

Community by Design

In the heart of Brooklyn, New York, A.R. Bernard's Christian Cultural Center is more than a church, it's a destination.

By Peter K. Johnson

When you walk into Christian Cultural Center (CCC), you may be surprised to see some features not typically found in a church.

The challenge was to build a church to accommodate a growing multicultural congregation of 20,000 nestled in the east New York section of south Brooklyn, about 15 miles from Manhattan.

But for senior pastor A.R. Bernard, CCC's new facility had to be more than a church--it must serve as a gathering place for the congregation that calls CCC home, and it must engage the community as a model of a church's involvement in wider society.

As a result, CCC has few of the stereotypical accouterments of a church building--and it boasts numerous features most would never expect in a church.

The ground-level entrance of the 97,000-square-foot facility opens to a spacious wood-paneled lobby with a marble and granite floor leading to the sanctuary. Paintings grace the paneled walls, conveying the impression of an art gallery. Wide hallways with 13-foot ceilings ease the traffic flow.

Between services, families and teenagers chat and sip coffee and soft drinks in a casual cafe, browse titles at the bookstore, or visit the flower shop and newsstand. Hungry attendees satisfy their appetites in the 120-seat upscale Koinonia Restaurant on the second floor.

In a city where just getting to church entails battles with freeway gridlock or numerous subway transfers, CCC is a multipurpose destination for Sunday worshipers--some of whom travel from as far away as Connecticut, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania to attend. But more than that, the unconventional amenities at CCC also support Bernard's vision that the church become a cultural center, as its name implies.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The vision to launch such an ambitious project was hatched when CCC grew out of its 28,000-square-foot home in an abandoned supermarket and began building in 1997.

The need was so great for a new facility that Bernard claims it was an easy sell persuading the congregation to buy into a new building and new model for ministry. Weaving the vision for the new facility into his preaching, Bernard would often say, "We are part of something much greater than ourselves!" The congregation quickly understood the need and the vision. "They were excited," he says. "They felt the pain of having to stand in line for two hours."

Several years before purchasing the land for the new building, Bernard remembers driving by vacant lots bordering Flatlands Avenue and Louisiana Street. Although the lots were overgrown with six-foot weeds and used as a dumping ground for debris, Bernard saw the potential of the property.

"When I walked on the property it was like stepping into something that you know is your destiny," he says. "There is this inner peace you can't necessarily explain."

Despite CCC's stellar financial reputation, banks were reluctant to loan the church the \$40 million estimated for the project. Stonewalled from going the conventional mortgage route, the church raised \$1.2 million from its income and floated a \$9 million bond, which the congregation soaked up along with friends from around the nation.

"It took a lot of people to believe," Bernard says. Fueled with high-octane faith, he scheduled the official public groundbreaking ceremony a week before the final contract for the land was signed. It was a big event with the congregation and local officials. "We put ourselves out there," he says.

OUTSIDE-THE-BOX

Along with the unusual financing, CCC took an unconventional approach to designing and building the new project.

Rather than hire a general contractor, Bernard enlisted the aid of his trusted friend Jim Halek, a consultant and construction manager who piloted the entire project. The owner of Integrity Development Inc. in Southlake, Texas, Halek has more than 30 years of building-development and construction experience.

"Jim Halek was very key to the project," Bernard says. In addition to sharing Bernard's vision for the project, he was indispensable in steering it to completion and keeping costs down.

"The first design the architect gave us was over-the-top," Bernard says. "We always had to scale him back to the realities of our pocket book." Bernard and Halek worked closely as the final design evolved. The process took more than seven months that they describe as a tug of war between form and function.

"People see physical beauty rather than function," Halek says. He whittled the original construction cost estimate of \$49 million down to about \$14 million. "The architectural firm didn't like my questions," he admits. Suggested exterior materials such as stone and brick were changed to Drivit, a less expensive but durable material made from fiberglass and acrylic. Brass doors in the sanctuary were recommended at first but then rejected as too costly.

UNIQUE OBSTACLES

Building in a densely populated urban area posed its own set of difficulties--not to mention that the land on which CCC sits was once a landfill loaded with pollutants.

To overcome this challenge, a polyurethane cap was sprayed on the ground surface to prevent gases such as radon and methane from seeping through the floor. Ventilation pipes with automatic gas sensors are spaced every four feet, and economizers change the building's air supply twice hourly.

"People inside are always breathing fresh air," Halek says. "It is one of the most environmentally friendly buildings in New York City."

Security is another issue particularly important in an urban setting. CCC employs 18 full-time security personnel aided by a sophisticated digital-monitoring system. Electronic sensors check badges worn by 112 employees and a small army of volunteers. Thirty digital-tape cameras monitor the building and grounds around the clock.

As the team raced against time to complete the project by December 31, 2000, the final weeks were maddening. Halek hung wallboard and pleaded with workers to stay all night. At 2 a.m. on December 29,

trucks applied blacktop on the 600-space parking lot during a snowstorm. The lobby and sanctuary opened on time for the first service.

Today, the facility that CCC built for \$16 million is appraised at more than \$40 million--the original estimate--a testimony to God's provision.

THE FINAL RESULTS

At 37,000 square feet, the sanctuary includes an oversized balcony with side ramps, allowing easy access to the altar. Cream-colored walls and rows of soft green chairs contrast nicely with bright floral carpeting. In spite of its capacity for 5,000 worshipers, the room maintains a sense of intimacy.

The three Sunday services attract 11,000 to 12,000 worshipers. Every Sunday about 200 people respond to altar calls. Annual decisions for Christ reach about 1,200. Bernard reports that 98 percent of these converts become CCC members.

CCC has used the new facilities to sponsor community educational programs covering first-time home buyers, criminal law and literacy training. These outreaches attract new people to the church and enhance its reputation in the community.

Bernard endured the building project relatively unscathed. "You must make sure that God called you to do it," he advises. He tried to stay flexible and delegate day-to-day operations.

"You may have something temporarily until you get what you really want," he says. "You must be willing to adjust and adapt." Citing health problems suffered by some pastors during building programs, he warns, "You've got to protect yourself as the visionary."

Even after completion, many changes were made. "We continue to work on the interior," Bernard says. "We are positioned differently now. We can take the time to think through the use and function of the building."

A WORK IN PROGRESS

But the building and Bernard's vision are still a work in progress, and the best is yet to come.

CCC purchased an additional 4-1/2 acres in 2003 for \$3.6 million. Plans for a six-story tower attached to the current building is the next step with the groundbreaking scheduled this year. It will provide new space for a school, theater, youth center, food court and offices.

Other additions include a museum of Christian history, senior citizens' residences, a gym, fitness center, theater, another restaurant, retail shops and a botanical garden.

"We want this complex to be a destination to express the culture and history of the Christian faith," Bernard says. Culture is expressed through CCC's art, drama, dance and music programs. He also plans to sponsor religious tours in New York City and use CCC as one of the stops.

He sees CCC extending the hand of Christ to multitudes and giving hope to the community. "The essence of my message is discovering the Spirit of God in you," he says. "The essence for me is Christ in culture."

Room for Relationships

Church designers are finding inspiration in unlikely places: shopping malls and airports.

Taking their cues from designers of malls and airports, many church architects have begun expanding the traditional foyers and hallways to serve as more than mere transitional spaces. They have now become destinations in themselves--a new feature called a "mall concourse."

"For years, church architects have made the same mistakes," says Richard Messner, president of R. Messner Construction in Wichita, Kansas. "The hallways were too narrow and the foyer space too small."

The mall concourse allows the designer to expand the use of hallways and foyers, incorporating fountains, bookstores, coffee shops and restrooms into the church format, Messner says. "It allows us to include flexible, public, fun space within the church."

The mall concourse is especially important for larger churches, Messner contends. It creates optimum "people-flow," which, in the long run, contributes to church growth. Church attendees are no longer crammed into hallways, forced to immediately exit the building after service times. The mall concourse offers a social setting for fellowship and continued ministry.

Commenting on churches like Christian Cultural Center, which have included unconventional elements such as coffee shops, bookstores and game rooms in new facilities, Messner says, "Churches have discovered that it's not a bad thing to incorporate what we enjoy during our fellowship times into the design of our churches."

Messner leads a construction firm whose specialty is innovative church designs, and he suggests that the growing trend may be attributed to an openness to reconsider what activities can happen in a church building--beyond worship, preaching and education.

While Messner has seen creative incorporation of computer and media labs, bookstore and coffee shop combinations and even print shops into the church design, he stresses the importance of the design and forethought that goes into what he considers the most important part of the church--the sanctuary.

"Because it is the center of all ministry in a church, when we master plan, it's all based around the sanctuary," he says. "We base the size of the mall concourse on the seating count of the sanctuary--the very first thing we design is the sanctuary."

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