



7 Signs That Your Project Might Be the RMS Titanic

The night of Sunday, April 14, 1912 was clear, calm and moonless as the RMS Titanic cruised along at 22 knots, just 2 knots shy of top speed. Despite the warnings of icebergs ahead, Captain Edward J. Smith continued “full steam ahead” to New York City with 2,240 passengers aboard. There are several unfortunate statistics concerning church building projects, statistics just as sad as those from the RMS Titanic’s sinking in 1912. How often have you heard of well meaning people and ministries going “full steam ahead” and not heeding obvious warnings?

The following is also a true story about a \$7 million ministry addition that began the process with \$1.5 million in their building fund. Many of the following “Warnings” are seen on church projects across the country every day, but not every church is able to call attention to the obvious without the risk of some type of relational damage. The hope of this piece is that just one church, or Christian organization, can be saved the grief and damage that this ministry experienced by not heeding the “Warnings”.

The ministry did not even realize that they had a problem until the building committee went to write a check to the builder and found that they did not have enough funds in the building fund account. The finance committee was contacted, only to find that they had not even begun to meet with any banks. The capital campaign committee was asked where is all of the money that they had raised, only to find that the money raised was committed over a three year period. The design committee was asked why did you design a building that cost \$5.5 million more than what we have, only to find that they were told to come up with what the ministry needed (wanted). The board was contacted and asked how could this have happened, only to find that they thought it was being handled by the committees.

What can we learn from this series of mishaps? The following are 7 Warnings that were evident, but not acted on:

Warning #1: Lack of Strong Leadership

A building project is no place for the weak or timid. When the project involves several million dollars of sacrificially given funds, the need for decisive leadership at the Board level and the Project level is imperative. Prior to beginning a building project, take a step back and objectively look at your leaders. Are they strong? Are they respected? Can they take charge when the going gets rough? Are they capable of actually making a decision? If any of these questions are answered with a “no”, the leader you have right now is probably not the right one for your building project.



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Warning #2: Lack of Communication

There are several “components” that make up a successful project team: The Board. The Building Committee. The Finance Committee. The Capital Campaign Committee. The Design Committee. Prior to beginning anything related to a building project, make sure that a representative from each of these different committee’s are meeting together and are on the same page. Two people, equally informed, seldom disagree. But if the people never get together to coordinate, discuss, inform and agree on a plan of action, collectively, the success of the team is greatly diminished. When Warning #2 is detected, refer to Warning #1 for corrective action.

Warning #3: Lack of Accountability

Lack of Accountability is a very close brother to Lack of Strong Leadership. Accountability can usually be addressed with checks and balances at the leadership and committee level. Warning #2: Lack of Communication, once “fixed” should remedy accountability issues. However, sometimes the existence of an extremely strong personality who may be driving his/her own personal agenda may need a stronger hand. The strong personality that operates outside of the bounds of accountability tends to have several other challenges such as conflict of interest, an agenda for the project that is not always in line with leadership, and probably is one of the key donors to the project. Strong leadership must come to an understanding with such individuals. Without an understanding of how things will be done, you place your project success at risk.

Warning #4: Lack of Experience

The last thing that any Board wants is to be made up of five guys in the building industry. Diversity on the Board is important, but make sure that their experience or profession is complementary to what is trying to be accomplished. Still, at the end of the day, you want to have a point person that understands construction and is capable of making the inevitable tough decisions from a position of experience and know-how. A word of caution, church facilities are commercial structures. An individual that just added on to his home, or built a greenhouse in the back yard is not always qualified to understand the issues that are faced on a commercial construction project. Equally harmful, is the individual who is very experienced, probably has his own commercial construction company, and who will be the primary general contractor or subcontractor on the project. In the case of the latter, refer to Warning #5.



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Warning #5: Conflict of Interest

Almost every church project has members who can supply labor and material as a subcontractor for the construction of the building. This involvement should be encouraged and can, many times, save the church significant amounts of money. The perception that the church is saving money tends to diminish if the subcontractor is also on any of the leadership teams for the church, particularly the building team. A couple safe guards, if this is your situation: 1) Competitively bid all work on the project. By bidding all work, leadership can truly have confidence that the church is receiving the best value the market has to offer. 2) If the individual is successful in winning the work, he must resign his leadership role on the building team. 3) Never accept “gift in kind” work. The individual should competitively bid the work, win the bid, do the work and get paid for it. If he is led to give money back to the church, great! The paper trail that is created with this scenario will be invaluable in the event of an IRS audit.

Warning #6: Professional Advice Ignored

The Team of Professionals that you have assembled are there for a reason. You invested the time to interview and choose the best possible team to guide your church through the process of designing and building your new facility. A team that has been involved with the challenges of designing and building many facilities have learned more from the “School of Hard Knocks” than any other experience. They probably know what will work and what will not. For example, when the Capital Campaign consultant shares that raising over five times the annual budget, in a down economy, is probably a long shot. He is probably right. Over the years, it seems that most design committees get to a point where their needs (typically including a lot of wants) exceed their ability to fund it. A common response is that, “we will just need to raise more money”, many times in excess of what the capital campaign consultant has determined is possible. With God all things are possible, but there needs to be a balance.

Warning #7: “Not Enough Faith”

When the outer limits of finance are being pushed, the “Not Enough Faith” line can sometimes rear its head. In the same dialog you might also hear, “If we build this, they will come”. Again, not to diminish the power and blessings of God, but this angle is not so much about trusting God as much as it is testing Him. We are all called to be stewards of what God has provided. We are called to have faith that God will provide our needs. We need to be able to prayerfully discern what God would have us do with the limited resources that every church has. When it comes to using funds that have been sacrificially given to build a facility to further the outreach ministry to the community, it is imperative that you have faith that is based on a full discernment of the entire demographic that your church encompasses.



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The project described was one that I was not involved with, but viewed from a painfully close distance. There are so many resources for churches to gather information from, the best being the National Association of Church Design Builders (NACDB). The NACDB can be found at www.nacdb.com.

I am sure that as you have read these 7 Warnings you might be thinking, “No Way!” To that I say “Way!” It IS possible to have all 7 Warnings on a project, but even if you only have one, that is too many. The unsinkable RMS Titanic received many warnings as they approached the ice fields. At full steam-ahead, and ignoring the warnings their fate was sealed. Again, many of these “Warnings” are seen on church projects across the country every day. By taking stock of your current situation, now, hopefully you can be saved the grief and damage experienced by not heeding the “Warnings”.

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