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Emmaus Mennonite: from tragedy to new ministry opportunities

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PROJECT PROFILE

Emmaus Mennonite Church

Location: Whitewater, Kansas
Project Scope: New Church Building
Square footage: 42,000 sq. ft.
Design Build Team: Fuqua Construction & Kelly McMurphy, Landmark Architects

The members of the Emmaus Mennonite Church were happy with their church building, located in a rural setting east of Whitewater. As a life-long church home for many of them, it held many memories. But, a roaring fire the night of January 28, 2008, quickly consumed the 80-year-old frame structure, leaving nothing but a pile of glowing embers and a shocked and grieving congregation wondering what they would do next.

There was no doubt that the 400-member congregation would rebuild and, in just a few days, they began a process that many congregations contemplate and prepare for over a number of months or even years. Emmaus did not have the luxury of that preparation time.

A building committee, chaired by Lester Busenitz, was quickly formed and its members began contacting builders to see what steps needed to be taken.

"This was something we had never done before. We had no experience," Busenitz said. The church had had two additions — a classroom wing in the early 1960s and a third floor to that addition in the 1980s — but no one had ever been involved in building a church facility from scratch.

It was important to get started quickly, the committee felt, as the church was now meeting in the Berean Academy gymnasium. It is a blessing that it is available, but still difficult for Sunday school, special events and just ordinary meetings, Busenitz said.

"It's (losing the church) almost like a death," Busenitz said. "There were some people who thought we were going too fast, but we felt we had to. We're probably pushing it harder than those who still have a building to meet in."

The raw emotions that are left when a beloved building is suddenly lost and the desire to try and get it back – even if that is impossible – led the building committee to carefully consider who they would choose as their general contractor. Finances were also a consideration as there had been no advanced building campaign to pay for a new structure and the insurance was not enough to replace the church.

"We prayed about the decision. We had heard of a lot of churches that have splits because of building projects and we wanted someone who could bridge the gap (between different opinions) and have good people skills," Busenitz said.

The Emmaus Mennonite Church features a floor plan all on one level, spacious sanctuary, and classrooms and other meeting spaces designed to support the church's ministry.

"We also were interested in having someone who was in driving distance. We'd never heard of design/build and we didn't tour other churches. But, after talking to several people, we just felt that Fuqua Construction was a good fit."

That initial judgment has proven correct, Busenitz said.

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"Max has a way of working through stressful situations."

Joining the design/build team was Kelly McMurphy of Landmark Architects of Hutchinson and by the first week of May 2008 the planning process had begun.

Meeting with the building committee at least once a week, Fuqua and McMurphy began the process of discovering what the congregation wanted in the new facility. One of the first decisions made was that the church would be relocated several miles south from its historic location to a piece of available ground across the road from Fredrick Remington High School. The new location was not landlocked, as the old one was, giving more design freedom. It also allowed for a structure with a larger footprint without encroaching on nearby neighbors, as would have been the case at the former site, Busenitz said.

The new building, above, while modern in appearance and building materials, utilizes design elements that are reminiscent of the older building, below, including the shape of the sanctuary windows and the use of white exterior finishes on the upper facade of the sanctuary.

Fuqua and McMurphy led the planning discussions by asking what the congregation would like included in a new facility, and what they wanted to have happen there.

"Max helped us by saying that we had been limited with what we could do in ministry by our old facility. We now had the opportunity to design something that would fit what we wanted to do. He asked us what ministry needs we foresaw in our new location," Busenitz said. "(The process) does make you think and evaluate what the church is doing, and what we want this building to house in the future. We believe the ministries have to come from the heart of the people – and unless the Lord builds the house, it won't be effective."

The Emmaus project is unusual, McMurphy said, because of the short timeline. Without a place of its own in which to worship, the congregation needs to have a completed project as soon as possible. Utilizing the design/build model facilitates that process, as the team and congregation members can bounce ideas off each other early in the process and create things to define the character of the space that might not have been thought of earlier. In this case, a process which would typically take six to eight months was shortened to a four month period. It has been a good coordination of cost and design, he said. It is a situation for which Fuqua is particularly well suited, according to McMurphy, who has teamed with Fuqua on a number of projects.

"Max is honest, trustworthy and very sensitive to the owners. He develops a comfort level that makes it easy for the owners to ask questions and develop this kind of project," McMurphy said.

Fuqua and McMurphy have been great to work with through the design process, Busenitz said. No idea is a dumb idea and they are very considerate of suggestions and requests by committee and church members. Some members want the old church back – even though it can't be the old church. It will be different. However, that emotional need is something to which McMurphy and Fuqua have been sensitive. Several elements of the design are reminiscent of things that were in the old church – the shape of the windows and a suggestion of a balcony in the sanctuary.

"Max has had some great insights as the committee is considering the plans. He and Kelly have very good people skills and are good at analyzing people's responses to see how an idea is going over. The integrity of what they've done and the way they work through the problems and concerns are very much appreciated," Busenitz said. He added that he had no idea how many times the plans had been redrawn in response to comments from building committee and church members.

While the new church will have some design elements of the old one, it will incorporate modern touches that the congregation believes will further its ministry and serve its needs. Those include a much expanded and more usable fellowship hall, a larger sanctuary, and a floor plan that is all on one level.

"It has definitely been a good experience working with Max and Kelly," Busenitz said. "Just about everything that has had to be done, we had no idea. We couldn't have done this by ourselves."

(Interviews for this profile were done prior to completion of the project.)

written by Cindy Baldwin, Baldwin Creative Services