

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

by

Paul Beasley-Murray

1st edition 2003

2nd edition 2004

electronic edition 2020

INTRODUCTION

A STORY TO INSPIRE

The purpose behind the writing of this booklet is to offer inspiration and ideas to churches considering engaging in a building project. There is relatively little written guidance available for churches wanting to build. True the Baptist Union Corporation have produced a series of five leaflets relating to church premises, but these leaflets are limited in nature ¹. Certainly, when we started to consider redeveloping our building, we felt as if we were re-inventing the wheel. Although we did consult with other churches, time and again we felt we were on our own, with little to guide us – apart from the Lord himself!

Our only source of inspiration and guidance was George Carey's *The Church in the Marketplace*, which tells the story of the way in which the Anglican church of St Nicholas in Durham went about redeveloping its premises ². Significantly, this book did not take the form of an instruction manual, but rather presents the story of one man and his people who embarked on a major venture of faith. It was this story element which provided the inspiration. Clearly the details of the project were peculiar to St Nicholas' – but we found the principles underlying the project to be relevant to us.

In similar fashion this booklet sets out to tell a story. In our case it tells of how we redeveloped our Edwardian buildings into a church centre fit for the 21st century. The story involves a good deal of 'blood, sweat and tears'; our redevelopment was not accomplished without much heart-ache. But it is also a story of faith, and triumphant faith at that. As a result of our building project, 'Building for the Future', we have become a much more motivated, committed and united fellowship; we now have a wonderful mission facility which is truly welcoming to all; we have raised our profile in the town so that there are few who come into the centre of Chelmsford who are not aware of us.

THE STORY'S CONTEXT

When I first set out to write the story, I did my best to leave out the people-difficulties which we experienced. I did not want to let the church down by telling of the struggles involved. I wanted to be positive and so I simply wrote of all the good things which happened. But the resulting picture was so one-sided that it was untrue. So I have been persuaded to tell the story as it was. The truth is that our building project became the 'lightning-rod' for every possible dissatisfaction in the church. So much so, that at one stage I somewhat ruefully thought to myself that the church would best be known as the 'Paul Beasley-Murray Martyr Memorial Church'! Let me explain.

In March 1993 I came to Chelmsford, the county town of Essex, thirty-five miles North-East of London, with a population today of almost 180,000. Originally a market town, it is renowned for its electronics industry and thanks to its links with Marconi claims to be the home of radio. Many people who live within Chelmsford commute to London (Chelmsford is only 35 minutes away from Liverpool Street and is one of the busiest commuter stations in

¹ The Baptist Union Corporation Guideline Leaflets relating to Church Premises are as follows: B1 *Church Trusts*; B2 *Buying land or premises for a church*; B3 *Selling church land or premises*; B4 *Redeveloping church premises*; B4a *Contract Procurement – the alternatives*; B5 *Letting Church Premises*

² George Carey, *The Church In The Marketplace* (Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1984; 2nd edition 1995)

the South East of England), whilst others from the surrounding towns and villages travel into Chelmsford to work.

The strong town-centre Baptist church to which I was called as senior minister has over the years been a ‘flagship’ for many in this part of the world. Some wondered what kind of challenge the church held for me. Indeed, one friend suggested that to accept the call to Chelmsford would be tantamount to accepting a free ‘meal ticket’; for I would find that with a minimum of effort the church could happily tick over, which would then leave me plenty of time to devote to my wider interests. How far from the truth my friend was!

In the first instance he misjudged my own commitment to pastoral ministry. For when I came to preach ‘with a view’, I told the church that if they were simply looking for a chaplain who would visit them, marry them, bury them, and generally keep them comfortable, then I was not their man; but if they were looking for a leader, who would never be satisfied with a packed church and who would seek to mobilise the church for adventurous mission, then perhaps I was their man.

Secondly, my friend misjudged the church. For the church in Chelmsford was in strong decline. In the 1970s, as a result of transfer growth caused by the expansion of the town, the church had experienced substantial growth so that by 1982 its membership had risen to 582; but ever since then the membership had been declining. On my arrival there were still over 400 members on the books, but many of these had not darkened the door of the church for years.

A key reason for the church’s strong decline was that it was highly resistant to change. Indeed, when I came to preach ‘with a view’ I felt that I was going back in time to the 1960s. Amazingly, here in the early 1990s was a church where many people still formally addressed one another as ‘Mr’ or ‘Mrs’, and where few people dared to be open and honest with one another. Whereas almost every other Baptist church had long ago integrated its communion service into the main service, here at Chelmsford this had only begun to happen in the ‘interregnum’ – with the result that still many church members preferred to leave in the hymn before bread was broken and wine poured. Charismatic renewal had too all intents and purposes passed the church by – the ‘hymn sandwich’ was still the order of the day. Sadly only a few years prior to my coming a group of some 30 key church workers, most of them in their 40s, had in despair left the church for other churches – there was little room for the ‘Spring Harvest’ culture in our church. Instead, I discovered that the church meeting was in the grip of a small group of older people who saw no reason for the church to change.

Although many members were blind to the plight in which the church found itself, thankfully the deacons recognised the need for change, and that without change the church would continue to decline and possibly even die. The mandate they gave me was to reverse the decline by initiating change and in this way lead the church forward. Unfortunately this was easier said than done. Change all too often sparks off conflict. People are much happier with the status quo. This was certainly my experience at Chelmsford.

Over the next few years I felt impelled to introduce a number of key changes:

- home groups replaced the traditional mid-week meeting for Bible study and prayer with a view to encouraging people to develop closer fellowship with one another

- a culture of open face-to-face encounter was encouraged in which the truth could be spoken in love; in the past difficult issues had either been pushed under the carpet or alternatively dealt with by sending letters around the church
- monthly 'church meetings' for prayer and discussion of Kingdom issues took the place of the previous bi-monthly, if not quarterly, 'business' meetings where points of order often seemed to dominate
- the nuts and bolts of much church life were taken away from church and leadership team meetings and instead became the business of task-orientated teams: e.g. we set up teams for pastoral action, social action, evangelism, nurture, finance, mission beyond Chelmsford etc.
- the organ and the hymnbook, which had characterized the worship life of the church were supplemented with contemporary worship involving worship bands, new songs, and the use first of the over-head projector and later PowerPoint

Without exception all these changes were discussed at length and over a period of time by the church meeting before being overwhelmingly adopted by the church. But without exception all these changes were resisted strenuously by the same group of people, who were led by what Lyle Schaller, a distinguished American church consultant, has termed the AAEOs – the 'Angry Alienated Ex-Old Leaders'. What's more, the resistance continued long after the changes had been implemented, and was accompanied by a remarkable degree of bitterness and resentment.

It was within such a context that the church made the decision to remodel its premises. Not surprisingly, this decision was strongly resisted by the same group which had resisted every other change. The upshot was that we went through an extraordinarily tough time in the church, which was difficult for everybody. A number of younger people moved away, despairing of a church which apparently could not live at peace with one another. Initially few of the dissidents wanted to leave the church – it was 'their' church - but gradually either the Lord took them to himself or they moved on to other churches. Today, thank God, the church is at peace with itself: church meetings are no longer battle-fields, but are without exception characterised by a spirit of unity.

If I am honest, I found my first seven years at Chelmsford exceedingly difficult. It was difficult coping with some of the criticism, which at times was very personal – receiving hate mail was not a joyful experience. It was difficult too seeing good friends leave the church – with the result that in spite of the changes we continued to experience numerical decline too. However, in church life sometimes a period of 'pruning' is necessary for further growth to take place (see John 15.2). Or to use another metaphor, a period of 'refining' is sometimes necessary before a church is ready to move out in effective mission. Today, thank God, the church is again growing: new faces are present every Sunday. The seven 'lean' years have been replaced by what we trust will be many 'fat' years to come.

This, then, is the context of our story of re-developing our premises. It is a context in which as a church we have known much pain. However, with the passing of time, we have discovered that this pain may be perhaps likened to the pain of child-birth – for after the pain we have experienced something akin to a new birth. The way in which we now 'do' church has moved up onto a totally different plane. The pain has resulted in much 'gain'.

1. THE INITIAL STAGE: CASTING THE VISION

1. THE NEHEMIAH VISION

Vision is of the essence of every major advance within the Kingdom of God. A church without vision is a church without hope - in the words of Prov 29.18: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (AV).

In most churches it is the minister who ‘casts’ the vision. However, at Chelmsford it was the deacons who initially cast the vision. To mark the beginning of my ministry in 1993 they encouraged the church to adopt as its motto the words of Neh 2.20: “The God of heaven will give us success. We are his servants, and we are going to start building”.

When Nehemiah first uttered these words, he was facing a crisis. Three neighbouring powerful rulers were threatening him. But Nehemiah refused to back down. Instead he expressed his faith in God by beginning to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The adoption of Neh 2.20 and the calling of me to be their new minister marked the resolve of the church to become an effective missionary force again. Mindful of the promise of Jesus to “build” his church (Matt 16.16), the church at Chelmsford wanted to be part of that grandest of building projects!

2. LAYING THE RIGHT FOUNDATIONS

Before a building is erected, foundations have to be laid. This was certainly true at Chelmsford. A number of key foundation stones had to be put into place before further building could proceed.

A key foundation was the development of a simple mission statement: “Our mission is to go Christ’s way and make disciples”, which was in effect a bringing together of the Great Commission as we find it in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 28.18-20) and in John’s Gospel (John 20.21). This mission statement was deliberately kept short so that it could be remembered by all. It was subsequently expanded as follows:

“Our chief task is to express God’s love in the way we live and in the words we speak, and through our lives and through our words to help others to respond to his love through a lifelong commitment to Christ and his Church. Through our regular Sunday worship of God and through our fellowship with one another – as expressed not least through our fellowship groups – we seek to find the strength and the resources for our mission”

The adoption of this mission statement ensured that mission was put at the heart of the church.

Mission statements by themselves, however, are not enough. Strategies need to be developed. In our case an analysis of our membership revealed that our church’s age profile did not reflect the general age distribution of our town: we had a preponderance of people over the age of 45. Furthermore, although as a church we were extremely active in running all kinds

of activities and events, for the most part these activities and events were aimed towards the two ends of the age spectrum. We therefore resolved that we would seek to create “a family church for all ages” by initially focussing our energies and resources on the 25-45 age group, with a view to redressing the age imbalance in the church. This strategy became another key building block as we sought to realise the Nehemiah vision.

Closely linked to this strategy was the adoption of four ‘ministry aims’ in which the ministers declared their intention to bring about the following:

- i) “*Exercise fresh hope and faith in God*”. This aim became increasingly important once we had committed ourselves to raising well over £1,000,000 for the redevelopment of the church.
- ii) “*Embrace ‘love of another kind’*”. As ministers we set ourselves the task of encouraging our people to open up their hearts as well as their homes to one another – as indeed to their friends outside the church.
- iii) “*Encourage personal change and growth*”. Here too was a major challenge. It is all too easy for Christian people to get stuck in a spiritual rut. The fact is that we are all on a journey.
- iv) “*Empower for witness and service*”. The task of a minister is not to act as the church’s chaplain, but rather to mobilise the people of God for mission.

3. CHALLENGING THE CHURCH TO CONSIDER (AGAIN) BUILDING

Vision alone is not enough, change too is necessary for a church to make any significant advance. Almost from the word ‘go’ I realised that not only did we as a church need to change the way in which we did church – we also had to change our church buildings. For with the passing of the years the building 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 a matter of having comfortable seats in which to watch the films. So they knocked down their old ‘flea pits’ and built new cinemas instead, with the result that people now go to the cinema again. I find it significant that in the main cinema in Chelmsford it is always the luxury seats which sell out first - people want to feel comfortable.

The parallel with church is clear. People are not prepared to put up with hard, uncomfortable pews - they are not prepared to put up with ill-heated and draughty buildings. What was good enough for their grandparents, is no longer good enough for them. Just as the cinemas needed to upgrade their facilities to attract a new cinema-going public, so we churches, if we want to attract a new church-going public, must do the same.

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. Michael Fanstone tells of a visit a couple from his church made to Blists Hill Open Air Museum in Shropshire:

“They toured the old stores restored to 1920s style where you can buy goods in pounds, shillings and pence. They appreciated the olde-worlde feel of the exhibits. Then they came to the chapel. They went in and were astounded; it was no different from the inside of churches today! They said it felt just like a time warp.”³

The same could have been said of our church premises in Chelmsford. Little had been changed since when it was first built in 1908. Furthermore, by comparison with the modern shopping malls and attractive eating-places of Chelmsford, our dark building with its solid oak front doors open only for a few hours on a Sunday, held little appeal and enticed nobody but the already committed to enter. As Kenneth White has rightly said:

"If the church is to hold its own... compared with, say well-appointed modern pubs, it has to **appeal** to people. We know that we have the Word of Life - but folk outside don't. The miracle is that so many people are converted today, in spite of us and our premises. How many more wait to be attracted?"⁴

If a church enters into a building project simply with the needs of its members in mind, then such an enterprise is rightly open to criticism. Certainly the spending of large sums of money cannot be justified if the comfort of the ‘saints’ is all that is in view. It was, however, the needs of those outside the church which were for me the driving force to challenge the church to consider entering into a building project. We needed a new mission facility.

So one September Sunday, almost six months to the day after my induction to the pastorate, I preached a sermon on Isaiah 54.2,3: “Make the tent you live in larger; lengthen its ropes and strengthen the pegs” in the light of William Carey’s so-called ‘deathless sermon’ based on this same text, when he coined the motto: ‘Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God’. I began by speaking of the need to ‘go for growth’ - growth not for growth’s sake, but growth for the kingdom’s sake; and then moved on to the need to ‘revamp the premises’.

“A lick of paint or the buying of cushions to line the pews are small things - God would have us go for ‘great things’. This church and its halls need a total revamp. Our wooden pews are uncomfortable and our facilities are embarrassing. We need to gut both the sanctuary and also the halls and start all over again.”

The idea of redeveloping the church in Chelmsford was not novel. On two previous occasions the church had seriously looked at two different schemes, but each time had turned down the opportunity. When I mooted the possibility of another scheme, there were many who were eager to go for it, believing that God was graciously offering the church one last opportunity to come into the modern world. But there were some who had voted against the previous two schemes, and unable to consider any new scheme they resisted the proposal with might and main. Thank God, however, the opposition did not win the day and as a result we now have a splendid base for mission in the community.

³ Michael Fanstone, *The Sheep That Got Away* (Monarch, Tunbridge Wells 1993) 162.

⁴ Kenneth White, *The Attractive Church* (Grove, Bramcote, Notts. 1979) 22.

2. THE SECOND STAGE –GRASPING THE VISION

1. SPEAKING OF THE NEED

Needless to say, it takes more than a one-off sermon to convince a church of the need to engage in a major re-building project. 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 for nothing but 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 overhead projector - but one was difficult to see, so two were necessary. The sanctuary actively worked against us, rather than for us.

The same was true of the church halls and the rest of the non-‘sanctuary’ bits of the church. Unattractive and bare, they belonged to a previous era. When people for instance came to deliver their children to our Child Contact Centre, they found the back entrance hard to find. The ill-fitting doors were difficult to open. 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 for the Child Contact Centre manned a desk placed bang 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 used in fact that they fail to realise how outsiders may view their building. We become acclimatised to the third-rate. Somehow we are prepared to accept a ‘tatty’ building, even although their own homes are far from tatty. And then we wonder why people are not keen to come and worship God in such a building!

2. AFFIRMING THE DECISION TO REMAIN A TOWN-CENTRE CHURCH

Our church in Chelmsford is in the town-centre. Over the road are the offices of Essex County Council, just round the corner are the railway station and the bus station. The shops, the night-clubs, the central library, offices of one kind or another - all are within a stone’s throw. Although there are no shops on Victoria Road South, people coming in from the villages by us will normally walk by our church on the way to the central market; likewise people coming in by train to watch Essex play cricket will also walk by our church.

In some respects this town-centre position has considerable drawbacks. There is, for instance, no housing in the vicinity, everybody therefore has to come into town to attend church. Parking during the week is a very real problem. There therefore was an argument for doing what many a super-market has done and moving to a larger green-field site on the edge of town - space then would no longer be at a premium and parking would be easily resolved.

However, right from the very beginning the church believed that it was right to remain a town-centre church. We believed that God had placed us where we were to serve the local

community. Each week thousands of students, shoppers, office workers, commuters, and young people pass by our church. To move to the edge of the town would in a very real sense involve moving to the edge of the community.

It is precisely because we are a town-centre church that we are able to run two clubs for people with mental health problems referred to us by social services, as also a child contact centre for 'broken' families referred to us by the courts. It is because we are a town-centre church that we can run a small café. Being a town-centre church, as distinct from being a neighbourhood church, provides all kinds of opportunities for Christian service.

There is a cost to being a town-centre church - not least the cost of parking. The church, however, by agreeing to remain in the town-centre in effect accepted that cost.

3. DRAWING UP A CLIENT BRIEF

The first stage in any building project involves drawing up what is termed a client brief. A client brief is a kind of wish-list, prepared by the church (the client) for the architect, in which it sets out its needs and desires. We asked ourselves such questions as:

What do we really want? How many people do we want to seat for worship? How much office accommodation do we need? How many small rooms does our Sunday School need? What space do our mid-week activities require?

Although inevitably a small group was delegated to draw up the client brief, the church was very much involved in the process. We convened a Sunday afternoon conference for members and friends of the church. We put people into small groups and asked them to rate from 0 (least important) to 5 (most important) the following proposed 'facilities to fulfil our mission'.

A sanctuary to seat 500
A carpeted multi-function room to seat 100
A hard-surface activity hall for children and young people
A suite of offices (counselling, pastoral, administrative)
Adequate parking provision
A coffee shop and lounge
Appropriate catering facilities
Toilet facilities including changing unit for babies
Access to all areas for the disabled
Flexible smaller rooms
Reception area
Other comments

4. ENGAGING AN UNDERSTANDING ARCHITECT

I'm impressed with what Sir Norman Foster managed to achieve at Stansted Airport, but I'm not convinced that even had we been able to afford his fees he would have been right for us. There is a lot to be said for engaging a Christian architect - or at the very least an architect who understands churches. A church building is more than just a space in which people may

congregate - it is intended to be a sacred space in which people encounter God. It is therefore important for an architect to understand what we are trying to achieve theologically.

For example, as far as the lay-out of the worship area was concerned, there were a number of issues which were more than simply architectural, but which had theological significance for us. In the old 'sanctuary', the pews had been arranged in a long narrow formation, where all that was visible of fellow-worshippers were the backs of their heads. We wanted to be able to sit in a semi-circle, and in this way emphasise the fellowship of believers. We didn't want to return to a high central pulpit, indeed we did not want a pulpit at all - but we did want a solid lectern to symbolise the importance we as a fellowship attach to the preaching of God's Word. In the past our baptistery had been hidden; we now wanted an open baptistery, which would symbolise faith's response to the grace of God. Partly as a result of buildings either side and partly because of the frosted glass used, the old sanctuary had been dark and gloomy. We now wanted plenty of light - to allow as it were the light of heaven to stream in. For, as Thomas Fuller, an English 17th century divine, once said: "Light, God's eldest daughter, is a principal beauty in a building".

In our case, we didn't immediately engage an architect. We approached several architects to present outline sketches to us. In the event only two submitted their proposals. The first submission involved largely retaining the 'sanctuary', but failed to address the problems of sight-lines - the only solution that architect came up with was to provide a large video wall on which everything could be seen. The second submission was much more radical. It involved inserting a new floor at balcony level, pushing out the wall beyond the old pulpit, cantilevering out on both sides with a view to gaining breadth, and so creating a new upstairs worship area and opening up a vast new space downstairs. After much thought and discussion, we decided to go for the more radical option!

5. LEADING THE CHURCH TO MAKE THE DECISION

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 too to be taken for people to be persuaded that change is necessary. 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".⁵

In our case, it took five months just to agree the client brief. This was agreed at a church meeting in May 1995. Then, having sent out the client brief, we had to decide between the two submissions. The deacons recommended that we go for the more radical option, with the

⁵ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

result that in November 1995 the church appointed the Ainsworth Davey Partnership of Harrow to develop their proposals ⁶.

In February 1996 the architect, John Ainsworth, presented to a packed church meeting his drawings and sketches. The following month a 'Special Church Meeting' was held at which the church agreed '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 the actual construction was given.

⁶ Following the retirement of John Ainsworth, the Ainsworth Davey Partnership was dissolved. The project was then transferred to the Fairhursts Design Group of Eastleigh, Hants., with Chris Davey as our lead architect.

3. THE THIRD STAGE DEVELOPING THE DETAILED DESIGN

1. SETTING UP A BUILDING PROJECT GROUP

Once the decision was made to go ahead with the scheme, a special building project group had to be set up. The deacons neither had the time nor the expertise to deal with the nuts and bolts of buildings. Fortunately there were people in the church with the expertise who were willing to give of their time: an accountant with experience in overseeing large-scale projects, a mechanical engineer working with a major London firm, a retired lecturer who had been involved in a variety of building projects connected with his college, and a retired housing association official who had amassed enormous experience of building projects through his work. The accountant, who was also a deacon, was appointed the chairman of the group. The retired housing association official eventually became the equivalent of an honorary 'clerk of works'. The ministers were 'ex officio' members of the group - although my attendances were limited and I only came to meetings when a crucial issue was involved.

It is no exaggeration to say that without this group our building project would never have taken place. They were the link between the church, on the one hand, and the architects and the builders, on the other hand. As the scheme proceeded, a lot of their work had to take place during the day - for it was only during the day that one could meet with the builders, the plumbers, the electricians, the mechanical engineer, the structural engineer and all the other specialists involved in the redevelopment. For the two members of the project group at work this made life very difficult.

Needless to say, the building project was accountable to the deacons, and through the deacons to the church meeting. During the life of the building project every deacons meeting and most church meetings received a report from this group.

2. GETTING PLANNING PERMISSION

Every building project needs to gain planning permission from the local council. Although we sought to liaise with the planners from the word go, we ran into difficulties in gaining planning permission. For although at the beginning of August 1996 we had been advised that the Chelmsford Borough Council were likely to be supportive of our application, and as a result lodged our formal application on 26 September, toward the end of November our architects received a letter stating that the officers did not believe our proposals were in accordance with the draft local plan. To compound matters, the officers appeared to be unwilling to discuss matters of detail. Finally a meeting took place at the beginning of February 1997 when our architect was advised at the outset that the meeting was a 'waste of time' because the planners objected to our proposed side extensions as a matter of principle, even although the preceding week I had been assured by one of the planners that there were no objections in principle. It was even suggested at that meeting that it would be best for us to consider moving out of town and building on some green-field site. Understandably our Christian architect felt frustrated: as far as he was concerned we were not encountering reasonable objection but rather "spiritual warfare".

Throughout this period as a church we had been praying. However, at this point more direct action was clearly necessary. I began to engage in political lobbying. In the first instance I met with our local ward councillor. I then wrote to the Chief Executive of the Council, to the Leader of the Council, to all the councillors on the planning committee, to the local MP, to the Chairman and Secretary of Churches Together in Chelmsford, telling them of our difficulties. In addition I wrote a detailed account of the difficulties we were experiencing in our widely-distributed church magazine.

As a result of both the prayer and the action, the situation quickly changed. On 1 April (what a date!) 1997 we were granted formal planning permission by Chelmsford Borough Council.

3. LEARNING FROM OTHERS

During the course of our building project I visited a number of churches who had been through a building project to see what we could learn from their experience.

Perhaps the most influential visit was made in March 1996 to Bracknell, where together with my assistant minister I met with Ben Davies, the senior minister of 'Bracknell Family Church', who had overseen a £3 million development of their new 'Kerith Centre'. On our return to Chelmsford I jotted down a number of 'insights' we had gained from that visit, which included the following.

1. Leaders are called to lead. If God has called us to lead and if we believe we have discerned God's will for our premises, then it is our God-given duty to call the church to follow our lead. Disunity is being caused by those who refuse to follow the leadership given. Is God calling such people to follow the leadership here - or to serve him elsewhere?
2. As ministers who are convinced that God has called us to Chelmsford, we are committed to seeing the church through the proposed building and fund-raising process.
3. We need to recognise that the primary root to most objections concerning the proposed project is money. We believe that money should never be the determinative factor. Only the best is good enough for God.
4. Paul was reminded by Ben Davies of the very first sermon he preached as minister at Chelmsford: viz. that there is always opposition when significant opportunities for ministry present themselves (1 Cor 16.9)

4. SELLING THE VISION

Architects' plans have their limitations. Most people find it difficult to 'read' them. Plans in themselves are not enough if people are to grasp the underlying vision. So in February 1995, the month in which our preferred architect was to present his plans, 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..."

A minister's letter in the church magazine was not enough. At around the same time the ministers and deacons 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. This was a massively time-consuming undertaking. On these visits we took with us a beautifully produced colour brochure full of pictures and plans in which we sought to spell out the vision underlying the building project. Entitled *Your invitation to 'Build for the Future'*, it stated:

"We have a vision of a new seven day a week church centre, serving the community of Chelmsford, constantly alive with activity, offering a wide variety of 'bridges' of friendship over which people can come into our church and find faith in Christ. The Leadership Team of the Baptist Church, Victoria Road South, invite [name] to join them in Building for the Future.

People were encouraged to sign and return response cards with the following wording:

- Thank you for your kind invitation to share in the vision of Building for the Future.
- After reflection I/we wholeheartedly share in this vision and wish to be part of it.
- With God's help I/we will give priority to praying for the church, its mission and vision on a daily basis between Easter and Pentecost
- I/we accept your invitation to attend the KAIROS Day on Sunday April 13

5. MAKING THE MOST OF THE OPPORTUNITY

Sunday April 13 1997 was 'Kairos' Day – the day when we took over the Chelmsford Shire Hall and presented the vision of Building for the Future.

Kairos is one of two words the Greeks used for 'time'. Ordinary time was denoted by the word *chronos* – from *chronos* such English words as chronicle, chronology and chronometer are derived. But *kairos* was used to denote time that was 'special', that was 'right', that offered 'special opportunity'. In the New Testament the word *kairos* often marks a time of special opportunity. For example, the 'day of salvation' is described by Paul as a '*kairos* day' (2 Cor 6.2). As Paul makes clear, action needs to be taken if people are to benefit from this 'day of salvation', this 'day of special opportunity'. Woe betide those who fail to accept God's offer of life in Jesus! For in spurning life, they opt for death.

What is true of the offer of salvation was, I believed, true of the opportunity presented to redevelop our premises. Along with my leaders I was convinced that if we spurned this opportunity to give new life to our buildings, we would in fact be embracing for our church a slow but sure death. I reminded the church of the Chinese word for 'crisis' – it is made up of two characters, one of which denotes 'opportunity' and the 'other danger'. If we did not seize the opportunity, then by default we would automatically be in danger. Even more seriously, if we as a church failed, then we would have failed the people of Chelmsford.

The heart of the 'Kairos' day involved responding to what we termed 'The Challenge of the Heart'. Everybody was issued with a commitment card, similar to the old-fashioned commitment cards filled out by individuals at the time of their conversion. The difference was that these cards were to be filled out as a sign of deeper commitment to the Lord. These commitment cards had the following wording:

THE CHALLENGE OF THE HEART

The Risen Lord Jesus says to every member of his church: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you" (Rev 3.20)

My response to the Lord Jesus: "Lord Jesus, on this day of special opportunity I gladly fling wide open the door of my heart to you. For you died and rose for me. Come right in and be not just my Saviour of my soul but my Lord of my life too. In response to your great love I resolve to give now as I have never given before and promise to examine my finances with a view to giving sacrificially to your cause"

Date: Kairos Day, 13th April 1997

Signed:

"If Jesus Christ be God and died for me then no sacrifice can be too great"

6. MOBILISING PRAYER

In almost every church mobilising people to pray is one of the most difficult of tasks. As a church we tried just about everything to encourage and stimulate prayer. We had days of prayer with prayer clocks. We set aside 40 days for special prayer. We had afternoons of prayer, evenings of prayer, nights of prayer, and days of fasting. We prayed for the building project at our Sunday services, at our mid-week church meetings, and in our home groups. We organised prayer triplets and prayer groups. We went on prayer walks. We circulated leaflets with suggestions for private prayer. You name it, we did it!

Perhaps one of the most significant things we did was at the beginning of 1997 when we sent out a 'prayer tent' to every member and friend. On the one side was our motto from Neh 2.20. On the other side was a list of prayer pointers together with a prayer:

"Father, we believe that you have set us the task of redeveloping the church premises, so that they may continue to be a place where generations yet unborn can find you and worship you. Bless our venture of faith; guide us in all the decisions that have yet to be made; inspire all of us with vision, so that hearts and pockets alike may be touched; and give us the necessary faith to overcome all difficulties that may come our way".

On the reverse was my pastoral letter for the New Year:

"This year the redevelopment of our buildings is uppermost in our minds. I want to begin this pastoral letter by reminding you that God is the key to this great venture of faith to which we have committed ourselves. It is God who has led us to this point, and it is God who will see us through. Our success as a church depends on God.

This does not mean that we do not all have a part to play. The Book of Nehemiah highlights the importance of God's people getting their hands dirty. The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt because everybody rallied to the cause. Nehemiah was very much a man of action, but he was also a man of prayer (see Neh 1,4-11; 2.4; 4.9). Prayer and action went together. We in turn need to be people of prayer and action.

Nehemiah got into rebuilding because he was moved by the plight of Jerusalem. My heart - I believe God's heart - is moved by the plight of thousands of 'lost' people here in Chelmsford. Our concern in Building for the Future is for 'bricks and mortals' - it is our response to Jesus' invitation to join him in building his church. Let's pray not just for physical and financial success, but for spiritual success too. With the help of our redeveloped premises our friends and neighbours will come and discover the love of God for them.

I will place our prayer tent on the kitchen dresser, to remind us as we sit down to eat, not just to thank God for our food, but also to ask his blessing on our church. May I encourage you to place your prayer tent where it will act as a constant reminder to you to pray to God to give us success"

7. AROUSING PEOPLE'S FAITH IN GOD

There is little point in praying if faith is lacking. Faith is the indispensable catalyst, if a church would see God at work. The Gospel writers tell us that when Jesus visited Nazareth he could "not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief" (Matt 13.58). I believe that what was true on that occasion, is still true today.

Unfortunately we often allow "the magnitude of our problems to blind us to the majesty of our Master" (James Stewart). We need to see life in a new perspective - in God's perspective - and then to live and work in that perspective. Of course, there is no room for shallow optimism, which ignores or dismisses problems, but neither is there room for pessimism, which allows people to be crippled by the problems that are around them. Realism can be optimistic, where God is involved, for he "is able to do far more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Eph 3.20)

So another key to the project was arousing people's faith in God – helping them to realise that nothing is too hard for God! I preached a series of Sunday morning sermons on the God of the Exodus. It is amazing how relevant the story of the Exodus can be to a building project. One Sunday morning, to a congregation many of whom felt that we had launched out on an impossibly demanding project, I took as my text the words of Moses to the people of Israel as they stood before the Red Sea: "Don't be afraid! Stand your ground and you will see what the Lord will do to save you today... The Lord will fight for you" (Exod 14. 3,14 GNB). I spoke of the way in which fear grips us when our earthly circumstances fill our vision, and went on to encourage my people to stand their ground and not panic, for God was with us and he would act for us. Quoting the exceedingly apposite comment of Jewish Christian scholar, HL Ellison that: "Once or twice in a lifetime the average Christian finds himself in a position like Israel's. When he knows that it is God who has brought him into it, he will find that God's command is to go forward".⁷ I urged the congregation not to 'chicken out' of the special opportunity that was ours, but instead go forward in faith and see how God rewarded our faith.

I shared the experience of Michael Baughen, who when he was Rector of All Souls, Langham Place, right opposite the BBC in Central London, led his congregation through a major rebuilding project. It was a pretty hairy project - not least because it was at a time of galloping inflation, then running at 25% per year. After the successful completion of the project Michael Baughen wrote:

"How much blessing is missed by some Christians and some churches because they will not launch out with God, but calculate resources and limit action to the knowable and seeable. Ventures of faith sort us out. Second-hand faith, merely cerebral trust in God, arms-length relationship with the Lord, is exposed when we have to trust the Lord in real and practical terms, whether in crossing the bed of the Red Sea, in sacrificial giving in a building project, or facing a challenge in our lives. Our faith has to become first-hand, something to be acted upon as well as held in mind. It so often brings people out of the shadows of Christian faith into its glorious sunlight. From the heart they can praise God for his greatness, a God majestic in holiness, for they have seen him act in power before their very eyes."⁸

⁷ H.L. Ellison, *Exodus* (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1982) 79.

⁸ Michael Baughen, *Moses and the Venture of Faith* (Mowbray, Oxford 1978) 27, 33.

8. ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO GIVE

The test of our praying and our believing was our giving. It was here that the ‘rubber hit the road’. It was here too where there was a good deal of sensitivity. In our church money was the great unmentionable. We tackled the subject of giving in a number of ways. My church treasurer wrote a simple nine-page booklet, *Money Makes The World Go Round*, spelling out the Biblical teaching on the subject of giving. He concluded with a challenge to us all to consider our giving to God’s work, and “specifically to consider giving a tithe (tenth) for the Church’s General Fund and a further tithe, over the next four years, for the building project”

On the whole the church tolerated its treasurer talking about money. However, for some, the thought of their minister talking about money, was unacceptable. Yet, as pastor of a church that was engaging in a massive redevelopment project, I felt I had no other option but to exercise leadership in encouraging people to give. So in spite of criticism from some, I preached on the need to give. One Sunday, for instance, I focussed on the example King David set of extravagant giving, when they took up a special offering for a building fund (see 1 Chronicles 29).

“It was precisely because he was overwhelmed by God that David gave so generously to the building of the Temple (29.3). According to the Chronicler David gave "more than 100 metric tons of the finest gold and almost 240 metric tons of pure silver " (29.4). This gift is described as coming "from his own personal property". The underlying Hebrew word denotes "treasure of special importance... because it was a kind of personal security against times of political hardship or disaster".⁹ In other words, David gave away all that symbolised security for him.

Not surprisingly, the thought of this kind of giving was frightening to many!

9. RAISING THE MONEY

In order to raise money for the building project, we engaged in a wide variety of fundraising events. We held ‘Extravaganzas’ at the church with all kinds of goods on sale. We organised concerts in the aid of the Building Fund. People opened their gardens, held coffee mornings, organised reflexology sessions, and went out on boat trips. Teddy bears, cards of all sorts, glass objects, paintings, wooden objects, were sold; auctions were held. Almost every other month we had ‘Brick Sundays’, when people brought to church small change which they faithfully put in a cardboard ‘brick’ in the intervening period. You name it, we did it. In so doing, we raised a good deal of money. But fund-raising has not been the chief means of raising money.

Nor has making applications to trusts been the chief means. In total we have only raised £42,000 from trusts and commercial enterprises, a not insignificant sum of money in itself, but by comparison with the total needed still quite small.

A welcome £225,000 was added to the Building Fund from the sale of one of our three manses, but even this large sum of money did not provide the major contribution to the fund.

⁹ J. Gordon McConville, *Chronicles* (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1984) 103

No, the chief way in which we raised money has been through direct giving. Direct giving has been of two kinds. In the first place, there has been significant one-off gifts. In the second place, regular giving of God's people, whether under the four-year covenant scheme in existence at the time or under the 'Gift Aid Scheme' with its then minimum £250 tag attached to it. Much of this giving has been, and continues to be, truly sacrificial.

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. 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.

10. BORROWING MONEY

We could not have proceeded with re-developing our premises, had we not been able to borrow money.

In the first place we borrowed money from church members and friends, £402,000 in fact. In so far as our church is not a wealthy church, I was amazed at the amount of money our people had saved for their retirement – and the amount which they were prepared to lend.

In the second place, we borrowed money from the wider Baptist family. We borrowed £10,000 from the Essex Baptist Association; and £35,000 from the Baptist Building Fund. However, our major lender was the Baptist Union Corporation, from whom we borrowed £375,000. A word of warning, however, needs to be said. Even Christian organisations lending money want cast-iron guarantees that their money will be re-paid. Promises are not sufficient. Binding covenants alone satisfy.

11. CARING FOR THE MONEY

From the beginning we were clear that we needed to separate our building fund from our general fund. With that intention we appointed a separate treasurer of the building fund, together with a separate book-keeper

As time went by, we realised how blessed we were in our choice of building fund treasurer. A long-standing member of the church, he had not only the necessary financial acumen, but – more importantly – the trust of the church. When the church was in despair at rapidly rising costs, he was able to communicate the need effectively to the church, giving both encouragement as well as challenge.

In addition to caring for the money, the building fund treasurer negotiated effectively with loan fund managers, in the course of which he was able to present sound proposals for repayments. He also drew up simple agreements, understandable to all, for members and friends wishing to lend money.

Our building fund treasurer was also responsible for encouraging and then re-claiming tax resulting from covenanted giving. Thanks to the stringent Inland Revenue auditing of

accounts, this calls for a dedicated eye for detail. So far, we have raised over £208,000 from the taxman!

Few of us realised at the beginning how major was our building fund treasurer's task. Looking back, however, we realise that without God's man in place, this task could never have been carried out to a successful conclusion.

12. ENCOUNTERING OPPOSITION

Just as Nehemiah encountered opposition to his re-building plans, so too did we. There was a small vocal minority in the church who had turned down the two earlier redevelopment projects put forward by my predecessor and who were determined to do the same yet again. At almost every church meeting they raised their objections, and thank God at every church meeting their objections were over-ruled.

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.

Some were frightened by the sums of money involved and believed that as a church we would end up with a massive debt. Amongst some of the older people in the church there was a folk memory of a time in the 1930s when the church had been seriously in debt, and had only resolved its problems by selling the manse. However, these critics failed to realise that the church was much stronger than it had been in the 1930s. Although the sums involved were large, 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 present at the Special Church Meeting in March 1996 voted to move forward with the redevelopment of the premises, we were concerned for the 20% who did not vote in favour and went to great lengths to win them over to the project. With hindsight, we may well have been wrong to have been overly concerned.

Unfortunately our 'dissidents' refused to accept the decision of the church meeting's decision to move ahead with the building. Instead of adopting the 'Gamaliel' attitude (see Acts 8.38,39), they sought to bring up the issue at church meeting after church meeting. So at a church meeting in May 1997 we gave an opportunity for the church to review its decision to go forward with the redevelopment of the building. After lengthy discussion the church meeting overwhelmingly confirmed its "conviction that God is still leading us to redevelop the church's premises in accordance with the Ainsworth Davey Partnership scheme". By the end of the year the project specification had been completed and all the pre-tender work had been undertaken, but still the 'dissidents' made vigorous protests. One of their key arguments at this stage was that the church was not spiritually ready for such a project. In part they were right. As a result of their actions there was little sense of unity with the result that church life became very unhappy. Finally in March 1998, while I was away on a month's study, the church was persuaded to put the project on hold in order that time might be given for people

to 'regain their first love for the Lord'. Six months later the church reviewed its decision and agreed to proceed to tender.

The upshot of all this delay was that the project simply increased in cost, with the result that the pre-tender work had to be reviewed in order to ensure that costs were kept within the agreed £1.3 million. This again caused further delay, and it was not until April-May 1999 that the tender process took place, with the contract being awarded to the Chelmsford firm of Frederick J. French at a Special Church Meeting on 20 June. At that point, a good number of the dissidents, having been outvoted yet again, left the church. It was a sad business.

One thing further, however, needs to be said. Although there was a great deal of bitterness amongst the 'dissidents', not everybody who voted against the scheme shared that same spirit of bitterness. Some at the time were genuinely confused, and in their confusion understandably felt unable to vote for the scheme; others at the time simply believed the scheme was wrong and therefore had to vote against the scheme. What has been enormously moving has been 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.

4. THE FOURTH STAGE - BUILDING

1. RELOCATING THE CHURCH AND ITS ACTIVITIES

On Sunday morning 27 June 1999 we held our last service in our old premises on Victoria Road South, and in the evening moved across to Chelmsford County High School for Girls where we held our first evening service. For the next year and a half we worshipped in this school, with our mid-week activities re-located all over the town.

It was not an ideal situation. In losing our central base, we lost access to the facilities we had previously enjoyed. Although buildings are not of the essence of the church, they do make a difference. There are very real disadvantages in hiring builds.

On Sundays, although we had the services of a school caretaker and therefore did not have to put out the chairs for the services, there were a lot of extra things to do. The sound-team, for instance, had to come in at 8.30 every Sunday morning to ensure that everything was up and running. Setting up for our monthly Sunday evening youth service was enormously time-demanding too.

Some of our mid-week activities had to cease, while others had to function in unfamiliar surroundings. We ministers moved our offices to a barn in the country. Although we greatly enjoyed our rural surroundings, we felt cut off from the church's weekday activities. People were not able to drop in on us easily, nor were we able to drop in easily on the various organisations of the church.

However, we survived. In many ways we flourished as a church. For in spite of some of the drawbacks of worshipping in a school hall, we had a great sense of God's presence amongst us. Yes, it was sad that some of our members went off to worship elsewhere. But the silver lining was that much of the past arguing over the rightness of the project disappeared, with the result that the atmosphere on a Sunday noticeably lightened the moment we moved out of our old premises and into the school.

2. ADOPTING A NEW NAME

It was in this period of re-location that we decided to adopt a new name for our church.

Over the years our church had received a number of names. For a long time it was known as "Market Road Baptist Church"; but then the road was re-named with the result that the church became known as "Victoria Road South Baptist Church". This latter name was much too much of a mouthful with the result that it was abbreviated to 'VRS', a meaningful term to churchgoers, perhaps, but a term which said nothing to those outside the church. It was this latter fact which persuaded us to change. First and foremost we needed a name which communicated to the world outside.

After much discussion we decided to call ourselves 'Central Baptist Church' – or 'Central' or 'Central Baptist' for short! At the same time we adopted a new logo, which made it clear that Central was 'the church with a cross at the centre'.

3. DEALING WITH ESCALATING COSTS

When John Ainsworth first submitted his outline proposals, the construction costs were estimated to be around £650,000 + VAT. Even that sum took my breath away. At a meeting with my deacons in October 1995 I circulated a paper in which I advocated that we look for another way forward, since I believed that the church had not the resources to go beyond £500,000. To their credit the deacons told me to tear up the paper!

When in March 1996 the Church Meeting agreed to go ahead with the building project the estimated cost had risen to £1,300,000. But when in June 1999 it came to accepting tenders, the lowest-priced tender together with costs already incurred meant that we were now looking at a bill of £1,557,000.

Then costs increased even more. Once the builders set to work they discovered that the roof needed re-placing 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 £1,783,000 plus a further £91,000 to refurbish the halls which had not been included in the project cost. In addition there was the £46,000 needed to support the relocation costs and the £12,000 for furnishings. All in all, the total amount needed was £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 at this point that we experienced a series of miracles – miracles of giving. For 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 between the money we had (in loans and in gifts) and the money that was due – only to discover that the gap, once bridged, had only 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.

Now, at the time of writing, sixteen months after the completion of the of the project, we have been able to repay £183,000 to members, £65,000 off the capital of the loan from the Baptist Union Corporation, and return £10,000 to the Eastern (formerly Essex) Baptist Association and the Baptist Building Fund. God truly has been good to us.

5. THE FIFTH STAGE – MOVING BACK

1. CREATING A SPACE FOR THE WORSHIP OF GOD

Although our premises are multi-purpose and are used extensively for all kinds of church and community activities, the chief purpose of any church building is surely that of the worship of God. Certainly this is true of our church. Thanks to the vision and creativity of our architects, in our ‘meeting place’ we now have a magnificent space in which to worship God.

What’s more, this space is full of sacred symbols. Traditionally Baptists have been very suspicious of symbols. Our earliest forefathers favoured the plainest of buildings. The earliest Baptist places of worship were simple ‘meeting-houses’, similar to the meeting houses in which many Quakers still meet today. In the 19th century, when Nonconformity was at its strongest and its most confident, Baptists began to be more ambitious in their buildings. Up and down the country, huge chapels were constructed, seating congregations of a thousand or more. Essentially places for preaching, they tended to have large balconies and high lofty pulpits. But for the most part they were very plain buildings, almost devoid of sacred symbols. Strange as it now may seem, less than fifty years ago even the presence of a wooden cross in many an English Baptist church could be a matter of controversy.

Today things are different. Although there are some churches which are still happy to erect buildings with as much architectural merit as a cement factory, many Baptists are taking church architecture increasingly seriously. I wonder, is that in part because we now take the doctrine of the incarnation more seriously? Just as the love of God for us was expressed in human form, so too we may express our love and our devotion for God in wood and brick. Indeed, just as the physical acts of eating bread and drinking wine can become means of grace, so too can the physical attributes of church buildings become means of grace to those who worship. Certainly that is true of our ‘meeting place’. It is intended to be more than just a space in which people may congregate - it is intended to be a sacred space, in which people may encounter God himself. Hence its name.

With this idea of a space for the worship of God, let me take you on a quick tour of our new meeting-place and see what it has to say about our understanding of God and our response to his love. Perhaps the first thing a traditional Baptist will note is that, unlike our former ‘sanctuary’, there is no pulpit. Pulpits have gone out of fashion. Often ‘six feet above contradiction’, the pulpit has proved to be an unhelpful barrier between the preacher and the congregation. But we do have a new lectern - or should we call it a ‘preaching desk’? It is not just an insignificant stand on which to rest one’s Bible. It is a solid piece of furniture. Its very solidity symbolises the importance we as a fellowship pay to the preaching of God’s Word. If a ‘sacrament’ is a means of God’s blessing his people, then for us Baptists preaching is our primary ‘sacrament’. As a church we offer all kinds of styles of worship and of music, but central to them all is the exposition of the Word of God.

Then there is our new communion table, beautiful in its simplicity. It is no altar - yet it speaks of the body and blood of Christ offered up in sacrifice for us, once and for all. It is a table - and speaks of the fellowship which we experience in Jesus when we come together around the table. It is an ‘open’ table - and speaks of the Lord’s invitation to all who ‘sincerely love our Lord Jesus Christ and desire to be his true disciples’ to come, eat and drink. Although there are times when the table has to be moved to one side because the space is needed for a family service, normally the table remains central, a constant reminder of the grace of God.

Behind the table, yet in clear view of all, is our wonderful new baptistery. How different from our old baptistery, constructed with Edwardian modesty and visible to none! If the table speaks of what Jesus has done for us, the baptistery speaks of the response we need to make to Jesus. Jesus invites us to make his death and his resurrection our own - to share with him in his death and burial, so that we might rise with him to newness of life. At the heart of our Baptist understanding of baptism is our theology of conversion. The baptistery symbolises faith's response to the grace of God.

Either side of the baptistery are two magnificent banners, rich in symbolism, depicting the triumphant words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life". Even those who fail to spot the symbolism of the lectern, the table and the baptistery, cannot fail to spot the symbols of the cross and resurrection. The crown of thorns and the crown of life are fairly obvious, but perhaps less so the purple robe of the Crucified and the catch of fish. But there may be other symbolism present too. Is the water issuing from the side of Christ symbolic of the Holy Spirit - or is it that the stake of the cross is plunged into the waters of chaos? Is the water swirling around the risen Lord symbolic of river of the water of life of which we read in the Book of Revelation? And what about the words "I AM", a title for God, written above the Cross - is the heart of God most clearly revealed in the Cross?

To the west side of the baptistery is the wooden cross, which used to dominate the pulpit in the old 'sanctuary'. It is an empty cross, not a crucifix - a reminder that our crucified Saviour is also the risen Lord.

To the east side of the baptistery are the drums and the piano, together with evidence of other instruments too. And of course there is our organ at the back. All these instruments symbolise our desire to worship God and give him the glory.

Around the platform area are our new chairs, arranged in one large semi-circle. I am so glad that as a result of our extending the breadth of the building we have been able to give expression to our understanding of the church as a fellowship of believers. Yes, the chairs symbolise fellowship. The importance of the chairs is not that we can be more comfortable - but that we can arrange them in such a way that we can see one another. When seated in ranks of pews, we saw only each others' backs - but now we can see the faces of at least some of our brothers and sisters.

Above us there are symbols too. There is the high wooden roof with its imposing arches. The wooden roof reminds us of the wooden ark in which Noah and his family escaped from the flood, the ark which later became a symbol of the church, which in turn became a symbol of salvation. And there is the light streaming through the new roof-lights. What a difference the light has made. It uplifts the spirit and inspires the soul. For us the light symbolises the light of heaven - as the light of heaven streams in, we are reminded of Jacob's ladder stretching between heaven and earth, and of Jacob's discovery: "This is the house of God", it is "the gate of heaven" (Gen 28.12-17).

When it came to re-building the chamber of the House of Commons, which was destroyed by a fire-bomb in the Second World War, Winston Churchill in putting forward his preferred design said: "We make our buildings and our buildings make us". Sometimes we are the worse for the buildings we have built. With our re-modelled 'meeting-place', we are much the better able to worship God.

2. NAMING THE NEW SPACES

As we began the move back to our redeveloped premises, the question arose: what do we call all the various rooms and spaces in our new church? All kinds of possibilities were raised. Some suggested we might consider naming rooms after famous missionaries, others that we might name them after former ministers of the church. In the end, we decided to go for more 'functional' names, which need little explanation. So we have, for instance, an 'Upper Hall' and a 'Lower Hall'. We also have 'Seminar Rooms' and a 'Counselling Room'.

The open area downstairs, where during the week our Oasis café functions and where on Sundays coffee is served after services, is named 'The Friendship Centre'. As a church we are in the business of offering friendship to all. The suite of offices, which includes offices for three ministers together with a large general church office, is named 'The Pastoral Centre'. A reminder that the ministers are not managers or bureaucrats but pastors. As pastors with a responsibility to care for the flock we are available to see people. As pastors with a responsibility to feed the flock we study God's Word with a view to expounding it on Sunday.

The most interesting re-naming related to the upstairs area where we come together for worship. As a church we were almost unanimous in not wanting to use the term 'sanctuary'. Not only does it have an old-fashioned ring, it is also a very un-Baptist term. God's people are called to be 'holy' (1 Pet 1.16; 2.9), not the place where they worship.

Some favoured the term 'The Upper Room'. Certainly for Christians this term has all kinds of very welcome connotations. It was, for instance, in an Upper Room that the Last Supper took place (Mark 14.15). It may well have been in that same Upper Room that the Risen Lord Jesus appeared to the disciples (John 20.19-29). Likewise the disciples may well have gathered in that Upper Room when the Holy Spirit came in power (Acts 2.2). But what does the term 'Upper Room' mean to non-Christians? Nothing!

At one stage I advocated the use of the term 'the Worship Area', for when we come together on a Sunday we come to 'worship the Lord with joy', singing before him our 'happy songs' (Psalm 100.2). Then I realised that this term could have some unreal limitations for what is a multi-purpose area. So finally, after much discussion, we opted for 'The Meeting Place'. In so doing, I believe we made a wise choice, even if for some Christians the term 'meeting' can evoke a massive yawn! The fact is that as far as outsiders are concerned, and they must always be in mind, it is a good neutral term. For them, at least, it does not have any unhelpful 'churchy' overtones. If anything it might remind them of 'the meeting point' at an airport or at a mainline station. Church is the place where you come to meet up with others (and perhaps, church is the place where you come if you feel lost!).

For people with nonconformist roots (i.e. Baptists and Congregationalists), it is most certainly not a neutral term. For them it is reminiscent of the term they used in the 17th and 18th centuries (and which Quakers still use) for their places of worship, the 'meeting House'. For Christians in general there are powerful motives for using this term for a 'church': for when we come together for worship, we come first and foremost to meet with God.

3. RETURNING HOME

Our very first service in our redeveloped premises was held on Sunday afternoon 4 February 2000. At that stage there were no chairs in the meeting place, the sound-system had yet to be installed, there was no organ – there was simply a carpeted space. Nonetheless we were able to hold a short service of ‘praise and prayer’.

We centred our thoughts around Psalm 122, a psalm of praise and prayer originally sung by Jewish pilgrims as they entered Jerusalem at festival time. The psalm begins on a note of praise: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the Lord’s house’ and now we are here, standing inside the gates of Jerusalem” (v1). Or in Peterson’s paraphrase: “When they said, ‘Let’s go to the house of God’, my heart leaped for joy. And now we’re here, oh Jerusalem, inside Jerusalem’s walls!” That was how we felt, full of gladness and joy, for we were back again in our church, after a gap of 19 months, praising God.

Like the pilgrims, we were overwhelmed by the beauty of what we saw. The pilgrims saw “a city restored in beautiful order and harmony” (v3). We saw our church, if not restored, then *renewed* in beautiful order & harmony. I confess that when it was first suggested that we put in a new floor at balcony level, I was not convinced. I didn’t think it would work. But how wrong I was. In the words of Peterson, our ‘new’ church was “well-built... as a place for worship”.

From praise the psalmist turns to prayer. “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (v6). We too prayed for God’s peace on all who enter our building. As we did so, we remembered, that for a Jew “peace” (*shalom*) means far more than cessation from warfare, it denotes ‘God’s very best’.

The Psalm goes on: “May there be peace inside your walls & safety in your palaces” (v7). Significantly the word for “safety” is also the word for “salvation”. So we prayed not only for peace, but also for “salvation” to be experienced inside the walls of this church, not least by “relatives and friends” (v8).

Acc to the NRSV the Psalmist ends on a note of dedication: “I will seek your good” (v9); or in the words of Peterson: “I’ll do my very best for you”. We too ended on a note of dedication, realising that this splendid building would only reach its true potential as we all play our part, seeking to do our very best for God & for his kingdom.

4. THE GRAND OPENING

From the very beginning we were clear that as a church we wanted to serve the community. So when it came to the Grand Opening on Saturday 28 April 2001 it was natural for us to want to invite representatives of the wider community to be present. To our surprise and delight, the community leaders wanted to be present – there were very few who declined our invitation. Indeed, we were almost embarrassed by the number of such guests, with the result that we were only able to single out some of the more eminent community leaders.

Our VIPs on the day included the Vice-Lord Lieutenant of Essex representing the Lord Lieutenant; the Mayor and Mayoress of Chelmsford; two distinguished members of the House of Lords who live locally, viz. an eminent lady engineer and the Bishop of

Chelmsford; our MP; the Chief Executives of Essex County Council and of Chelmsford Borough Council; the Vice-Chancellor of Anglia Polytechnic University which is based in Chelmsford. There were, however, many other special guests: social workers, local councillors, and even local undertakers, in addition to many representatives from other churches in the town and beyond.

Our guest preacher for the day was David Coffey, the General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. His instructions were quite precise: preach for no more than 15 minutes and remember that you are speaking to the community as much as to the church!

In large bold print on the front cover of the order of service were the words: “*To the Glory of God*”. The same words were etched on one of the two ceremonial building stones. Just as the medieval builders of churches and cathedrals used to carve the initials ADMG on their buildings – *Ad Dei Maiorem Gloriam* (‘To the greater glory of God’) – we in our turn wanted to ensure that our splendid premises reflected not our glory, but God’s.

6. THE FINAL ONGOING STAGE – LIVING OUT THE DREAM OF A SEVEN-DAY-A-WEEK CHURCH

1. WELCOMING THE COMMUNITY

From the word ‘go’ we decided to make our premises available to the community when they are not being used by the church. We do not, however, offer them free, but rather hire them out at competitive rates.

We have been amazed at how eager the community has been to use our premises. In any given week we normally have at least 400 non-church people through our premises – and often many more. Essex County Council and Anglia Polytechnic University in particular, but also a host of other business too, are regular users of the building. We have rapidly become a favoured venue in Chelmsford for concerts and conferences, exhibitions and receptions, seminars and consultations.

The result is that as a church we have had to become VAT registered. Our present annual turn-over from lettings exceeds £80,000. This money has been very welcome, not least in view of the remaining debt we still have to pay off on our building. However, one thing, we are all agreed upon is that money is not the central issue. We have not redeveloped our building with a view to hiring out our premises, but rather with a view to serving our community. Even the lettings is a form of service.

As a result of these lettings, our profile in the community is high. In a way which was not true before, people now know where we are. It is probably not much of an exaggeration to say that there is not one employee of Essex County Council who has not been in our premises.

Furthermore, in coming into our new building, people become aware of what we stand for. In our Friendship Centre downstairs as 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.

2. USING VOLUNTEERS

The secret of our church’s success is the vast army of volunteers who care for the church (as distinct from the many who staff the church’s own organisations and activities).

Several months before we moved back into our redeveloped premises we were able to appoint a volunteer church centre manager. We were extraordinarily blessed in having the services of a man who had just retired, whose energy and dedication to the Kingdom of God has been boundless. His task was to oversee the smooth running and maintenance of our building. In addition he took responsibility for the marketing of the church centre to outside agencies. But within a matter of months the role of the church centre manager became far too

much for one person. With a church open for ‘business’ from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every week, we found that we needed by two further volunteer deputy managers.

There is the team of volunteer receptionists who are the first point of contact for people visiting the church. There is the team of volunteer cleaners, who between them come in every day to ensure the building is ready for use. There is a volunteer who deals with bookings, another volunteer who oversees external catering. Other tasks relate to building maintenance, the operation of audio-visual services for external bookings, and the arranging of tables and chairs. We are greatly blessed with a large number of deeply committed people.

We are still in the process of sorting out how we deal with volunteers. We are committed to producing and maintaining a ‘quality manual’ defining the duties and responsibilities of everybody; to ensuring that regular ‘team’ meetings are held at which problems can be aired and information shared; to giving an opportunity for annual ‘reviews’ for everybody, providing an opportunity to listen, encourage and express appreciation.

3. RE-STARTING THE OASIS CAFÉ

High on our agenda was re-starting our Oasis Café, suspended during the many months of re-location. Serving light refreshments from 10.30 a.m. to 2 p.m., the aim of the enterprise is to build bridges of friendship between the community and the church. The kitchen staff and those who wait at tables are all volunteers, with the result that prices are more than competitive with elsewhere in town. The café is the shopwindow of the church during the week and as such has a vital role to play.

In the old premises the Oasis Café struggled for survival. How different the story is now. Much of the time we are almost overwhelmed by the numbers of those dropping in. Many are ‘regulars’ – every Tuesday morning for instance we welcome a group of ‘dog walkers’ and their dogs (destined to become guide dogs for the blind), Many are total strangers, who for one reason or another call in. The numbers create a challenge. We can be so busy serving people that we can miss out the key task of befriending. This is serious, for at the end of the day we are not called to make a healthy profit, but to make disciples.

4. DEVELOPING NEW ACTIVITIES

A number of new activities have sprung up since we redeveloped our premises. During the week we have started up two activities to take advantage of our town-centre site.

The first is Central Forum, an occasional (sometimes monthly, sometimes weekly) Tuesday lunch-time event, when we invite local figures in the community to give a punchy talk about an issue dear to their hearts, which hopefully will be of interest to others. Central Forum lasts for 30 minutes – the 20 minute talk is followed by 10 minutes of questions. Speakers have included the governor of Chelmsford Prison, the head of a local counselling agency, the Canon-theologian of Chelmsford Cathedral, the County Head of Libraries, Heritage & Culture, the chairman of the Borough planning committee etc.

The second is Central Live, primarily a weekly Monday evening event for sports enthusiasts. Capitalising on the fact that we have the largest screen in town, we have subscribed to Sky

Sports so that we show Premiership football matches and other major sporting events. We screened the key World Cup football matches – but also non-sporting events such as the Queen Mother’s Funeral. The size of the screen apart, the advantage we have over the local pubs is that our venue is family-friendly, for it is alcohol- and smoke-free.

As part of our ministry to senior adults we have added a new Sunday ‘event’. On the third Sunday of the month, when in the evening we hold a ‘youth rave’ (Synergy), in the afternoon we run ‘Outlook’, a 45 minute fast-moving programme for ‘the mature in years and young at heart’, followed by the best afternoon tea in town! Designed to meet the needs of people journeying into the mature years of life – ‘a time when we still have much to offer and to learn from each other’, the programmes have an ease of style and content, combined with Christian challenge and affirmation. Not surprisingly it is a well-patronised event.

Another new activity is the serving of wine on church premises! Like almost all Baptist churches, alcohol has traditionally been banned from all church activities. However, we believe that times have changed. So although we do not allow the bringing of alcohol onto the premises, we do allow the serving of wine at such events as wedding receptions, quiz nights, Alpha courses, and concerts. We consider that the refusal to allow the drinking of wine is an unnecessary sub-cultural hurdle for people to jump when coming to church events. Interestingly, it was a committed teetotaler who proposed that for the sake of the Gospel we allow the serving of wine on church premises!

5. EXPERIENCING A NEW TOUCH OF GOD’S SPIRIT

As many churches have discovered, the redevelopment of buildings and the renewal of God’s people go hand in hand. This was the experience of George Carey when he was Vicar of St Nicholas Durham; already this is beginning to be our experience too.

In our loan application to the Baptist Union Corporation, we concluded our submission with these words:

“Precisely because of the enormous financial challenge posed by the present scheme, we believe that as a fellowship we will be the stronger fellowship for having had our faith tested in this way”.

Looking back over the past few years it is very evident that 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 and baptisms are up. True, we have still a long way to go before we are anywhere near the kind of people God wants us to be. However, the building project has undoubtedly been used by God to enable us to take a number of steps forward in our life together.

6. IN CONCLUSION

So, in conclusion let me say, if our experience is anything to go by, for churches engaging in building projects there may well be tough times, but the end result is worth all the tears.

Toward the beginning of our building process I was given a card, which I pinned up on my office noticeboard and kept it 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. Ben Davies of Bracknell Family Church was right when he wrote to me after the Grand Opening: "Think the unthinkable - speak the unthinkable, believe for the impossible and pay the price for it" . Yes, the price is high, but it is more than worth paying. For us, at least, it has marked the beginning of a new life, new growth, and new hope.

THE STORY CONTINUES (Addendum: October 2004)

Twelve months on – and two print runs later – it is good to be able to report that the work of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, goes on apace. Although we are not unmindful of the 'ministry' our members offer in their places of work and of leisure, our premises play a key role in the mission and ministry of our church.

Church Use

Congregations on Sunday continue to increase. There is never a Sunday when do not welcome visitors to our services. The resultant growth means that as a church we are now considering disbanding our present morning service with a view to creating two 'missionary congregations'. Although there are always seats available on a Sunday morning, latecomers often struggle to find a seat; this in turn creates awkwardness and embarrassment. We believe that if we do nothing about this problem, then our congregations will cease to grow. For as church growth researchers point out, once a church is 80% full, it is 'full'.

Although we have considered the possibility of planting a church elsewhere in the town, we do not see this as part of God's purpose for us at the moment. Our vision for Central Baptist is of a strong town-centre church which, out of its strength, can serve the community all the more effectively.

Making changes to church life is always uncomfortable. If we are to incorporate new people, we must move out of our present comfort zones. For first and foremost we exist not for ourselves, but for others. In the words of William Temple, "The church is the only organisation which exists for the sake of its non-members". This, of course, was the driving force behind 'Building for the Future' – the vision of a mission facility for the 21st century. In a sense this creating of two 'missionary congregations' is but an extension of the original vision.

In the past twelve months new activities have been springing up. Encounter, a thriving new group for students and those in their twenties, meets after the Sunday evening services in the Friendship Centre, where it also holds a monthly student lunch. The Friendship Centre is likewise home to Ozone, a new midweek group for young people: in line with the chemical formula after which they are named (O₃), they seek to be 'Open to God', 'Open to one another', and 'Open to others'.

A further exciting development has been the setting up of ProAct, a community resource centre for the disadvantaged, in particular the growing number of disadvantaged people from

the 'Black and Minority Ethnic' community. ProAct provides advice and practical support with job search skills, CV writing and housing applications; it also helps people facing discrimination and prejudice. In addition, it seeks to put disadvantaged people in touch with the key service providers in the area.

Community Use

The premises are used by the community more than ever before, with the result that 50% of use of the building is by the community, and 50% by the church. Whereas in the first edition we stated that every week over 400 non-church people came through the premises, now it is more like 1000 non-church people – one week recently we calculated that we had hosted over 2000 non-church people.

One popular facility we have added to our Friendship Centre is a small cyber café - essentially three computers with broadband internet access. No charge is made for their use, although donations are welcome. Students and others come in to use this facility – and the children on a Sunday love to use them too!

An interesting feature of our lettings is that, almost without exception, they consist of a series of 'one-off' bookings. Many town-centre churches, which allow their premises to be used by the community, have a limited clientele, in the sense that most of their bookings are long-term in nature: their premises, for instance, are used every week by the blind or by the disabled, by Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon, by a dance class or by a music group. With the exception of a large retirement group which meets in our Lower Hall once a fortnight, we have no long-term bookings. Some of our lettings consist of a series of bookings: e.g. a series of supervised contact sessions with a problem family or a training course which might take place over a number of weeks. However, generally speaking, the bookings are for one event only. This demands a good deal of work on the part of our church centre administrator; however, it does ensure that there is a constant supply of new people coming into our premises.

For the many non-church people, a church like ours is a revelation, because it is so different from their previous experience of church. In the first place, it's a comfortable place to be. What's more, there is a distinctive 'feel' to the place. In part this arises from the various symbols around: in the Meeting Place, for instance, there is the large cross as also the large colourful banners, all pointing to Jesus and his love. Everywhere there are displays relating to various aspects of church life. However, above all, it is a welcoming place: the church staff and volunteers go out of their way to act as gracious hosts.

Church centre staff

The increased use of the premises and the resultant increased income has meant that we have been able to expand our church centre staff. Along with the full-time church centre administrator, who is responsible for all the lettings, we also now have a full-time church centre steward, who ensures that the many diverse demands are met.

Church finances

In part as a result of the lettings, but mostly because of the generosity of church members, the debt on the building continues to be reduced. We are now in the happy position that there are no longer any outstanding loans to church members. At this current moment our present debt to the Baptist Union Corporation and other Baptist funds and other is £260,000 - still a sizeable amount of money, but relatively little compared to the massive amount of money already raised. God is indeed good!

A Town-Centre Church

As our name implies, Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford is a town-centre church. Nobody lives around us – rather we are surrounded by offices, the central library, and a university campus. The challenge for us has been to develop a role specific to our situation, and not to be simply a pale reflection of a neighbourhood church.

It is precisely because we are a town-centre church that we are able to run our café, our mental health clubs, our child contact centre, and now our community resource centre, Similarly, it is precisely because we are a town-centre church that so many groups in the community wish to use our premises.

Because as a town-centre church we are easily accessible, people with no church connection will sign up for one of our Alpha courses. Some of these people see our Alpha publicity as a result of coming to a secular course or event being held at the church. Others on their way to the shops see our Alpha banner and decided to give us a try. While yet others find us on the web.

Yes, we are different from many other churches. With events of all kinds taking place on our premises, we are a seven day a week church. From 8.30 in the morning until 10 o'clock at night the place hums with life. It's a great privilege to be the pastor of such a church.

A town-centre church with a future 'parish'

As a result of major redevelopment in central Chelmsford, the area around the church is about to undergo great change, with the result that by 2010 our town-centre church will have a new 'parish' around it. The local university has sold off its old Central Campus and moved half-a-mile away to a new campus. Almost all the old university buildings will be demolished, and in their place 692 apartments constructed – 25% of which will be 'affordable' housing.

On the other side of the railway viaduct, only some four hundred yards away, there will be further redevelopment, with yet more apartments. Six hundred yards away, another major apartment complex is coming on stream.

All of a sudden, perhaps as many as 3000 people will have moved only a stone's throw away from the church. We are excited as we see opportunities for mission and service! Our task as a church is to discover the needs of these newcomers – and then meet those needs in the name of Jesus.