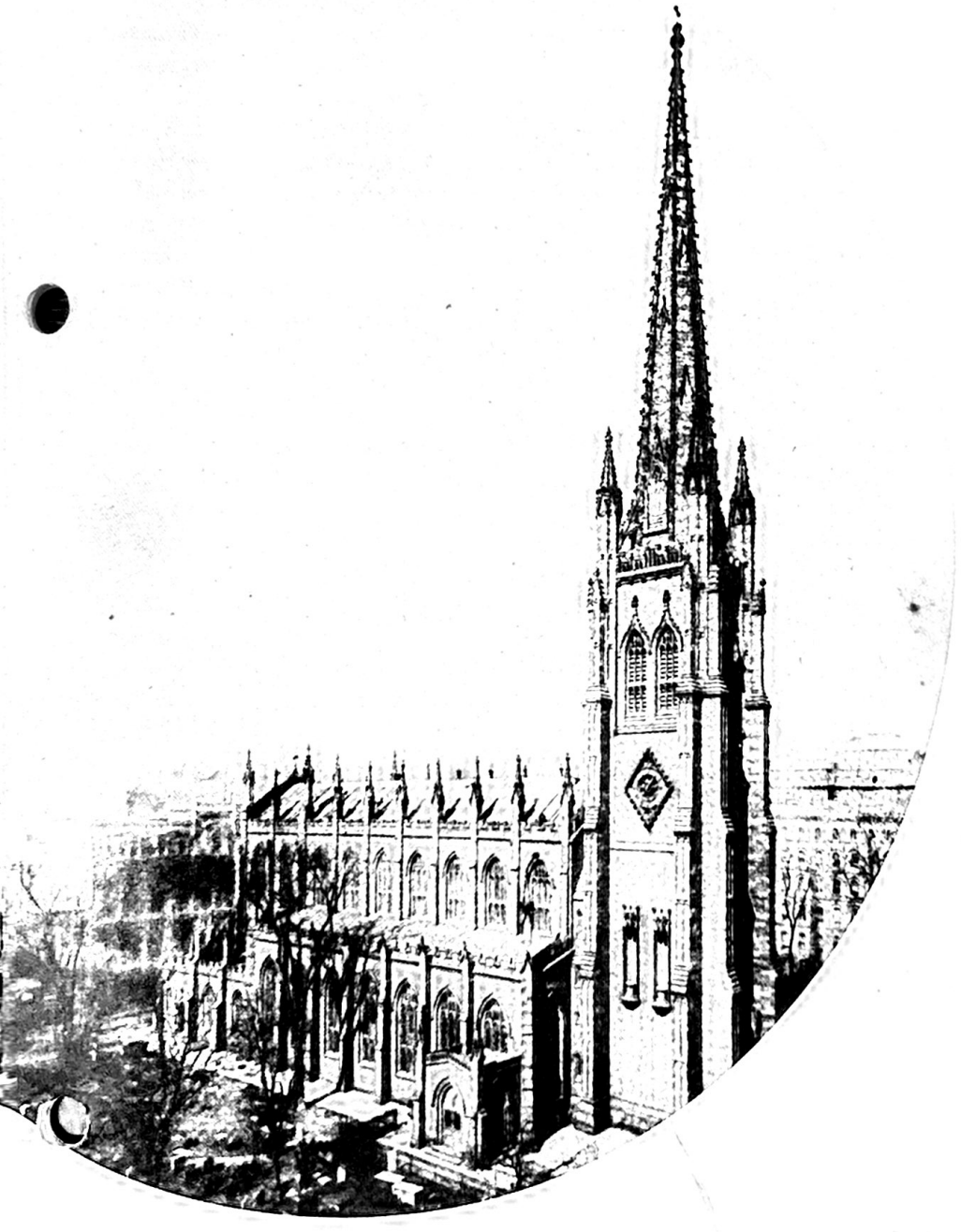
New York Landmarks Conservancy

Common Bond

Gothic Revival Religious Architecture



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Repair Projects

A well-defined scope of work and up-front research to identify qualified contractors are critical to success.

MANAGING SMALL REPAIR PROJECTS

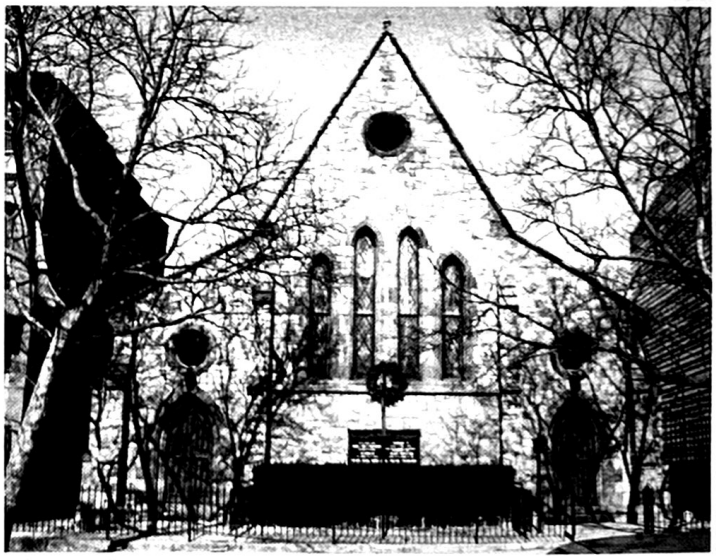
The sanctuary ceiling is crumbling, and you think it's due to a faulty roof. How do you begin to correct the problem? Often a Building Committee will try to get repair work done by asking several contractors to visit the site and submit proposals. Typically, the Committee discovers that each firm has a different solution -- and a different price. One contractor may say the roof needs to be replaced, while another may say that the masonry needs repointing. Then the Committee is stymied by sorting out what treatment, if any, is the right one and how to compare prices.

Preservation architect Michael Devonshire reports that he is frequently called by Building Committees to help guide them out of this predicament. The key to avoiding this situation is to first define the cause of the problem and precisely outline its repair before asking for bids. Says Devonshire: "Don't let the contractor drive the project."

When the institution itself lacks the expertise to define the problem specifically and write recommendations for its repair (called the "scope of work"), the best way to get on the right track is to retain an independent preservation architect, building-materials conservator, or a construction manager, depending on the type of work involved. Their fees can range from $100 for a brief consultation to a few thousand dollars for long-term assistance. These knowledgeable building professionals can help to establish priorities and budgets, determine the correct treatment for the building problem, create outline specifications that describe the materials and techniques to be used to repair the problem, produce sketches to show bidders, and assist with project administration, such as walk-throughs, bid analyses, contract negotiation, approval of work, and mediation of problems. Good long-term relationships with building professionals can be very handy when emergencies arise.

If you have a number of small, urgent projects as well as long-term restoration needs, a report such as a conditions survey or master plan can establish priorities. These planning documents can provide an objective assessment of the conditions of each building component while making recommendations for repair or replacement. Surveys and preservation plans by architects and conservators can cost from $2,500 to $15,000 depending on the complexity of the structure and geographical region. Limited free advice on setting priorities and obtaining professional assistance may be available from preservation organizations (see Resources.)

Once you have a clear, written scope of work that includes a description of the problem and the repair solution, send it to a number of contractors. Search out qualified, experienced contractors who have recently performed comparable work on historic properties. Get referrals from the Landmarks Conservancy, local preservation groups, your congre-



Ken M. Lustbader

Church of the Ascension, Brooklyn, New York (Henry Dudley, 1865-1866), is an example of the Gothic Revival and resembles a small Early English-style parish church modified to accommodate an urban site.

gation, and other institutions in the community that have undertaken similar work. Try to get at least three qualified firms to bid on the same scope of work. Check references thoroughly by contacting former clients and inspecting completed projects.

Evaluate qualified bidders for their level of expertise, contract price, and personal chemistry with the Committee. Choose a contractor who communicates in a manner that you can understand. The contractor should be able to clearly state how he or she would handle specific conditions or problems, since many disputes and legal problems are a result of poor communication.

If one contractor seems best for the job, but the price is too high, the Committee may request that the firm reconsider the bid. If prices from all qualified bidders are too high, you will need to reduce the scope of work or break it down into affordable prioritized components that can be implemented over time.

Have your institution's legal counsel review contracts before signing anything: make sure it includes a work schedule commitment and confirmation of the starting and completion dates. In addition, the contractor should provide proof of licensing and workmen's compensation and liability insurance coverage before starting the job.

Once the project is underway, a Building Committee member or consulting professional should frequently inspect the work. It is often easier and less costly to correct unacceptable work before the project has progressed too far. This will help to maintain good relations between the Building Committee, contractor, and congregation.

Acknowledgements: The Rev. Mabel Burke Lewis and Marion Anderson, Church of the Ascension; Ken Follett, Apple Restoration and Waterproofing; Michael Devonshire, Jan Hird Pokorny Architects and Planners; "Project Management in Major Construction Projects" by Christopher Jenks in *Common Bond*, Vol. 8, Nos. 2 and 3.

Case Study: Contruction Management at Church of the Ascension

Leaking roofs and gutters, open mortar joints, deteriorated wood trim and window frames, buckling stained glass, and damaged interior plaster were among the most obvious problems facing the Building and Grounds Committee of the Church of the Ascension in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, New York and its new Rector, The Rev. Mabel Burke Lewis. Parishioners were eager to spruce up the crumbling plaster and flaking paint in the sanctuary in time for the Church's 150th anniversary in 1996 but knew that they had to first stop the leaks. The first step was to launch a Building Restoration Campaign in 1994 to raise funds for long-neglected repairs to the 1866 Gothic Revival granite Church.

Rather than hiring an outside preservation consultant, the Committee wanted to reserve every penny of their limited funds for urgent repairs. From 1994 to 1995, members met with local contractors to evaluate roofing, gutters and leaders, and masonry repair needs and received a wide range of proposals with different scopes of work and prices that were difficult to evaluate. In addition, not all of the firms seemed sufficiently familiar with proper restoration techniques for historic buildings.

At the suggestion of New York City Council Member Kenneth K. Fisher, the congregation met with members of the Landmarks Conservancy's Sacred Sites Program seeking technical and financial assistance. Subsequently, the Committee applied for a grant, and the Landmarks Conservancy staff, as part of its technical review, visited the site and recommended that the Church first repair the failing roof drainage system. In addition, the Landmarks Conservancy provided the Church with the names of three contractors who have had experience working on historic religious properties.

One of the recommended firms, Apple Restoration and Waterproofing, clearly explained its approach, gaining the Committee's and Rector's confidence that the work would be appropriate and durable. Apple prepared a detailed contract proposal with general conditions and specifications for repairs. In the spring of 1995, a Sacred Sites grant of $3,500 was awarded for gutter and leader repairs. Apple obtained a permit from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and began initial gutter, leader, and masonry repairs in the fall of 1995.

The Church wanted to continue to employ the restoration expertise of Ken Follett, a Vice President at Apple, for future projects as additional funds were raised. Says Follett, "Since Apple is based in nearby Brooklyn, we have adopted the Church as a community service project, providing broad assistance as both a preservation consultant and construction manager." Follett is now assisting with long-range planning and fundraising, in addition to developing detailed scopes of work, finding qualified contractors to bid on other projects, helping to negotiate contracts, and overseeing work. The Church hires the individual firms and pays Apple a percentage of the project cost as a management fee.

"It wouldn't make sense for me to handle Ascension's other projects as a general contractor," Follett added. "The type and small size of their repair jobs doesn't require the amount of insurance I carry for large exterior restoration projects." A general contractor with legal responsibility for subcontractors, such as Apple, has to charge substantial overhead to cover insurance and administration costs that would exceed the management fee. Follett has already overseen sewer repairs at the rectory and developed a plan and budget for site drainage improvements at the Church .

Says Mother Lewis, "The construction management option is very significant for religious institutions. Often we don't know how to manage this kind of restoration work. It's important to have someone who does know the business and can negotiate contracts, supervise projects, and inspect all the work."