



A Church Extension Planning Guide

Getting a 'Yes' Vote for the Building Project

Many congregations have legitimate building improvement needs but stumble at the point of gaining approval to undertake a project. In some instances a committee, appointed for that purpose, brings a recommendation to undertake a specific project. It might be to purchase property or to expand the existing building or a more radical step like relocating. But when the proposal is made to the official body of the church, the recommendation is tabled indefinitely or it meets significant opposition. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the vote is "no." The committee, disheartened by the response, quietly goes out of existence.

It is not unusual for a building proposal to die on the first attempt. It may take a second or third try before a "yes" vote can be obtained. It may be that some people were not convinced of the need, others may be fearful of the financial costs, or some may think that the issue is being forced upon them. So three, five, or ten years later the congregation must face the problems again.

What is behind this failure to move forward? It is probably because the process did not enable the members to understand, own, and approve a course of action which would have improved the congregation's facilities and its ability to minister. It might take a crisis before action is taken.

Why do we need to start over and over before "yes" votes are received? There may be several reasons.

There is a natural resistance to change, a condition that must always

be considered. Unless the need is stated dramatically enough to stir discontent with the present conditions; unless the elected and assumed leaders strongly affirm the needs; and, unless persons can come to believe the change will improve the situation and are capable of achieving the change, the resistance will persist.

The perception of need for the project also has a bearing on how difficult it is to get a "yes" vote. Approval to replace a leaking roof or a faulty heating system is fairly easy to gain. The need is simple to demonstrate and does not require major changes. But the proposal to relocate the congregation to a new site will get an automatic "no" vote on the first proposal unless a lot of preparation and understanding is gained by the members. To get a "yes" vote to rebuild a burned building will not be difficult, and may be made on the street as the members watch the flames being fought. However, to replace an old existing building, even at the same location, is not nearly so easy. The first is an understood crisis—we can act fast. The second takes time and much education.

While there is no guarantee for every situation, a "no" vote, either from inaction or by formal action, could be avoided in most situations if the proper strategy is used by leaders of a congregation. If the need is real and demonstrable, and the church is financially capable, a "yes" vote can be achieved.

Some facts of life must be acknowledged:

1. Since people resist change, it takes time for understanding and

appropriation of the possibility by members of a congregation.

2. Members must learn how and why changes are to be made and how their situation will be improved.

Therefore, as a basis for decision making, there must be a clear statement outlining the needs, how and why changes are to be made, and how the ministry will be improved. Congregational decision making requires this kind of clear and concise statement.

Also, there must be participation in the decision making. Society has moved away from authoritarian leadership to collaborative and participatory styles of working in human organizations.

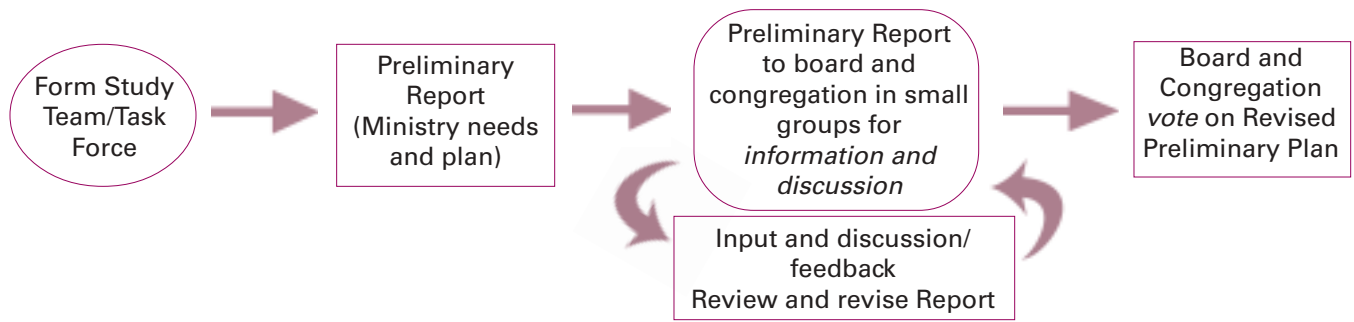
The process for getting a "yes" vote for the building project involves developing a consensus around the future ministry needs of the congregation and developing a facility plan that will meet those identified needs.

Initiate a Study

The first step is to form a strong initiating group. This is another word for a study committee, task force, or team composed of capable leaders who can see beyond the monthly budget crisis, and can dream about greater possibilities. They should also be rooted in reality. It is best that this group not be called a building committee, because some will think the plan has already been conceived and the decision is being forced upon the members.

This study committee will do a thorough study of the total life of the congregation and the community which it serves. It needs to describe its present and future mission and pro-

Process Leading to Vote #1



gram. Based on program requirements, it will analyze how the present facility serves and what is needed to serve adequately. (Resources for planning efforts by congregations are: from Church Extension—*Claiming God's Vision* [strategic/program planning] and *Building Planning Workbook* [building planning] and from Disciples Home Missions—*Faithful Planning*.)

It is important that the ministries and program of the congregation be described first, since they should dictate the kind of building required. The building should not form the program, but vice versa. The committee's report will be the product of its research and input from program groups within the congregation, as well as other resource persons. It should be a clear systematic statement of needs discovered and recommendation(s) for a specific course of action to be taken.

The strategy of congregational consensus building is key to this approach. Some may try other approaches; generally, the results are less productive.

For instance, an aggressive leader recognizes a need and proposes to the board that the church take action immediately, only to be voted down. This can result in the leader being rebuffed and the needed action postponed because there was no popular support, even though the need was legitimate.

In another instance, well-meaning leaders may take a survey or opinion poll of the membership on what they want to do regarding building improvements. Such surveys rarely lead to action. Instead, they often frustrate action by solidifying such diverse, uninformed opinions, that no one can figure out what the church should do. Individuals remember their suggestions and wonder why they were not taken seriously. Also, while a survey is taken

on the assumption that it is a way people may participate in making decisions, it really fails to meet people's need to participate. They are not really making decisions by only registering opinions. They need a more active part in making choices after clear information is available. Therefore, it is better to have an informed group appointed for the task of stating the needs and giving direction for action.

Inform the Congregation

The second step toward getting a "yes" vote is building congregational consensus through the involvement of a broader group of members and their participation in the evaluation of needs. Assuming a committee has done an adequate job in its study, and has clearly stated the needs in its report, it must get the information before the leadership and congregation without calling for a "yes" or "no" vote. The committee should have agreement on a recommended course of action. Note: It should not ask church members to make a choice of two or more options unless it wants a divided congregation. It should state the course of action it believes to be the best. The committee must be united on its recommendations before taking these to the board or congregation or it will face the possibility of inaction or a premature "no" vote.

The report of the committee should be labeled "Preliminary Report" to show it is still in process. The report would be presented for discussion to the board and later moved to the congregation. Board discussion could continue over a period of two meetings, and may result in early suggestions. If the board has serious problems with the recommendations, or with the suggestion that it be taken to the congregation for discussion, the committee may need to do some more

work or allow more time for board discussion.

Assuming the board approves a congregational discussion of the recommendations, the study might be mailed out in printed form, but it would be followed with an opportunity for small groups within the congregation to review and discuss the recommendations with representatives of the study committee. This might be done through neighborhood groups, class groups, or a congregational meeting that allows time for small groups of not more than 12 persons to discuss the recommendations and information. All of this should be presented in a permissive environment, asking for response and input by members and not be an attempt to "sell" the idea. No formal votes are taken at this time. The study committee should keep records of these group meetings and take the opinions and questions seriously as they review the results. The leaders and recorders for the small groups must have clear instructions for these meetings to provide consistency in the questions and reporting. Occasionally a congregation may be advised to request Church Extension's Listening Conference Counseling service. Consultants can be more objective and effective in this phase since they have no "ax to grind" or "program to sell."

The committee needs to seriously and prayerfully consider the input that is received. If revisions of the recommendations are necessary, make them. If additional information or expertise is needed, obtain it. In many instances, the help of a Church Extension consultant relating to finances, timetable, or architectural matters may be needed before a final report and vote is taken.

Only after this kind of process, where general opinions are shared and people have the opportunity to understand the needs discovered by the

committee, should the call for a formal vote be made. Study committee members need to remember that it may have taken them six months or longer to reach their conclusions. It is important to allow time for the congregation to consider and absorb those learnings and understandings.

A cardinal rule in this process is: Don't hurry the decision. The process of information sharing and discussion may take several months after the study is completed. Time is an ally as long as the issues are kept before the people. Therefore, do not rush the educational process! However, once there has been broad discussion and positive response, it is time to take a congregational vote. If the need is real, the case is clear and it is demonstrated how the project can be accomplished, a "yes" vote will follow.

A Word of Advice to the Study Committee

You are the key link in the "yes" vote. You will need to be thorough in your work and patient in the educational process. You cannot expect instant approval of findings that it took you months to gain.

You need to be clear on your purpose and your agenda before you start. Schedule regular meetings and agree to a deadline for completing the task. The planning services provided by Church Extension and Disciples Home Missions are designed to help congregations by providing a process and study material.

Important Cautions for the Study Committee

First, take the time you need to complete the study. Don't be in a hurry to reach a conclusion. Do a thorough study. Take the time to get all the

appropriate facts and information.

Second, allow yourself to think and dream big. Do not let dollars interfere with your dreams. You will be brought back to reality soon enough, but don't begin a study by saying we can't afford to do this or that. Premature consideration of finances can cut off creative work. Besides, most of the committee, without the help of a person working in the field of capital financing, will not have a clear idea of what the congregation can afford to spend.

Finally, let the professionals design your facilities. For many years there was a saying around Church Extension, "The first person bringing in a floor plan should be dismissed from the committee." At this initial stage of research it is too early to determine architectural solutions, particularly from committee members not trained as architects. Floor plans should be developed by a qualified architect after the study is concluded.

As stated earlier, the proper sequence for a study is to analyze the purpose and mission of the congregation, describe the program for the present and future that seeks to carry out that mission, and then design the building to house that program. Usually the architect is employed after the congregation has agreed that it wants to proceed with a building improvement program. The study committee's task is to demonstrate the need and gain approval for further planning with an architect.

Take a Sequence of Votes

This "Yes Vote" process encourages a sequence of votes by the board and congregation for a successful building program.

The first vote comes as a result of the study pointing out the needs for ministry and gaining support to proceed

toward further planning. This is accomplished before specific building plans are developed. Another vote will be taken after the facility plan is developed, reviewed, and discussed by the congregation.

What constitutes a "yes" vote with sufficient strength to proceed? In a voluntary organization like the church, a simple majority of 51% is not a strong enough vote. While unanimity might be the ultimate hope, it may not happen. If the "yes" vote is less than 75% of those participating, additional time and education is probably needed before proceeding.

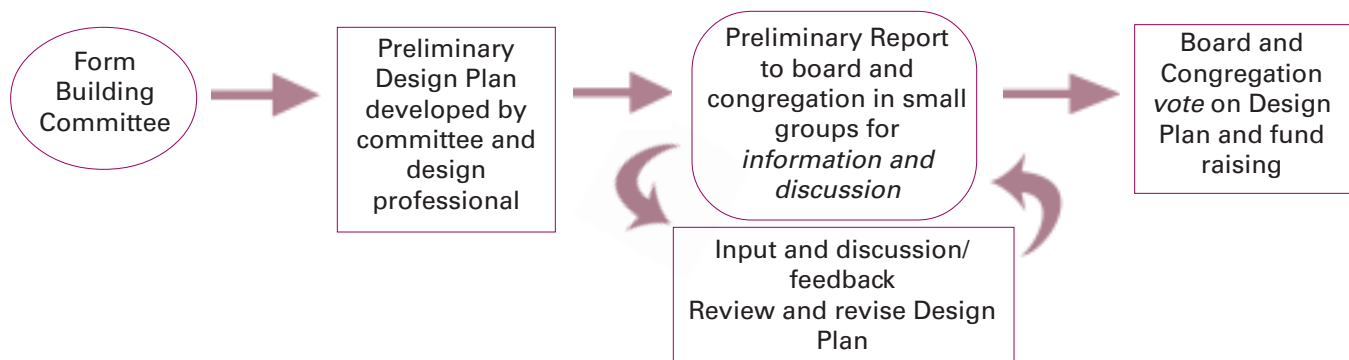
Occasionally a planning committee may not want to present its proposal of a ministry plan and desire to move forward with a building project until the architect has completed a building plan. It reasons that people will not vote on a project that they cannot visualize and the project will be easier to "sell" when people have something they can see. Good projects have been voted down when such a strategy has been followed unless the members have had opportunities to understand and agree on the need prior to the development of plans. It is easier to find fault with a completed plan if the need is not clearly established. Besides, nitpicking on details and architectural style can be a source of dissension. Therefore, the first vote endorsing the need will be the basis for further affirmation when a specific plan is prepared by an architect.

A reminder: Do not present two or three alternatives to a board or congregation. Such an action will only produce division and stalemate.

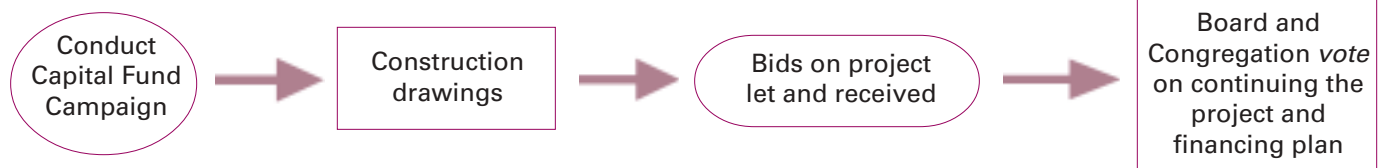
Second Vote is to Approve Preliminary Design

The second vote will be taken after a preliminary design plan has been

Process Leading to Vote #2



Process Leading to Final Vote



produced to the satisfaction of the architect and planning committee. The planning committee will take adequate time to work with the architect until they have what they believe to be the most workable solution. When this preliminary design plan is completed to the committee's satisfaction, the architect will assist them in making the presentation to the board and congregation. The committee's recommendation will be presented in an atmosphere where people can question and make suggestions. The vote will be taken only after the presentation and the planning committee has heard members' reactions. If the architect and the committee have done careful work, they will undoubtedly get a "yes" vote.

Note: the preliminary design plan is not a construction drawing. Construction drawings are the most expensive aspect of development of plans and should never be commissioned until the preliminary design plan has been approved by the board and congregation and usually not until a building fund campaign has been completed and financing assured.

Careful Fund Raising Essential for Success

Fund raising is pivotal. A very important aspect of any building program is the fund raising effort. This effort is often the pivotal point in determining whether a project can be accomplished. This is a time when members are asked to seriously consider the stewardship of all their resources. It should also be approached with careful preparation and with professional help. An effective building fund campaign will be an educational program that will help people understand needs and requirements. It will be a comprehensive program reaching out to all members and friends of the congregation. It will give every member an opportunity to participate in the effort and to make a definite commitment for a specified pledge period. The results will determine how much can be accomplished,

as well as the timetable for the project.

Since fund raising is crucial, Church Extension recommends that the congregation seek assistance in conducting the campaign. Church Extension staff members and resources are available to congregations of all sizes for a very modest fee. The cost of raising funds using the Church Extension program is only about 1% of the amount raised. Church Extension can assist the congregation in determining a realistic goal, and its relationship to a potential loan. This goal is often determined by church leaders as part of the financial planning for the project.

Effective building fund campaigns are best conducted prior to the completion of building plans, as long as the general concept of the project and the ministry needs that are to be fulfilled by it have been clearly defined and endorsed by the congregation. This procedure means members become committed to the project early and are not contributing solely on the basis of their likes or dislikes of the final plans. They will more likely be unwavering supporters to the program if they begin giving early, and they will not become alienated if modifications or compromises become necessary or if some details of the architectural plan do not completely please them.

The final vote of a congregation will come after bids are received. At this time the updated plan of financing is presented, along with any request for a loan. Usually the possibility of getting a "no" vote at this point is minimal, for the members have participated in and moved along with the evolution of the project and are enthusiastic about getting underway. However, care must be taken not to spring any surprises on the congregation. Continued efforts should be made to keep members informed at every step. There should be no secrets about the plans, about the financing, or any other aspect of the program.

'No' Can Still Mean 'Yes'

What if the vote is "no"? It does happen occasionally. What should happen then? It must be remembered that a "no" vote means that a particular proposal or solution has not been affirmed. The reasons for the proposal still remain even though the project is not supported. Some action will eventually be necessary.

When there is a "no" vote, we need more time. Care should be taken to analyze the nature of the opposition. More listening may be required. More information may be needed. Conferences with individuals may be useful. Some compromises or revisions may be necessary, but if the need is essential for the effective ministry of the congregation, success will eventually be possible. With the passage of six to 12 months, the waters might be tested again with the board and key leaders in anticipation of another opportunity to get a "yes" vote.

Planning Guide

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Additional Planning Guides addressing a variety of facility planning issues are available from:
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