

Church Executive™

HELPING LEADERS BECOME BETTER STEWARDS.

DESIGNING FOR MAXIMUM ENGAGEMENT:

A CHURCH EXECUTIVE FORUM



Presented by:

HH Architects; CSD Group LLC; Thrivent Church Financing

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Budgets are usually the first thing you think of when you hear the word “steward.”

There are many facets and challenges to being a good steward. What about vision and mission? Both are vital to our success, yet all too often they seem to be left on the back burner.

The budget’s job is to fund the mission that supports the vision, not the other way around. If you allow the inverse to take place, you often end up with dismal results and / or analysis paralysis.

By Jake Drown

Engagement is for *everyone!*

An experienced church architect discusses what “engaging design” really means — and it’s a lot more than bricks-and-mortar



Bruce Woody
President & CEO
HH Architects
(Dallas)

Church Executive: The topic of “designing for maximum engagement” is top of mind for you and your team. Why?

Bruce Woody: During COVID, there was such a period of *disengagement*. Church leaders demonstrated their flexibility by shifting quickly from in person service to online services. Now, the importance of reengaging and maximizing time with guests, visitors and members is crucial. We are starting to see church leaders are ready to engage and get everybody back into a sense of worship and fellowship on campus. The current

trend reflects that people desire to be in-person and fully engaged as families. Certainly, churches prefer this.

CE: Have you seen engaging design strategies change in the aftermath of COVID?

Woody: There has been a tremendous focus on a sense of hospitality and churches are meeting those expectations, not just for existing members but for new members who might have worshipped online and are just now coming to the campus for the first time. One simple example has been offering outdoor fellowship spaces.

CE: Right; it does seem like COVID would spotlight the need for outdoor gathering spots.

Woody: Yeah, for a long time, churches dismissed outdoor spaces, but HH Architects has been designing them for years. There was a period of time that these spaces were eliminated from designs due to cost, but now church leaders are seeing the value that outdoor space brings to the church.

CE: When we use the term “engaging design,” when should that experience start — and end?

Woody: Most people searching for a new church will first search online. Therefore, the church website needs to have an impactful first impression that clearly provides the overall style of the church (ideally carries over into the design of the church building(s)). Online, a church promotes fellowship and engagement. If a visitor arrives at the campus and the building is not reflective of the church website, it’s sending a mixed message.

The church buildings should ensure a welcoming and intuitive experience. Outdoor spaces (parking and pedestrian outdoor spaces) should connect naturally to navigate to the building(s) for people. The church campus layout needs to provide a sense of warmth, safety,

security — all these are key to a design that families will experience these essential elements.

CE: These days, is it accurate to say that engaging design means people feel welcome on campus all week long?

Woody: Yes. We’ve been seeing this for the last couple of generations. Church has changed over the years, from a weekend experience to providing more opportunities to the congregation to participate with their communities.

The current generation of church leadership encourages involvement from all age groups to interact versus being segmented into activities for adults, senior adults, youth and so on. They desire to see all ethnicities and cultures together, enjoying family activities in hospitality-focused spaces on campus.

CE: A church’s culture, or DNA, plays a big part in its design. But are there also universally engaging design principles?

Woody: Again, it starts with hospitality. Today’s culture anticipates an *experience*, whether they’re going to a movie, to a restaurant, or to church. It should be very welcoming, positive and uplifting. If your church doesn’t have large common gathering areas, it can’t really facilitate hospitality because there’s no space to do it. It’s equally important that every space has a design, an intent and a purpose, regardless of age group. Careful considerations need to be made when designing the campus layout to ensure that all aspects are planned during the design process.

“Most people searching for a new church will first search online. Therefore, the church website needs to have an impactful first impression that clearly provides the overall style of the church (ideally carries over into the design of the church building(s)).”

CE: How have you ensured engaging design in smaller churches, or those on a limited budget?

Woody: Regardless of church size all these principles apply. If the building looks unprepared for visitors, or if church leadership is constantly apologizing for a lack of facilities (or for the state they’re in), you’re sending a clear message of lacking coherence. Again, people are looking for an experience that meets or even exceeds their expectations. To sum it up: whatever you do, do it to the best of your abilities. Whatever you *can* do, do it well.

CE: What about multisite locations? Do engaging design strategies differ in these spaces?

Woody: No, they’re the same. It’s even more crucial that these locations all send the same message. The design should deflect church attendees from having different experiences based on locations. Otherwise, a person might have the opinion, that the *church really doesn’t place the same priority on their other campuses like they do the home church*. Across the board, it’s important that the strategy, the messaging — all of it — is universal. **CE**

— Reporting by RaeAnn Slaybaugh

All-in on A/V

**The right system is essential to engagement.
Here's how to get it (in plain-English).**



David McCauley
Principal
CSD Group LLC

Church Executive: How can a church leader know that the A/V system is falling short of its engagement potential?

David McCauley: Reaching 60-percent-more-active engagement is something I talk about often. Yes, this is a hard metric to measure; but I feel that most leaders can get a pretty good sense of connection when looking around an audience.

As a leader / teacher, when teaching classes or speaking at events, I track engagement in a couple of ways:

Eye contact: This simple but informative [observation] is a key to what people are really paying attention to. If they're only looking at their phones, or at other things going on in the space, there's a good chance they aren't connected.

Audience response: Some cultures are quiet; others are more responsive. Either way, response is always something that we look at, especially during worship. If people aren't singing, they're not connected. It's a huge clue that some adjustments are needed in your space.

I developed a process that starts with a questionnaire for church leadership based on this exact topic. I ask them to rate the importance of parts of a project, from architecture to technology. A matrix we've designed helps our design team effectively understand and guide leaders on the journey of engagement. The end result is connecting and communicating effectively with the congregation. If that's through architecture, great. If it's through technology, that's great, too.

CE: As we look at your website, driving maximum engagement is clearly at the heart of what you do. Can you expand a little on each of the statements listed there, below?

Audio: "We design audio systems that ensure your message is delivered with clarity and power."

McCauley: Spoken into existence: this is how the world was created, and it's also the best way to communicate with most people.

When our team thinks about engagement, we think about the whole package — from room acoustics to electronics — and the effect these elements have on people. We find a balance; a space in which souls are activated in worship but worshippers' ears are also reachable in the softest moments when you're sending a life-changing message.

Then, if you need a system with bass so loud that it knocks the devil out of the church, we can help with that, too.

Video: "We design the technology you need to visually communicate your stories."

McCauley: Video is so important. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then what are 24-plus pictures per second worth? It's a huge part of next-level engagement.

Lighting: "We design an immersive atmosphere that keeps your audience engaged with your message."

McCauley: Eyes are the window to the soul; you can guide people with intensity, help change a mood with color, and intensify engagement. People were designed for light. A picture of our Creator is light.

Acoustics: "We design a balanced environment that will ensure your message is delivered clearly."

McCauley: Acoustics are often overlooked but are one of the most powerful ways to connect and engage. Most people don't understand the importance of acoustics or how it affects people and the dynamics of the room.

With our dynamic acoustic systems, it can be a pretty direct and quiet space, or I can press a button and it sounds like a cathedral. It's art and science; experience and engagement can intertwine.

Done wrong, acoustics are distracting. Done well, they make all the difference in terms of connection.

CE: Stewardship-focused church executives might assume that a truly engaging A/V system comes with a high price tag and requires "all the bells and whistles." What's the reality?

McCauley: Everything has a cost; the goal is to put the budget where it does the most towards reaching church leaders' goals, and then phase in other wants and needs later. We need to set the roadmap and expectations before we can hit any target.

CE: What effects has COVID had on how engaging church A/V systems are created now?

McCauley: There was a lot more attention on reaching outside the walls of the church. Now, it's focused on how to get people engaged *in person* again. What creates that special moment of connection with other people, that shared experience?

I believe the world will never think the same as before. COVID has impacted how we view the worship experience. I even find myself thinking 'Hey, I can just watch it at the house while I'm cooking.'

But doing so means you miss the component of engagement and connection that comes with worshipping *together*, in person, and how that experience deeply impacts us. **CE**

— Reporting by Emma Green



How functional design helps drive financing

When the term “engaging design” comes up, the financing part of the equation might seem unrelated.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

affordability is the No. 1 factor. This is why the church, its lender *and* its architect need to all be in sync early in the process. Only by collaborating can they answer the Big Question: Can the church *afford* what’s being designed? If phasing the project or scaling it back is necessary, you definitely want to engage the lender and the architect and make sure your plans make sense.

A word about affordability

Let’s talk more about affordability and what that really means.

As your church prepares for expansion, a general rule of thumb is that total project costs should not exceed funds available to pay for those costs. Consider the formula below:

$$\text{Loan Available} + \text{Cash on Hand at Time of Settlement} = \text{Total Costs}$$

Whether you are phasing a project or building all at once, lenders can’t underwrite based on future growth expectations. Have a plan, based on what you know today, to fund your project.

As outlined above, lenders generally won’t consider future anticipated events — such as future capital campaign receipts —



Chris Lewis
Senior Relationship
Manager
Thrivent Church
Financing

I’ve been working in the church loan market, exclusively, for more than 16 years. I’ve known Bruce Woody, President and CEO of HH Architects, that entire time. Our organizations attend and sponsor the same conferences. Outside of learning about projects Bruce is working on, we also see each other multiple times a year at these conferences.

So, sure, there’s a personal relationship; but there’s also a lot of synergy in what we do for church clients — including projects with a truly engaging design, like one we collaborated on near our nation’s capital. Designed like a lodge, it offers large, yet intimate, gathering spaces and a rustic feel throughout. Places

where people can gather informally during the week to drink coffee, hit the wi-fi, and socialize.

A facility that doesn’t sleep.

What your space “does to engage” is critical

This project is actually a great reference point for what we’ve found, as lenders, to be the case: affordable and functional design is typically what takes a project from concept to reality.

While “wow” factors can be budget busters, not so for engaging spaces that promote community. In fact, over the past several years, we have seen many more flexible gathering space areas being built as compared to conventional sanctuary space.

Regardless of what kind of space a church is hoping to build, though,

“Whether you are phasing a project or building all at once, lenders can’t underwrite based on future growth expectations. Have a plan, based on what you know today, to fund your project.”

when underwriting the church for a loan. The church’s strategy of communication for the capital campaign can change based on what your lender outlines as a potential loan.

Simply put, if your church is planning a \$10-million project and can borrow \$5 million, that means you’ll have to raise \$5 million to offset project costs *prior* to loan settlement. How you communicate with the congregation about the campaign will likely change based on your borrowing capacity.

Don’t shortchange your project with a “business as usual” approach

Completing a successful building project has a lot of moving parts, but the odds greatly increase when the church, lender and architect all work together.

Unfortunately, what often happens is that a church engages the architect *first* to “draw the dream.” Then, the church contacts the capital campaign firm to raise money for the dream. Then, the church calls the lender ... who tells the church that it can’t afford the dream.

Getting a lender to provide a church’s financial capacity on the front end is a game-changer. This way, the ministry can plan based on their financial reality. **CE**



3 KEY ELEMENTS FOR AN ENGAGING LOBBY OR WELCOME AREA

By Bruce Woody, AIA

Getting people to engage in today's fast-paced culture is challenging, with all the competition for attention we carry with us. Yet, at our core, we're all social creatures seeking connection — *real* connection.

As church leaders, we need to break down barriers and create authentic spaces that allow for (and encourage!) this engagement.

In a church lobby or welcome area, there are several aspects — both horizontal and vertical — that create connection. Let's focus on three key concepts:

#1: First impressions

One of the most influential roles a lobby can play is to make a great first impression. Lobbies have personalities that speak to guests and begin

their experience — they need to speak to hospitality. As a person's first point of contact with a facility, it must send the message: *Welcome! We're glad you're here.*

Incorporating hospitality amenities allows for opportunities for people to connect at a conversational level, to slow down and let down their guard. Ample and varied seating areas give people options to gather and cultivate friendships with people they might have just met.





At Cornerstone Chapel in Leesburg, Va. (shown, left), seating incorporated along the edges of the main commons allows for these quick conversations without impeding traffic flow. A centrally located café with additional seating creates the opportunity for deeper connection — even becoming a destination itself.

The use of glass and natural light is another way to enhance this welcoming feeling. Bright, open spaces feel comfortable, and being transparent is a good way to open doors to the community. Activity begets activity. Being able to see ministry on display invites and draws in curious seekers.

#2: Brand integration

A ministry's brand should be considered as a design element. This is the easiest way to speak to the community and share a brand story that's authentic and relevant. Every institution has an established identity that speaks to its core, to its philosophy of ministry. When someone walks into your facility, the building needs to speak the same language as your online and print presence to resonate with their expectations. This creates a more authentic experience.

When Preston Trail Community Church in Frisco, Texas (above) decided it was time to relocate to continue its growth, one of the concerns was maintaining an established identity as a highly creative, community-driven warehouse church. The design of the building references this identity, and specific elements throughout the campus help recall this vision to the average guest.

#3: Wayfinding

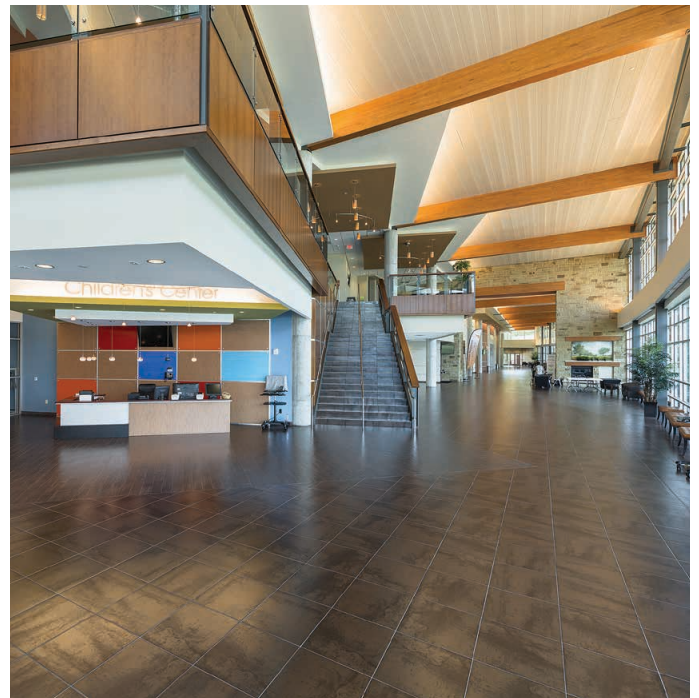
At their core, lobbies are connecting spaces. They move people from one space to another. To be effective, this should be an intuitive process. Both first-time guests and longtime members should be able to orient themselves and easily navigate the space.

Architectural elements, lighting, seating groupings, finishes, materials and more can all be used to provide visual clues, along with well-placed signage.

North Dallas Community Bible Fellowship Church in Plano, Texas (pictured, right) never had a significant lobby space before its current campus — just a maze of corridors. This was addressed by making the primary spaces accessible from a single, large commons across the front of the campus. No matter the door you enter, where you're looking to go is visible.

With proper wayfinding as a guide, lobbies can move people through a space during turnover between services, as well as provide areas to stop and connect. These two functions might seem opposed to each other, but a great lobby allows for both. It enables a sense of control at the user level, ultimately making guests feel more comfortable as they make spontaneous connections on their terms.

By providing a strong first impression aligned with your unique brand and a well-planned design, you create a welcoming environment, setting the stage for connection to happen. We're called to fellowship in Christ



and share the good news — we can start by removing our barriers and proclaiming: *Welcome! We're glad you're here!* [CE](#)

Bruce Woody, AIA, is president & CEO of **HH Architects**. He speaks around the country about the importance of campus master planning and has been working with ministries for more than 30 years.

Priorities.

Does budget drive your mission, or does your vision drive your budget?

By Jake Drown

Budgets are usually the first thing you think of when you hear the word “steward.”

There are many facets and challenges to being a good steward. What about *vision* and *mission*? Both are vital to our success, yet all too often they seem to be left on the back burner.

Vision tells us where we are going; *mission* tells us how we will get there. Just when you think you have the two dialed in, here comes their arch nemesis: a budget!

The latest, the greatest, the most expensive (said no one ever), the most reliable, the most affordable, the most cost-effective — your vision was so clear, your mission so strong. Then along came these troublemakers and their friend, *budget*, diluting your best laid plans.

Let's get our priorities straight

The budget's job is to fund the mission that supports the vision, not the other way around. If you allow the inverse to take place, you often end up with dismal results and / or analysis paralysis.

What on earth does any of this have to do with designing for engagement and technology? Everything.

Sure, we love to talk tech and all things AVL; but before we can do that, we need to understand your vision. Aligning your projects priorities with your vision will allow you to steer your mission and plan within the guardrails of your budget. When vision gets in the driver's seat, mission becomes the vehicle, and budget becomes the co-pilot.

We have put together a free and simple online tool to help you prioritize so you can execute your vision. You can access the tool 2 different ways:

1. Use your phone camera to scan the QR code below:

csdus.com/priorities



The budget's job is to fund the mission that supports the vision, not the other way around. If you allow the inverse to take place, you often end up with dismal results and / or analysis paralysis.”

2. In a web browser, visit csdus.com/priorities.



About CSD

CSD Group has been helping churches answer the right questions for more than 30 years. Established in 1989, Custom Sound Designs (CSD) is a design-build integration company specializing in Audio, Video, Lighting and Acoustic systems for a variety of settings — houses of worship, board rooms, auditoriums, classrooms, outdoor venues and more.

From our headquarters in Fort Wayne, Ind., to our branches in Fort Worth, Texas and Colorado Springs, Colo., we have not only built a network of industry professionals across the United States, but also a portfolio of successful projects and lifelong relationships spanning more than 48 states.

Jake Drown serves as Senior Designer & Marketing Officer for **CSD Group**. A second-generation pastor's kid, tech guru and audio aficionado, Jake brings a wealth of knowledge and a unique understanding of the intricate balance between vision, mission, budget and technology within ministry.

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