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for

The Cornerstone Knowledge Network

Introduction

In 2005, The Rainer Group was commissioned to do a major research study on the impact of church building programs on the overall health and well-being of the congregations. The Cornerstone Knowledge Network, an organization of three major church builders in the United States, asked our team to provide a frank and realistic assessment, even if the news was not good for church builders. We called our research project FIRSt™: Facility Impact Research Study.

The first decision made by our research team was to conduct the study from a qualitative perspective. In other words, we would seek to obtain detailed quantitative *and* subjective information. We sought not only to have basic data, such as building costs and church growth rates; we also sought to get opinions, perceptions and human reactions to the overall process. When the research team was about one-third through the research process, we truly saw the value of this approach. The lengthy interviews the team conducted yielded invaluable information that would not have been available in a typical telephone survey.

At the onset, our team made the decision to do a significant portion of the research on the church site. Our original goal was to research 55 churches, with at least 30 of the churches visited on site. We exceeded both goals. Our total number of churches studied was 58. Through careful management of the budget for this project, our team members were able to travel on site to 44 churches. Not only did we far surpass our goal, the on site experience enhanced the value of our research well beyond our expectations.

Though we believed our report had quantitative accuracy, we still desired to include more churches in the study to narrow the margin of error to +/- 4%. Instead of

conducting the in depth interviews and extensive travels prevalent in the first stage of this study, we decided to ask nine quantitative questions of an additional 263 church leaders to test our initial quantitative results with a much larger sample. With these additional churches, we had a total of 321 congregations for the study.

Now the total of churches in the study is as follows:

Total churches:	321
Churches in quantitative study:	263
Churches in qualitative study	58
On-site studies conducted	44*

*Included in churches in qualitative study

Our team members traveled all over the United States. From Washington State to Naples, Florida, the researchers spent hundreds of hours in interviews with numerous persons in the churches. In most cases, the researcher interviewed three to four persons in the church, typically the senior pastor, a staff minister and one or more laypersons. They would then take a tour of the facilities, paying particular attention to the recently completed building project.

With a central thesis of determining the positive or negative impact of a building program on a congregation, we then decided the different categories that we would use to assess the efficacy of the projects. These categories comprise the essence of this report.

- *The cost of the project.* We assumed that the monetary expenditures of the project would somehow impact the overall evaluation of the process. We were correct in that assumption. However, our entering bias was that we would hear some regrets about the level of expenditures after the building program was complete. To the contrary, the single greatest regret expressed was that the expenditures were too low and the projects too small. The church leaders often expressed

disappointment toward builders whom they believed guided them to build too small.

- *Type of facility.* Was there any relationship between the type of facility built and the overall satisfaction of a completed project? We did detect several trends. The lowest level of satisfaction tended to be the result of building a fellowship hall that did not have function beyond fellowship gatherings and meals. The highest level of satisfaction surprisingly took place in multi-building projects in a total church relocation.
- *Third place facilities.* We knew prior to the project that The Cornerstone Knowledge Network had a keen interest in third place facilities. Our research team members were told to pay careful attention to these types of facilities. We had an initial flurry of excitement when the early reports were delivered by team members. It seemed as if we were discovering an overwhelming trend and preference for third place areas. However, after further reports were delivered, the trend did not prove to be as pervasive as we originally thought.
- *Attendance of congregation.* For equal comparisons, we used average annual worship attendance as our growth and congregation size measurement. The only correlation we found is the most expected correlation. The larger the attendance, the larger the new construction expenditure.
- *Growth of church.* We were particularly interested to see the “before and after” growth related to a building program. We were very surprised to find that over 80 percent of the churches grew after the facility addition. We did not expect the number to be at that level.
- *Weekly per capita giving.* The research team also investigated the dollar amount given per attendee each week. We chose this measurement so that churches of different sizes could be compared on a level basis.
- *Feasibility study.* The researcher asked a simple “yes” or “no” question regarding whether the church conducted a feasibility study prior to the construction of the facility. Though we did not dig deeply into this issue, we did find a strong correlation in overall satisfaction with the building project if a feasibility study

- was conducted. The disappointment, however, is that only one-third of the churches conducted a feasibility study.
- *Motivation for building.* The churches were asked to provide us key responses on why they built a facility. Though multiple responses were allowed, only a small number of the churches indicated that “ministry” was a reason for their building project. The overwhelming response was “space.”
 - *Evaluation of the entire building process.* This subjective question of the overall impression of the building program yielded very positive response, well beyond our initial expectations. A theme evident throughout our research was that the process of building new facilities is much more positive and rewarding than conventional wisdom sometimes suggests.
 - *Method and evaluation of fundraising.* Church facilities are typically the biggest expenditure of congregations. We thought that no evaluation of facility additions would be complete without discovering how churches raised the funds to complete the facilities. The two dominant approaches were professional stewardship consultants and internal fundraising. Again, we were surprised how positively the two leading approaches were assessed.
 - *Indebtedness incurred.* This issue was straightforward. Most churches borrowed and most churches borrowed from banks.
 - *Conflict issues.* Once again, conventional wisdom was dispelled in our research. We anticipated that we would hear multiple horror stories of building programs: pastors frustrated and leaving; divided and demoralized congregations; and ongoing conflict between the congregations and the builders and/or the architects. To the contrary, very few such stories occurred. Over nine out of ten churches rated the conflict level as “none” or “minor.”
 - *Timeliness of building project.* Our research showed that if there is a single issue that can cause a project to be perceived negatively, it is a project with delays. Still, the news was mostly positive. Nearly three fourths of the churches rated the timeliness of the project as “very timely” or “somewhat timely.”
 - *Key person in the congregation for the building project.* We were very interested in discovering who took the front role in the church during a building program.

Not only did we find that the senior pastor was the most likely person, if it was someone other than the senior pastor, the building program did not receive as favorable assessment.

- *Key person in the congregation for the fundraising.* The person in the congregation who took the front role in fundraising tended to be either the senior pastor or a key layperson. Both scenarios were typically deemed successful.
- *Selection process for architect/contractor/design-build firm.* This part of the study was one of the more frustrating because we saw no dominant pattern. Almost every church had its own unique story.
- *Overall evaluation of the new facility.* Once again, we were surprised with the overwhelmingly positive responses. We frankly expected to hear more stories about major problems with the building after it was completed. We heard a few, but their numbers were relatively small. Nearly nine out of ten churches rated the quality of the completed facility as “excellent,” “very good” or “good.”
- *Most successful aspects of the building program.* This subjective series of questions were at the heart of our research. One dominant issue is worth noting: Church building programs were seen as one of the most unifying events in several of the churches’ histories.
- *Least successful aspects of the building program.* If there was one single moment of surprise in this research, it took place at this point of the interview. We consistently heard that church leaders felt that church builders encouraged them to build too small. There is a sense that church builders are erring on the side of caution while church leaders would like to take greater steps of faith.

Concluding Notes: The Major Takeaways

A good researcher will provide details of points and sub-points, but the better researchers take the totality of a project and highlight one to five of the major issues. In the case of FIRSt, we believe we have five such takeaways. The itemization of these five major points does not imply a low level of importance of all other discussions in this study. It simply affirms the greatest issues for church builders for the next several years.

When it was all said and done, the person hours spent on this project was 1,074 hours. The team members traveled all over the United States. They listened to senior pastors, staff members, and laypersons. They mostly heard stories of great success stories, and a relative few of the most negative stories.

This report may seem to be a whitewash study for our clients who are church builders. But we tried every research angle we had to discover negative information. In the end, we simply could not deny the facts.

We close with the five major takeaways.

1. Building programs by overwhelming data are positive events for churches. We believe many church builders are erring on the side of caution to the detriment of churches. We affirm such works as *When Not to Build* by Ray Bowman. But we believe many churches and builders have moved too far on the side of conservatism in constructing new facilities. Certainly, we should be cautious and good stewards in the biggest expenditure most churches will ever make. But over caution often leads to curtailed growth which leads to less available resources ultimately. Frankly, we believe many church builders act in a defensive mode on this issue and should, not for the sake of revenue but for the sake of Kingdom growth, encourage aggressive building programs for healthy churches.
2. We see an emerging and growing trend in churches that desire “one-stop shopping” in church building programs. We believe that the great companies of the future will include a team of architects/designers, builders, church health consultants and stewardship consultants. We encourage our clients to move quickly toward forming these alliances or hiring such persons on their staff. We

- are aware of a major church builder in the South that recently hired a full-time church health consultant.
3. Church health analyses prior to committing to a building program are critical. Even a basic health overview can be immensely helpful. As we have noted redundantly in this report, healthy churches have the ability to commit much more resources toward facilities than many church builders may suggest. The healthy churches must thus be clearly identified. The Rainer Group is working on a template church health analysis that can be used in a one-day consult. We hope to have it available by the end of 2005.
 4. Multi-purpose buildings bring the greatest satisfaction to church clients after the fact. Before the fact, many churches may lean toward single-use facilities. Where possible, church builders should move clients toward the multi-purpose facility or the facility that can be used on multiple days.
 5. Third place facilities and trends in postmodern church buildings are still emerging. It is too early for us to discern how significant this trend will be. We know that the builders of The Cornerstone Knowledge Network are watching the trend keenly; so will we at The Rainer Group.

Appendix

Nine Selected Questions and Responses

1. What was the church's primary motivation for the facility addition?

Space	199
Ministry	68
Relocation	55
Other	<u>18</u>
Total	340

Some respondents gave more than one answer, so the totals do not add to 58 and 321 respectively.

2. How would you rate the overall facility addition process?

Excellent	112 (35%)
Very Good	138 (43%)
Good	32 (10%)
Fair	19 (6%)
Poor	<u>20 (6%)</u>
	321

3. Did the church conduct a feasibility study?

Yes	106 (33%)
No	<u>215 (67%)</u>
	321

4. Has the church grown since the facility addition?

Yes	257 (81%)
No	<u>61 (19%)</u>
	321

5. What was your evaluation of the overall funding process?

Excellent	141 (44%)
Very Good	90 (28%)
Good	61 (19%)
Fair	25 (8%)
Poor	<u>4 (1%)</u>
	321

6. What was the level of conflict in the congregation regarding the facility addition?

None	128 (40%)
Minor	164 (51%)
Disruptive	19 (6%)
Major	6 (2%)
Divided church	<u>4 (1%)</u>
	321

7. How would you describe the timeliness of the project?

Very Timely	138 (43%)
Somewhat Timely	96 (30%)
Somewhat Slow	35 (11%)
Slow	23 (7%)
Very Slow	22 (7%)
Excessively Slow	<u>7 (2%)</u>
	321

8. How would you rate the overall facility addition process?

Excellent	112 (35%)
Very Good	138 (43%)
Good	32 (10%)
Fair	19 (6%)
Poor	<u>20 (6%)</u>
	321

9. How would you rate the quality of the completed facility?

Excellent	202 (63%)
Very Good	80 (25%)
Good	29 (9%)
Fair	4 (1%)
Poor	<u>6 (2%)</u>
	321

The Cornerstone Knowledge Network is an association of Aspen Group, The Rowland Companies and Cogun, Inc. The mission of CKN is to provide innovative, educational, development and construction services empowering churches to radically impact communities. For more information or to learn about the Cornerstone Conferences, go to www.cornerstoneconferences.com.