

CHURCH EXECUTIVE

Seven capital campaign trends that will impact churches

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As church leaders brace for changes during the recession, authenticity is still key to expansion.

by: Brad Leeper

The economic turbulence across the country has created a bumpy ride for church giving. Capital campaigns in churches are also feeling the effects. If your church is considering any type of expansion, there are some current trends and changes on the horizon.

Trend #1: Projects are becoming less frequently building-related.

There is a trend away from building expansive multi-million dollar auditoriums. With construction costs and borrowing limitations prohibiting large construction projects, church leaders are turning to creative alternatives. And many are finding that relevant ministry spaces already exist in their community. This trend has brought about a change in terminology with the term, capital campaign, giving way to the more relevant expression, ministry expansion project.

These innovative strategies are often more compelling to supporters because they can see that their gifts are being used wisely and creatively. The costs are often much less than new construction, too.

One of my colleagues helped a church raise millions for several church plants in a major metro area. Not a dime went to any capital improvement.

Ideal spaces

A church purchased an office building adjacent to their campus for a much less than it would have cost to build new offices, even after the renovation. Then their old office space on the main campus became the ideal space for their children's ministry to expand.

Another church has committed to placing one of their locations within a 15-minute drive of all the people in the northern part of their state. They have also learned to take advantage of meeting space in hotels that cater to business traffic during the week but are nearly vacant on weekends. The cost is not much different than a long-term mortgage, and they gain flexibility with less long-term financial commitment.

To expand, many churches are moving to a multi-site or multi-venue model that results in more locations, at less than half the cost and in half the time. Watch for the Internet church experiment to explode in the next year.

Trend #2: The giving season is growing shorter.

Traditionally, capital campaigns adapted a three-year giving season, primarily because of the need to maximize pledges to secure a long-term loan. But with less lending options and cheaper alternatives to building, there is a trend for more frequent mission expansion projects with a smaller giving season.

Multi-site strategy

For example, a church I work with just finished a massive construction project and immediately outgrew the space within months of opening. Ordinarily, the next step would have been to build an even larger facility at a projected cost of more than \$30 million. Instead, they are opting for a multi-site strategy at less than 10 percent of that cost. Rather than the standard three-year giving season, they are pursuing financial gifts within the next nine months only. The cash will be in hand when the multi-sites are launched in the fall and no bank loan will be required.

There is no reason that a church should not consider a series of smaller campaigns over three years rather than one large one.

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In turbulent times, people are much more comfortable with short-term commitments because of uncertainty about their job, or financial investments. Bank loans are not necessary for many projects today if you can raise the necessary resources in a shorter amount of time. People appreciate paying as they go in projects rather than committing the church to long-term debt in these times.

Trend #3: Mission expansion will be a rare opportunity to build faith and overcome fear.

Now more than ever, a mission expansion project is a spiritual journey. The disruption of economic confidence is opening a rare moment to teach, preach and celebrate the uniqueness of our faith.

Trend #4: Churches will perish for lack of vision.

In times of crisis, vision will be the defining factor for a church's success. Churches with weak vision will decline in this season, as giving loses momentum and the passion of the people turns elsewhere. But churches that excel in the best practices of defining and communicating their vision will flourish.

Trend #5: Mass communication is giving way to targeted groups.

A traditional capital campaign assumes that most of the communication is one-size-fits-all. Just like our culture, church populations have diverse and unique groups that each has their own special needs. So the conversation must be customized for each of those groups. An expensive brochure or creative video alone will no longer be adequate. Intentional layers of communication spread out over more time will be more effective.

In this sense, communication has become far more complex. It will take more time and more intentionality to communicate with the various groups to maximize their financial investment.

Trend #6: The five-week communication window is changing.

In classic capital campaigns, most of the information is communicated in a five-week window, with the assumption that people are in church each of those five weeks. But the idea that projects can be launched and completed in less than 40 days will no longer be the best practice.

Now it is very rare for people to be physically present in church every Sunday. Facebook and other cultural shifts have changed how we communicate. People now long for intimacy, affinity, and community within an authentic context.

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In addition to a brochure, leaders are fostering conversation. They are creating places of dialogue where givers can get face-to-face with visionaries in an intimate setting. It has been demonstrated that a steady stream of meaningful communication in the six to nine months prior to the actual public phase of the campaign builds momentum to a tipping point that culminates in a successful financial outpouring.

Trend #7: Leaders are relying on coaching rather than program management.

Pastors are finding that a customized approach is essential. The best stewardship consultants actively coach and come alongside leaders to guide them through best practices rather than only serving as a program director.

While you may wonder if some of these new trends are relevant for your ministry, there's no doubt that there are big changes in store for church giving in the coming years. As you seek God's guidance for your ministry's expansion, consider the changes you need to embrace as you prepare for church in the 21st century.

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