

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Church Relocation May Be Only Option

AUTHOR(S): Charles Willis

PAPER: 2011-11

REVIEW DATE: January 2011

"Churches that relocate tend to do so because they really have no other option," Davis Byrd believes. Byrd of LifeWay Christian Resources directs the Southern Baptist agency's church architecture service.

Only two factors, he said, lead to that circumstance: There is no available land for expansion or the environment has changed.

Lack of available land often means local codes forbid further expansion. A significantly changed environment may render a church incapable of adjustment. Those changes, he said, may be residential becoming commercial or growth that has moved in another direction.

"Churches that move usually are responding to an inevitable step if they are going to survive and thrive," he continued. "Most say 'no' to the idea of relocation the first time or the first few times it is suggested because it is such a radical change."

"If the most plausible option is to relocate, the subject will continue to come up. If a consensus cannot be reached, those who want to survive and thrive will leave, and the others will stand watch until the last one departs," he observed.

Repeated discussions of moving the church generally indicate the subject is the right one to pursue, Byrd said, because the factors that brought it up to begin with still exist.

The missed opportunity in relocation for many is that they fail to put their self-identity on the table for examination and possible redefinition, he said.

For Churches that lose a building to fire, the thinking typically is "Let's build it back" instead of "The slate is clean. What do we want to write?" Relocation, Byrd said, provides even greater opportunity to clean the slate. Many churches that move could be significantly different from the church they have been, instead of taking what they have been and moving it to a new location "to do more of the same."

"One of the things we in church architecture try to do is encourage churches to address their identity, self-image and intentionality about ministry – to get rid of excess baggage and to explore growing in new directions," he said. "Many move a church that is unexamined and not prayed over. The total church life is in question,

not just one part of it."

Byrd said a church relocation can be risky because it is uprooting and disruptive, threatening and expensive. "It is the most drastic change a church can think about, but it is potentially the most exciting, renewing, invigorating thing a church can encounter."

Key ingredients for a successful relocation are good architectural consultation and good church staff leadership. Talking with leaders of churches that have successfully relocated may be helpful as well, he said. Leadership in the church should have good vision for the future above and beyond the concept of a move, be sensitive to the potential for conflict and be skilled in leading people through the process. Equally important, he observed, is having leadership "that will be there through the duration of the transition."

"If the pastor is the most critical leadership position in the church and is the key vision setter, it is important that the pastor stay with the people through the relocation. The likelihood of success diminishes when leaders move to another church before the transition is complete," he said. "Take the time to educate and excite the people," Byrd advises pastors. Referencing Habakkuk 2:2-3, he said, "If the people don't see the vision, you need to wait until they do. You can't give all the answers. Otherwise, it won't be an act of faith; it will be a business venture."

Anticipating a relocation as a quick cure-all leads to disappointment, he said.

"Phase one of a new church facility is going to involve compromise, in all likelihood. Almost no church can afford to put enough additional space into a new facility to solve all their problems," he said. "A lack of resources can be emotionally devastating. The sooner the issue of compromise is faced and accepted, the better."

Many churches intentionally continue multiple Sunday schools and worship services after a move, both to encourage growth and to provide continued choice of schedule members have come to expect. "It's good stewardship of resources," Byrd said, "to use the same square footage of resources more than once."

"The reason to move is that there is a future because of the move – not that the entire future will be realized all at once."

Charles Willis writes for the Baptist Press (Southern Baptist Convention).

Church Development Discussion Papers are not formal publications of The Toronto United Church Council. They present independent ideas and observations that are intended to encourage discussion and comment among church leaders in local congregations and Presbyteries. The information, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in these Discussion Papers are entirely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to The Toronto United Church Council. Articles are reprinted with permission.