

Making a Better Barn: Leading a Church through a building project

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The agony and the ecstasy

One of my most painful and yet ultimately extraordinarily exhilarating tasks in the past ten years has been to lead my church through a major building project. In a brief article it is impossible to do justice to the story - those who want to know more will need to read *Building For The Future*, which tells in greater detail how we redeveloped our Edwardian buildings into a church centre fit for the 21st century¹.

The need for change

The story began in 1993, when I became the senior minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford. Almost immediately, I realised that we had to change our church building, for, with the passing of the years, it was increasingly working against the mission of the church.

The fact is that people's expectations have changed. The cinemas discovered that some years ago. They realised if they were to attract people to see their films, then it wasn't simply a matter of having good films to show. It was also about having comfortable surroundings. So they knocked down the old 'flea pits' and built new cinemas, with the result that people are now going to the cinema again in increasing numbers. The parallel with church is clear. Hard, uncomfortable pews in poorly heated and draughty buildings will not do. What was good enough for their grandparents is no longer good enough for them. If we want to attract a new church-going public, we must upgrade our facilities.

But not only was our building uncomfortable, it also spoke of a by-gone age and in turn of a God who belonged to the past. No wonder we had difficulty in attracting people to church.

So almost six months to the day after I began my pastorate, I preached a sermon on Isaiah 54.2-3, drawing inspiration from William Carey's so-called 'deathless sermon' based on this same text, in which he coined the motto: 'Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God':

"A lick of paint or the buying of cushions to line the pews are small things - God would have us go for 'great things'.... We need to gut both the sanctuary and also the halls and start all over again".

It took a further year before the church formally agreed to take a serious look the premises. In the meantime I sought to highlight the way in which our buildings were working against us, rather than for us - not that this was too difficult!

The 'sanctuary' itself was dark and depressing: massive in height, with a balcony running around most of the church, with a high central pulpit, it was reminiscent of a past era. The sight lines were such that it was good only for preaching (the only feature in the church which was visible to all was the pulpit). The communion table and the lectern were invisible to those in the balcony, while the baptistery was visible to none. For preaching, and indeed for singing, I wanted to use an over-head projector, but one was difficult to see, so two were necessary.

The same was true of the church halls and the rest of the premises. For example, when people, came to deliver their children to our Child Contact Centre, they were faced with a cold corridor more akin to what you might see in a prison than in a place which welcomes visitors. The receptionists manned a desk placed next to the men's toilets. Basil Fawlty couldn't have arranged things better if he had tried!

It is a sad fact that with time church people get used to poor facilities, so that they fail to realise how outsiders may view their building. Somehow we are prepared to accept a 'tatty' building, even although our own homes are far from tatty. And then we wonder why people are not keen to come and worship God in such a building!

Agreeing to change

The decision-making process for a large Baptist church can be quite involved, and all the more so when radical changes are afoot. Decisions cannot be hurried. Time needs to be taken for people to understand what is involved. Time needs to be taken for people to be persuaded that change is necessary. The fact is that most people do not welcome change of any kind, with the result that very often many of the initial responses tend to be negative. As Machiavelli recognised long ago:

"There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all who profit by the old order, and only luke-warm defenders in all those who profit by the new order. This luke-warmness arises partly from fear of their adversaries, who have law in their favour, and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have actual experience of it". 2

In our case, it took five months just to agree the client brief, and a further ten months to agree "to proceed with the alterations to the church buildings on the basis of the architect's outline plans, at an estimated cost of £1,300,000". This was just the

beginning. There were many more church meetings before the go-ahead for actual construction was given.

Selling the vision

Architects' plans have their limitations. Most people find it difficult to 'read' them. So I wrote an article for our church magazine, in which I sought to 'flesh' out the plans.

"When you first arrive, you'll enter an internally modernised Edwardian building. As you walk through the main reception area, you will pass a welcome desk where information will be given on the church's activities together with directions to the various activities of the day. Tables will have been set out to serve coffee and fruit juice after the service. Subdued easy-listening music will be piping its way gently through into all the public areas.

Most people will be making their way up to the first floor auditorium through one of the three main staircases. Some, however, will prefer to use the large lift, which will be regularly whisking up and down as it disgorges its passengers only to collect another group of people.

The auditorium itself is large and carpeted. It is also well lit. During the day, light comes in from the large roof lights situated between the beams of the attractive wooden roof. At night there are downlighters and uplighters, which blend together to give a most attractive feel.

The five hundred or so comfortable chairs are grouped around the slightly raised stage in a large semi-circle. The stage itself is quite wide - the focal point is formed by an open raised baptistry at the back, topped by a modern tapestry. The large communion table is sited towards the front of the stage - at communion services one gets a real feeling of gathering round the table of the Lord. There is no pulpit as such. Instead there is a large modern lectern for the worship leader and preacher to use.

There is plenty of space for the music group to one side - as also for an organ. The styles of music being played range from classical to jazz to rock..."

Needless to say, such a letter was not enough. At around the same time the church leaders devoted the period of Lent to make personal home visits on all the members and friends of the church to share with them the vision, and to challenge them to become part of that vision.

Raising the money

We engaged in a wide variety of fundraising events, which brought in a good deal of money. But fund-raising has not been the chief means of raising money. Nor was making applications to trusts. In total we only raised £42,000 from trusts, which by comparison with the total needed was still quite small. A welcome £225,000 was added

from the sale of a manse, but even this did not provide the major contribution to the fund.

The chief source of money has been through direct giving, both on a one-off and on a regular basis. Right at the beginning of the project the leadership team challenged the church to a decade of double-tithing - a tithe for the church and a tithe for the building. Needless to say, in challenging the church to make that commitment, the ministers and deacons had to back their words with actions. Although not everybody has double-tithed, a good number have. One couple even treble-tithed.

Encountering opposition

There was a vocal minority in the church who at every stage bitterly opposed the project. Some argued that it was wrong to spend money on 'ourselves' and that instead we should give more money to the poor or to missionary work overseas. Although we stressed time and again that we were investing in a mission-facility, somehow this concept failed to make sense. Our critics failed to realise the missionary nature of the local church. They were still operating with a pastoral paradigm, where the task of the church was understood as serving the needs of church members.

Others were frightened by the sums of money involved and believed that as a church we would end up with a massive debt. However, although the sums involved were large, we believed that, if everybody got behind the project, the sums were far from impossible.

As a leadership we bent over backwards in seeking to gain a consensus for moving forward with the building. Although almost 80% of the members voted to move forward with the redevelopment of the premises, we were concerned for the 20% who did not vote in favour and we went to great lengths to win them over to the project. With hindsight, we may well have been wrong to have been overly concerned, for we kept on putting off the redevelopment, which in turn meant costs increased. Finally, however, we felt we had no choice but to go ahead, and in June 1999 awarded the contract to a local firm. At that point, a good number of the 'dissenters', having been outvoted yet again, left the church. It was a sad business.

Although there was a great deal of bitterness among the 'dissenters', that was not true of everybody who voted against the scheme. Some were genuinely confused, and understandably felt unable to vote for the scheme. Others simply believed the scheme was wrong. It has been enormously moving to see these people gradually change their minds. Once the redevelopment was complete and it became clear what had been achieved, a number had the courage and the grace to admit they were wrong and then begin to give generously themselves to the project. For such changes of heart we are indeed grateful to God.

Dealing with escalating costs

When in March 1996 we agreed in principle to go ahead with the building project, the estimated cost was £1,300,000. By June 1999 the lowest-priced tender together with costs already incurred meant that we were now looking at a bill of £1,557,000, but then costs increased even more. Once the builders set to work they discovered that the roof needed replacing and there was water below the proposed lift-shaft. All kinds of unexpected contingencies raised their ugly heads. We now found that we were facing a bill of 1,932,000. At this stage there was no choice: we could not now go back, for we were already committed. We had to bite the bullet and go forward, whatever the extra cost.

It was then that we experienced a series of miracles of giving. During the autumn of 1999 the treasurer of our building fund had to appeal for money to 'bridge the gap', not just once, but on five or six occasions. Each time members and friends of the church dug deep to the point that we believed that there could be no more money left in the fellowship. Each time we thought we had bridged the gap, only to discover that the gap had opened up again. Remember, this was at a time when many of us had been double-tithing for several years, when people had already given generously, indeed sacrificially, from their savings and investments. Yet when we felt we had exhausted the resources of the fellowship, the Lord somehow provided. For me it was as though we were standing on holy ground. What we experienced at this time was truly awe-inspiring. God was at work in our midst.

Moving back

Finally, the builders were finished and we were able to move back (for 18 months we had been worshipping in a local school, with other activities re-located all over the town). Our very first service in our redeveloped premises was held on Sunday 4 February 2001. At that stage there were no chairs, no sound-system and no organ! But all that soon changed, with the result that on Saturday 28 April 2001 the Grand Opening took place.

Serving the community

We redeveloped our premises primarily with the needs of the church's mission in mind. Every day the premises are now used by a wide range of church organisations - we are very much a seven-day-a-week church.

However, from the beginning we decided to make our premises available to the community when they are not being used by the church. We have been amazed at how eager the community has been to use them. In any given week we normally have at least 400 non-church people through our premises, and often many more. We have rapidly become a favoured venue in Chelmsford for concerts and conferences, exhibitions and receptions, seminars and consultations.

The result is that last year our turnover from lettings exceeded £80,000, while our target for this year is £120,000. Needless to say, this money has been very welcome, not least in view of the remaining debt we still have to pay off on our building.

As a result of these lettings, our profile in the community is high. People now know where we are. Furthermore, in coming into our new building, people become aware of what we stand for. In our Friendship Centre downstairs, and in every room, there are eye-catching displays. In the Meeting Place there are our two amazingly impressive banners declaring that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. In this way, our service to the community becomes a form of pre-evangelism.

Experiencing renewal

As many churches have discovered, the redevelopment of buildings and the renewal of God's people go hand in hand. Certainly we have been renewed spiritually through our building project. There is now a new spirit of commitment and a far deeper sense of unity than ever we had before. People come to church expecting God to be present and to work in our midst. Visitors abound, congregations have increased, and baptisms are up. Our building project has undoubtedly been used by God to enable us to take a major step forward in our life together.

So, if our experience is anything to go by, churches engaging in building projects may well encounter tough times, but the end result is worth all the tears. Near the beginning of our building process I was given a card, which I pinned up on my office notice-board and kept there until the redevelopment was finished. It read: "It will happen.... You just have to keep believing". There were times when I was near to despair, despair not just related to the building, but to the very existence of the church. But, our faith was rewarded and 'it' did happen. A minister friend was indeed right when he wrote to me after the Grand Opening: "Think the unthinkable, speak the unspeakable, believe for the impossible and pay the price for it". Yes, the price was high, but it was more than worth paying. For us, at least, it has marked the beginning of a new life, new growth, and new hope.