

Bridging The Communication Gap

The Architect and Today's Contemporary Church

by David Rauch

Based on the sensitivity of this issue, this has been one of the most passionate articles for me to write. Even though this article is intended to help the local church, if a copy of this article happens to accidentally fall onto your architect's desk, well, that may not be a bad thing.

I believe this has become one of the most important topics since the move to use technical tools and media in the local church. If you are upgrading or retrofitting an existing worship facility, (especially if you are building a new one) knowing how to communicate effectively is key, and it is what we will discuss in this article.

Communication is the key to success. One of the largest and most important concerns is how to communicate your vision so that the architect can make it come to life on paper.

The use of technical systems is a must, and so is relaying the importance of their integration to the architect. The intent is to communicate so that technical systems can be considered and placed within the design stage of the facility, as opposed to the aggravatingly more popular method; dropping them in at the end. Let's explore some of the reasons why this is such a hurdle.

WHY SUCH A COMMUNICATION GAP?

Simply, while the church envisions the importance of the technical system implementation in their overall worship experience, the architect thinks about how the church will look, and how they can provide the cosmetic, aesthetic and unique design look to the facility.

Many architects, especially those unfamiliar with technical system application, may not want to consider how technological tools will "fit" around their design. In many projects that I've experienced, the architects truly believe that these technical systems can just be "dropped in" at the end of the build.

Consultants need to help the architects by clarifying this misconception. The architect does not want their design to be altered or cluttered. However, if everyone is on the same page, the technical systems can potentially complement the architect's work.

The plain fact is that the church has to be "built around" these technical systems. The time to begin planning and designing the application is upon conception of the design process. The misconception between the local church and the architect exists in an unnecessary battle of "looks" vs. "technical application", when really, the two should be inter-related.

What are the keys to success? Two main things, 1) knowing how to build the church around the technical systems and 2) having a technical consultant to help you with this educational and building process.

Having a consultant on board with you upon your initial conceptual meeting with your architect is going to be the most important decision you will make during this process. A good consultant is going to save God's money concerning your investment. It will also be the bridge between you and the architect in reference to being able to speak the language on what your needs and wants are.

Most consultants/media designers and integrators have always been seen by the architect as the "guys who come in and change everything". They have a point- because most of the time the consultant, designer or media integrator usually gets called in after the project is underway or even after the design stage for the facility is complete.

An architect needs to have a full understanding of the church's vision- incorporating technical system implementation as well as intended design focus.

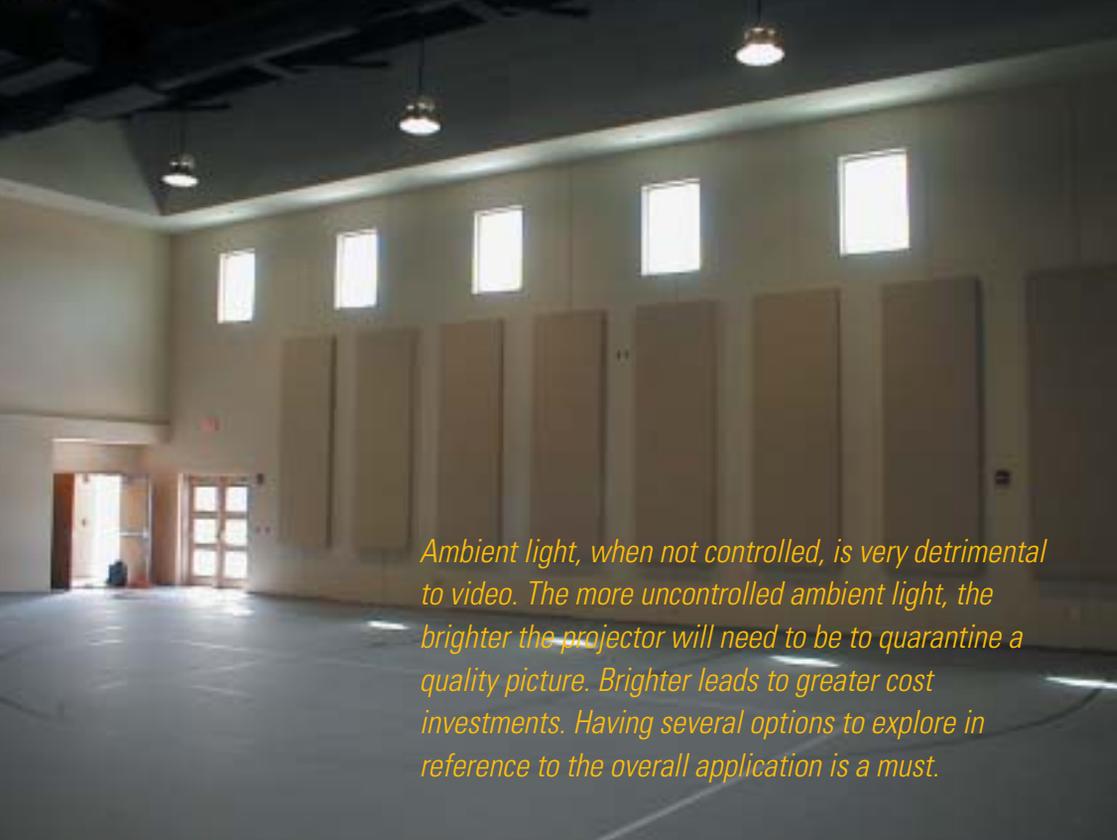
Here are some questions that could help you decide who and who not to consider as an architect..

11 GOOD QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR ARCHITECT

- 1) Has your firm ever built a church?
- 2) If your firm has not built a church, how will you approach the project and who will you surround yourself with to achieve success?
- 3) If your firm has built a church, does it fall into the category of a traditional church (i.e. sanctuary/pew seating, platform with choir seating, no technical systems use, etc.) or a contemporary style church (i.e. multi-purpose, stage or platform, frequent use of technical systems: audio, video, lighting, staging, etc.)?
- 4) Referencing design flexibility, does your firm know the meaning of a “multipurpose” facility concerning the building of a contemporary church?
- 5) Has your firm designed a facility that utilized technical tools in the areas of audio, lighting, theatrical/production, architectural, video and/or staging systems? Have the staging systems incorporated draperies, percenium (the opening, width and height of the stage area for use of drapery applications or hard wall) etc.?
- 6) In reference to satisfying acoustical challenges within the facility, when is the usual time you bring aboard an acoustician to help in the overall design of the worship space at conception?
- 7) Do you intend to gather correct information concerning weight and structural load requirements for the audio, video, lighting and staging systems, additional specific electrical needs for these disciplines, specific circuiting needs, btu ratings- and have this information ready for the subcontractors in all areas of the building process via the blueprints?
- 8) Do you understand the importance of having a “church acoustician” vs. a standard acoustician in reference to satisfying/conforming to the acoustical needs of a church that utilizes technical systems for specific music styles?
- 9) Do you understand what design considerations and necessary requirements need to be addressed concerning the application of video for use in the worship environment- and is your firm aware of rear video screen versus front video screen application in the overall design and how to consider proper space requirements in the initial design concept?
- 10) Within the design of a church facility, have you worked with fly systems, drop/fly space, lighting electrics, and catwalk systems and / or lighting?



This, unfortunately is a great example of how not communicating with your architect correctly and early on (through a consultant) can lead to some challenges when all is said and done. There are two major factors that could have been solved if the correct application information was communicated early on. First, not using the correct lighting (in this case halogen or mercury vapor) in the facility can lead to interference in the audio system, and the video system— especially when using support cameras. Proper placement of down-lighting is also critical. Second, the air register when active was blowing at such a force that we measured a 45 degree movement of the screen backwards.



Ambient light, when not controlled, is very detrimental to video. The more uncontrolled ambient light, the brighter the projector will need to be to quarantine a quality picture. Brighter leads to greater cost investments. Having several options to explore in reference to the overall application is a must.

priceless knowledge in reference to what works and what does not work. They should be able to apply design expertise information in the areas of audio, video, lighting and staging, and (if brought in at the right time) should help bridge the communication gap between architect and the church. They should help answer application questions for both parties, and be able to provide ideas and critical information concerning all

- 11) Do you understand the importance of a conduit riser (a detailed drawing of the conduit to be used to route wiring throughout the facility for the technical tools); not only for the application and routing of needed media tool operation, but also for future-proofing the church... and how this riser design is crucial in the blueprints for you as the architect?

THE CONSULTANT

One of the largest barriers I've noted while working with the local church for the last 10+ years is their lack of understanding the critical importance of hiring a technical consultant to help them out with the building or retrofit process. The initial answer I usually receive is that "We can't afford one.", or "Why do we need one?" In fact this individual is one of the most important people in this entire process.

In the big budget picture, the investment that you make to get a good consultant involved with your project will save tens of thousands of dollars, if not more, when everything is said and done. They will not only help you with your desired needs and wants, they will be able to communicate to the architect correctly and help solve challenges that need special attention. To help break down this barrier I want to explain why and when you need a consultant during this process.

The technical consultant should have a vast amount of knowledge from numerous designs they have personally been involved with, as well as information concerning successful (and not so successful) projects they have been privy to. They should be able to provide

the areas of technical implementation.

When do you bring in the consultant? At conception of the vision, no later than the second meeting with the architect. Again, by default and most commonly, the church, when planning a new facility design or retrofit, is going to immediately contact an architect to see if they can capture the vision on paper. After that initial "vision design" comes back from the architect, it is time to bring in the technical consultant to help both parties come together.

Finally, I believe breaking down the communication gap goes well beyond the architect in every case. Not only does the consultant possess the right qualifications for getting you started, but they also may be someone to consider as a "project manager" for your church during the build process.

In the majority of cases there is usually no one on the church staff that possesses the vast knowledge needed to make sure a project is running correctly and efficiently.

Many times the appointed manager is a part of the audio-visual integration company installing the equipment. During the process, this "Media Designer" will be following their scope of work. During the build process, the individual or A/V job supervisor will have their hands full with the install, and won't have time to "manage" the overall project.

Make sure the communication between the General Contractor and the other important subcontractors remains open. A "go-to" or "single point of contact" individual should be appointed, who has been a part of the process from day one and can answer questions.

SOME HELPFUL DO'S and MAJOR DON'TS

DO'S

Research, Research, Research! As you begin the process of looking for individuals and firms to help you accomplish your vision, look at their work and ask questions. Try to visit some of the sites they've worked on. This is the beginning stage to communication success.

Hire a technical consultant. Interview them well. You are looking for integrity, quality and excellence in their presentation as well as experience in the technical media design and integration area. Not only are they the bridge in the communication process with the architect, they provide priceless answers to many questions and solutions for ideas and concepts that you are considering.

Bring the consultant in no later than the second conceptual meeting with the architect.

Have the consultant help you find a media design firm that cares about your church and excels in quality, excellence and integrity.

Have the consultant help you or the media design firm find an A/V integrator that genuinely cares about the work to be done and cares about the church.

Have the consultant help you choose the General Contractor, and have them help you or the General Contractor choose the subcontractors, especially the ones (i.e. electrician) that understand the work at hand and who are willing to listen and learn.

Put together a well thought out building committee. This should be a "guiding" committee, one that is concerned with finding the correct people to accomplish the job.

Make sure you have a well thought out and healthy technical budget. 10% - 15% of the overall facility cost (i.e. \$2,000,000.00 = \$200,000.00 - \$300,000.00 for three media areas (audio, video, lighting) is a good start.

Work together as a team to achieve success. If something is forgotten or something needs to be added or removed, working together along with the consultant and architect will make things go much more smoothly.

Make sure you "future-proof" your facility. Many times when things cannot be done initially due to budgets, etc. it is essential that a conduit riser and other needs (electrical, structural, etc.) be well thought out for future growth and expansion. The consultant will know the process and how to get it done.

MAJOR DON'TS

Try not to hire from within the church body. This goes for everyone you are considering for the project at hand.

I have visited and worked with numerous churches and have been an integral part of the design and build process. I have seen many things happen when hiring takes place from within the body of the church. Here are two major things that have been very detrimental to the building process and the lives of the individuals involved.

First, one of the major reasons that this is done is to save money. The "hired" entity sometimes believes that because they are "giving" a "gift", they have control over the project. I have seen this in many areas and not only does that

collapse the communication bridge, but it sets the stage for possible failure of vision; the "real" vision that the church and leaders are striving for.

Second, many times the person will take on the project with sincere commitment and intention. However, down the road, because of the "gift" factor and not receiving the kind of money the hired entity is subject to getting for their work, the "sense of urgency" and manpower to complete given requirements in a timely manner falls to the wayside. This has caused major problems, thus



Above is an example of what can be expected when communication is achieved early in the process. The correct lighting was used and is completely controlled through "dimming" systems. Even though a rear projection screen was not used in this facility, the front screen application works great supported by the complete control over all theatrical and architectural lighting. There are no windows in the facility. Excellent audio and acoustical satisfaction was achieved with correct acoustical applications complemented with speaker applications that cover both the spoken word and music reinforcement with a dedicated stereo speaker application.



Again, through proper communication at conception your project will have great success. From the church staff and planning committee to the architect's design, general contractor, electricians and all subcontractors involved, there was not only a complimentary understanding of how we needed to work together, but the understanding that the audio, video and lighting design we provided along with excellent acoustical applications to complement the audio system were successful because the facility was built around these tools and not "dropped in" at the last minute.

compromising the success of the goals of the church.

Unfortunately because of the above-mentioned issues along with many other possibilities that seem to arise during this process, people's feelings and lives are many times seriously hurt. So many variables during this process can be compromised. Without getting into great detail; timely progress of task completion, doing it another way vs. the way it was planned or designed, conflicting ideas, last minute changes, etc. come into play. When addressed, questioned and brought up, due to the nature of the "gift giving" attitude, things can deteriorate to the point of individuals and their families leaving the church. Areas of discipline and subcontractor work in the building process come to a grinding halt and people start leaving the job. Feelings are hurt, lives are broken and this, I can assure you, was not what God had planned.

If you have gone over budget in another area, DO NOT compromise and use the technical systems budget to balance an oversight. This always seems to be the area where money is taken from to heal mistakes. Remember,

the technology integration you are providing is something that in itself has no power. However it does have the power to help support the word of God so that the lost may come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior.

It all boils down to choices, needs and wants, however the front door ministry of your church is very important. If it means not having cushy backs on the chairs vs. not having media to help reach the lost of the community, or compromising that media to where you can't do it with quality and excellence, therein lies your choice.

Most importantly, as a church staff or staff member, don't try and "project manage" the building process yourself. Pay the General Contractor and let them do what they do best: run the project.

Communication Is The Key

The element of communication can make or break any relationship. Communication is the key to success, and if it is compromised, there is room for failure. The communication bridge must stay strong and intact with

the architect because that is the entity that you have brought alongside to help you give life to your vision.

The expertise of a technical consultant can help you build a communication bridge with you and your architect that will provide success concerning the goals God has placed before you to accomplish. It can also help you bring your vision to life; sometimes in ways that you never thought of.

In all of these seemingly heavy subjects on this issue, there is a glimmer of hope! Recently I was a part of one of the most important meetings that I have ever attended while in this industry.

I was invited by one of the best and largest traditional church architects/builders in the U.S. to come and speak to them concerning how to work and communicate with local churches.

Learning how to understand what churches want technically, how to implement their needs and wants, and how to “build the church around these tools” was a spotlighted topic. The fact that this meeting took place at all is incredible news!

A new standard for all architectural firms/builders is gradually being put in place. This meeting just opened

one of the most “closed and locked” doors ever known to the consultant.

We discussed a very positive and successful three-phase process. Phases two and three consist of the design and bidding-out phase. The most important phase is phase one, the initial conceptual meeting with the three parties involved, the church, the consultant and the architect.

Phase one usually takes place the second time the church has met with the architect. After giving them some idea of what size, shape and capacity they are thinking of for a new facility, the needs and wants come to the table in reference to the media application and integration process. After a presentation by the architect of what they came up with, this meeting dives directly into critical information gathering. An educational process takes place between the church staff, the architect and the consultant. This phase, the “conceptual” stage, is critical in reference to setting the picture of what can be expected in the building process and what may and may not work technically. This is the kind of architect to look for, an architect that understands the importance of this communication bridge. ♦

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