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So congratulations – you are getting ready to open! Here are some helpful ideas to get you up and running well in time for the first year of operation.

Plan the opening day a long way ahead

Often churches nominate an official open day several months after they hope the building work is finished. If you are having special guests and community leaders to the BIG day, this is a wise move as building delays do happen! Go back to your stakeholder map and make a list of who to invite. This may be a strategic way to attract new people into your building.

Invite local people within the community to your special day and gear a Sunday service to newcomers. It’s your chance for a fresh opportunity to impact your community. Food afterwards is always a lure! Plan the day or weekend carefully and don’t miss this opportunity to get some local press coverage to advertise all the new facilities.

Managing and staffing the new building.

A new building may require significantly more people to staff it. What mix of paid employees and volunteers will you have? What training will they need? What roles require people who are paid (and have a contract of employment) and what roles
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could be filled by volunteers who may have an agreement. Well before your open day, recruit, induct and train your staff and volunteers and allow time for them to get used to the building before any official opening. If you are setting up a café, consider some ‘dummy days’ with church members, to make sure everything runs smoothly. In your planning make sure you allow for time off, annual leave, sickness and statutory bank holidays in your rotas.

Plan regular reviews in the first year of operation as well as the normal annual appraisal reviews; good practice extends this process, albeit in a less formal way, to volunteers.

Develop an operating policy

Churches often worry about having to allow anyone into the building who can rent the premises and fear some groups may be incompatible with their own faith objectives. Normally for a charity that has been given charitable status on faith grounds this should not be a concern. There are exemptions that specifically cover faith groups not having to rent their premises to certain groups who would be seen by the majority of their congregation as incompatible with their governing document. (So of course that governing document needs to be well written and consistent with your aims.

Other Christian groups may take the view that their building is a tool to use to build relationships with people of other faiths and see it as a new opportunity. Either way, it’s helpful to establish a written operating policy. This will cover group rentals, charges, use of the building in terms of alcohol sales, noise levels, opening and lock up times (often these are stipulated as part of the planning permission application, so check there), staffing levels, and health and safety policy. Draft a policy and check with other churches to help you refine this.

Planning and monitoring the finances

We will deal more with budgeting elsewhere, and there is a budget template in Excel format in the section. This sample template can be adjusted to suit your context, but includes cashflow forecasts for the running costs of a new build or major church building extension. Consider the income and expenditure of items such as a café, room rental income, special events, insurance, Council tax (and your exemptions which will usually range between 80-100%), additional staff costs, utility bills, legal and accounting costs and maintenance.
Have a nominated person (perhaps in addition to your church treasurer) who can manage these additional finances. Train staff to manage budgets. You may have cross payments between a charitable company and a trading company to have to make and managing your bank accounts may be a significantly bigger task now than before the opening. Gear up ready for the extra work and don’t be afraid to pay professionals to help with the workload, they may be able to save you some money as well.
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Keeping the vision

At the start of the journey you set up a clear written vision of what you were hoping the building project would deliver. Keep this at the forefront of your mind. Don’t let the ‘tool’ of the building ever take over from the vision. The tail must never wag the dog! The building is there to serve the vision, not the other way round. When the maintenance team become too precious about the new carpets, blinds or equipment, then it may be time to re-examine the vision and ensure you are still on track. It’s good for the church leader to keep reminding their congregation of the original vision!