properly slotted? Have you implemented lay leader training programs? Have you developed opportunities for large and small group dynamics? Are you providing opportunities for active outreach and ministry—both locally and globally?

**6. Did a strong majority support the changes? (Assess your project's process)** New facilities become effective tools for ministry only if the people use them as such. And people will only use them if they supported the renovation in the first place. Managing a facility change initiative is a delicate and sometimes complicated process.

Analyze any congregational votes taken—they'll seldom be 100 percent but they should be at least 80 percent. Compare capital campaign pledges with actual giving amounts (even if people cannot vote on a project by ballot, they always vote with their checkbooks). Review the process for communicating with the congregation. If you discover weaknesses in the process revisit the problems and allow time for correction in people's minds.

**7. Did you put it on the card? (Assess your project's budget)** Once people are energized about a facility project, it's difficult to scale back expectations. With multiple ministries casting the grand vision for their spaces, more elements become "necessities." This results in Project Scope Creep. The cost keeps inching upwards, but is always justified by the vision. Then to pay for the project, debt amounts keep growing. And since banks don't eliminate mortgage payments, staff and ministries will be cut before debt service on a loan.

In one six week span I attended three churches designed by other firms in which they presented public appeals for special gifts to cover the major cost overruns from recent building projects. As I listened to these appeals, I thought, these churches will experience shortages in staff or ministries due to the debt, but will have no idea why they've stagnated.

Like a family maxed out on a credit card the first steps are to accept the reality and develop a plan for retiring the debt. Also, the enhanced facility may present new ministry opportunities you've not previously considered. Organize leadership brainstorming sessions or planning retreats to discover new prospects for serving Christ in the improved facilities.

If your facility project seems connected with plateaued attendance or diminished energy do not lose hope. In fact, maybe you only need a minor course correction for your building project to launch new ministry vigor.

In Nehemiah's day critics mocked their work on the city walls. Despite feeling insulted, the people prayed and responded with zeal and commitment to God's work:

*Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart (Nehemiah 4:4-6).*