

More Churches Turning to Consultants to Drive Growth

Each weekend, 18,000 people gather at one of Eagle Brook Church's five locations outside St. Paul, Minn., to hear **pastors** preach family-friendly sermons on avoiding excuses and learning to forgive.

When it's time to ask for donations, Executive Pastor Scott Anderson said he's careful to ask only when God deems it necessary.

In recent years, it's been necessary a lot.

Since 2001 the nondenominational church raised \$40 million to build four new campuses.

"We take very seriously the command Jesus gave to **evangelize** and to reach the world," said Anderson. "When we start to get overfull, we look at the demographics and see if God opens a door."

A door has opened in Woodbury, he said, where about 2,000 people pack a high school auditorium each weekend. Last year the church decided to erect a \$30 million campus in Woodbury with state-of-the-art sound, light and video systems and stadium seating for 1,500 people.

Anderson and his staff knew it wouldn't be easy asking churchgoers to donate to a fifth building campaign. So the church once again hired RSI Stewardship in Dallas—one of a legion of **church** consultant businesses in the U.S. RSI helped Eagle Brook raise \$24.6 million three years ago during the recession.

Last November the church started a new "One by One" campaign, with a goal of \$20 million. "Our mission is unwavering," the

website reads, “to reach people for Christ. Our avenue to reach them is to build new campuses.”

Eagle Brook members pledged the full amount in two months.

RSI shaped the campaign message and used both print and digital media to build interest. The company urged church leaders to get members to pledge online, rather than through the traditional paper pledge cards, and ask them to write checks immediately.

Fancy brochures and websites don’t hook congregants, said Joel Mikell, president of RSI. “A capital campaign is a spiritual thing before it is a financial journey,” he said.

These days many churches are struggling to detect God’s direction. Many congregations are mired in debt, saddled with large mortgages as they lose longtime elderly members and scramble to woo young families that will place checks in collection plates.

The recession took the most vulnerable. Nearly 350 churches have been sold in the last seven years after defaulting on loans, said CoStar Realty Information Inc., a data company.

To stand out in a crowded field—and attract more members—**churches** are hiring some of the estimated 3,000 consultants trained in ecclesial concerns, according to the Society for Church Consulting, a membership organization in Louisville, Ky. The society said it has taught 1,000 church coaches in 11 years. And while some worry consultants may be exacting too steep a price for their services, others point out that the church support network has changed.

“Many churches were not getting the help they needed from their denominations,” said Gary McIntosh, owner of Church Growth Network, a business in Temecula, Calif. “So many found independent people outside the denomination who had a new perspective.”

For up to \$2,000 a day consultants will guide a church's transition to a new pastor, settle conflicts or focus on "strategic visioning." The bigger companies focus on capital campaigns. And while business is down from its pre-recession height, consultants say it's growing again.

RSI, one of the largest concerns, boasts annual revenues of \$4 million, said Kevin Lloyd, the chief operating officer. The company is working with about 100 churches annually and the average church client seeks to raise \$2 to \$5 million and pays \$40,000 for RSI's services.

A major competitor is Generis in Atlanta, which recently helped Houston's First Baptist Church collect \$71 million in pledges and expected gifts from its 5,000 regular worshippers. The money will fuel the next two budgets and a host of missions projects. People are happy to give to a church when they "see good returns, an effectiveness of ministry," Generis' co-owner Jim Sheppard said.

Sheppard said he helped a pastor create "significant internal focus" about the giving goal through sermons, a website, Twitter and Facebook and email blasts – "anything that you have at your disposal."

Some Christians, though, are suspicious of the companies' motives. William Wilson, president of the Center for Congregational Health Inc., a nonprofit in Winston-Salem, N.C., said private for-profit entrepreneurs don't always bring the salvation churches seek.

"My fear is that there are people who are seizing the opportunity when churches are especially vulnerable to make a financial windfall off of congregational troubles without the conscience to realize ... that the fees they are charging are so extravagant that they actually add to the congregation's dysfunction," said Wilson.

Consultants don't always fix every problem. In 2011, members

of Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Billings, Mont., approved a \$3.2 million project to renovate its original A-frame building with nicer classrooms that would attract more families. The **church** draws about 300 people each Sunday.

Leaders in the church, whose **pastor** had recently quit, hired Kairos and Associates, a consultant in St. Paul, Minn., for \$38,000 over three years. Suspecting the church was having problems, Kairos representative James Pence asked Russ Crabtree of Holy Cow! Consulting, to give a computerized assessment of the congregation's health. Crabtree found that Good Shepherd had one of the lowest levels of energy and satisfaction that he'd ever measured.

Kathy Kelker, Good Shepherd's Sunday school superintendent, said church leaders then realized Pence's consulting work went beyond fundraising.

"It was more like a psychology makeover," she said.

Pence spent 18 months creating and managing a campaign—including crafting a theme and sermon topics and organizing meeting agendas—and personally meeting with members.

"We were asking them to dig deep to get out of its funk," said Pence.

By November, members had pledged \$650,000 and an architect drafted plans for a scaled down, \$2 million project.

The new pastor arrived in December and was not pleased. The Rev. Steve Loy found a \$41,000 deficit in the half million-dollar budget. No one could tell him precisely how much of the pledge money had been collected. In January, Loy halted the project.

Pence said he had questioned whether the project was wise, but church members were insistent. He said he didn't know the

extent of the church's financial problems.

"I don't direct; I shape," he said.

In recent months, a Good Shepherd church committee has begun to pursue the project again, although Loy isn't certain that the church will pursue construction. Loy said that the consultant was "extremely valuable."

"They can bring quantifiable data," Loy said. "And they bring an outside perspective that's valuable for a congregation, because a congregation can be very myopic."

Eagle Brook Church in Minnesota, meanwhile, is moving ahead. Once it raised \$5 million in cash, it was able to borrow \$12 million to start construction on a 75,000-square-foot building.

The campus is expected to fill soon after the doors open, Anderson says. The church bought an extra big parcel—40 acres—assuming it will expand someday. Church leaders will carefully weigh the next round of fundraising.

"You don't want people to feel manipulated or used," Anderson said. "It's a careful line that you walk."