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# Guide to Selecting an Architect for Your Church

Interview Questions, Evaluation Criteria, and Selection Process

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Prepared by Hawkey Church Management Inc.

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## Introduction

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Selecting the right architect is one of the most important decisions your church building committee will make. The architect you choose will shape your building's design, influence its cost, and determine how smoothly the project moves from concept to completion. Getting this decision right sets the foundation for everything that follows.

### Why Church Projects Are Different

Not all architects have experience designing places of worship. Church buildings present a unique set of challenges that general commercial or residential architects may not fully appreciate:

- **Building Code Classification** — In Ontario, churches fall under Group A, Division 2 occupancy under the Ontario Building Code (OBC). This classification governs fire safety, exiting requirements, accessibility, and structural standards specific to assembly occupancies.
- **Worship Acoustics** — Sanctuary design must balance spoken word clarity with musical performance. Poor acoustic planning leads to expensive retrofits.
- **Flexible, Multi-Use Spaces** — Churches typically need spaces that serve multiple functions: worship, fellowship, education, community outreach, and more.
- **Phased Construction** — Many church projects are built in phases as funds become available. The architect must design with future expansion in mind from day one.
- **Volunteer-Led Committees** — Unlike corporate clients, church building committees are typically made up of volunteers who meet evenings and weekends. The architect must be patient, communicative, and skilled at guiding group decision-making.
- **Budget Sensitivity** — Churches are stewards of donated funds. Every dollar matters, and cost overruns have a direct impact on the ministry and congregation.

### The Selection Process Overview

This guide walks you through a structured process for selecting an architect: building a shortlist, preparing for interviews, conducting interviews using HCMI's proven 21-question framework, scoring each firm, and making a final selection. Following this process ensures your committee makes an informed, confident decision.

#### HCMI Tip:

At HCMI, we recommend interviewing at least three firms before making a selection. The differences between firms become clear only when you can compare their approaches side by side.

## How to Structure the Selection Process

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### Step 1: Develop a Shortlist of 3–5 Firms

Begin by identifying architects who may be a good fit for your project. Sources for candidates include:

- Referrals from other churches that have recently completed building projects
- Your denomination's building or facilities office
- HCMI's network of architects with church project experience
- The Ontario Association of Architects (OAA) directory
- Local firms with a portfolio that includes institutional or assembly buildings

### Step 2: What to Look For

When evaluating firms for your shortlist, prioritize:

- **Church-specific experience** — Have they designed churches before? How many? Can you visit completed projects?
- **Understanding of not-for-profit clients** — Do they appreciate the unique dynamics of working with volunteer committees and congregational decision-making?
- **Willingness to work within budget constraints** — Are they accustomed to designing to a fixed budget, or do they tend to design first and cost later?
- **Full-service capabilities** — Can they provide or coordinate all required disciplines (structural, mechanical, electrical, etc.)?
- **Communication and availability** — Will the principal architect be personally involved, or will your project be handed off to junior staff?

### Step 3: Preparing for the Interview

Proper preparation ensures productive interviews and fair comparisons:

- **Share project information in advance** — Send each firm a brief project description including your approximate budget, timeline, site information, and any concept work completed to date. This allows them to prepare a meaningful presentation.
- **Have the full building committee attend** — Every committee member should be present for every interview. This ensures consistent evaluation and allows the committee to discuss impressions together afterward.
- **Allow 60–90 minutes per firm** — A thorough interview cannot be rushed. Allow time for the architect's presentation (20–30 min), your questions (30–45 min), and committee discussion (10–15 min).
- **Use the same questions for every firm** — Consistency is essential for fair comparison. The 21-question framework in this guide ensures that.

### Step 4: Reference Checks

Before making your final selection, always check references. Specifically:

- Ask for a list of church clients and contact information for their building committee chairs
- Visit at least one completed church project by each finalist firm

- Ask references about budget accuracy, communication, responsiveness, and whether they would hire the firm again

**HCM Tip:**

Schedule all architect interviews within the same one- or two-week window. If interviews are spread over a month, committee members will struggle to remember and compare earlier presentations.

## The Interview: HCMI's 21-Question Architect Interview Framework

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The following 21 questions form the core of HCMI's architect interview process. They are organized into seven categories, each designed to reveal a different dimension of the firm's capabilities and fit for your project. Use this section as your interview guide — bring printed copies for every committee member.

### CATEGORY 1: UNDERSTANDING THE PROJECT

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- 1. What does the architect see as important issues and considerations in your project? What are the challenges of the project?**
- 2. How will the architect gather information about your needs, goals, and vision for the project?**
- 3. How will the architect establish priorities and make decisions when competing needs arise?**
- 4. How do we ensure that we get a design that we are all happy with?**

■ *What to listen for: Does the architect ask questions about YOUR ministry, your congregation's culture, and your growth plans — or do they jump straight to talking about the building? The best architects listen first and design second. Look for genuine curiosity about how your church functions.*

### CATEGORY 2: PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

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- 5. Who from the architecture firm will you be dealing with directly? Is that the same person who will be designing the project? Who will be designing your project?**
- 6. What are the steps in your design process?**
  - How does the process move from initial concepts to construction documents?
  - What approvals or sign-offs happen at each stage?
- 7. How does the architect organize this process?**
  - What is the expected timeline for each design phase?
  - How are meetings and reviews scheduled?
- 8. What does the architect expect the owner to provide?**
  - What information, decisions, or resources will the committee need to supply?
  - How much of the committee's time will be required?

■ *What to listen for: You want to work directly with the person designing your building, not a junior staff member who relays information. Confirm that the principal designer will attend your committee meetings and be your primary point of contact throughout the project.*

### CATEGORY 3: INTEREST IN PROJECT

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- 9. How interested is the architect in this project?**
  - Why does this project appeal to them?
  - What excites them about working with a church client?
- 10. How busy is the architect?**
  - How many active projects does the firm currently have?
  - What is their current capacity to take on a new project?

- Can they commit to your desired timeline?

■ *What to listen for: An overcommitted architect will cause delays and frustration. You want someone who is genuinely excited about church work and has the capacity to give your project the attention it deserves. Beware of firms that seem to be taking on your project just to fill a gap in their schedule.*

## CATEGORY 4: QUALIFICATIONS / RELATED PROJECT EXPERIENCE

### 11. What sets this architect apart from the rest? Stylistically, do they have a preference for a certain type of design?

- How would they describe their design philosophy?
- How do they balance aesthetics with function and budget?

### 12. What kind of experience does the architect have directly with churches? Could you provide a list of church projects that your firm has worked with?

- How many church projects have they completed?
- What denominations or congregation sizes have they served?
- Can they arrange a site visit to a completed church project?

■ *What to listen for: Church experience matters enormously. An architect who has designed multiple churches will understand worship flow, acoustic requirements, phased construction, and the dynamics of working with congregational committees. Always ask to visit their completed church projects in person.*

#### HCMI Tip:

When visiting a completed church project, talk to the building committee chair and the pastor — not just the architect's chosen reference. Ask whether the project came in on budget, whether the architect was responsive, and whether they would hire them again.

## CATEGORY 5: PROJECT MANAGEMENT

### 13. What will the architect show you along the way to explain the project? Will you see models, drawings, or sketches?

- Will they provide 3D renderings or physical models?
- How will design options be presented for committee review?

### 14. What services does the architect provide during construction? Will we have a regular meeting time during construction with Builder, Architect, and Client?

- How often will site visits occur during construction?
- Who handles shop drawing reviews and field questions?

### 15. What is the architect's experience and track record with cost estimating?

- How do they approach cost estimation at each design phase?
- Can they provide examples of projects that came in on budget?
- What happens when estimates exceed the budget?

■ *What to listen for: Cost estimating track record is critical for church projects. Ask for specific examples of projects that came in on budget versus those that did not, and what the architect did to manage the variance. Regular construction-phase meetings (typically bi-weekly) with builder, architect, and client are essential.*

## CATEGORY 6: INCLUSIONS

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### 16. What disciplines are included in their fees?

- Architectural: Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Structural Engineering: Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Electrical Engineering: Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Mechanical Engineering: Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Sprinkler Design: Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Interior Design: Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Audio/Visual (A/V): Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Security and Data: Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Other (specify): Included?  Yes  No  Extra cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_

### 17. What other studies or engineering might you see this project requiring?

- Geotechnical Investigation: Required?  Yes  No Est. cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Land Survey: Required?  Yes  No Est. cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Designated Substance Survey (DSS): Required?  Yes  No Est. cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Parking Study: Required?  Yes  No Est. cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Traffic Study: Required?  Yes  No Est. cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Other (specify): Required?  Yes  No Est. cost: \$\_\_\_\_\_

■ *What to listen for: Get absolute clarity on what is included in the base fee and what will be charged as extras BEFORE signing a contract. Unexpected additional fees for engineering disciplines or required studies can significantly impact your project budget.*

## CATEGORY 7: FEES

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### 18. What would the architect expect the fee to be for this project?

- Is the fee a percentage of construction cost, a fixed fee, or hourly?
- What is the estimated total fee amount?

### 19. What other costs should we expect for disbursements?

- Travel and site visits: Est. \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Electronics, computers, FTP, phones: Est. \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Blueprints and outsourced printing: Est. \$\_\_\_\_\_
- Courier and delivery: Est. \$\_\_\_\_\_

### 20. What are the hourly rates for each level of staff?

- Architectural Technologist (Junior): \$\_\_\_\_\_ /hr
- Architectural Technologist (Senior): \$\_\_\_\_\_ /hr
- Architect: \$\_\_\_\_\_ /hr
- Senior Architect / Principal: \$\_\_\_\_\_ /hr

### 21. If the scope of the project changes later in the project, will there be additional fees?

- How are scope changes priced?
- Is there a formal change-order process for architectural services?

■ *What to listen for: Typical architectural fees for church projects range from 6–10% of the construction cost. Ensure you understand the complete fee structure including disbursements, hourly rates for additional work, and how scope changes are handled. The lowest fee is not always the best value — consider what is included.*

**HCM Tip:**

Ask each firm to provide their fee proposal in writing after the interview. This gives you a document to compare and keeps the fee discussion transparent for your committee's records.

## Evaluation Scorecard

Use this scorecard immediately after each interview. Have every committee member complete their own scorecard independently before discussing as a group. Rate each criterion from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

Criteria	Firm A (1-5)	Notes	Firm B (1-5)	Notes	Firm C (1-5)	Notes
Church Experience						
Design Approach						
Communication Style						
Fee Structure						
Budget Management Track Record						
Availability / Timeline						
Included Disciplines						
Construction Phase Services						
Overall Impression						
TOTAL						

**Evaluator Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**HCMI Tip:**

Collect all individual scorecards before opening group discussion. This prevents dominant voices from influencing others' independent assessments. Tally the scores and discuss any criteria where committee members scored very differently.

## HCMI Tips Summary and Next Steps

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### HCMI Tip:

Never select an architect based solely on fee. The lowest-cost proposal often excludes critical disciplines or provides fewer construction-phase services. Evaluate the complete value proposition, including experience, included services, and their track record of delivering projects on budget.

### HCMI Tip:

Request a written proposal from each finalist that includes scope of services, fee structure, estimated timeline, and a list of included disciplines. This document becomes the basis for your contract and protects both parties.

### HCMI Tip:

Check insurance and licensing. Confirm that the architect carries professional liability insurance (Errors and Omissions) and is licensed with the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA). Ask for proof before signing a contract.

### HCMI Tip:

Involve your congregation appropriately. While the building committee leads the architect selection, consider presenting the shortlisted firms' portfolios to your church board or elders. Broader input at this stage builds congregational confidence in the process.

## How HCMI Can Help

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At Hawkey Church Management Inc., we attend architect interviews with our clients to help evaluate proposals and ask the right follow-up questions. Our experience managing church building projects across Ontario means we know what to look for — and what red flags to watch out for.

We also assist with contract review, fee negotiation, and ensuring that the scope of architectural services aligns with your project's needs and budget.

### Ready to begin your architect selection process?

Contact Hawkey Church Management Inc.

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