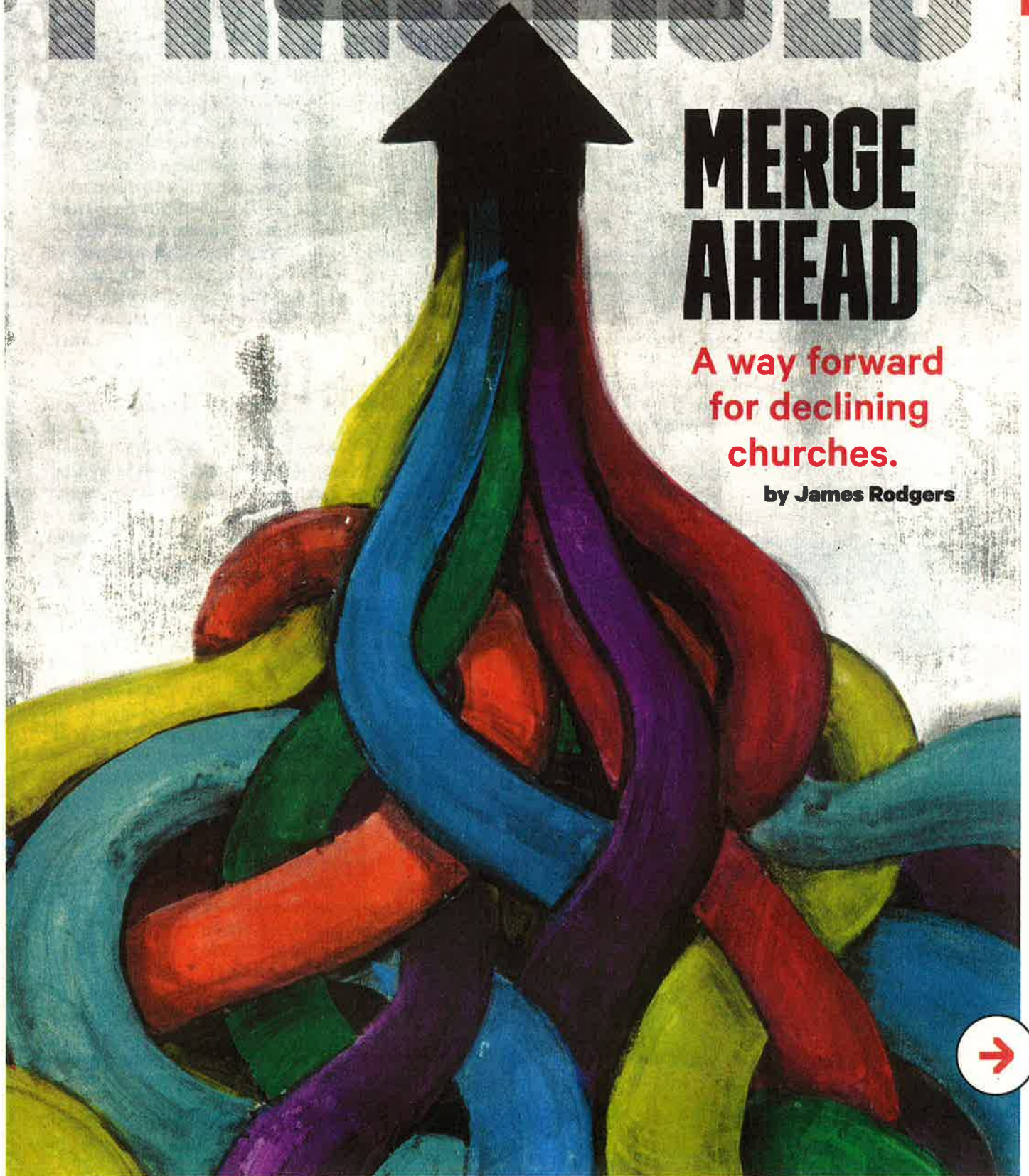


PRACTICES

MERGE AHEAD

A way forward
for declining
churches.

by James Rodgers





PRACTICES



W

hat 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. So they did. 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 Church Facility Ministry. Then, with the sale of the property, the church engaged my firm's services to find and/or build their new facility.

So we started 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. Needed to dream again, to experience God's clear intervention. That was what we prayed for. And God blessed us with an adventure that culminated this past May in a concluding service that demonstrated God's presence in amazing ways.

AN AMAZING ADVENTURE

A stymied interim pastor, along with a ticking clock, is not normally a good combination for wise decisions. However, while I did not know where we were going, I also felt a strong conviction that God was leading our steps. I'm not trying to be overly mystical, but it was an unusual internal dynamic. I had often taught that if God was leading,

it didn't matter if we understood the details. But . . . now I was living it.

I regularly shared this conviction with the congregation, and I think it made a difference. I wanted to cast a clear vision for our next steps, but how could I cast the vision when I wasn't sure what it was yet?

So I focused on what I knew: that God was leading, and that made it okay. I called the people to embrace the unknown, calling this chapter for our church, "The Great Adventure." A Steven Curtis Chapman song by that title became our theme. One of the lines from that song calls us to the "glorious unknown." The peace I felt so strongly became contagious.

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

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 only by the \$800,000 we received for the sale of our building.

Along the way, God closed some doors and opened others. The twists and turns truly became a "great adventure into the glorious unknown."

SLOW DOWN AND COMMUNE WITH GOD

God's timing is different from ours. I know that God is never late, but he is seldom early—at least according to my schedule. This was certainly true for our Great Adventure.

Following my conflicted prayer in May, I anticipated a quick process due to our fast moving clock. However, God led us to slow down for the sum-

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mer season. We continued pursuing options, but I switched my Sunday morning message series from adventure themes from Acts 15-18 and Paul's missionary journey to "Slow Down and Commune with God" from selected Psalms. With all the church had been through, we needed a time to enjoy the new pastor-and-congregation relationship.

Looking back, this pause to rest in God was a blessed respite for all of us.

LOVE THE PEOPLE

This pause allowed me to just preach the Word and love the people. Before I came, many pastors had turned them down for all kinds of reasons: not enough money, undeveloped ministries, disrepair of the building. After so much rejection, it is easy to get discouraged. They just needed pastoral care for a time.

I wondered how much I could do on a part-time basis (Sundays and one day during the week). But little expressions seemed to matter greatly. A sympathetic ear, sharing a meal, or a quick cup of coffee created significant connections. The cliché is true: "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Along the way, these people became very dear to my whole family.

One example is the 22-year-old drummer with the worship team, Mike Jr., who wanted to meet me for dinner. He knew I have kids his age, but he still wanted to meet with me! I considered this a rare opportunity.

It turned out he had recently gotten engaged and wanted to ask me to officiate his wedding. That became even more special because of the relationship we developed. This ministry was fun. Yes, I used the word fun.

GOD PROVIDED GREAT LEADERS

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 Sr., Don, Dale, and Tim, along with their families, filled the gaps and provided excellent ministry foundations for our church. Each one was different, with unique skill sets, and we needed them all. At times I stepped back and thought, *Wow, this is how it's supposed to be!* God was guiding our steps as a unified leadership team.

We could have continued as a congregation on our own, and I developed a ministry scenario 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 wisdom. A lifetime



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Reflections on Church Mergers

Merging with another church presents unique challenges and opportunities. Among my recommendations:

1 Think Kingdomly. Keep people's eyes on the bigger picture rather than the personal conclusions. This is particularly true for pastors; your role will experience significant forms of change.

2 Read the book, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work* by Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird. They define the possible merger models to consider. I often joked that I slept with the book during the process.

3 Be flexible (sometimes). Often God changed our path along the way. If we'd not been open to his new directions, we would have been frustrated.

4 Be resolute (sometimes). The right DNA fit was the most important decision criteria. This clarity helped give courage to take confident steps of faith as needed.

5 Anticipate an adventure. The adventure theme trained our people to be looking for God to be at work with a heart of faith and hope.

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 option 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). However, 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

NorthBridge they recognized the similar ministry culture and treated Zion Bible Church people as dear friends from day one. Our people connected quickly and easily in numerous contexts. And while 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 mak-

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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, so we moved forward in dialogue through the end of the year. We could see God's clear leading through providential events, and with NorthBridge would provide a contribution to the kingdom of God.

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

ing a long term difference for NorthBridge—a church ten times larger. Only God could do that!

AN AWESOME CONCLUSION

On May 25, 2013, 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.

It was an amazing experience.

Over 200 people attended the service and more than 300 enjoyed the reception that followed. The service lasted three hours. Admittedly, I looked at my watch a few times and wondered what people thought. Afterwards, everyone fully testified that time flew by for all of us. God was present in a special way!

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").

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 not buildings.

INVESTING THROUGH LEGACY GIFTS

For more than 80 years, Zion Bible Church was actively involved in missions around the world. So in the final service, the congregation unanimously gave legacy gifts for eleven ministries that were intended to make a significant impact in their efforts. Here are just two examples:

1. A church planter in Ireland had just received approval for a building purchase for their church, but they had numerous improvements needed before services could be held. He testified, "I had a five-year plan to implement, but this gift immediately completes the entire five-year plan! It's like you're not closing a building, you're just replacing it with another building in Ireland."

2. A Youth for Christ missionary needed funds to launch his ministry at Zion High School. He had just been declined funding from a Christian foundation when the next morning

we invited him to our last service. At our reception, with tears in his eyes he shared, "This legacy gift doubled the amount I requested from the foundation."

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.

NORTHBRIDGE'S GIFT

On June 1, 2013, 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 that will make an amazing impact through 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 seems 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.

Reflecting back, I'm very thankful for that prayer of confusion the previous May. I didn't know what to do. But in the end, it was a Great Adventure into the glorious unknown.

On our coffee table sits the lamp that I lit during that final service, symbolic of our Great Adventure. The lamp became a gift from the church with a card that included these words: "Thank you for stepping in when you did and slowing us down and taking a deep breath, so we could watch God open and close doors to the greatest adventure for our church."

I wouldn't have missed this ride for anything. And now, as part of the NorthBridge Church family, I'm looking forward to the next Great Adventure. LJ

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Four Models for 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. This means a church is restarted under a stronger, vibrant, and typically larger church. At Zion Bible Church, we knew we were relocating, so a rebirth under new management did not make much sense for us. We developed a plan for relaunching on our own if our other merger scenarios did not work out.

2 ICU (intensive care unit). This is a merger between churches that are in trouble hoping simply to survive. ZBC didn't need that. The people remained energized and passionate for serving Christ while looking for the right context.

3 Marriage. This is a union of relative equals. We considered this with a couple of other churches, but incompatibilities became evident. For a marriage model to work, the mission, vision, purposes, values, and church culture should be clear as part of a new entity.

4 Adoption. This is when a larger or more stable church welcomes a smaller church. This is what eventually happened. The fact that NorthBridge owned land close to Zion created a unique situation as they were already thinking about Zion as part of their future ministry area. In addition, the timing seemed providential for both churches.

—J.R.