

Congregations that are preparing for building projects or even routine rehab or repair work often struggle over the congregation's basic priorities and the overall balance between investing in the building structures versus mission outreach. Once the decision is made to move forward with a building project, the congregation's leadership or property committee is charged with gathering bids for the best quality work at the lowest prices.

**Congregations must ensure that their purchases reflect their values.**

Although congregations must use their resources wisely, they must also ensure that their purchases reflect their values. At the individual level, people of faith want to be ethical consumers, avoiding products produced under sweatshop conditions and supporting companies that treat workers, the environment, and communities with respect. Similarly, people of faith through congregational purchases and contracts can seek to support ethical firms and contractors. Getting the cheapest price may not best reflect the congregation's values.

## Gathering Additional Information

In addition to getting answers directly from the building contractors (and subcontractors) or firms, consider checking with the following agencies and organizations:

**Better Business Bureau**—Does the company have any complaints against it? Is it a member in good standing of the Better Business Bureau?

**State and Federal Departments of Labor**— Have any fines or citations been issued against the company within the last year?

**Building Trades Council/Central Labor Council**—What kind of reputation does the firm have? Do the workers have a collective bargaining agreement?

**Previous Customers**—Ask to look at similar projects that have been completed by the company and to talk with customers who have had similar work done.



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## Building Projects and Religious Values

**Ethical Questions for Congregations to ask Building Contractors**

## Beginning the Process and Clarifying Values

The first thing to do is to see if your diocese, denomination, or faith body has established a building policy or set of ethical questions to ask. The following Roman Catholic dioceses and archdiocese have building policies: Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Youngstown, and Washington, D.C. If so, you will want to use your faith body's policy or questions.

If such national denominational or local policy does not exist, you will need to develop your own ethical process. As a starting point, the congregation or committee should affirm or reaffirm the values to which it believes businesses should adhere. Below are some suggested values to consider:

- All workers should be treated with respect and dignity.
- Workers should be paid fair wages that can sustain families.
- When a business flourishes, its workers should share in the economic benefits.
- Companies should strive to provide family health insurance and contribute to a pension program.
- Companies should respect workers' right to organize a union in the workplace without fear of harassment or firing.
- Companies should not discriminate in hiring, wages, or promotion based on race, gender, or ethnicity.

## Develop Ethical Questions

After the leadership or committee has clarified its values, a brief questionnaire should be developed for all contractors or businesses bidding on work. Following are some questions to consider asking those whom you ask to bid on building construction work:

What **wages** are your workers paid per hour? How does this compare to the prevailing wage in the industry?

Do you provide **affordable health care** for your employees and their families?

Do you make an employer contribution to a union **pension fund** or another pension fund?

Do you respect workers' **right to organize** and have a voice on the job?

Are your employees provided with **professional training** through a Department of Labor-accredited apprenticeship program?

What is the **health and safety record** for your workers? How does it compare with the average industry record? What safety precautions will your workers use on this job?

Do you hire and train **women and people of color**?

Has your company ever been charged with **unfair labor practices**? If so, what was the outcome?

Can you provide proof of **workers' compensation and general liability insurance**?

Are your **workers classified as employees** and not as independent contractors? (Some unethical contractors illegally classify workers as "independent contractors" as a means of avoiding paying taxes and insurance on employees.)

Does your firm use **subcontractors**? If so, can you please tell us about the employee treatment of those firms? Can you answer the questions above about the subcontractors?

### Researching Safety Records and Prevailing Wages

To check if a contractor has been cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for violations, visit [www.osha.gov/oshstats](http://www.osha.gov/oshstats). The online database allows individuals to search by company name or scroll through all construction companies in a particular area.

To find out the prevailing Davis-Bacon wage rate, call the Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division's Branch of Construction Wage Determinations at (202) 693-0087.