

Post-Merger Ministry is a Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance

*Reflecting back five years
after a larger church adopted us*

By James Rodgers with Mary Ann Rodgers

First appeared: October, 2019 online issue of CT Pastors

Verse for Today (vft)

“The LORD your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you.”

Deuteronomy 7:22—NIV 84

About 11:00 am on November 30, 2016, my phone rang while I was in an important meeting. It was my wife, and since she was staying with my mom at the hospital, I excused myself and took the call.

“Jim, you have to come now,” Mary Ann said. “Your mom has 24-48 hours to live.”

I pressed the phone closer to my ear as I stuttered, “But, um, our final inspections start in two hours, and the church is planning for our occupancy permit before Christmas. For that to be possible we have to start the process now! Um, can I leave after the inspection?” My voice trailed off as I sensed the stupidity in my question.

With compassionate resolve, she got our her nurse voice. “No. You must come now. The medical director of intensive care is with me and asked me to call you as the medical power of attorney.”

As I slipped outside the room where I’d been in a tense meeting with one of our subcontractors, Mary Ann continued, switching to her pastor’s wife voice, “I know you’re more than eight hours away. But first drive back to the house and get your funeral suit and funeral service files. I am so sorry, Jim,” her voice began to break up, “You must leave now.”

During the 75-minute drive back home, then eight more hours from Illinois to Ohio, I thought about a lot of things. Of course I needed to leave immediately. Yes, the church gaining occupancy before Christmas



NorthBridge Church—May, 2019



Zion Bible Church—May, 2014

Continued from page 1

was important, but why did I hesitate? My dad had died 10 years earlier so my mom was depending on me. Throughout the quiet drive into the night, I floated between prayer and reflections. Why was the new building so important that I hesitated to leave the construction site immediately?

Much had happened over the previous four years. Completing NorthBridge Church's building in time for the planned occupancy before Christmas was just the final leg of a long journey. Zion Bible Church (ZBC)—where I served as their last official pastor—had merged with NorthBridge. The merger had gone well, but until we were in the new building, my role as ZBC's pastor wasn't complete. We needed to be worshipping within the radius of relocation that ZBC agreed upon after selling their building. That meant occupying the new church facility for NorthBridge.

It started in November 2012, when I provided pulpit supply at ZBC. After a 100-minute commute, Mary Ann and I visited the restrooms in the basement. No one else was present when we looked around the basement observing remnants of past ministry successes and evidences of major disrepair. I admit that I said, "I'm glad to provide this morning's Bible teaching, but ... well ... praise God He didn't call us to serve here."

In December, the major repair problems caused them to sell the church building to the adjacent hospital. I continued with occasional pulpit supply—even more thankful God had not called me there. So, of course, by April 2013, I accepted the call as their interim pastor with the promise that I would lead them to God's next destination, physically and spiritually. God does have a sense of humor!

God providentially guided us through numerous merger options. By the end of 2013, we were meeting with NorthBridge Church, and our journey culminated in the ZBC building retirement service on May 25, 2014. The next Sunday, we officially merged with NorthBridge, a church about 10 times larger than ZBC (adoption model of merger). Since we shared similar DNA in doctrine, culture, vision, and worship, we had high hopes for success (see Facility Ministry Newsletter—Spring, 2018 and "Merge Ahead: What to Do When Your Church is Declining" <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2014/fall/what-to-do-when-your-church-is-declining.html>). But while the adoption merger was the right choice for our church at that time, it also introduced new ministry challenges. Work still had to be done in four key areas of adjustment: people, worship, staff, and facilities.

People Adjustments

Merging a 50-person church into a 500-person church meant numerous adjustments for our congregation. I was brought on the NorthBridge staff for a year of service as transitional pastor. Since our new church home drew from a much larger radius, we focused on blending with people from a similar geographic area—that was the easiest way to begin. ZBC was located 14 miles east of NorthBridge Church's temporary meeting place at Antioch High School. So we organized monthly fellowship meetings in the Zion area and invited former ZBC people along with current NorthBridge attenders. And because the name Zion Bible Church would be going away, we promoted the monthly fellowships as "NorthBridge East" gatherings. We also made clear that this was a transitional ministry initiative until assimilation could be completed.

Beth, Peggy, and Sandy—the wives of former ZBC elders—organized and hosted various monthly fellowships, including lunches, cookouts, bowling, and harvest time activities. Strangers quickly became friends. The cross-pollinations peaked at the final NorthBridge East fellowship event in April of 2015. During my devotional time, I reminded everyone that my role as transitional pastor would end in the next month. Senior saint Wanda cried; I would be the last pastor from her lifetime church. It was an emotional time for everyone, but we all agreed God was directing our steps.

Continued from page 2

Worship Adjustments

Over the previous decade, ZBC had transitioned from a more traditional form of worship with organ and piano to contemporary music with guitars, drums, and keyboard. Yet NorthBridge's worship practices were even more upbeat—and at an increased volume.

Tim and Wanda represented ZBC's senior saints, and they heartily supported the merge with NorthBridge. However, the new style and volume caused them some difficulty. To their credit, they never opposed the process and always endorsed the new church family. Rather than complaining about these changes, they sometimes waited in the lobby until the music time was over. The dismissal of children allowed them to enter the auditorium without disruption. Mary Ann and I spent some Sundays in the lobby reflecting with Tim and Wanda. We didn't try to talk them into liking all the changes, but rather, we listened to their thoughts. They needed time to adjust and someone to listen to them.

God rewarded their willingness to change with an unexpected blessing. Various family members who had left ZBC prior to the worship transition now joined NorthBridge—partly because they liked the new worship style. Since the merger, Tim has gone home to Jesus. And these days, Wanda enjoys the full worship service along with numerous family members, including three great-grandchildren born into the NorthBridge Church family since the merger.

On a recent visit, I was leaving the first service as Wanda entered the second. She smiled, hugged me, then grabbed her walker with determination and scooted into the auditorium saying, "Love seeing you, Pastor Jim, but I have to go find my seat. Worship is about to start!"

Staff Adjustments

Often the trickiest post-merger adjustment is for the staff and/or missionary family of the adopted church. ZBC funds helped launch the NorthBridge Church building campaign and support current missionaries for two years. There were also funds to cover my salary for a year as my title changed from interim pastor of Zion Bible Church to transitional pastor at NorthBridge Church. In the meantime, I continued my call as an architectural pastor with Facility Ministry, so my role with the two churches was part-time.

Mark Albrecht, lead pastor at NorthBridge, gradually led the ZBC flock under the shepherding wings of the NorthBridge staff. The transition symbolically completed during my last week on staff in May 2015. We hosted an open house at our home for the high school graduation of our daughter, Hannah. The former ZBC elders and Pastor Mark were engaged in an energetic game of bags with plenty of cheering and jeering. Nearing the game's conclusion, they invited me to jump into the next game, which I initially confirmed. But as the last few points were tallied, I realized someone would have to drop out and Pastor Mark would probably volunteer first. I sensed the Holy Spirit leading me to back away quietly. As the host of the open house, I could easily move on. Then, with me watching at a distance, Pastor Mark stayed for the next game and metaphorically completed the shepherding transition. I would greatly miss working with Mike, Don, Dale, and Tim, but it was time for the transition to be completed. God's plans for me at Zion Bible Church had been fulfilled.

Facility Adjustments

The ZBC building was sold to the adjacent hospital with the majority of the proceeds given to NorthBridge, helping them build their first facility. In March 2015, NorthBridge embarked on a three-year financial campaign, and in the fall, we acquired the permit to begin work on the site. While I was no longer part of the NorthBridge staff, I was called into various areas of service including site superintendent during construction.

Page 3 of 4

Continued from page 3

During college breaks for my son, Timothy, I often called on him to join me on the site for days of hard labor and muddy work clothes. The timing of his help often proved providential!

Over the next year, progress continued, and we celebrated various construction milestones. I was cautiously optimistic that we could acquire our final building permit in time for the church to celebrate Christmas Sunday in the new building. That meant starting the process on November 30, 2016. Representatives from the county would tour the building and give their first feedback regarding occupancy requirements. Two hours before that meeting, my wife called to tell me about my mom.

We had thought my mom was getting better. At least that's what the doctor said when I left her side the previous Sunday. Mary Ann followed her nursing intuition and stayed behind in Ohio, sensing something more might be wrong. She was right. I reached the hospital late Wednesday night following a long and reflective drive. My sister, Karlene, joined our vigil soon afterwards. Then, about 3:00 a.m. on Saturday, my mom met Jesus and my dad.

The next week was filled with funeral arrangements and caring for my mom's house and her belongings. Before the funeral, I received an encouraging call from Pastor Mark as he prayed for us and the funeral service. I'm sure his mind was on the possible occupancy in the new building before Christmas—along with the ticking clock—but with pastoral compassion, he never mentioned it during our call.

We planned to return to Illinois on Sunday right after the funeral, but a major snowstorm shut down traffic on the interstate, requiring us to wait another day. When I finally returned to the construction site on Tuesday, December 13 I discovered we were facing major obstacles to gaining occupancy. There was much to do and less than a week before we planned to hold our first service in the new building.

Journey's End

I woke the morning of Sunday, December 18 exhausted and still grieving from my mom's passing. I was tired, but we had made it! Through careful scheduling, process documentation, and God's providence, we made it to dedication Sunday, our first service occupying the new facility! The merge—and related relocation to the new building—was complete. Several women from the church had worked zealously to create a beautiful setting with nativity items, lights, Christmas trees, and snowflakes. No longer two separate congregations, we were now one united body in service of our Savior. With sunlight streaming through the new windows, my wife and I stood with our three children, tears running down our faces. 18 days after Mary Ann's urgent phone call, we were listening to a united congregation sing, "Silent night, holy night, all is calm..."

Prior to construction, NorthBridge was a church of about 500 attendance each Sunday. In 2018 Pastor Mark sent a letter of appreciation noting that in the 15 months since moving in, the church had reached 1,000 new households and that the Easter service welcomed 1,200 people. I often caution pastors about the wishful thinking of, "If you build it, they will come." However, if a church has developed healthy ministry infrastructure, then facility improvements *may* result in growth—and sometimes amazing growth like we experienced at NorthBridge.

In the spring of 2019 we attended NorthBridge with our daughter, Sarah, who is part of their leadership team launching a special needs ministry. As our children grew up, they often waited for Mary Ann and me as we connected with people following services. But on this Sunday, we were waiting for Sarah as she organized details for their first event for people with special needs. I sat in the corner of the bustling lobby while Sarah's brief discussion evolved into a mini-meeting with several leaders. My eyes again filled with tears as I embraced God's goodness and His sufficient grace that brought us through this amazing journey.