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Business

# A time to BUILD UP

## Cherry Hill firm weighs flocks' funds

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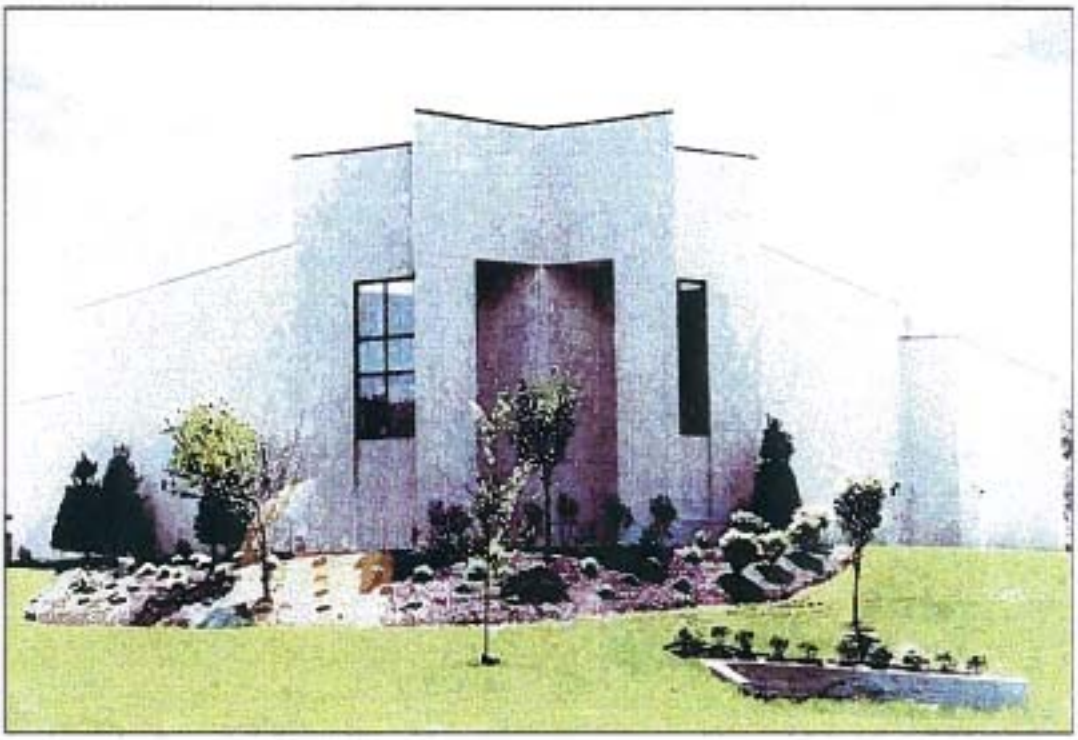

The exterior lines of Adath Emanu-El synagogue in Mount Laurel call to mind the Star of David. The congregation moved to the building from Willingboro in 1997.

Photo provided

For architects of houses of worship, the first meeting with the volunteer building committee can be the last.

"When the subject turns to money, I try not to roll my eyes if somebody says, 'God will provide.' I pause respectfully and say something like, 'Indeed, God will provide; but God is not a banker.'" said Thomas Viviano, director of operations for The Bannett Group, a 30-year-old design/build company that has developed its own following in the field of religious construction.

So far, the Cherry Hill company's portfolio includes two synagogues and two Christian churches in the Delaware Valley, plus completion of the design phase of a Presbyterian church in Edison.

While every community is different, Viviano says Catholics typically spend the most because "they buy granite, stained-glass, fancy pews and want a building to stand forever."

"We advertise to the religious community, but our business seems to grow from word of mouth. These buildings call attention to themselves. They are a major event when they open, so people tend to ask about the builder," said Viviano, a lapsed Catholic who is more focused on pleasing his client, sticking to a budget, meeting deadlines and turning a profit than the differences from one religion to the next.

Three years ago Viviano began working with Pastor Andy Wallin of the Fellowship Baptist Church in Mount Laurel to build a facility that would include a 700-seat sanctuary with a hot tub-size baptismal pool, classrooms, offices, day care center, parking for 300 cars and a fellowship hall that could host weddings, showers and nightly gatherings.

The new building also had to meld with a small, 20-year-old church that the congregation had outgrown.

For years, members ended the Sunday service there by folding and stacking their chairs so the all-purpose room could be turned into a basketball court or meeting hall the next day, Wallin recalled. The original church was financed by 25 families who put their homes up as collateral against construction loans.

When the congregation hit 900, requiring five pastors and six staffers, a building committee was born.

Today, the old church connects to the new building, which took seven months and $2.5 million to build. It opened two years ago — 35,000 square feet of tile, blond wood and teal carpet where every corner is wheelchair accessible.

The church raised a half-million dollars and borrowed the rest.

"The building is

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### THE BANNETT GROUP

- Design/build firm
- Religious construction represents under 25 percent of the company portfolio.
- Headquarters: 1998 Springdale Road Cherry Hill
- Phone: (856) 751-8800
- Web site: www.thebannettgroup.com
- Employees: 35
- Revenues: $33 million (company projection for 2005)

AL SCHELL/Courier-Post

The Bannett Group's Thomas Viviano worked on Fellowship Baptist Church in Mount Laurel.

M. SCHELL / Courier-Post

**Jennifer Trump of Delran, preparing for her wedding last month at the Fellowship Baptist Church in Mount Laurel, gets help in setting up for the ceremony from Beki Bicking of Vincentown.**

# Church/Houses of worship present challenges to builders and faithful

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heaven-sent," Wallin said recently, trying to stay out of the way of women preparing the sanctuary for a wedding.

"I'm busier now than ever, but this wonderful place meets our needs," he said.

Unlike more traditional construction in which an architect designs a building that a congregation might not like or be able to afford or is unbuildable for other reasons, the design-build method begins with a budget and works backward. The process is done with a team of people and the players remain constant from beginning to end.

"There are no surprises or change orders," Viviano said. "It's a balancing act. I tell clients to begin the process with three lists: What you need, what would be nice to have and the really cool stuff. In the Baptist church, we had to strike an extensive chair rail and landscaping to save money. Once we knew the church had expert volunteers to do the work, we agreed to let them finish up."

Work on the Baptist church went smoothly, said Viviano, because the volunteer building committee was made up of smart, reasonable people who knew how to listen and compromise.

> "These buildings call attention to themselves. They are a major event when they open, so people tend to ask about the builder."
>
> **Thomas Viviano, The Bannett Group**

Besides religious construction, The Bannett Group has built about 40 Walgreens and several branches of The Bank.

Retail remains its largest sector, followed by medical, and commercial/industrial. Religious construction represents under 25 percent of the portfolio.

A family-owned business, Bannett employs 35 professionals and anticipates $33 million this year in revenues.

While the design-build method is generally considered more efficient and less stressful for the client, the firms are expensive to run because they have a large stable of professionals on board. Design-build firms also are excluded from loads of lucrative work in the public sector, which generally requires separate bids for the design and construction.

Homebuilder Brad Haber does not covet The Bannett Group's religious connections.

"The cardinal rule for a developer is to avoid churches at all costs," joked Haber, regional vice president of Red Bank-based K. Hovnanian Homes, one of the largest builders in the country.

"Building by committee will kill you. Then when all the fighting is done, somebody on the committee has a brother-in-law who is a builder and they give him the business."

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