



Leaking Gutters and Sacred Spaces: Practical Tips for Facility Repair

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First Baptist Church of Cumberland, Indiana, had a gutter and roof problem. At least that's what the trustees thought. They knew they had storm damage, and during the past few winters they had noticed that ice was backing up. This may have had something to do with the various ages of the roofs and gutters. Over the years, new wings had been added to First Baptist's building—not unlike the additions to many churches dotting the metropolitan Indianapolis landscape.

So the Rev. Kevin Rose, associate pastor, called the Indianapolis Center for Congregations,¹ looking for someone who could do church guttering and roofing work. Since its inception almost seven years ago, the center has fielded thousands of requests from congregations in its nine-county service area as part of its mission of helping Indianapolis-area congregations find solutions to their practical problems. We who work at the center do that by connecting churches with excellent resources, both local and national.

Building issues are among the top requests. Center staff members have handled more than 75 congregational cases related to building concerns in the past six years. These include questions on selection of architects, facility expansion, accessibility issues, and stained-glass window restoration. Many other cases that come to the center are indirectly related to sacred space issues—such as capital fund drives for new or expanded buildings, strategic planning, worship, and relocation issues. In addition, the center, through its innovative Resource Grants Program,² has awarded more than \$70,000 to 16 area congregations for building-related resources and projects.

Looking at the Big Picture

As the center's resource director, Nancy DeMott took First Baptist's case. After talking with Kevin Rose, Nancy gave him the names of some guttering firms recommended by other Indianapolis-area congregations. The Indianapolis Center for Congregations frequently relies on the experience of area congregations in compiling a list of best resources for other congregations. That's part of the center's work—serving as a sort of “consumers' report” for congregations.

Equipped with these references, the church's trustees met. Afterward Kevin called Nancy and reported that the trustees, after discussing the guttering problem, had decided that they needed to find a general contractor who could give them some overall help with maintenance. They wisely realized that they needed someone who could help them with a “building big picture,” rather than a firm that could do only a bit of guttering and roofing.

Nancy asked the associate pastor if the trustees might want to consider doing a facility assessment. Center staff members have learned that various types of facility assessments can be made—something that most congregations don't realize. Types of assessments include Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Assessment (an evaluation of a building for compliance with that 1990 federal law), energy efficiency studies (see the box on page 13 for more information), historical renovation assessment for older buildings, and analysis of a church's space needs. Nancy recommended for First Baptist an assessment in which a consultant comes in and identifies what immediate repairs are needed and develops an ongoing plan for repair and maintenance. Specifically, she recommended using a local nonprofit group that calls on the expertise of experienced retired and semiretired executives and professionals who work for low or no fees.

First Baptist went with that recommendation, and a retired architect from that organization was assigned to work with the congregation. He surveyed the facility and helped the trustees find three high-quality facility assessors that did the kind of work needed. The trustees then selected an inspection firm to analyze their facility thoroughly, to create a priority list of immediate repairs, and to develop a multi-year preventive maintenance plan. The consultant was also present during the assessment to “ask the right questions.”

As the project progressed, the inspection turned up major building problems. They were all related to shoddy work done when the church added classroom space 10 years earlier. To completely repair the water damage and prevent future damage, some of that work would have to be redone.

By then, the folk at First Baptist were fairly frustrated. What had seemed a simple problem had grown into a full-scale investment of time and money. But to its credit, the congregation did not back away from the problems that had been identified. Empowered by having reliable information on the nature of the problem and positive solutions to it (what sort of work needed to be done and who could do it), the trustees moved from frustration to action. They hired the appropriate contractors to repair their facility and did it right. In the end, they were well satisfied—and their gutters no longer leaked.

What First Baptist Learned

Looking back at the process, members of First Baptist Church of Cumberland reflected, identified, and shared with the center the following five essentials they learned—steps that can help your congregation maintain and repair your facilities.

1. Get an inspector. First Church members learned that when their “new” classroom space and narthex were built more than 10 years ago, they should have hired a professional inspection company before signing off on any work. This practice is extremely important for church building committees or trustees who oversee such projects. Limited expertise or knowledge on the part of well-meaning volunteer committee members often creates a situation in which unscrupulous contractors and shoddy work can be overlooked. A high-quality professional inspector will quickly catch improper procedures and poor workmanship. An independent inspector should be involved throughout any building process. “The cost of hiring an inspection company is worth every penny,” said Kevin Rose.

2. Do it right the first time. They learned that temporary fixes and shortcuts only postpone and often multiply the expense of repair. While a short-term fix may be less expensive, it is always better to make repairs thoroughly and correctly the first time. If the job is done right, a five-year period of fixing gutters doesn’t end up concealing that make-do fixes were driving water up under the roof, ruining decking and plaster beneath.

3. Get a facility maintenance report. The congregation learned that getting a full facility maintenance report gives a committee the big picture. This point is important because it relates to the temporary-fix temptation cited above. Building problems are often interconnected. A full report helps a group avoid focusing on one small problem and spending money to repair it, only to discover a year later that a previously unidentified but related problem must be corrected before the initial problem can be properly dealt with. Without a comprehensive report, costs can quickly spiral out of control, and repairs will fail to produce a unified solution.

4. Refer to your inspection report when hiring contractors. The congregation found that obtaining an outside inspection report gives a common focus to a property ministry team, as well as a list of needs to check off when interviewing potential contractors. One contractor often has a different idea from another on how to repair the presented problems. Methods used to gather information about your needs and goals vary from contractor to contractor. Contractors may also take different views as to the primary issues, concerns, and challenges presented by your church’s project. With such a report in hand, your committee can more easily determine which suggested solutions meet the inspector’s description of needed repairs and help prospective contractors stick to the tasks you believe need to be done.

5. Be patient with the process. First Church learned that it takes time to move through the interviewing, inspection, and reporting process. Those congregation members who just want to “get things fixed” need to be reminded of the benefits of the process, and not just the fix. Yes, it can seem as though nothing is happening—especially when the roof is obviously falling down. But patience and process are keys to arriving at a successful solution to any sacred space issue.

First Baptist Church learned valuable lessons. And while experience may be the best teacher, one congregation may find it more prudent (and less frustrating) to learn from another church’s experience than to discover the pitfalls on its own. What First Baptist found from its experience may well save you time, money, and frustration as you encounter similar building-related issues.

Guidance on Building Issues

You can learn from the Center’s experience, too. We’ve learned (and are constantly relearning) in our work with local congregations that simple building questions (fixing the gutter or repairing windows) often don’t have simple, straightforward solutions. In many cases, while immediate building problems are being repaired, deeper problems are discovered. Congregations need to be aware of this possibility and to be prepared to invest the time, energy, and frustration to address the emerging deeper problems.

We offer the following guidance to help you as you begin addressing any building issue—whether it be gutter repair or redesign of interior space or major additions or renovations. The answers will help you as you work with an outside consultant

or contractor. You may find, though, that not all the questions apply to your situation or that some of them are answerable only as your project progresses.

1. Describe the problem. Begin by carefully describing your church's problem. It's not enough to say (especially to a contractor), "We have a gutter problem." Be as specific as you can. Is the problem that the gutters are falling down? Leaking? Leaf-laden? Not draining?

2. Decide how to solve the problem. After you've defined the problem, ask what you think needs to happen to solve it. Is it something members can do themselves, or is outside help called for? If so, what kind of outside help? In First Baptist's case, the retired consultant helped trustees differentiate between the need for a project manager or for a general contractor, and to determine which was best for their situation. Both approaches can work. First Baptist, following the consultant's recommendation, went with a proven contractor with his own crew.

3. Determine your time investment. Carefully consider how much time and energy the congregation is willing to invest in fixing this problem. This calculation has a lot to do with preparing the congregation for how much time it will take truly to solve the problem. Remember, many people will want to "just get it fixed." You need to have clear answers to 1 and 2 on this list to help them realize that it won't be fixed tomorrow—unless, of course, it will (as in the case of a youth group member's crushing a basketball into a building gutter, which needed only to be replaced).

4. Ask financial questions. Ask two money questions: "How much can we realistically afford to spend?" and "How much can we afford not to spend?" To understand the second question, remember that the quicker fix may be less expensive in the short run but more costly in the long term. A simple gutter patching may solve the leakage problem—but not the problem of ice building up under the roof. When dealing with finances and buildings, you may have to look at special arrangements—going outside the regular budget, drawing from congregational endowments, borrowing from a bank or church-extension service, or embarking on a special fund drive. When you know what you can spend, communicate that clearly to the contractor—and stick to it! And realize, too, that unless you've had a thorough inspection of the problem, you may not have a realistic idea of the actual cost.

5. Determine your time frame. Consider another time issue. How soon would you like the problem to be addressed? "Yesterday" is not the right answer. The problem, most likely, did not develop overnight. And the solution won't be found quickly either. Still, you need to think carefully about a time frame that will work for your congregation—considering both the problem and your church calendar. Ask yourselves, "Are there rigid time constraints?"—especially in relation to congregational events and holidays. As you negotiate with prospective firms, ask them how busy they are and how interested they are in your congregation's project. Discuss whether they think they can meet your proposed schedule. Then get them to put the dates in any contract you sign. You'll need to communicate all of this information to the contractor or firm you're working with.

6. Clarify roles. Decide early on who will represent the church as the primary contact with those involved in designing and building your project. If too many cooks can spoil the soup, too many church members offering too many ideas or proposed changes to the contractor can botch a building project. At the very least, such advice can slow the job considerably. At most, it can lead to cost overruns, confusion, and dissatisfaction with the final job. Likewise, settle up front who from the firm will work directly with your congregation.

Dealing with Vendors

Finally, ask, "What are we looking for in a vendor?" If you're like many church building volunteers, you may have no idea how to answer that question. From our own experience with congregations, contractors, and sacred space issues, we offer the following two suggestions for thinking through this question.

1. Find out whether the vendor has ever worked with a congregation. Ask what percentage of the firm's practice involves projects with congregations. Those of us who are involved with congregations know that they are very different from most other organizations. They have peculiar characteristics and a culture unlike that of other groups. To us, but maybe not to a contractor, there are obvious ways of dealing with business—committees, boards, sessions, and so on, depending on the congregational polity. Then certain finance issues are often common to many congregations—like years of underbudgeting for routine maintenance or renovation, dwindling operating income, or unrealistic expectations of how much professional renovations (versus volunteer efforts) really cost. Finally, the emotional and spiritual investment of the congregants may be high. Some of them may have served on committees that made previous building decisions. Ask prospective vendors for a list of past church clients and the names of contact people they worked with at those congregations. As you consider your budget issues, check the firm's track record with cost estimating (and confirm it with the other congregations it has worked with). Ask for samples of actual construction costs versus budget costs for recent projects. You'll also want to find out whether the firm has completed projects such as yours for other congregations.

2. Make sure that any vendors carry the proper limits of liability and other insurance. If a project-related accident occurs, you want to ensure that the congregation isn't liable. Likewise, if the job is botched, you want to know that you have recourse. You hope you'll never need to use the insurance—but it's important for your peace of mind. Also contributing to peace of mind during the project is knowing that the vendors have all the proper licenses (such as an architect's license) and permits for your locality. Ask for copies of all these documents.

Sacred space issues—whether they be leaking gutters or major renovations— can seem daunting. Putting to good use the lessons learned by First Baptist Church of Cumberland, Indiana, and the Indianapolis Center for Congregations can ease some of your concerns, leading to the completion of a project that is both satisfactory and satisfying.

NOTES

1. The Indianapolis Center for Congregations, Inc., established in 1997, was founded to help strengthen congregations in the central Indiana metropolitan area. The center is affiliated with the Alban Institute, a research, publishing, education, and consulting organization based in Bethesda, Maryland, which provides resources for congregations nationwide. The Center is a gift to the greater Indianapolis area from Lilly Endowment Inc.

2. The Center's Resource Grants Program is designed to help provide congregations with the financial ability to find and use the best resources available for addressing their challenges and opportunities. Grants can be used for resources ranging from print and digital media to consulting services, educational programs, and workshops. These matching grants are awarded in amounts up to \$15,000, and cover half of the cost of a project or resource.

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