

Take a Proactive Stance on Facilities Maintenance

By Matthew Boomhower

A typical congregation generally divides its annual budget into three categories: mission and ministry, staff, and facilities. In a growing and mission-oriented congregation, mission and ministry and staff represent the largest expenditures, followed by facilities. This is laudable because it reflects the directive given by Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations. On the other hand, a congregation that allocates the largest portion of its annual budget on facilities, whether on maintenance or new construction, may be misplacing its priorities or desperately clinging to past glory.

But while it is important to recognize that facilities maintenance should not eat the bulk of a church's budget, it is equally critical that congregations understand that ignoring or under funding the upkeep of a facility creates problems that could have a devastating effect on the main focus of the congregation, which is mission and ministry.

In order to understand facilities management, we should take a quick look at three types of maintenance:

Ongoing maintenance – changing light bulbs, oiling hinges.

Reactive maintenance – something's broken and must be repaired.

Proactive/preventative maintenance – something will eventually wear out, so there should be a plan for its replacement.

The best analogy for facilities management is to think about it in terms of owning and operating a car. In addition to the cost of fuel, every driver understands that the vehicle will require other work in order to operate properly. If you drive a car and fill it with fuel when the tank runs low, but never change the oil or other fluids, the car's performance will suffer and eventually one or more systems will fail. Intellectually, every driver understands that the cost of doing the required maintenance is much lower than the cost of replacing the entire engine.

We can take this car analogy one step further, because like maintenance work on your car, most proactive building maintenance is easy to put off and hard to appreciate. Buying four new tires for your vehicle has no noticeable effect except to remove \$300 to \$400 from your bank account. Of course, it is easy to understand that if they were not replaced, the results of a blowout could be catastrophic.

As with a car, many congregations are very good at making repairs after something is broken or when a repair need is urgent. Most congregations have line items in their budget for these types of expenses.

Where many congregations fail in the stewardship of their facilities is in planning and budgeting for proactive or preventative maintenance that would have the effect of keeping major unplanned repairs from becoming unbearable. It is always better to know the age and condition of your roof, and to plan and budget for its eventual replacement in advance, rather than discovering that a major leak has occurred in the nave and needs to be fixed immediately. Allowing a roof or other building component to deteriorate to emergency level greatly limits the congregation's ability to

gather quotes and perform other due diligence on perspective contractors, which often leads to higher costs.

Unfortunately, the attitude of many congregations at budget time is to ignore these types of facilities issues because they think that by funding those line items they take money away from other important budget lines. Often they justify not funding facilities maintenance at the appropriate level by saying that the building is not the focus of the church's ministry.

By putting in place a system that allows the congregation to identify, budget and plan for items that will need eventual repair or replacement, the congregation gains a huge amount of control over the process and becomes much better stewards of their facilities. Congregations who adopt this type of system notice immediate benefits, such as reduction of surprise expenses and, over time, control over their facilities budget.

Once congregation leaders get behind a preventative facilities management initiative, one big hurdle they may face, especially if they have not been maintaining their facilities and planning for replacement of old components, is the initial high cost of this program.

A congregation that I am involved with had to face the fact that when they implemented this type of proactive plan for dealing with approximately 15 years of deferred maintenance, they were looking at over \$250,000 worth of repairs. Their campus has approximately 120,000 square feet of buildings, so this works out to just over \$2 per square foot. Typically this type of proactive maintenance should be funded at approximately \$.08 to \$.10 per square foot annually for this size of facility; thus, it is easy to see how these costs had developed to the point of having a major impact on the congregation. However, despite the pain of dealing with the cost of this accumulated maintenance, the congregation boldly undertook a capital campaign program, and now it has regained control of their facilities. Not every church may have the capacity to embark on a capital campaign initiative, but every church can begin setting aside funds for the maintenance of their assets.

Planning for facilities expenditures, especially those that are hard to see, is not as easy as planning for easily quantifiable expenses such as staff and programs, but it is just as important. It is critical that church leaders remember that part of advancing the ministry is ensuring that the vision is not derailed by unforeseen expenses. A person who wants their car to last many years will make plans for its maintenance. Congregations have to take the same approach with their buildings and grounds.

Matthew Boomhower is president of San Diego, CA-based Southern Cross Property Consultants, a facilities management and construction management consulting firm that specializes in working with churches and other non-profit organizations. He can be contacted at matthew@southerncrosspc.com.

This article originally appeared in "Church Executive Magazine" in November 2004.