

GOING PLACES WITH GOD

A 31-DAY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE
FOR
CONGREGATIONS CONSIDERING RELOCATION

COMPILED BY DEREK GENTLE

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SO YOUR CHURCH IS DISCUSSING RELOCATION

Relocation is a big decision for a congregation. As they used to say in weddings, it is not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly, but soberly and discreetly. This step should be taken only when it is clearly the best strategy, at the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Davis Byrd, of LifeWay's Church Architecture Department says churches need to relocate for one of two reasons:

1. Out of a need for additional land area that is unavailable in the present location, or
2. They have a poor location to do the ministry they feel called to do.

It is not the purpose of this material to urge your congregation to relocate. That may not be the best course for your congregation — there is no such thing as a “one size fits all” answer on this question. By considering relocation, your congregation is saying that you have issues that need to be addressed. If you are considering relocation for the second reason above, the discussion will be particularly difficult for your congregation, for your church may be at the point of a life and death crisis.

One of the most difficult things for you or some of your fellow church members will be to sort through the emotions relocation talk stirs up. Some may feel that the church is considering a course that is disloyal to your forbearers, or that the church will never be the same in another location. These feelings will not just go away if we ignore them. They are powerful and sometimes agonizing. We need to acknowledge these feelings, but we should not allow them to prevent us from studying the facts about the situation, and searching for insights from Scripture that may apply to it.

Discussions about relocation are about more than your building's street address. They are about the kind of church you are going to be. The relocation decision is about your church growth strategy. What is your church's niche in the Kingdom of God? What are the strengths of your congregation and where could you best put those strengths to work?

The relocation question involves some of your deepest held doctrinal beliefs — in particular, the doctrine of the church. What do you believe about the nature and mission of the church?

Your answer to the relocation question may also reveal your level of spiritual commitment. The key question is: would you be *willing* to support relocation if you knew God wanted it? These are spiritual issues that need to be *thought through* and *prayed through*.

You would not be reading this if you did not love your church. However, be warned: this booklet will speak firmly to you and your fellow church members concerning ministry and mission. The strong wording is intended to overcome the defenses we put up to protect our feelings concerning the church we love so much. God bless you as you enter the presence of God, and study relocation together with Him.

Now to Him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think—according to the power that works in you— to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. – Ephesians 3:20-21

PRAYING FOR GUIDANCE

Make Your ways known to me, Lord; teach me Your paths – Psalms 25:4

God is not hiding His will from you or your church. Ron Dunn used to say that people often talk about God's will as if it were an egg in an Easter egg hunt. It is as if we are required to obey God, but first we have to find God's will, wherever He hid it. To the contrary, God has already taken the initiative and is ready to guide you if you are willing to follow.

Our church was growing, but it was landlocked with no room for expansion. Efforts to buy key properties around us had failed. One day, as I prayed, I asked the Lord that if He wanted our church to relocate, that He would have someone offer to sell the church some land. I then felt impressed to add that it didn't necessarily have to be property we would actually purchase – just an offer to get the ball rolling on the discussion. A few weeks later, a member of the church offered to sell the church a piece of property on the main road through town. Within days, the deacons were on the church bus touring possible sites for a new building. Someone on the bus asked about a particular parcel that was not for sale at the time. Inquiries were made of the owner. Within months the church had purchased 25 acres of land on the side of town where growth would come. The judgment of the congregation was that the Lord had closed the door to staying at our present location and that He wanted us to relocate.

This is not to say that you should pray the same prayer or that your church should relocate. It is to say that if you seek God's guidance He will give it. He promises, "I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with My eye on you, I will give counsel" (Psalms 32:8).

Once God has revealed His will, you must obey. God does not reveal His will for our intellectual evaluation, but for our ready obedience.

God's guidance will come whether He leads your church to relocate or not. If He leads your church to relocate, it will be with a new vision and a new opportunity for mission. If He leads you to stay, He will renew your vision, perhaps giving you a fresh strategy for reaching and ministering in the community where you are.

Today's Scripture Reading: Acts 16:6-15

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Thank You, Lord, that You have a plan for our church. Thank You that You are in the process of making that plan clear to us as a congregation.*

HOW TO KNOW THE WILL OF GOD

...So that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. — Romans 12:2

How do you recognize the will of God when you see it? We may be committed to obeying God, but sometimes, we are not exactly clear on what God wants us to do. Here are a couple of reasons we get confused about God's will:

- *Our life experiences have taught us that we can't always trust our desires. It is true God gives us the desire to do His will (Philippians 2:13). We shouldn't automatically assume that God's will is that one thing we don't want to do! If we are walking in the Spirit and in a pattern of obedience, our desires usually fall into place as we seek to follow God's will. On the other hand, we remember that Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. Jesus prayed "If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).*
- *Is God blessing it? Generally speaking, if God isn't blessing it, God isn't in it. On the other hand, the Lord isn't always in the most popular trends. There are numerous stories of missionaries who served for many years before seeing a single conversion.*

There are some keys to recognizing God's will. Give each of these your consideration:

- *God steers only moving cars, not parked ones. If you are sitting on the sidelines of Christian living and of Christian service, God isn't going to guide you. Life commitment is a prerequisite to recognizing God's will.*
- *You have to sign the check before God will fill in the amount. You cannot wait to see if you approve of His will, you have to first be committed to do it, whatever it is. Then, and only then, will God make his plan clear.*
- *Is it Biblical? God has already spoken through His Word. He meant what He said the first time. He will not contradict Himself. Asking for a sign after God has given us direction is to test Him. It would be like asking a policeman if you should obey the speed limit!*
- *How does it align with God's calling on your life (or church)? God has prepared and gifted us to serve in particular ways. There is a niche we each fill as an individual and together as a church. The Lord might guide us to fill that niche in a new way or place, but He will not lead us to break from His basic calling on our lives.*
- *What are mature Christians saying about it? God often speaks to us through others.*
- *Has God put up any roadblocks or barriers to the direction you have been trying to go? Sometimes God simply closes the door. Or has God opened a door? Revelation 3:7 tells us Jesus, "...opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens".*

Today's Scripture Reading: John 15:14-16:14

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, today I present myself to you, a living sacrifice, at Your disposal. By Your Holy Spirit, renew my mind that I may recognize your good will when I see it.*

GOD IS DOING SOMETHING NEW

*Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Do you not see it?
Indeed, I will make a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. — Isaiah 43:19*

God is doing something new in your church! That is why you are discussing relocation. And even if moving isn't the right answer for your church, some kind of change is. If everything were going perfectly, you wouldn't be discussing relocation. Either you are growing and don't have room for growth or you can't grow at your present location. Either you should move your facilities to where growth is possible or you should change your facilities and approach to ministry.

The changes may be expensive or uncomfortable. Yet one way or the other, big steps need to be taken. You cannot continue doing things the way you are doing them — and please God. It is obvious that change must come. The problem is that we all hate change, don't we?

In *The Monday Morning Mission*, Howard Hendricks lists five attitudes toward change:

1. Early innovators (2.6%), run with new ideas
2. Early adapters (13.4%), influenced by (1) but not initiators
3. Slow Majority (34%), the herd-followers
4. Reluctant Majority (34%)
5. Antagonistic (16%), they will never change

The Bible is clear: God is looking for early innovators and early adapters. He says, "Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Do you not see it?" Do you see how God is at work to do something new and meaningful through your church? Will you show confidence in God's ability to "make a way in the wilderness" and "rivers in the desert"?

Change is inevitable. If you do absolutely nothing, change will still come. At that point, however, the change will be the painful decline and death of your church. You can sit by and watch the dreaded changes come, or you can adapt with God and experience the Christian adventure.

When the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, they were instructed to follow the Ark of the Covenant — "Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before" (Joshua 3:4, NIV). Whenever God leads His people — whether to the Promised Land, or to a new location, or to take a new approach to their mission at their present site — they will be able to say, "We have never been this way before."

Today's Scripture Reading: Psalm 40

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Heavenly Father, your mercies are new every day. You made us new creations in Christ. One day, You will form a new heaven and a new earth. You do new things. To avoid change, I would have to avoid You — and I don't want to do that. Please help me adapt to what You are doing and move with You.*

BUT I WANT TO BE LIKE THE OTHER KIDS

Then we'll be like all the other nations — 1st Samuel 8:20

The children of Israel wanted a king. Samuel warned them that it would mean expansive government: taxes, a military draft, and civil service for their children. It would not work out the way they had it pictured in their minds. And ultimately, it was a rejection of God's direct rule over them. But, "The people refused to listen to Samuel. 'No!' they said. 'We must have a king over us. Then we'll be like all the other nations: our king will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles.'" (1st Samuel 8:19-20). Sounds just like children, doesn't it? "We want to be like the other kids."

Sometimes you hear about a church that has relocated and how well the new location works out for them. Other churches hear their story and decide that relocation is the answer for their problems, too. They get the idea that if they moved to a different part of town, and into a new building, new growth and a new spirit would come to their congregations, too. Sometimes, churches get "Relocation Fever."

Someone explained it along these lines. A church gets a burden to reach, say, young couples. They pray about young couples for a long time. They listen for the leading of God's Spirit. Finally, the Lord tells them, "To reach young couples, do A, B, and C. In obedience to God, they do A, B, and C. They end up with one of the fastest growing young adult ministries in the state. Then, other churches begin to ask them how they reached so many young couples. They answer, "We asked God what to do and He told us A, B, and C." The other churches rush to implement the three-step program. Some of the congregations begin to reach young couples and some don't. What they all failed to realize was that the real first step was seeking God's leading, not "A." The Lord may have wanted one of those churches to reach middle-aged people and another church to start a crisis pregnancy center. They weren't listening to God, so they missed it.

We cannot find God's will for our congregation by photocopying another church's ministry plan. God has given each one of our congregations a unique niche in the Kingdom's work. While we can learn from each other, "copy-cat planning" can cause us to miss the Lord's good plan for our church.

Today's Scripture Reading: First Samuel 8:1

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Heavenly Father, thank You that our congregation has been given a unique place in your Kingdom. Help us see our niche. Deliver us from trying to copy Your plan from someone else.*

DECIDING TOGETHER

After he had seen the vision, we immediately made efforts to set out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to evangelize them. – Acts 16:10

In his book *The Pursuit of God*, A. W. Tozer wrote, "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned not to each other but to another standard to which each one must individually bow." In the same way, when everyone is tuned to the will of Christ, they are at unity and are of one mind.

This principle applies to the decision-making process in our churches. The purpose of a church business meeting to determine together, as a congregation, what the Holy Spirit is leading us to do. It is not simply a matter of majority rule. In this kingdom, we are seeking the rule of God. We vote in a democratic fashion for the purpose of clarifying what we understand His leading to be. The attitude is "Thy will be done," not "My will be done."

Here are some guidelines for approaching the discussion of church business:

- Each member is honor-bound to pray and seek God's will.
- Think Biblically. In church, we base our decisions on Biblical principles. If you had to cite a Biblical text on which to base your remarks in church conference, could you?
- We are all fallen creatures, subject to sin and wrong motives. Be humble in holding your opinions. Be gentle in dealing with others who disagree.
- Even though we are seeking the will of God, and each of us has the right to say what we believe that to be, try not to sound like you have a corner on the market – "I know God's will, now listen to me."
- Listen to hear the Spirit's wisdom through the others.
- Remember, not everyone is good with words. Listen to the spirit of what the others say.
- If we or someone else speaks with anger and threats, something is wrong. That kind of attitude isn't from God (James 3:13-18).
- When someone appeals to tradition instead of Scripture or sentimentality instead of the mission of the church, discount their counsel.
- Be prepared to vote against your personal preferences if God so leads.
- Remember, every member gets his say, not every member gets his way. After the matter is decided, be a team player.

Today's Scripture Reading: James 3:13-18

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Dear Lord, we are talking about some important matters at church. Please help me to speak with wisdom and gentleness what You would have me to say. Help me to hear others out respectfully. Help us, together, to arrive at Your will.*

HOW ARE YOU LOOKING AT IT?

If you keep silent at this time, liberation and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's house will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. — Esther 4:14

It was October 29, 1941, during the trying days of the Second World War. Winston Churchill was visiting his old school. It was his second visit during the war. On both visits, the students serenaded the prime minister with the words of school songs he himself had sung as a boy. A verse was added to one of the songs in Churchill's honor. "Not less we praise in darker days the leader of our nation." In his remarks Churchill thanked the students for the honor. Then he told them how he had asked the head master to change the words from "darker days" to "sterner days," explaining:

Do not let us speak of darker days; let us rather speak of sterner days. These are not dark days: these are great days — the greatest days our country has ever lived.

In a matter of weeks, Japan would attack Pearl Harbor and the Americans would be brought into the war alongside Great Britain. This time Churchill spoke to a joint session of the United States Congress:

I will say that he indeed must have a blind soul who cannot see some great purpose and design is being worked out here below, of which we have the honour to be the faithful servants.

If these are challenging moments for your church, you could see this time as a dark time. Or, you can see these as great days and see yourself as part of some great purpose... on mission with God.

Most people have to settle for coasting through a legacy left by someone else, but — whether the answer for your church is relocation or not — you get to be part of the generation of vision. By the grace of Almighty God, you have the privilege of being there "for such a time as this!" Get on your knees and thank God for the honor. Then get up and get to work!

Today's Scripture Reading: Esther 4

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, You have told us that your eyes range throughout the earth to show yourself strong for those whose hearts are completely Yours. * You have mightily used men and women through the years. When I was young, I dreamed of being such a person. Then as I grew up, I tried to avoid having to make choices like the ones they had to make. Help me to see this challenge as one of the greatest opportunities in my life.*

* 2nd Chronicles 16:9

WHY ARE YOU ANGRY?

So the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry?" — Genesis 4:6 (NKJV)

A typical reaction of church members to the subject of relocation is anger. Someone not connected to the church would wonder why. The motive of those making the recommendation involves those things the church members value — greater opportunity for evangelism and growth. So why be angry?

Often, a reason for anger is that many of the members' memories are associated with the building. One hears comments like: "My father was on the committee that built this building" "We had my mother's funeral here" "Both of our daughters were married in this sanctuary" It is very much like the experience of a family when the last patriarch or matriarch in a family passes away — they grieve not only the passing of the loved one, but also the loss of the house. It had been the gathering place at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Cousins grew up climbing the big trees in the yard. That place, for them, is layered in memories. The same is true for our church buildings. No wonder such strong emotions bubble up!

Others are angry that other church members oppose relocation. They see them as standing in the way of progress and their dream of a whole new, fresh facility. They may see anyone standing between them and that vision as the enemy — and they tend to treat them that way.

"Why are you angry?" is the question God asked Cain in Genesis 4:6. Cain had offered a sacrifice of fruit to the Lord and the Lord had rejected his sacrifice. Cain had worked hard for the fruit. It was quality fruit and he felt really good about it! While Cain's sacrifice was rejected, his herdsman brother Abel's sacrifice was pleasing to the Lord. This made Cain furious! So God came to reason with him. "If you do right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). In times of strong emotions we, too, have to master our anger.

"Man's anger does not accomplish God's righteousness" (James 1:20). You won't treat people with whom you disagree in a Christ-like way when you are mad. It's hard to make a wise decision when your judgment is impaired by anger. It is ungodly to attack a person whose motive is to help the church succeed, even if they are misguided. Loudly arguing on the basis of your sentimental memories, or a headstrong desire to move on is not a spiritual approach. Instead, be careful to calmly deal with the facts. Be patient with those who see things differently.

There is no reason to be upset or defensive. All we have to do is obey God. Whether or not relocation is the right thing, there's nothing to be upset about. If it is God's will — you won't be betraying your grandfather who was on the building committee or your daughter who was married in the sanctuary. Instead, you will be obeying God. If relocation isn't His will, God will give you a renewed vision for your church for its current location. So relax, all you have to do is obey.

Today's Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:20-32

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Heavenly Father, help me to hear the heart of others with whom I disagree. Bring us all into one mind on this matter — and if that means I need to change my opinion, help me become willing to do so. Help release our vision for the church and to seek Yours... and to release our anger that we might all clearly see Your will.*

SECURE WISE COUNSEL... AND LISTEN

Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. — Proverbs 15:22

Churches, like individuals, should have a teachable spirit. The book of Proverbs reminds us more than once of the value of getting good advice (11:14; 20:18; 24:6).

Jim Swedenburg tells of going to a church as minister of education. He soon discovered that the church had space that wasn't functional. There were problems with classrooms being the wrong size for the age group, having too few rooms for some age groups, and having more rooms than needed for other age groups. So, the church secured the services of the Church Architecture Department to help them renovate their space. The building was renovated twenty-five years ago now, and the space is still serving the church well. Now the rest of the story... The church had discarded almost identical drawings from the same Church Architecture Department twenty years before Jim came to the church. The church committee decided they knew better than the expert and went with a local architect. Jim found the rejected blueprints stored in the office. If the church had listened the first time their space would have lasted fifty years, instead of twenty.

Church members sometimes discount the help of denominational leadership or outside consultants asking, "What does he know about our church or community?" (As if their church is completely unlike any other church or community.)

Outside consultants can be a great help:

- An outside consultant can bring fresh eyes to your situation and see things from an objective point of view. By the way, it isn't only our weaknesses we miss; sometimes, we need help to see some of our own strengths.
- While the consultant isn't a member of your church, he will have had experience in many churches. By contrast, most of the leaders in your congregation have been members of your one church so long, they may have a more limited perspective.
- By virtue of his training and experience, your consultant will know things you don't know.
- Most consultants will want to listen to you to gather your insights about your church and community. Then, on the basis of your input, along with the hard numbers and his own observations, he will bring recommendations for your consideration.
- Be willing to consider that even if he isn't 100% right, he may be 75% right—and you need that 75%.

Never follow any human blindly. Instead, give advisors your prayerful and thoughtful consideration. When various different counselors have told you the same thing, that should give their counsel extra weight.

Today's Scripture Reading: Proverbs 15

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Father, please grant me a teachable spirit and the ears to hear what Your Spirit says to the church through Your servants.*

YOU HAVE YOUR ORDERS

Then Jesus came near and said to them, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...' Matthew 28:18-19

Here is a simple test. Read the following true story; then give your honest first impression:

After the facilitator concluded his presentation on "Reaching People through the Sunday School," a pastor approached him and said, "I appreciate your remarks concerning Sunday School, but I think the Lord just wants me to take good care of the people we have and not worry too much about growth." The facilitator had a military background; he wanted to address the matter man-to-man. So he looked the pastor in the eye and slowly told him in low, measured tones, "God oughta kill you!"

Now, was this your first impression? "That poor little pastor! He just loved his church members and wanted to take care of his congregation. That Sunday School guy sure was mean to him!"

Or, was this your first impression? "That pastor had a lot of nerve thinking he could re-write the Great Commission! Of all the people in church, the pastor should be the leading supporter of evangelism. Good thing someone was willing to make him face the gravity of the situation."

If you identified with the pastor, it may be an indication that you have given up on evangelism and have redefined the church's mission. Many church members place a higher priority on taking care of the members the church already has. The people we go to church with are our friends and they mean very much to us. But it is easy for our Sunday School classes and churches to become "circles of friends" rather than "bases for outreach." Fellowship can become an end in itself.

Question: Does Jesus have all authority ?

Question: Is the Great Commission Christ's order to evangelize every people group on the planet and to make disciples of them all?

Question: If Jesus has all authority, and His orders have binding upon every Christian, can we ignore His command to evangelize?

If you identified with the facilitator, be careful not to be impatient with fellow-church members who have gotten sidetracked from the church's mission. Condemning them would be counter-productive. Personal hurts or struggles may have distracted them from the work. They may need your encouragement in renewing their commitment to the Great Commission.

It is not OK to be indifferent to the peril of the lost. We have our orders. The Lord's people don't have the luxury of deciding whether or not to engage in evangelism or to grow our churches. These things aren't optional. They are commands to be obeyed. As William Temple said, "The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members."

Today's Scripture Reading: John 4:34-38

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, it's so hard to see when my eyes are on myself. Help me to look up and see the fields ready for harvest. Help me, not only to look up, but also to get up, and enter into Your work.*

WHAT ARE THE REAL PRIORITIES IN YOUR CHURCH?

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness – Matthew 6:33

Our priorities are not what we say they are – just because we say those are our priorities. Our priorities are what we do in practice. Here is a five-question test to determine the priorities in your personal life or in your church. Your priorities are what you:

- Talk about.
- Think about
- Spend your time doing
- Spend your money on
- Choose when it comes down to making a choice

For example, look at your church budget and church calendar. In them, your congregation has documented your priorities. How much have you budgeted for ministries to people outside your church? In the budget-making process, is it a case of doing last year all over again, adjusted for inflation? Look at your church calendar. What does it show about the importance your congregation places on evangelism? How many evangelistic events are planned for the year? How many training opportunities are scheduled for members to learn to share their faith more effectively? What is the “buzz” in your church about? What do the members talk about excitedly? These will tell you your real priorities.

What are God’s priorities for your church? Do they include:

- Christ-centered worship
- Biblical instruction (with an aim toward building disciples)
- Prayer
- Caring acts (benevolence and other ministry)
- Nurturing fellowship (not the kind that only talks about the ball game, the kind that encourages and helps people stay on track in their Christian walk)
- World evangelization (Listed last for emphasis.) Evangelism is the main work for the whole church until Christ returns.

“What you do is what you really believe; the rest is just talk.” – Peter Lord

Today’s Scripture Reading: James 2

Today’s Prayer Guidance: *Heavenly Father, I have been around church now so long, that I know what I am supposed to say. Sometimes, I use the right words to cover my failure to do the right things. Help me – and help us as a church – to be doers of Your Word and not hearers only.*

WHERE ARE YOU?

So the Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" — Genesis 3:9-10

Some anonymous person listed the titles if we were to be entirely honest every time we sang a hymn. Here's how some of the old favorites might come out:

"I Surrender Some"

"He's Quite a Bit to Me"

"I Love to Talk about Telling the Story"

"Take My Life and Let Me Be"

"It is My Secret What God Can Do"

"Where He Leads Me, I Will Consider Following"

"Just as I Pretend to Be"

Adam had sinned and now God was in the Garden looking for him, "Where are you?" Adam swallowed hard and answered: "I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid" (Genesis 3:9-10). Adam gave a truthful answer. As easy and as obvious as that sounds, it's just hard to be objective when we are so close to the situation. Sometimes, we can't see the condition of our buildings. We've been going there so long that we don't notice the cracks in the wall. We don't see what a first-time visitor sees. We love it so much that we are willing to park on the street and walk 500 feet to the door. We see the neighborhood as it was, more than it is. We have trouble seeing the true condition of our facilities.

Some of the questions churches considering relocation need to answer are:

- Does your congregation have adequate facilities? (Quality and quantity)
- Do you have adequate parking?
- Are the people in your congregation able to effectively evangelize the people who now live in your community?
- If you needed to build, would you have the land on which to build it... without using up parking?

If the answer to all of these questions is yes, then you probably don't need to relocate. But if your community is transitional or your facilities are landlocked, you probably do need to give serious consideration to relocation.

All this sounds simple enough. We often think we know the answers until we do some serious research. The demographics, square footage requirements, and land use studies sometimes surprise us. We should never ignore the hard numbers. Giving a complete and accurate answer to all these questions will require courage and integrity.

Today's Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 2:11-18

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Father, You desire truth in our innermost parts. Yet, I sometimes have trouble seeing things as they really are. Give me the eyes to see our church situation as it really is and the integrity to call things by their correct names.*

THE CHURCH IS NOT A REFUGE

God is our refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble. — Psalms 46:1

Recent decades have brought more change than any other period in the history of the world. Many church members have lived through much rapid change. We have experienced huge strides in technological advance. We have transitioned from a culture heavily influenced by a Christian world-view to a far more secularized society. Your neighborhood may be changing. The world around us is certainly changing. You yourself may be changing with new issues of health and age.

Changes, both good and bad, are constantly coming. One need not marvel that many people feel overdosed with change. As a result, many want church to be a place of refuge — to be the one place that stays the same, to be a source of stability and security.

There is such a refuge from the radical changes of life and unfolding history. It is a secure place, a place where everything is always the same. That place is in the presence of the Lord. The same yesterday, today, and forever, He does not change. We can enter this familiar refuge and draw fresh strength.

Be still my soul; the Lord is on thy side!
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change He faithful will remain.

—von Schlegel

While we may meet in a room we call a sanctuary, it is for the purpose of drawing near to Him who *is* our refuge. In His presence, we find strength to grow and to be sent out into the world. We are sent, not to hide from, but to engage the world around us. The gates of hell cannot prevail against God's church! We are sent to people with Good News. We cannot turn the church building into "Fort God" and hole up in there. The church is not a place of refuge, God is. The church is a people on mission.

Today's Scripture Reading: Psalm 46

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, thank You that You are always there, faithful and unchanging. Remind me of Your everlasting love when I try to find refuge in something earthly.*

CHURCH BUILDINGS ARE TOOLS, NOT TEMPLES

He is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in shrines made by hands. — Acts 17:24

Humans are not capable of constructing a dwelling place for God. Paul told the intellectuals in Athens that God “does not live in shrines made by hands.” When Solomon prayed the dedication prayer for the Old Testament temple, he said, “But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain You, much less this temple I have built.” (1st Kings 8:27).

Sometimes we forget this as we pray. How many times have you heard a person lead an offertory prayer with these words, “Lord, it is good to be gathered in Thy house”? And many of us have heard preachers encouraging regular worship attendance saying, “Be faithful in the Lord’s house.”

A building may be designed and designated for spiritual purposes, but it can never be a dwelling place for God. Instead, a church building is a tool. Tools aid us in accomplishing a task. They are a means to an end. Jesus preached sermons on mountainsides and preached from boats. Anywhere Jesus is, is good enough. However, church buildings give us room for everyone to gather. A well-designed building enables everyone to see and hear the message, undistracted by the surroundings. With the right tool we can do the job better.

If you are leaning toward relocation, you need to be forewarned that a new building in a new location won’t do ministry for you. The location and quality of your buildings matter, but buildings are still just tools. It is possible for a relocation project or a building program to become a “substitute mission” for the Great Commission. If you are leaning against relocation, you will want to reaffirm that God dwells in people, not buildings; if your congregation votes to move you won’t be abandoning His house.

Today’s Scripture Reading: Second Samuel 7:4-7

Today’s Prayer Guidance: *Dear Lord, I have many memories tied up in that building, as You know. Sometimes, it is hard to distinguish in my mind between church and that place. Please help me think objectively about this matter and to see it from your point of view.*

GUARD YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS

Little children, guard yourselves from idols. — First John 5:21

I remember in high school going on choir tour to New York. In one place we saw a man on his knees casting lots before an image. This is what we normally think of as idolatry. Yet, many congregations need to face the possibility that their building has become to them like a graven image.

“But that can't be! God gave us this building” someone will object. People often remember the sacrifices made in a building program of years long past and can recite stories of God's miraculous provision. But yes, in our hearts and internal value systems, a building can become just that. Augustine put it this way, “Idolatry is worshipping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that ought to be worshipped.”

Jeremiah warned Jerusalem that judgment was coming to that city. The people thought along these lines... That can't be, the temple of God is here. God would never do anything to hurt the home of His holy Temple. It's presence here protects us. But the prophet warned them, “Do not trust deceitful words, chanting: This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” (Jeremiah 7:4). True, God had given them the temple, but it had become an object of misplaced trust.

As you read Numbers 21, you see the children of Israel being bitten by poisonous snakes. God instructs Moses to make a bronze copy of the snake, promising that if they will look up to see it, they will be cured. And cured they are! God told them to make the bronze serpent. God blessed the bronze serpent. It was such a good thing that Jesus would later use this event as a figure of speech to describe His saving work. However, if you read First Kings 18:4, you find that the children of Israel had begun to worship the bronze serpent instead of the Lord. That which was good and of God had been turned into a graven image. They attributed powers to the object and relied on it for worship — instead of the Lord alone. Hezekiah finally had to have it destroyed.

If the presence of Jesus isn't enough for you, then whatever supplement to Jesus you think you need has become a graven image. If you feel you have to have a particular building to worship, that the building is essential for your worship, you are so close to being an idolater, it's scary. In the same way, if you are trusting a new building to do the work of ministry for you, and to fulfill your dreams, that might be your graven image.

Today's Scripture Reading: First Kings 11:1-13

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Heavenly Father, deliver me from the temptation to seek meaning and fulfillment in anything or anyone other than You. Sometimes, I simply get so emotionally involved in things; they become a cheap substitute for You, Lord. Forgive me and deliver me from that temptation.*

THE CHURCH: COMPARED TO A BUILDING

You yourselves, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house — First Peter 2:5

A man was answering questions for a national poll. When asked for his church preference, he responded, “Red brick.”

The poll was thinking of denominations, but the man was thinking of the church as a building. A church member may tell his wife that he is going to run over to the church for a few minutes. But the church isn't a building; it's compared to a building.

Over and again the Bible uses this word picture. Words like *foundation*, *master builder*, *cornerstone*, *edify*, etc. are spread all across the New Testament.

Jesus said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18).

Paul described himself as “as a skilled master builder,” telling us, “I have laid a foundation, and another builds on it” (1st Corinthians 3:10).

Ephesians 2:22 says “The whole building is being fitted together in Him and is growing into a holy sanctuary in the Lord.”

It is a great figure of speech. Churches, like buildings, are inhabited — God dwells in His people.

Both buildings and the church need the right foundation: “No one can lay any other foundation than what has been laid—that is, Jesus Christ” (1st Corinthians 3:11). Christians can build each other up and congregations can be strengthened.

Though compared to a building, the church is composed of baptized believers who have committed themselves to the Lord and to each other. In each passage that uses this figure of speech, the point is made clear: “You are...God's building” (1st Corinthians 3:9). We don't go to church, we *are* the church.

This is evident when we suffer the loss of a building to fire. It is always amazing how people respond with comments like “That building was not the church, WE are the church. WE will continue to worship God and to do what He has called us to do.”

What would you do if your building were lost to a fire? You might grieve over its loss. That would be Okay. It might bring some difficulty, but the church marches on. Take that attitude into your future. Never forget that you are part of the Lord's eternal, glorious church, indwelt and empowered by the Spirit, with a purpose and a mission in the world!

Today's Scripture Reading: First Peter 2:1-10

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord Jesus, help me to build up my fellow-members in your family. Show me how to help prevent our congregation from shifting off of our Foundation and moving away from you. Enable me to do my part to make the church stronger.*

CHURCHES DON'T MERELY DIE, THEY COMMIT SUICIDE

I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live – Deuteronomy 30:19

When the Lord reminded the people of Israel about His ways, He told them, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” The choices they would make about obeying God would determine whether they could long continue as a people. Their choices would impact not only themselves, but also their children after them. The same is true for the church. Churches are constantly making choices – life and death choices. They make life choices when they decide to follow the Holy Spirit’s leading and when they choose to selflessly minister. They make death choices when they become self-centered or have their minds made up about the direction of the church, regardless of the Spirit’s leading.

Someone has pictured the difference between live and dead churches. Here are some highlights:

LIVE churches are intense and earnest about praise;

DEAD churches just “go to church.”

LIVE churches move by faith;

DEAD churches inch along by sight.

LIVE churches focus on people;

DEAD churches focus on problems.

LIVE churches have the fresh wind of love blowing;

DEAD churches are given to bickering.

LIVE churches evangelize;

DEAD churches fossilize.

How do churches become “live” or “dead”? They become the sum total of their choices. The “dead church” keeps making death choices until it ceases to exist. A church never merely dies, it commits suicide. God invites us to “Choose life.”

Today’s Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:15-22

Today’s Prayer Guidance: *Lord of Life, let Your life flow through me and through our church. Keep me from busying my spiritual life to death. Help me to stay plugged into You, as the source of life. Prompt me as a church member to use my influence to make life-choices.*

THE CHURCH WITHOUT FAITH IS DEAD

The righteous will live by faith — Romans 1:17

It is said that the African impala can jump to a height of over 10 feet and cover a distance greater than 30 feet. Yet, they can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a 3-foot wall. The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall. Many churches are the same way; they refuse to take a step of faith without seeing proof of success in advance. Faith is living in the light of God's leading, without requiring a guarantee of success. "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2nd Corinthians 5:7).

Of all people, Christians should have the most love of challenge. Think of the heroes of the Bible, "who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength after being weak, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight" (Hebrews 11:33-34).

When Glenn Akins came to consult with First Baptist Church, Tallahassee, he asked what size church First Baptist was: small, medium, or large. Perhaps two people in the service raised their hand to say large. Then he pointed out that the congregation, though not a super-church, was larger than more 90% of the churches in the state. He explained, "Small isn't bad, but you need to act your size." Then, he turned to Numbers 33 and discussed the majority report of Promised Land spies, "To ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and we must have seemed the same to them." They failed to see themselves in their true size once God was factored in. Their unbelief doomed an entire generation to die in the wilderness. He concluded, "When you think like a grasshopper, you get squashed like a bug."

Faith is confidence that God will come through. The story is told of a group of people in Kansas who after a long drought came together to pray for rain. As they met, they discovered only one young person had brought an umbrella with her.

Moving a faith-less church to a new location will solve nothing. A faith-filled church may not need to relocate. Many times churches have acquired property they never would have dreamed they would have, thus eliminating the need to relocate. Just as faith without works is dead, so the church without faith is dead.

What are you trusting God for?

Today's Scripture Reading: Hebrews 11

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Father God, I know that without faith I cannot please You. You are able to do more than I can dream of, both, in my personal life and in our church. Please give me the eyes of faith to see it, and the heart of faith to accept it, and the will to trust You to do it.*

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

What are you doing here, Elijah? – First Kings 19:9

Elijah had spent all of his energy in battling the false prophets on Mount Carmel. Then, when he was emotionally drained, Jezebel sent him a death threat. Elijah ran!

"And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' So he said, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life'" (1st Kings 19:9-10, NKJV).

Is your church in a cave of discouragement and depression? Such a congregation faces a murderer's row of problems: Key lay leaders have moved out of the community. Other members now have to carry too heavy a load. Every church decision is second-guessed. Tough questions are followed by tougher follow-up questions. Church families seem to have roast preacher more often for Sunday dinner. There are sides forming; everyone is expected to choose a side. Perhaps newer members are challenging the old guard. Some have expressed their displeasure at the state of the church by withholding or designating their offerings. The atmosphere is getting tense; sometimes you dread going to church. There has been a major explosion in church business meeting (or you feel one building up). And there are others who, having had their fill of these things, have given up, and are looking for a new church home. That is a "cave of discouragement and depression."

Elijah was presently located in a cave. God's question was, "Why are you here?" He answered that he had done his part, now he was alone, and his doom was sure. This answer didn't satisfy the Lord. So, God rested him, encouraged him, and sent him out with a new set of orders on a fresh mission. Do you think that maybe, somehow (relocation or in some other way), that is what the Lord has in mind for your church?

Today's Scripture Reading: First Kings 19

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, this sounds something like us. We have been beat up and burned out. We almost felt You had forsaken us. Help us as a church to see that You have been there all along. Help us to get out of this cave. Impart to our hearts confidence that You can use us again.*

WHERE HAVE YOU COME FROM, AND WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going? – Genesis 16:8

Hagar ran away from Sarah and God went to find her: "He said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?' She replied, 'I'm running away from my mistress Sarai.' Then the Angel of the Lord said to her, 'You must go back to your mistress...'" (Genesis 16:8-9). Even though it would be tough, Hagar had to get back to her purpose in life, to serve in the household of Abraham. Sometimes, a church needs to get back to its purpose, also.

As you study the history of most churches, you find that they were founded by a group of people burdened to reach lost people. They prayed and worked hard to establish a new congregation. Winning people to Jesus was the highest priority. Stories in the church archives tell of mighty revivals and all-night prayer meetings. It was all about the Great Commission. The buildings they constructed were a means to that end. Does that sound like your church heritage? Sometimes, we have to admit that we have become a little aimless in our ministry and we need a plan to get back on track. Does your congregation need to make plans to minister again?

A certain congregation had voted to construct a new building. The building committee, in consecutive meetings passed the following resolutions:

1. We shall build a new church
2. The new building is to be located on the site of the old one.
3. The material in the old building is to be used in the new one.
4. We shall continue to use the old building until the new one is completed.

Every church needs a ministry plan – hopefully one that is better thought out than the one of this building committee. A ministry plan evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the congregation. It surveys the make-up, needs, and trends of the community. A ministry plan considers how the strengths of the congregation match up to meet those needs. Then, plans are made to do ministry – with clear action steps. To fail to plan ministry is to plan to not minister. Kennon Callahan lists three qualities of effective long-range plans. Such plans are: (1) Responsible and realistic, (2) Courageous and compassionate, and (3) Prayerful and powerful. ¹

Continuing a great legacy of outreach and ministry requires faithful planning. The key questions in considering relocation are, "Can we continue to fulfill our mission in this location?" – and if not, will we make adjustments to continue our mission? If your church has a heritage of evangelism and outreach, then staying at your present location may be the most radical break from your past possible. Your church wasn't founded to preserve historic buildings.... Or to turn buildings into fortresses to hide the members from their neighborhoods. You will have to consider whether relocation isn't the best available option for preserving your heritage.

Today's Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:7-14

Today's Prayer Guidance: *O God, please place Your plans for Your church in my heart and show me Your plan.*

¹ Kennon Callahan, Twelve Keys for an Effective Church, Josey-Bass Publishers, 1983. Page IX

WHERE IS YOUR BROTHER?

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel"— Genesis 4:9

Hunter Street Baptist Church was located in the West End section of Birmingham. However, the demographics had all changed; so, pastor Buddy Gray led the congregation to relocate. Sardis Baptist Church, an African-American congregation, agreed to buy the building. Buddy asked their pastor, "Dr. Pettigrew, what are your black pastor friends saying to you about your congregation buying our building?" "They are telling me that if I wait three years, I can have it for nearly nothing," he answered. "That's true, so why aren't you doing that?" Buddy followed up. "Because," said Dr. Pettigrew, "The Lord told me that if I let your church die, He was going to let my church die. I figure what we are giving you for this building will give your church a fresh start and give us a good building at a fair price." At the time, Hunter Street was averaging 230 in attendance; now at their new location, worship attendance exceeds 4,000. Both Sardis Baptist and Hunter Street prosper today because someone considered himself his brother's keeper.

Who does your church exist to reach? While most church members would say that we are here to reach everyone, that is unrealistic. Most of us would be glad to reach everyone, but we really aren't able to do so. God gifts some people to reach across cultural boundaries. Even these trans-cultural ministers usually have the gifts and training to reach only a single culture group.

There are two principles of church growth that explain it well. Here is the first one: *Folks like us make a church like ours, and a church like ours reaches folks like us.*¹ Are the people in your community like the people in your church? If they are the same, you may not need to relocate. But, if they are different, here is the cold hard fact: you will never reach them. Stop blaming the pastor if the church isn't growing.. And, if you're trying to reach them, stop blaming yourselves.

Has a high percentage of your membership moved out of the community, driving back to attend church? If so, you are not going to be able to persuade an adequate number of people from outside your community to take the same drive. Unless you have some unusual, fantastic program, there sits your building half-empty in a community with as large a population as ever.

Now, here is the second principle of church growth: *The way for a church to evangelize culturally different people is to deliberately and intentionally plant new congregations focused toward the new community.*² Is it possible that God has brought the mission field to your neighborhood? Is it possible that God – the ultimate owner of "your" church building – wants to put those people in His building? Could it be that the Lord wants your congregation to share your facilities with another congregation? Or, to start a new work to reach the new people in your community?

"Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's guardian?'" (Genesis 4:9) Christians all know the answer.

Today's Scripture Reading: Acts 11:19-26

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Father, as You know, our church has supported missions for years. We have given generously to support those who take the Gospel to other lands and peoples. Now some of those peoples are coming to us. Help me to think more like a missionary.*

WHY HAVE YOU LIED TO THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...?" — Acts 5:3

Ananias and his wife, Sapphira wanted the rest of the church to think of them as generous givers. They sold a piece of property and gave part of the money to the church. So far, no problem. However, they told the leaders that they had given all of the proceeds from the sale to the church, when in fact, they had kept back a portion for themselves. Peter was plain with both of them (just before God struck them dead) — they had lied, not to men only, but ultimately to the Holy Spirit of God!

Sometimes a church considering relocation will announce that they have studied it and that they are going to stay and minister to their changing community. Now these people are not the right ones to reach their community. They are not gifted for cross-cultural evangelism. They may start a clothes closet or food pantry, but they don't start new ministries designed to reach people in a way that results in changed lives and new churches. They pretty much go right on doing what they have always done.

Here is what is really happening: they knew they couldn't say out loud that they weren't willing to obey God's clear leading to relocate. They had to sound more spiritual as they gave their reasons for staying. So the party line was, "We're staying to minister to our community." Who can argue with that? Yet, absent a ministry plan with details and deadlines, these are empty promises. The truth is that the church simply didn't want to relocate and needed some camouflage. Ultimately, such a church is lying to the Holy Spirit.

If the Holy Spirit is leading your church to stay at your present location, then He is probably also leading you to plan radical changes in how you will conduct your ministry there. You will need to consider such issues as:

- Your approach to evangelism.
- A profile of the typical person you are placed there by the Lord to reach.
- Your worship style and schedule.
- Benevolence and social ministries such as a food pantry, furniture ministry, or a clothes closet.
- Training for job skills, stress management, well-baby care, Christian money management, etc. (These meet needs and open doors for evangelism.)

A commitment to staying at your present location means big changes. No lie!

Today's Scripture Reading: James 1:17-27

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, what do you want us to do about the people who live here, but who will never enter our church building? We are afraid of some of them. How would you have us to treat them in Jesus name?*

DO YOU LOVE ME MORE THAN THESE?

When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" – John 21:15

Peter had gone fishing. He simply didn't know what to make of everything that had taken place. Jesus had died and, and now had appeared to the disciple. Peter had fished for a living; it was a familiar environment. It was a context in which he felt secure. At the end of this fruitless fishing trip, the Lord appeared, asking questions.

"When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?'" (John 21:15)

Bible students sometimes discuss whether Jesus was asking Peter if he loved Him more than the other disciples (as he had boasted earlier) or whether he loved Jesus more than the fishing nets laying about. The nets were right there, and were a source of security for him at a time when Peter felt so much confusion. Either way, we need to be able to answer that, "Yes; we love Him more than anything." If we believe our church to be a great church, then our yes is proven in our obedience to His command to "Feed My lambs."

Do we love Jesus more than our sources of security? Does Jesus mean more to us than the building in which we worship Him? Is our mission more important to us than our memories?

"The controlling purpose in the ingrown church has to do with survival – not with growth... When this distortion of purpose prevails, the danger is that eventually the church will make its own life, programs, and traditions into its object of worship. The church will give to itself the honor that belongs to God alone. What began as a way of surviving becomes blasphemous worship..."¹

Your church may not need to relocate. Or it may not need to relocate... yet. But, as Christians, we must be able to say, "Yes, Lord. I love you more than these."

Today's Scripture Reading: John 21:1-17

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, I believe that I love You, but I don't always know if I love You most. Help me become intolerant of rivals for Your affections.*

¹ C. John Miller, Outgrowing the Ingrown Church, Zondervan, 1986, pages 35-36

LEAVING A LEGACY

“Descendants will serve Him; the next generation will be told about the Lord. They will come and tell a people yet to be born about His righteousness—what He has done.” Psalms 22:30-31

It is our privilege as Christians and church members, not just to enjoy a heritage left us by someone else, but also to leave a legacy for others. The poem by Will Allen Dromgoole wonderfully captured this idea in, *The Bridge Builder*.

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came at the evening cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim-
That sullen stream had no fears for him;
But he turned, when he reached the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.
"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim near,
"You are wasting strength in building here.
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way.
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build you the bridge at the eventide?"
The builder lifted his old gray head.
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,
"There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him."

When your grandchildren ask how you used your influence in the church, will they be looking at a someone who selfishly clung to a legacy left by someone else? Or will you be able to tell of joining with others to build a bridge for future generations? Will you be able to testify firsthand how the Lord guided and provided — “and tell a people yet to be born... what He has done”?

Today's Scripture Reading: Joshua 16:6-14

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Father, please give me the vision and courage to leave a legacy of faith and service to my family and to my church.*

SEASONS IN THE LIFE OF A CHURCH

From the Issacharites, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do: 200 chiefs... — First Chronicles 12:32

There are seasons in the life of a living church. There are seasons of growth and rapid advance. There are also less dramatic seasons for solidifying progress made. Like the farmer who has to get all of his family into the fields in order to bring in a harvest, there are busy times when everyone has to do their part to help. There are times of crisis when decisions must be made to save the future of the church.

Buried in a genealogy in First Chronicles is a great gem of truth. The tribe of Issachar had 200 leaders “who understood the times and knew what Israel ought to do.” They understood their season of history from God’s point of view. They recognized what forces were at work. And they knew what God wanted done. It doesn’t mean they had strong opinions about what they wanted to do, but rather, they had insight into what they ought to do in that moment, that season in the history of God’s people.

Robert Dale describes the lifecycle of churches in his book, *To Dream Again*. He writes:

A shorthand way of describing a healthy church, organizationally speaking is that it plans. An unhealthy church solves problems.

Also, a healthy church is...

- *Proactive and takes initiative for its ministry*
- *Builds on and is renewed by its dream, and*
- *Ministers to others.*

On the other hand, an unhealthy church is...

- *Reactive and surrenders its initiative for ministry*
- *Declines and doubts itself to death, and*
- *Must itself be ministered to.*

...Churches must constantly open themselves to revitalization. They must dream again! To stand still is to die. ¹

If your church is discussing relocation, then your church is clearly in a crucial season. Forces are at work. Be assured that God is also at work around you. He is inviting you to join Him. It is the season to dream again.

Today’s Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:15-19

Today’s Prayer Guidance: *Heavenly Father, it is easy to see the problems. And sometimes, it seems we put out one brushfire only to have another problem spring up. Help our church family, and help me, to dream again — and not lose hope for Your church.*

¹To Dream Again: Growing Healthy Congregations for Changing Futures by Robert D. Dale, 2018, updated edition), Nurturing Faith

WHAT DOES YOUR PASTOR THINK ABOUT RELOCATION?

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. — Hebrews 13:17

One of the most well known lines spoken to pastors is, “Preacher, we were here when you came and we’ll be here when you leave.” Through the years, this sentence has been the rationale for rejecting many a pastor’s leadership. It is an unwitting confession that these church members do not regard Jesus Christ as the Head of the church and its only Owner. They are assuming some kind of squatter’s rights. They believe they have a right to exercise a “controlling interest” in the church by reason of their tenure or gifts. They reject the New Testament pattern of leadership.

Perhaps the best reply to this statement would be, “So what?” There were Pharisees when Jesus began His earthly ministry and the same Pharisees were there three years later when it ended. So what? Jesus was still right. Paul ministered in some gentile cities for only days – a months-long ministry was a long one for Paul. There were always idolaters when he came to a city and idolaters when he left. So what? Longevity in a particular church, in itself, proves absolutely nothing.

A congregation should hear the pastor’s views on the direction of the church with respect and give his recommendations their prayerful consideration. No, pastors aren’t always right. And yes, we make our decisions together, as a congregation. Nevertheless, it is both wrong and unwise to dismiss a pastor’s proposals without prayerful consideration.

Does your pastor have training in evangelism and church growth? Then, his training should be given some weight. Does he preach the Word? His knowledge of the Bible should be respected. His call by God to your church should be given a measure of deference.

Some say that respect is earned; there is a measure of truth in this saying leaders should recognize. Yet, on the part of followers, respect for the office is either given or withheld. One mark of growing, healthy churches is that they have good “followship” as well as good leadership.

Today’s Scripture Reading: First Samuel 8

Today’s Prayer Guidance: *Dear Lord, lead our pastor as he leads us. Give him wisdom and insight. Help us to respect him and hear what You have to say to us through him.*

WHO'S IMPACTING WHOM?

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by men. You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. — Matthew 5:13-14

Is your church impacting the community or is the community impacting your church?

If, overnight, your church disappeared from the face of the earth, how many people in the community would know the difference?

Are we like the dog chasing the car? Would we know what to do with them if we caught them? If large numbers of people from the community started attending this church, could we handle it?

Are we hiding from the community as it now is, hoping things will go back to the way they were? Are we in denial, needing to come to grips with reality?

Do we love our neighbors? Do we fear them? Are we jealous of them? Do we respect them?

Do we have the right strategy to reach them?

Have we given up on impacting the community? Have we shifted our emphasis to more achievable goals? For example, plenty of declining churches are well-kept — the roof is in good shape, the lawn is neatly manicured, and the building has a fresh coat of paint. The congregation doesn't know how to reach their community, but they know how to maintain a building! But, remember, on the Day of the Lord, "The elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed" (2nd Peter 3:10). That nice building will go up in smoke! Only changed lives will endure; they alone are of eternal value.

So, are lives being changed here, or not? And if not, what do we need to do about it?

Are we the best ones to reach the people who live here now? Or do we need to find some new partners who can help us? Do we need to simply get out of God's way and allow someone else to come in who can reach our neighbors?

These are hard questions. It takes courage to answer them... honestly.

Today's Scripture Reading: First Thessalonians 2:1-13

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Father, let us see the power of the Gospel at work in the lives of others. The Gospel is a powerful, life-changing message. If you have to move us, place where You can use us to touch lives. If we have to adopt new approaches, or find new partners, help us to do so. Please let us be part of spreading the Good News.*

BUT THAT'S A LOT OF MONEY!

"I will shake all the nations so that the treasures of all the nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord of Hosts. "The silver and gold belong to Me..." — Haggai 2:7-8

When our church discussed relocation, the expense was a major consideration. We thought we would have to build in smaller phases and over a longer period of time to replace the space we had, much less add the space we needed. But we knew that what we were buying was a future. But it worked because God blessed it. While we were careful to do our homework and not be presumptuous... to not overextend ourselves... God provided. He provided in ways we could not have foreseen. There were times when it felt like God had opened the windows of heaven and threw money down at us. I think one of the reasons was that we maintained our level of missions giving; I think God liked that. We were in our second phase building within two and a half years.

Whatever God is leading your congregation to do, He can afford to pay for it. As George Mueller said, "God's work done in God's way will never lack for God's supply."

Whether your congregation decides to remain at your present location or relocate, your church will need to spend money. Ministry at your present location will cost money. Relocation will cost money. Even if your church were to decide to take no action at all and just sit there, there is nothing more expensive than an empty building.

In the decision-making process, many churches fail to consider the money they could lose in lost contributions. When some members see that their church stubbornly insists on maintaining the status quo, they will leave – taking their money with them – and move their membership to a church with some vision. Though your church is more conveniently located for them, there will be prospects who choose to join other congregations. Their offerings will be going into the budget of another church, one that wants to do something.

Churches with a mind-set to conserve and play defense, fail to conserve or protect anything. A church succeeds only when it is on offense. And here we reach the heart of the matter. Do we want to reach people enough to take risks and spend money? Paul told the Christians in Corinth, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for you." (II Corinthians 12:15)

It isn't that finances shouldn't be considered in planning. It is good stewardship to provide cost-effective ministry. However, the lowest price is a false basis for deciding the future direction of a church's ministry. Our redemption cost God His Son. Good thing for us God didn't decide our eternal fate on the basis of a cost analysis!

Today's Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, help me remember that the earth is Yours and everything in it – including those things I call my own. I praise You that You can be counted on to provide for every good work You call us to do. Guide me to make decisions concerning those things You have entrusted to me in concert with Your will.*

IT'S ABOUT JESUS

He is also the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead so that He might come to have first place in everything. – Colossians 1:18

After the annual Senior Adult Day service, with all of the usual recognitions, one of the members approached me, glowing. “Preacher, this is what it’s all about!” he remarked with approval. I thanked the member in the spirit of his kind gesture, but then thought, “No, this isn’t what it’s all about.”

It’s not about your grandfather who was a charter member of the church. It’s not about the stained glass windows, as beautiful as they are. It’s not about the traditional Christmas Eve service which is always conducted so beautifully. It’s not about your friends in your Sunday School class. It’s not about your mother who faithfully led the Women’s Missionary Union for so many years. It’s not about your past or your traditions or your building or your fellow church members. It’s not about you and it’s not about us. It’s about Jesus!

Expressing love and appreciation is one thing. But when people start sharing the spotlight with Jesus, a church is in trouble. When tradition has a place of authority beside the Word of God, they are in trouble. When people come to church as a little fish, hoping to be a big fish in a small pond, there is trouble. When Jesus’ priorities for His church have to be cleared with a “church boss,” something is just plain rotten!

When it’s about Jesus, He is the main topic of conversation. Church members seek new ways to introduce Him to others. They seek to know Him better and want to do His will. In fact, they adapt their lives to give Him obedience. When it’s about Jesus, church members seek His glory; And He gets the credit.

*For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. – Romans 11:36*

Today’s Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-29

Today’s Prayer Guidance: *Lord, I confess that “our church” is Your church and it is all about You. Protect me from the temptation to try to make it about me. I renounce every claim to ownership of Your church I have ever made. Help us, as a church, to make it about Jesus and to keep it that way.*

THE FLEXIBILITY OF FAITH

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and went out to a place he was going to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed as a foreigner in the land of promise, living in tents. – Hebrews 11:8-9

Flexibility is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances without losing one's focus or joy. The flexible person isn't stubbornly rigid or obstinate, but able to go with the flow, making the best of the situation.

Abraham was such a person. He was told by God to leave home, a place at that time, of considerable wealth. He was to leave without knowing where he was going; there was no itinerary provided. He was told only that God would lead him to the right place. For the rest of his life, Abraham and his family lived in tents, not houses. They would often strike camp and move to another place. It was a permanent impermanence. No one would choose it, but faith made it possible.

Abraham and his family would live in a foreign land and in a different culture than the one from which they had come. The Bible teaches that we, as believers, live in a "time of temporary residence" (1 Peter 1:17). We don't fit in. We are not from around here. This is not our home.

Abraham left not knowing where he was going, but knowing Whom he was following. And that was all he needed. With his vital connection to the Lord, he could adapt to anything else, without losing his focus or joy.

It is unbelief and disobedience that keeps us in a rut (which would be a grave with both ends kicked out). Faith makes us flexible. As a church member you may need to demonstrate flexibility to adopt new methods to reach your community or you may need to show flexibility to move to a new location. Regardless, flexibility is a continuing need of God's people.

Today's Scripture Reading: Numbers 9:15-23

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Father God, we have done church in familiar ways because we found comfort in the familiarity. But I'm learning that You don't always hang out in the familiar places. You like to do new things in new ways and reach new people. Help me, Lord, to adapt and go with You.*

NO CHURCH WILL GROW TO NEED THE SPACE IT DOES NOT PROVIDE

When the feet of the priests who carry the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, come to rest in the Jordan's waters, its waters will be cut off. The water flowing downstream will stand up in a mass. — Joshua 3:13

When the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, they had to cross the Jordan River. The river was in flood stage and fording it with children and possessions wasn't an option. God told Joshua that He would do something similar to what He had done forty years before at the Red Sea. Only this time, the priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, would lead the procession. The waters would not stop flowing until the priest's feet were in the water. And suddenly, they were standing on dry ground!

Some churches are waiting until they achieve the growth to justify building the facilities they need. It's a "chicken or egg thing." And which came first? The space. Here's why:

The lack of space can prevent growth from ever taking place. We are talking growth space here, not a prettier church parlor or a gym. However, lacking one part of your growth space can prevent growth for the church as a whole. If you have a great building but lack parking, for example, growth can be stopped cold. Church architect, Gary Nicholson, tells of one church he consulted that would grow, hit a ceiling, and then go back down. It turned out that the church's attendance was being limited by the capacity of their preschool space.

Churches need balanced space — balanced in parking, worship, and education space. And balanced throughout the various age groups. If you want to have 500 people in attendance, then you need to provide the space to reach 500 people to worship, park, and attend Sunday School. This can be through multiple services, or whatever strategic use of your buildings and property it takes. But, if you decide to wait until you have 500 people, it will probably never happen.

This is not to say, "If you build it, they will come." Ministries reach people. People reach people. Buildings do not reach people.

Even perfect space would be of limited value in a declining community. If you are in a community that is changing demographically, if your church is torn by division, or if your congregation is unwilling to evangelize the people living in your community, then space is not your most pressing problem.

Nevertheless, no church will grow to need the space it does not provide. It is like pouring concrete. First, the framer builds the form to hold it. Then, you pour in the concrete to fill it.

Now, here's where you as a member of the church come in: you have to be willing to take that first step into the water.

Today's Scripture Reading: Second Kings 4:1-7

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord, is it possible the reason we don't already have more people is because we didn't set a place at the table for them? Help me Lord, to do my part to make room for more. And help me to always make more room in my heart.*

ALL ON THE ALTAR

God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he answered. "Take your son," He said, "your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering..." – Genesis 22:1-2

For family devotions, Martin Luther once read the account in Genesis 22 of Abraham offering Isaac on the altar. His wife, Katie, said, "I do not believe it. God would not have treated his son like that!" "But, Katie," Luther replied, "He did."

God called on Abraham to be willing to give up his son. Isaac, the long-awaited son of promise – his only son whom he dearly loved. Yet, Abraham had his knife in the air to kill him before God stopped him.

Sometimes, when God makes big demands of us, He doesn't always stop us from meeting those demands. God has the right to demand anything of us He wants. And He is perfectly comfortable in calling on us to sacrifice our ambitions to have a "cutting edge church" or to give up a beloved building. The question is not whether God will make extreme demands on our lives, but whether we are willing to lay our all on the altar.

Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?

Your heart does the Spirit control?

You can only be blest and have peace and sweet rest

As you yield Him your body and soul.

– Hoffman

The Lord told Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me" (Genesis 22:12). This devotional guide was designed to help you and your fellow church members determine God's will about relocating your church facilities. Don't be surprised if, in some way, the Spirit leads you to lay your all on the altar.

Today's Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-11

Today's Prayer Guidance: *Lord Jesus, whatever you lead our church to do, I will obey you. I may not like the final decision. It may cost me time or money, or time, or my memories, but as you gave Your all for me, my all is on the altar for You.*

