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# Worship

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# The Language of BUILDING

## MUST-READ TIPS FOR SELECTING THE RIGHT BUILDING CONTRACTOR



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Director of business development, Van Winkle and Company, Atlanta, GA



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President & CEO, Corcoran Companies, Longwood, FL



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Vice president, Gleeds, Atlanta, GA

By Sibley Fleming

Selecting the right building contractor for a new church or addition can mean the difference between saving time and money, and shelving an expensive set of architectural drawings. Whatever project delivery method a church selects—design build, design bid build, construction management, or integrated project delivery—one key ingredient for success is making the right choice of contractor.

“I firmly believe that God gives a church a specific ministry, that he calls them to a mission in their community,” says Lee Corcoran, president and CEO of Corcoran Companies, a design build firm based in Longwood, Florida, that has completed more than 70 church projects to date. “When God calls you, he also gives you a vision for accomplishing that mission.”

The problem most churches face, he explains, is a lack of competence when it comes to design or construction. To make up for the deficit, naturally, churches need to hire competent firms. Here are a few tips on how to choose the right contractor for your job.

### 1 Experience counts

All experts agree that a good church contractor is an experienced church contractor. That experience should include a proven track record of finishing projects that come in on time and under budget. “They need to give the church a list of similar projects and references that show they’ve done similar projects and they’ve done well,” says Corcoran.

Contractors with an expertise in commercial space but no church building experience can make errors, including incorrect space proportions, poor integration of technology, and compromised sound and lighting.

Daniel McCabe, project manager for Continental Construction Management Inc., based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, agrees. Continental, a general contractor, specializes in retail and church construction. What’s the difference between churches and commercial real estate?

“The same commercial building codes are in effect for both places,” says McCabe, “but churches need more parking space and more bathrooms than code requires.

They're gathering places and their hallways and movement need to be larger than other areas."

In addition to asking for references of past projects, McCabe recommends that

environmental awareness, flying a contractor across the country may not prove beneficial, unless a church is located in the middle of nowhere and no local contractors are available.

Corcoran himself serves as an Elder in his church, Northland, A Church Distributed, in Longwood, Florida. He is also a student of theology and attends churches of various denominations to ascertain different views. As a result, when churches convey information to Corcoran about their ministry, he's able to understand clearly and incorporate the church's objectives into a building design.

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churches also ask for references from architects the contractor has worked with in the past.

## 2 Where does your project fit in?

"The most important thing for any delivery method is to make sure you've got the right contractor for the right project, that it's the right size for them," says Chris Williams, a vice president with Gleeds in Atlanta, Georgia, a construction and project management firm that employs more than 1,200 people in 13 countries. Williams heads up the firm's faith-based project management division.

"In the ideal world, it needs to be the most important project in their office," Williams adds. The logic is fairly simple—if your project is too big for a particular contractor, he may have difficulty in fulfilling your needs. If it is not an important project, it could receive less attention than it deserves.

Where the building contractor is located can be just as important as where your project stacks up in his priorities. In the current environment of heightened

"It's always better to hire a local contractor and local subcontractors," maintains Williams. "To my mind, there are social benefits to that." In addition, good local contractors are also more likely to know the good local subcontractors.

## 3 Speaking the same language

Finding a contractor that has not only built worship facilities, but who also understands the church environment, is an important factor in the success of your project. "Christians have—and even denominations have their own specific languages and ways of relating to one another," explains Corcoran.

To be effective, contractors must be able to speak the client's specific language and be able to integrate into the client's system. Learning those varied tongues means having team members who are just as knowledgeable and comfortable in various denominational churches as they are in nondenominational houses of worship.

At Corcoran Companies, a large number of employees are actively involved in their own churches and several have worked in full-time ministry in the past.

## 4 Nailing down costs

There are a number of variables when it comes to the dollars and sense of selecting a contractor. The cheapest price, for instance, is not always the least expensive solution in the long run. Churches should look at a bid and ask if it is bid to the architect's plans and consider if those plans are subject to change.

Once construction has commenced, change orders can be very costly, and can increase the project's total cost by as much as 20% as a result of poor planning. McCabe recommends that churches ask contractors for a firm cost as well as the cost of a change order.

"Churches can ask for a monetary penalty if the contractor is late," McCabe says. "Those penalties can be a percentage of the project, calculated daily, or even payment of interest on the construction loan for each day a project is late."

A clear understanding of how a contractor handles project delays up front—whether the church has requested a change, permitting has been delayed, or the contractor is simply behind schedule—can relieve a lot of angst on the back end.

In short, contractors who are problem solvers and willing to be collaborative can help save money even without participating in the design. Van Winkle and Company based in Atlanta, Georgia, was able

to save Zion Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia, \$120,000 simply by changing the shape of a basement for a 60,600-square-foot addition, according to Chris Abbey, director of business development for Van Winkle. Not a small sum when the project cost came to \$8.46 million.

## 5 Who's on the team?

When churches approach a design-build firm, in which the architect and contractor work in collaboration to complete a project, it is wise to ask if the architect has just teamed with the contractor for your project or if they work for the same company under the same roof.

Scott Lee, a senior architect with The Aspen Group, a church design and construction company with offices in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Frankfort, Illinois (near Chicago), says, "In my own experience, I find it very helpful to have the contractor and architect in the same office as an integrated team." Benefits include clear communication about the project as well as mutual trust and the ability to work together to come up with the best solutions to issues as they arise. A good set of construction drawings and specifications produced by the architect should leave no mystery in the contractor's mind as to the design intent or the details. However, cautions Lee, "The design and construction of a church facility is a complex process with numerous possibilities for miscommunication between the owner, architect, and contractor. Staff contractors and architects



Chris Williams of Atlanta, Georgia's Gleeds maintains that, in an ideal world, a church should get the sense that their project is the most important one a building firm is handling. Shown here, First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Georgia.

*Photo courtesy of Gleeds.*

can readily collaborate on the design as it's coming to life, clarify the design intent and detail, and add value solutions."

If an architect and building contractor are teaming up for your project, "make sure they trust each other and communicate with each other well—and work together for the best solution for the church," says Lee.

Williams of Gleeds has witnessed the result of failed design-build partnerships. "I've seen situations with design build where a contractor has teamed with an architect, but because it's design build, the contractor controls the architect," he recalls. "You can have a situation where the architect doesn't visit a project." And that leads to another pertinent question churches should ask their contractors: how frequently will the designer visit my project?

### Specialization is king

In the future, it is likely that church contractors will become more and more specialized in the jobs they do. "Years ago, you could be generalists and you could get by," says Corcoran, "but that's not the case anymore." As ministries become more technologically linked and more focused on their ability to reach people, more knowledge will become necessary on the part of those who design and build worship facilities.

For instance, Corcoran's own church (Northland), seats about 3,000 people, but it has a membership in the neighbor-

hood of 12,000. That is possible because Northland has several multi-site ministries, which are linked together during the service by technology. While each site has its own worship team, the message is delivered from a single location.

In addition to becoming more specialized, McCabe believes contractors of the future will be more collaborative and will be required to have at least one staff member whose specialty is worship facilities.

Lee points to a future that is not bogged down in mistrust between the architect and contractor. "I know that church clients want to be assured that they're not going to be stuck in the middle of an ongoing argument between the contractor and the architect," he says. "I think there's going to be more collaboration between architects and builders in the future."

**Sibley Fleming is an Atlanta, Georgia-based writer and author of several books, including *How to Rock Your Baby*. She has been named Georgia Author of the Year and has been recognized for outstanding writing by the National League of American Pen Women.**

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