

This Old Church

The Problems of Deferred Maintenance



John R. Throop

The congregation of Old First Church faced a dilemma. They saw an opportunity to minister to the surrounding neighborhood and make a little money by renting their facility to a latchkey-kids after-school program. The church, constructed in 1921, featured a large fellowship hall that would house the program. Before starting up, the program director invited the city fire marshal to inspect the facility.

That's when things started to unravel. The fire marshal cited more than twenty-six major code violations, including a sealed exit door (to prevent break-ins), lack of railings and unsafe steps in the stairwell to the basement (put off for future attention), no sprinkler system (no money), no alarm system (ditto), and exposed wiring (unfinished project). The fire marshal threatened to close the hall unless repairs were made immediately.

These problems didn't happen overnight. They accumulated over many years. The church board secured bids to correct all of the code violations, which cost more than \$60,000. The 120 members debated whether and how to raise the money, and bickered about who was to blame for the current crisis.

This old church now had to pay the price for deferred maintenance. Many congregations are confronted with the same issues and dilemmas. They occupy buildings constructed when labor was plentiful and energy was inexpensive. Most churches in the United States were built during four waves of church construction, which parallel high points of American church life and general prosperity—in the 1900s, the 1920s, the early to mid-1950s, and the early 1970s. Many were built to accommodate large congregations, which have now shrunk dramatically. Some are located in rural areas that may have reached their high point over 100 years ago. While these older buildings can develop serious structur-

al problems and need greater attention than ever, these smaller congregations have fewer financial resources to maintain them.

These congregations also have fewer human resources. In the past, churches often relied on skilled tradespeople in the congregation to help with church maintenance projects. As those volunteers have grown older, they are no longer able to spend as much time maintaining the building. Many younger members do not have the time or skills to take their place. Many prefer to pay someone else to do the work, but tradespeople and contractors can be expensive, and the resources may not be there to pay them.

Pastoral leaders also struggle with church maintenance. Seminaries trained them to be preachers and shepherds, but they often know little about church organization or building management. While I was in seminary, I never had a course in congregational administration or dealing with the church building. God has a sense of humor, however. The day before my ordination, I had to wet-vac a church basement that flooded because of excessive rain. It turned out that the exterior drains hadn't been cleaned in years. A board member said that day, "Welcome to the real business of church."

He wasn't that far off the mark—the buildings we use to worship God, nurture adults and children in the faith, and minister to the community reveal something about our stewardship and our ministry priorities. If we really believe in the Incarnation—that God became human and filled material things with grace—then we understand that church buildings glorify God and must be handled in a sacred manner. They are vehicles and vessels for the presence of God in the world. The custodians and maintenance people who care for them are ministers of a sacrament. If this is true, then the condition of our church building is a theological statement. A building in disrepair is a statement we may not wish to make.

There are four ways that congregations can begin to better care for their church building—prayer, planning, prop-

erty assessment, and preventive effort.

Few buildings and grounds committees pray intently for the fruitfulness of their efforts. Often, these committees engage in "practical" work—which is often separated from "ministry." We need God's guidance in the practical activity of the church, perhaps more than in other dimensions of ministry, because

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the building can help or hinder God's work in the place.

Also, the costs to maintain buildings and grounds often are significant, as churches are specialty structures and often were built with materials that are hard to duplicate. The church I currently serve was built in 1844. Recently the limestone exterior needed tuck-pointing. We learned that commercial-grade tuck-pointing material could disintegrate the stone, so our contractor—a firm specializing in historic preservation—arranged to have the material hand-mixed and applied.

Money, or the lack of it, can limit important maintenance projects. Finding the funds to repair and update can become a spiritual struggle and a source of division. Or it can be a time when the congregation finds a renewed sense of dependence on God's grace and provision. Prayer is essential to discern the necessary steps and the proper timing. Maintenance projects can turn the old saying around: "Don't just do something—stand there!"

Prayer and planning go hand in hand. God's vision for the congregation's future and its ministry priorities must be discerned and shared. It is hard to know where to update or repair the building without knowing what ministries are priorities. Those priorities are difficult to identify without vision and direction. Often, maintenance decisions are made during a crisis, such as equipment failure, an accident, or code violation. Sometimes they are guided by donors rather than by a defined strategic step.

A property assessment by someone outside of the congregation can help in this process. Church members become accustomed to the condition of the building. They don't mind the dingy, damp nursery, the leaky pipes in the basement, the loose railings or steps in the stairwell, the weeds growing throughout the church grounds, or the parlor that hasn't been updated since 1970. This is sometimes called "The Shag Carpeting Syndrome"—if people walk by a tear in the carpeting or other maintenance problem six times, they don't notice anymore. Likewise, we tend not to notice the maintenance needs in our own houses until we need to sell. We treat our churches in much the same way—except that visitors notice, and make their decisions about returning based in some measure on the state of the property.

One particular area of concern is the nursery. Church leaders often say that they want to attract young families, but balk at the cost of refurbishing the nursery. Yet the condition of the nursery is a key decision-point for young families trying out a church. While some older members may say, "This nursery was good enough for our children," they miss the point—it's not good enough for the parents who are visiting the church today.

A property assessment team can perform a walk-through of the building and identify key rehab projects. Input from the assessment, visitor comments and

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other sources can then be fed into the planning process. Maintenance and upgrade projects can be evaluated by ministry priorities. If one of the priorities is to attract young families, one goal may be to rehab, refurbish, and expand the nursery. If another priority is caring for older members, then projects like chairlifts, or a hearing-aid system may be part of the plan. The church board can look at priorities and determine when and how projects fit into the church's goals and timelines.

The assessment also can support a capital needs analysis, and efforts in preventive maintenance. A capital needs analysis recognizes that every piece of equipment in the church has a certain life span and will have to be replaced or rehabbed at some point. Preventive maintenance efforts protect the capital investment and help it to last as long as possible. It's surprising how few churches have a written analysis of their capital needs, considering that replacing or updating equipment can be very expensive. Many churches operate with a "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality. Then, when a repair is necessary, there is a crisis—and usually an expensive one.

One area of major concern is the church's heating system. A regularly scheduled maintenance program can extend the life of the heating equipment. Planning ahead by having the system serviced in the off-season can save money as well.

Some churches may have an older heating system that is no longer manufactured. Obtaining parts and service becomes increasingly difficult. Perhaps the church's "furnace man" can't do the

work any longer. The system also is highly inefficient and costly to operate. The time to do a capital needs assessment is now—while the system is still functioning—not after it dies.

Before replacing the system, there are a couple of additional issues to consider. One is air conditioning. The property evaluation team might recognize that younger people, especially with children, find the lack of air conditioning in the summer a barrier to attendance.

The capital needs assessment might suggest that, if the heating system is replaced, air conditioning should also be installed. Doing both at the same time may be more expensive than replacing the heating system alone, but it likely is cheaper than doing both separately. Also, if there are meetings or programs that use the church building during the week, it might make sense to install zoned heating so that only those rooms being used at any given point are heated. If the heating system is being replaced, this project could be cost-effective even if requiring more cash up front. The capital needs analysis and a preventive maintenance program affects every aspect of the church's ministry, from organs and pianos to computers and copiers. They enable the structure of the congregation to run efficiently so that the ministry can be done effectively—or, as in the case of Old First Church, so that it will not suffer disruption and discord.

Good maintenance practices and the stewardship of the gifts of previous generations can help make Christ, not crisis, the center of all we do to build up the people of God. □

Six Key Questions for Capital and Maintenance Needs

- 1) What are the structural needs of the church property?** Foundation, floors, lighting, walls, beams, windows, roof, parking lot.
- 2) What are the infrastructure needs?** Wiring, plumbing, paint, drywall/plaster, carpeting, pews/chairs, pulpit furniture, sound equipment.
- 3) What are the equipment needs?** Room furnishings, computers, office equipment, interior and exterior maintenance tools.
- 4) What are the safety needs?** Fire extinguishers and alarms, smoke detectors, sprinkler systems, emergency lighting and exit equipment.
- 5) What are the aesthetic needs?** Paint, carpeting, draperies, wallpaper, landscaping.
- 6) What are the future needs?** Coordinate with strategic plan.

Silver Saves Churches

Two historic churches recently had to sell off some of their heritage to pay for long deferred maintenance.

In Edinburgh, Scotland, a church in one of the city's poorest communities sold its eighteen-piece set of seventeenth-century communion silver for \$291,000 to the National Museum of Scotland to pay for a much-needed renovation of the church. Leaders at Holy Trinity Church, which opened its current facility in 1972, said that the sale would pay for a quarter of the cost of needed repairs. Holy Trinity currently has a leaky, flat roof which will be replaced with a pitched roof that should hold up better. The silver was originally made for much older Edinburgh church, Trinity College, and had not been used since 1972.

"To be honest, the silver was of no use to man nor beast," Stanley Brook, the church's minister, told Religion News Service (RNS). "We could not ask the people of Wester Hailes [the church's neighborhood], who are among the most vulnerable in society, to support a national treasure when there are many other patrons of the arts with much deeper pockets. Although we could have got much more money for the silver if we had hawked it around the United States, there was a resistance among our parishioners to it leaving Edinburgh."

In Quincy, Massachusetts, United First Parish Unitarian Church has also sold its prized silver collection in order to fix the roof. The 126-member church, also known as the Church of the Presidents, meets in an 1828 building beneath which presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams and their wives are buried. The silver was given to the church by the family of John Quincy Adams.

The church recently needed a new plaster ceiling as well as sixteen steel trusses to support the roof. Members had to choose "having the silver with no building, or having the building with no silver," pastor Sheldon W. Bennett told RNS. The church needs an estimated \$1.7 million for repairs. Sotheby's had estimated that silver would bring as much as \$1.3 million at auction. The silver was auctioned off by Sotheby's on January 19 for just over \$3 million. □