

What churches don't want to hear in raising capital funds

It's inevitable – growing churches at some point will find themselves scrambling to accommodate the people God is sending their way. Which means they need facilities, and that usually means they have to raise money. But churches are often unprepared for the hard work and the hard truths that come with such a project.

Most churches don't have the cash on hand to fund a new building or expansion – the operating or general fund is already spoken for and the church must turn to its constituency for additional funds. The most frequent means of accomplishing this is through a capital funds effort, often called a capital stewardship campaign.

A capital campaign is a complex endeavor involving many “moving parts” that need to be sequenced and coordinated to position the church for optimal success. The success of the campaign is important to the life of the church because it is often tied to maintaining ministry momentum. Depending on the size of the church, it will take 4 to 10 months and, in some cases, even longer to plan and implement the campaign. Think of a capital campaign as a pilgrimage – taking church people from a point of awareness to a point of commitment.

In our role as advisers on capital funds efforts, sometimes we have to say things that churches and pastors don't necessarily want to hear:

1. You will have to talk about money.

This is the elephant in the room so let's go ahead and get this one out of the way. You will have to talk about money – there is no way around it. The key is to be honest, straightforward and non-manipulative. Contrary to popular opinion, church people don't mind their pastor talking about money – it's when they think he (or she) is not being straight that they get uptight. Talk straight about money and possessions. When we do not talk straight about money and possessions in the church, we raise suspicions among our people.

Because it involves money, the capital funds effort will invoke some of the highest sensitivities in the church. As one pastor told me, “I have people who will sit in my office and tell me some of the deepest, darkest secrets of their lives, but when I begin to talk about money, they go silent.” Talking about money in the church can be sensitive, but it is necessary.

2. Your people are not as up to speed as you assume they are.

No matter how obvious the need may be for the planned project, do not assume your people see it and understand it the way you and your leaders do. Church people are busy and committed and do not have the margin in their daily schedules to think about these things. You will have to create a process that invokes their attention and focus. Generally, the senior pastor must lead this effort.

Building consensus begins with transparent, authentic communication. Church people do not want you to “spin” the project a certain way just to win their support. Give them the facts and answer their questions. A campaign communication effort must engage the entire congregation in a meaningful way over time.

Make sure you have thought through the entire project. The congregation will ask questions (yes, even some hard questions). Do not assume you can get all of the project details together later – be prepared. Detailed construction drawings are not necessary but you will need cost estimates, lending information and initial government approval for the project before moving ahead with the campaign. Thinking the project through in a comprehensive manner will inspire confidence in the campaign.

3. You will have to give it priority.

A capital funds effort must be properly prioritized to do it right. No one would suggest that a church stop doing ministry during the capital campaign, but it should get “top billing” for a season. It must have the focus and passion of the senior pastor, otherwise church people will assume it is not that important and will not prioritize it in their own lives. The campaign result will reflect the lack of priority.

Several suggestions:

- Clear the deck of other intensive ministry efforts during the campaign season.
- When planning a campaign calendar, pay attention to key dates in the life of the community (sports, civic, etc.)
- Plan around the school and holiday calendar.
- Plan well in advance.

4. Leaders must give.

This is a big one. You cannot lead your people to a place that you are not going. If you and your leaders are not fully committed to lead by example, you will not be able to bring the kind of passion and focus that will make the campaign process work. Sacrificial giving – that is, over and above current giving – will be required. It is a myth that the senior pastor can coast in a campaign and not lead the way in this area.

This can be hard because sometimes, not all leaders are giving to the effort. No one should be in leadership on a campaign team if they are not personally committed to sacrificial giving.

5. The senior pastor will have to challenge major donors.

Generally, capital campaigns (excluding those for debt retirement) will produce three-year pledges of two to four times the annual operating income. A church can raise two to two-and-a-half times its annual income even without wealthy donors. If a church needs more than that, there must be a focus on those who can make larger gifts (\$100,000 to \$250,000 or more, depending on church size). In most cases, this process will involve the senior pastor visiting with these people to present the vision, make the case for the project and challenge the donor to prayerfully consider a significant gift. Asking for larger gifts first is the model King David used when building the temple in Jerusalem.

You cannot overlook the power of major gifts in a capital funds effort, whether you believe you have access to wealthy donors or not. Most churches have at least a few, though they can be hard to identify (read *The Millionaire Next Door* by Thomas Stanley).

You may not want to hear these things, but they are important if you are to execute your capital funds and building effort well.

One final comment. There are a lot of charitable causes appealing to your people for their funds. In general, the one who makes the best case for support wins. No matter how committed a person or family is to your church, be assured their alma mater or the local cancer hospital will be vying for those same dollars. If they make a better case, that is where the money will go. Be bold and make your case well.

You might wonder, “Where is God in all of this?” I have assumed that your church will place God at the center of your capital fundraising plan and that everything you do will be for His glory. It is important to bathe the entire effort in prayer and while we are called to plant and water (in the words of the Apostle Paul), it is God who grants the increase.

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Sidebar

No vision, no project.

A building project must be a logical extension of the vision and mission of the church. Any project that does not meet this criteria will create a disconnect with prospective donors. The project needs to be expressed in terms of people, ministries, impact on a community and the world, instead of brick and mortar. In other words:

- Why are we building this?
- Why are we building it now?
- What happens if we do not build this now?

Do not assume your church knows and understands the vision and mission. Having traction with leaders does not guarantee traction with the broader constituency. Take opportunities in advance of the building effort to persistently and consistently inform and remind the church.

Vision drives facility expansion – make no mistake about it.