

Merging Churches:

Facilities Can Confuse Key Issues

The following excerpt is from a *Leadership Journal* article,
Fall, 2014 by: James Rodgers

What was I going to do? The challenge gripped me during prayer time at our church. It was May, and within a year, our church would no longer have a building, and our future was uncertain.

With a mixture of emotions, I was convinced that God wanted me to lead this church to its next chapter; but I did not know where that would be, nor how we would get there.

“Okay God,” I prayed. “In obedience I accepted this call as interim pastor to lead them to their new home. So we need You to lead our steps!”

My whole family loved Zion Bible Church, a small congregation of about 50 nestled in the center of Zion, Illinois. But the church was struggling.

A year and half earlier, their pastor of 36 years retired. The search for a new pastor was discouraging and frustrating. In addition, the facility needed major repairs. So when the adjacent hospital offered double the appraised value for the property, it seemed God was leading them to sell. But what next?

I started as pulpit supply during their pastoral search and declined numerous offers to candidate for the full-time position. I believed God wanted me to continue my ministry as an architectural pastor with Facility Ministry. Then, after the sale of the property, we discussed the possibility of interim ministry. Therefore, I accepted the call as interim pastor to lead them to their next chapter.

In April, we started out by identifying the church’s DNA so we could find a good match among our options.

But then, in May, after the initial excitement waned, I was crying out to God. There were so many obstacles in our future! Despite 19 years’ experience as a local church pastor, I felt stymied. And the clock was ticking. We had until June 30 of the following year to be moved out of our building.

The church needed hope. It needed to dream again and to experience God’s clear intervention, leading the way. So that was what we prayed for. And God blessed us with an adventure that culminated the following May in a concluding service that demonstrated God’s presence in amazing ways.

While we did not know where we were headed, we knew God was leading. So, the church board and I knocked on every door of possibility. We identified two basic scenarios:



Verse for Today (vft)

“This is what the LORD says: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”

(Jeremiah 29:10-13—NIV 84).

1. Find an existing building on our own. Through my network of church architecture and construction management, we investigated scores of properties, but each one presented significant challenges.

2. Merge with another church. Half a dozen churches approached us about merging. Again, each scenario presented significant challenges. In several cases, our board wondered if the interest was prompted by the \$800,000 we received for the sale of our building.

While we wanted to catch our breath, the clock was still ticking. Future options needed to be carefully and quickly evaluated. God blessed this experience with excellent church leaders who stepped up in significant ways. Mike, Don, Dale, and Tim, along with their families, filled the gaps and provided outstanding ministry foundations for our church.

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We could have continued as a congregation on our own, and I developed a ministry model for that possibility. We evaluated scores of buildings or pieces of property, but none seemed ideal. Plus, any situation would have required all our funds and more.

Then, at one meeting, I distinctly remember Dale’s comment, “I think we will still struggle.” Dale didn’t always speak a lot, but he often voiced great wisdom. A lifetime member of the church, he was also wise enough to put aside personal desires. He had the courage to say what we all realized in our hearts.

So we turned to the second possibility and evaluated our merger options. One scenario we pursued was a merger with two other churches and we concluded that a “Marriage Model” merger could work for us (see sidebar). Also, we learned the other churches were not seeking the same things that we were. Simply stated, our church DNAs did not match. This was a significant concern.

Then, in August, I received a letter stating that we were being uninvited to the merger discussions. We were stunned! And discouraged. We were 10 months away from giving up our building, and we had to start over. But, God was at work.

Mike, our board chair, knew of another church, NorthBridge, in the adjacent community of Antioch that might be worth investigating. The DNA match was quickly apparent, as we moved forward in dialogue through the end of the year. We could see God’s clear leading through numerous providential events.

While the DNAs of Zion Bible Church and NorthBridge Church were a match, NorthBridge was about 500 people and we were about 50, so this would be an “Adoption Model” merger (see sidebar).

Although NorthBridge was located in the next community, they owned property that was halfway between their current site at Antioch High School and Zion High School. They had experienced numerous challenges to building on the new site, and proceeds from the ZBC building sale would allow a facility for NorthBridge to be built. Little Zion Bible Church was actually making a long-term difference for NorthBridge—a church ten times larger. Only God could do that!

An Awesome Conclusion. On May 25, 2014, one year after my confused prayer, we conducted the final service at the Zion Bible Church facility. Board member Don, along with numerous others, organized the service and got the word out. The service was a “Building Retirement,” with three points of reflection and worship music: (1) Rich Heritage for Christ, led by Pastor Dave, my faithful predecessor of 36 years; (2) Great Adventure, which I led to give testimony of God guiding us into the “Glorious unknown;” (3) Future Vision, led by Pastor Mark, lead pastor at NorthBridge.

Perspective on the Facility. During that final service, we played a portion of the video showing the construction of the building from the 1930s. It is an actual video, not just a collection of still photographs. You can see that video on YouTube (search for “Zion Bible Church 1933”). Despite being in the Great Depression, many people gave of themselves and contributed to the construction. While the video documented the construction of the building, it is not really about the building, it is about the people. Although it was difficult to leave the building, we realized the ministry of Zion Bible Church was always about people and not buildings.

Legacy Gifts. For more than 80 years, Zion Bible Church was actively involved in missions around the world. So the congregation unanimously approved legacy gifts for eleven ministries, to be given in the final service. Each ministry testified to the amazing timing and specific need in each situation. While Zion Bible Church was ceasing as its own entity, it was giving birth to many other ministries that would continue its legacy.

On June 1, 2014, the week after that final service, we were officially adopted and became part of the NorthBridge family. Our board members presented a twelfth gift, which was for NorthBridge: a check for \$500,000 which made an amazing impact for NorthBridge’s future facility.

My wife, Mary Ann, observed that this final gift, after the other Legacy Gifts, was still more than the most recent appraisal for our property, at \$465,000. She noted that it seemed like the feeding of the 5,000 when the disciples picked up the leftovers and filled twelve baskets—one for each of them. Again, only God can work this out!

It started with a confused prayer the previous May. However, this first chapter of our great adventure ended with amazement at God’s plans and I wouldn’t have missed this ride for anything!

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2014/fall/what-to-do-when-your-church-is-declining.html>

Four Models of Merging Churches

The book *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, by Tomberlin and Bird identifies four approaches to mergers. Evaluating these helped clarify our next steps.

1. **Rebirth.** A church is restarted under a stronger, vibrant, and typically larger church.
2. **ICU.** A merger between churches that are in trouble and simply hoping to survive.
3. **Marriage.** A union of relative equals in terms of overall church health—not just size or budget.
4. **Adoption.** When a larger or more stable church welcomes a smaller church.