

COLLABORATION IN DESIGN

by James Hundt, AIA

Although you won't find the word in the Bible, thousands of other books have been written about the subject of collaboration. Broadly defined as "the action of working with someone to produce or create something", collaboration is touted as an effective leadership style in many different cultures and as a means of community building in many different venues. When it comes to building or renovating churches, while the National Conference of Catholic Bishops devoted only a single paragraph to the subject in *Built of Living Stones*, it is one that is well worth reading. Paragraph 205 has this to say about collaboration:

Collaboration is essential to every architectural project, but it is even more so in architecture at the service of liturgy, for cooperation reflects the very nature of the Body of Christ. The members of the parish community along with their pastor, the liturgical consultant, the artist, the architect, and the contractor are all called to a collaborative effort, whose goal is to summon forth the finest expressions of faith within their means.

The paragraph goes on to discuss specific components of the collaborative effort. This article focuses on the collaborative effort between the liturgical design consultant and the architect and ways in which this effort can be made most successful "so that a place of sacred beauty will emerge from their mutual dialogue"¹.

The first essential is that there must be mutual respect for each other and what each one can bring to the project. While architects are educated in design and construction, liturgical design consultants are usually educated in theology, liturgy, fine arts and/or in art or architectural history. The combined educational background of the two professionals brings a wealth of knowledge to the process. While each one may have a good understanding of the other's field of expertise, they both understand that, together, they can bring more to the parish and to the process than either one could bring alone. Trust is an essential part of this mutual respect.

The second essential ingredient to a good working relationship is a shared understanding and appreciation of the parish with whom they are working. This will usually come out during the interview process, as the interviewee talks about his or her feelings about working with this particular parish. The shared excitement between the two professionals can easily spread to the parishioners.

Open-mindedness is another essential ingredient for both professionals. It is not uncommon for people in the design fields to be excited about their ideas and to want to see them move forward. But in a collaborative process, it is important that both professionals keep an open mind about design solutions. Many times a solution that seems ideal can be made even better when it is challenged by someone on the right grounds. If compromises

¹ *Op. cit.*

need to be made, they should ideally be acceptable to both professionals. In the best-case scenario, everyone learns something from everyone else and the parish reaps the benefits.

Also important to a successful working relationship is effective communication. This starts with an exchange of contract documents that helps all parties understand the division of responsibilities or, in shared responsibilities, which professional is to take the lead. Besides the design of the worship space and other spaces, tasks such as the design of liturgical furnishings, material and color selection, review of lighting designs and acoustical criteria may fall to one or both professionals or might be contracted to other parties. Spelling these things out at the beginning of the project makes for a much smoother design and construction process and can help avoid bruised egos.

During the entire course of the project, including during construction, both professionals will need to always be aware of the other's communications with the parish and with other consultants and design professionals. Often items that seem trivial and unimportant can have a major impact on some other aspect of the project. It is always preferable to be guilty of communicating too much rather than too little.

Which professional gets hired first varies from project to project but if the architect is hired first, the liturgical design consultant should be hired before any design work has begun. In many cases, the liturgical design consultant is hired first and assists the parish in the architect selection process. The most successful projects usually result from having a professional team that works well with the parish and works well together. It can be a very rewarding experience for all involved that helps to renew the parish as they build or renovate their worship space.

About the author:

James Hundt, AIA has been involved with the design and construction of religious facilities since 1980. Over the years, he has designed a wide variety of buildings for religious organizations and other institutional clients throughout the country. Mr. Hundt graduated from the McGill University School of Architecture in Montreal in 1980. He is actively involved in sustainability issues on both a local and national level, including presentations at conferences such as Form/Reform. He has served as President of the Association of Consultants for Liturgical Space and Vice Chair of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art & Architecture (IFRAA). He has had articles and award-winning projects published in journals including Environment & Art Letter, Architectural Lighting and Ministry & Liturgy. His architectural practice in Clifton Park, NY serves clients throughout the United States.