

CHAPTER 6: MISSION VS. MORTAR

“But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.” (2 Samuel 7:4-6)

The word church is generally understood as a building. “We are looking for a church to get married in,” or “it’s the church on the corner of Philadelphia and Salem Boulevard.” There are no significant references to church buildings for the first two hundred years of the church’s existence. The Greek word “ecclesia” (church) refers to a summoned or called forth group of people. The word was not used exclusively by the Christian church. The Ecclesia was the principle assembly of the democracy of ancient Athens during its Golden Age (480-404 BCE). These were the representatives who were summoned out from the general population for a political mission. The word as it described the church was referring to the community that was summoned forth by Jesus to witness and serve his mission in the world.

Architecture and space are irrelevant to Christian community and calling. This is why the first Christian communities gathered in the home (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Howard Snyder writes in his excellent work, *The Problem of Wineskins*: “Christians did not begin to build church buildings until about AD 200. This fact suggests that, whatever else church buildings are good for, they are not essential either for numerical growth or spiritual depth. The early church possessed both these qualities, and the church’s greatest period of vitality and growth until recent times was during the first two centuries AD. In other words the church grew fastest when it did not have the help—or hindrance—of church buildings.”

Capital (building) debt can be a tremendous drain on mission resources even in the best of economic times. Ginghamburg Church had a very manageable debt (just under two million dollars) for a church with our annual budget. Then the economic tsunami hit. General Motors left town and the unemployment rate shot from 5 to over 12% in just a few months. We cut the 2009 budget by almost \$400,000 and laid off or did not fill 12 staff positions. I am really glad we did not go ahead with the \$24 million sanctuary project that we had planned ten years ago. Ginghamburg’s facilities are rather modest for a congregation of our size. Our average weekly worship attendance is approaching 5,000 but our main multipurpose facility only holds about 1,000 folks--packed in. The utility costs in 2009 were \$225,000 and maintenance upkeep another \$208,000. Buildings eat money!

There is no question that we are creatively maximizing all of our spaces on the three Ginghamburg campuses. Most of our spaces are used multiple times with multiple set ups each day. Storage space is used for group meetings and classrooms. A teen cell group uses my office on Wednesday evenings since it is the last space available. I am truly grateful for the buildings that we have built, and there is no question that we could use

more space. But in light of the gospel mandate that directs the church to meet the urgent needs of the least and the lost, escalating utility cost, and the global economic crisis, churches must find creative ways to minimize brick and maximize mission.

Growing churches inevitably face space constraints. With growth comes the dilemma to build or not to build, where to build, and what to build? This is when we must honestly wrestle with the issue of theology of space. Buildings define our ministry and values. They also create a certain permanence that tends to become restrictive with demographic and culture shifts. Much of the United Methodist Church's ministry has been limited by the fact that over 70% of our church facilities are located in small towns and rural areas where only 16% of the US population lives. The permanence of our 19th and 20th century capital assets has us out of position for 21st century mission. We have assigned sacred value to our physical facilities and we can't let go. Buildings are not sacred—people are sacred! We need to let go of buildings and invest in the world that God loves and for whom Jesus died.

Our Church Board has made three serious attempts to initiate a building program that would complete the master plan developed in 1993. We have traveled to church campuses around the country, and enlisted the services of consultants and architects. We have prayed and fasted, done feasibility studies and spent days in planning retreats. Each time the Spirit has put in our spirits a yield sign saying, "That is not where I am going, but follow me to..."

In 2004 the "follow me to" became Darfur. I had a vision of a child standing and pleading, "Come over to Darfur and help us." The establishment of The Sudan Project (thesudanproject.org) became the latest alternative to a building campaign. Ginghamburg Church and our partners have invested almost 5 million dollars in The Sudan Project through Christmas 2009. The project is committed to the development of sustainable agriculture, safe water, and children's protection and development programs. If we had followed our own strategic plan and gone ahead with the capital campaign as planned, we would not have had the mobility to respond so rapidly to what the United Nations has deemed the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Listening to the voice of the Spirit allowed us to move with God in speed and to have significant impact in scope.

Jesus gave his followers a metaphor that is instructive for all of our church structures and mission focuses. "No one puts new wine into old wineskins, for the new wine will burst the old skins, ruining the skins and spilling the wine. New wine must be put into new wineskins" (Luke 5:37-38). What kind of wineskin-structures will allow the church to be fluid and flexible enough to continually focus resources in what God is doing today?