

Steps on the Journey

Every merger process is unique, but not necessarily for the reasons you might think. They are unique because the context and calling of every church is special. The demographic and lifestyle mix in every community (even in rural and remote contexts) is more complex today, and nuanced in ways that shape congregational culture and ministry practices differently even with churches belonging to the same denomination. Therefore, the call to mission for each congregation must be more sharply focused than ever before, and it is harder to unite congregations that are truly prepared to travel the same path.

On the other hand, the merger process can be more standardized than you might think. First of all, denominational identities and politics are less important than ever before. Most denominations recognize this, and have become far more flexible in facilitating mergers between unlikely partners than ever before. Collaborations between denominations are increasingly common. Secondly, the systemic dysfunctions and principles that make healthy churches are remarkably similar in every congregation. Regardless of context or denomination, the stories of decline and the leverage points for renewal are remarkably parallel.

Many leaders assume that the decision to merge is made in a single, scary, radical leap. That only happens when churches have left it too late and didn't have time to look before they leapt. In fact, mergers unfold in four distinct stages, each stage marked by a decision to move forward.

- **Merger in Principle:** The first decision is to support the decision in principle, i.e. as a real possibility for effective, sustainable ministry. Churches form A Vision Team to build trust, discern vision, do the research, and explore the options.
- **Merger in Practice:** The second decision is to merge into one church by choosing a new board and a new name, worshipping together, and then developing an asset management strategy.
- **Merger in Fact:** The third decision is to merge assets, choose a location, and develop a staffing or leadership strategy.
- **Merger in Ministry:** The fourth decision is to keep, call, or appoint new leadership for both program development and administrative support. Then develop a basic strategic plan to improve programs, initiate new ideas, and terminate ineffective tactics.

It sounds simpler than it really is. There are many nuances and challenges to the process of moving people from grief to hope, and many surprises unique to churches and their contextual realities that will reshape the process along the way.

Here we introduce two stories involving four churches in conversations about merger. These are “true stories” in the sense that they are a composite of both our experiences guiding mergers. They each illustrate the process for successful mergers.

Merger #1: Urbanization and the Shift to the Suburbs

The story of two churches caught up in the migration from the city to the suburbs.

Wesley and Asbury are two United Methodist Churches in the urban sprawl of a major city. Their city is typical of many fast growing areas like Philadelphia, Chicago, and Omaha; or like Charlotte, Nashville, and San Diego. These cities reflect the new urban realities in which population growth has outgrown transportation infrastructure, and diversified far beyond the old stereotypes of race, age, and education.

Wesley is an historic, white, middle class church of senior matriarchs and aging boomers educated in the old liberal arts tradition. They were once the prestige church of a satellite suburb with 1000 members and 750 in worship. Now they are an invisible church hidden behind high-rise apartments with 200 members (mostly relocated

miles away or in nursing homes) and an average of 75 in worship. They have a strong sense of sacred space, but also provide space for several non-profit organizations for day care and food distribution. The pastor has announced his retirement next year, and it is unclear whether they can afford full time ministry.

Asbury was established in the glory days of the 1960's. It's a black church with a mix of families and singles, with a large representation of upwardly mobile African-American professionals. They once had a reputation for social action, but struggle to find identity as the neighborhood becomes more multi-cultural and dominated by young singles. Ten years ago they had 500 members (mostly active) and 300 in worship. Now they have 150 members and 100 in worship on a good day in between amateur sports seasons. They believe in youth ministry, but have a relatively small youth group; and host addiction intervention programs. The church has experience the tragic death of one pastor, and a scandal with another. Their young pastor is the fourth pastor in six years.

Merger #2: Urban Renewal and the Transformation of the City

The story of two churches in the multi-cultural mix of the urban core.

Faith Temple and Pine Street Presbyterian belong to two traditions, but they are located in the same urban core of a major city. Their city is typical of many economically depressed and multi-cultural urban core environments like Newark, Cleveland, and St Louis; or Jacksonville, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. These cities reflect the urban realities of changing economies that have created housing crises, and left legacies of pollution, under-employment, and poor education.

Faith Temple is an independent evangelical church with a long local history, and loosely connected with a Baptist association. Their congregation's formal membership is scattered across the city, and their average worship attendance is about 60 and quite ethnically diverse. The church building needs major upgrades and parking is limited; but the education wing has been updated to house a Christian Charter School for grades K-8. They sustain themselves through rental income to the school, but the school needs more capital investment.

Pine Street Presbyterian Church is also a formerly prestigious church, but they experienced a significant congregational split over a public policy position by the denomination. The pastor and a large part of the congregation left the denomination. The remaining congregation is led by an interim minister and pursuing a visioning process. They rent space to several small ethnic churches, but are struggling to make ends meet and debating how to cut staff. They are not known for any particular outreach ministry, but have an excellent choir and historic pipe organ. They currently have an interim minister. She has served the church for about 18 months.

The leaders and boards of each pair of churches have decided to merge in principle, and begin a conversation about merger. The conversation has been given more urgency for Wesley and Asbury because the Bishop wants to model bi-racial ministry ... and cut back on denominational subsidies. The conversation for Faith Temple and Pine Street has been given more urgency because the mayor and neighborhood constituencies need healthy churches that can sustain healthy neighborhoods.

There are two other "partners" that will emerge from time to time in their conversations about merger.

The first is an independent consultant. This consultant is independent because he or she is experienced in multiple denominational traditions and politics, and is not biased in one way or another; or this consultant comes from beyond the politics of church and community, and brings a larger perspective of ministry effectiveness and relevance. Consultants bring an objectivity that helps churches overcome control, reduce stress, and deepen their understanding.

The second "partner" is a large mega- and multi-site church. These churches are springing up around most major urban centers, and have a strategy of acquiring congregations that are well below critical mass for survival, infusing them with a new attitude and resources, and creating what is essentially a clone to the mother church in a new location. Their strategy may or may not be interesting, but their experience and their passion for mission is very helpful. And their leaders are almost always ready to offer advice on innovative ministries, non-profit outreach, lay empowerment, and staff development. In our story, the church is called "Harvest Community Church".

The True Cost of Discipleship

Anticipating the Real Price of Success

Successful mergers rarely begin with top-down directions from the head office of a denomination. They almost always begin bottom-up from the urgent, candid, conversations of pastors and other church leaders.

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

It was mid-January when the idea of merger was seriously considered. Both Methodist congregations had their annual Charge Conference in late November. Advent and Christmas was behind them. And they were anticipating annual leadership retreats. These pastors normally met for lunch every Monday, and this time the District Superintendent joined them to follow up on the proposal to merger.

The best one can say is that the pastors were each cautiously excited. They each wanted to their churches to be relevant to their changing communities, but they each realized how stressful the merger idea might be to their congregations.

After the initial enthusiasm, the group began to discuss the inevitable objections. One problem was unique to their denominational context and unexpected. The District Superintendent told them that there was no blueprint, and it was up to them to find a way. The Bishop only promised to leave future pastoral appointments open-ended, but (contrary to past experience) there was to be no top-down imposition of a strategic plan. Mergers based on top-down decisions had all failed. Successful mergers required bottom-up ownership.

However, the District Superintendent recommended a number of books for background reading, and connected them with the websites of a number of outside consultants that could offer good advice about the real “cost” of a merger.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

It was the first Monday in February that the idea of merger was first raised seriously. The pastors of these two churches had been meeting regularly for prayer and mutual support. They often collaborated with each other in ministry. They shared outreach projects together. They covered for one another if anyone was sick or on holiday. They shared similar challenges in the church and in the community. Most importantly they encouraged each other in spiritual life, in the struggles to sustain the church and bless the community. On this first Monday in February, both pastors had just completed their annual meetings. The intersection of prayer and reality prompted the discussion.

The idea sounded wonderful. It seemed but a further step in a collaboration that had been unfolding among these churches for years. Why not merge? It actually made perfect sense to merge. Together they could go deeper in faith and go further to bless the community. They could pool their volunteer and financial resources. They could downsize bureaucracy and reduce financial overhead. They could worship in inspiring numbers and impact the community with more energy.

After the initial enthusiasm, the pastors began to discuss the inevitable objections. One problem was unique to their urban context. They each represented very different traditions. Their theologies were alike, but different. Their spiritual practices were familiar, yet foreign. Their organizations had parallel committees, but their decision-making habits were different. The Presbyterian pastor had strong obligations to a middle judicatory, and worried about her career. The other pastor was suspicious of denominations and worried about his reputation.

Given their hopes and anxieties, they initiated additional conversation with the senior pastor of Harvest Community Church . . . a large mega-church at the edge of the city. This pastor was able to share his experience of the struggles and joys of church growth.

Beyond these unique problems, both sets of pastors faced similar objections.

The first common objection was that each church tended to define themselves by what they were not ... rather than by what they were. Unclear about their own identity and purpose, the one thing each church did believe was that they were not like “them”. Each church had a distinct culture. While many members among the churches got along, other did not. Each church included elements of the community that were not present ... and perhaps unwelcome ... in the other churches.

The next objection was that each pastor felt a duty to support the program and support staff in each church. Moreover, each church had a core group of volunteer leaders. There just wouldn't be room in a merged church for all the staff to have a job. Somebody would lost their job, or lost their authority.

Then, of course, there would be objections about property and money. Each church would expect everyone would come to their building. Each church would assume everyone would sit in their pews, enjoy their stained glass windows, and hold their hymnbooks. Emotional ties to properties and technologies were huge. Just imagine the upset, turmoil, and grief! Not to mention the competition, jealousy, and anger!

And finally there was the money. True, each of the four churches was in difficult financial shape. Each annual meeting had just passed deficit budgets. Capital savings were rapidly being used up. Even if they sold property to raise capital, heaven only knew where the money would come from to merge a church, build or renovate new space, hire or redeploy and train staff. Members were aging and money was tight.

The amazing thing, however, is that none of the four pastors was discouraged. Indeed, each surprised the other by remaining so enthusiastic. Why? They recognized that each of their colleagues was clear about their own identity and calling. Each one had a deep faith in the real presence of Christ in their lives and in the life of the community; and that although they had their disagreements they all lived by the same code of respect and love. Each one had a deep aversion to letting the church die, and a readiness to make whatever sacrifice needed to be made in order for the church to thrive. And each one shared a deep compassion of the diverse and sometimes desperate community in which they lived.

And here was the best news of all: each pastor knew several leaders in their church who shared that vision. They were not alone. So despite all the objections, it was time to get serious.

Trust

The Foundation for Candid and Faithful Conversation

When the boards of each church decided, in principle, to commit to a merger conversation ... and the word spread among their constituencies ... the reaction was predictable. Initially there was great enthusiasm for the idea. The churches had been cooperating with each other for years. They all face similar challenges. They all had similar opportunities ... if only they had the resources to seize them.

It wasn't long, however, before all the objections were raised. Calm consideration soon broke down into a chaos of worry. "Controllers" from each church took advantage of the chaos and tried to stop the conversation before it even began.

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

Controllers from Wesley gathered a group of middle-class retirees who were chronically anxious about debt, and wanted to preserve large reserve funds against rainy days; and a group of well-educated, senior management professionals who were nervous about surrendering authority over assets to blue-collar or middle-management people who didn't know how to budget.

Meanwhile, controllers from Asbury gathered a group of protective parents who were worried about the future of the youth, and wanted preserve the innovation of the children's ministries; and a group of choir members and lay pastors who were passionate about that their style of worship would be subsumed by an elitist understanding of hymnology and liturgy.

The undercurrent of anxiety, of course, was the hidden racism that thrived on stereotypes entrenched in each congregation. Many members from both churches simply didn't believe a truly bi-racial church could thrive.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

Controllers from Pine Street rallied a group of theological purists, denominational exclusivists, and multi-cultural enthusiasts. They were afraid that the purity of "Reformed Theology" might be lost, and that the merged church would behave more "Baptist" than "Presbyterian". Moreover, although rental income to other churches never paid the bills and never resulted in any real cooperation between cultures, they felt that the church couldn't abandon the ecumenical initiative of housing other fledgling congregations.

Meanwhile, controllers from Faith Temple rallied some of the matriarchs and patriarchs who were top givers, a large group of inactive and non-resident members with family roots in the historic church, and a few teachers committed to the preservation of historic buildings. They feared the loss of their historic building as a visible symbol of faith, and argued that the church would dishonor the memory of past church members.

The undercurrent of anxiety, of course, was the not-so-hidden suspicion among many members of each church that people in that other church were not really saved or sufficiently Christian.

The Vision Team, and the pastors and boards from each of the churches, realized that they did not have a solid foundation for honest conversation. They couldn't calmly discuss the costs of discipleship without knowing ... and respecting ... one another's deepest convictions, behavioral expectations, and organizational aspirations. They did not share a common language. They did not have comparable assumptions. The "corporate cultures" of each church were surprisingly different.

- **Wesley** often referred to "Wesleyan" tradition and theology, and defined community by weekly celebration of Holy Communion.
- **Asbury** often referred to "Black" history and experience, and defined community by "spirit-filled" worship and social service.

Interactions between the two churches were always polite and politically correct, but rarely profound and humble.

- **Faith Temple** often referred to the Bible, and defined community by assent to a specific set of doctrines.
- **Pine Street PC** often referred to “Reformed Theology”, and defined community by participation in committees and task groups.

Interactions always reflected longstanding rivalries. They all told jokes at the others’ expense. They all had stereotypes of the others that were caricatures of reality.

None of churches had really worked to define in everyday language the bedrock beliefs they actually turned to for strength in times of trouble; nor were they very clear about positive behavior patterns for which their members; nor were they very daring to admit negative behavior patterns that consistently sabotaged their best laid plans. They realized they had to build a solid foundation and a common language.

Each pair of pastors jointly developed a plan for each church to build clarity and consensus about its own identity (core values and bedrock beliefs) and its own trajectory (history and vision). This took some time, and required a combination of large and small groups to involve as many people as possible. Once each congregation became clearer about values, beliefs, vision, and mission the conversation was then expanded to include all four churches at once. They were able to establish and celebrate deeply held faith convictions that they all turned to for strength in times of trouble. They were all willing to hold one another accountable to positive behaviors epitomized by the “Fruits of the Spirit”.

Of course, education and preaching was not enough. The heat of the debate was really about power and self-interest. Each pair of pastors and boards arranged for a multitude of intentional conversations between controllers and individual people or families in their groups, and specific people who were their friends and also supportive of the merger. In other words, they got friends talking to friends, and in the midst of caring persuasion many people calmed down, felt reassured, and supported the plan. This was helped by denominational leaders who supported the plan; and by guest speakers from churches that had followed similar mergers and succeeded.

Each pair of pastors wisely understood that neither reason nor relationship would quell the opposition of a few. They warned each of their churches that some members would leave in a merger, and there could be short term financial loss. They also explained to their churches that many new people would be attracted to a larger merged church, and that there would be long term financial growth.

Vision Team

Trusted Leadership to Discern the Future

It was time to fish or cut bait. The four churches all understood that each board working separately could never develop a recommended strategic plan for merger. Therefore, each pair of churches held a congregational vote supporting, in principle, the process of merger and appointing representatives to an ad hoc committee that would develop a strategic plan.

Each pair of churches called this committee a “Vision Team”. This team would eventually bring a plan back to the congregations for final approval. Depending on the plan, it might also require approvals from parent denominational judicatories.

At the very beginning, it was important for all church members, from all churches, to understand the real mandate of the Vision Team. They were not just representing the interests of each congregation. They were developing a plan to grow God’s mission in the city from the combined spiritual lives and institutional assets of the four churches.

They described the mandate of the Vision Team using the metaphor of the Seeds and the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9). The “soil” was the mission field ... all the lifestyle segments represented in their particular neighborhoods and across the city. The “seeds” were the four churches ... all of the human and physical resources that are dedicated to Christ. And the “sower”, in this case, was the Vision Team itself in imitation of Jesus. The responsibility of the Vision Team was not to preserve each seed in a little bag for the sake of posterity, but to sow those seeds in particularly fertile ground so that they could bring forth a harvest “a hundredfold” more than the original church members.

All churches assumed that their pastors would be a part of the Vision Team. There were some special circumstances in each merger process:

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

The pastor of Wesley initially wanted to decline. He felt that he would be retiring soon, and should not have influence over the future of the church. His board, District Superintendent, and the other church partners persuaded him that this would be a mistake. He was widely respected and his experience was extraordinarily valuable to the planning process.

It was helpful for both pastors to talk with a church consultant. His experience helped the pastors understand how important their mission attitude and leadership credibility was to a merger conversation. Many people might have doubts and anxieties, but will still commit to the conversation because they trust the leader. Where the leaders go, so goes the church.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

Similarly, the interim pastor at Pine Street wanted to decline, thinking that an interim ministry was more about pastoral care and healing divisions, rather than future planning. A number of church members encouraged her decision. Again, her board, Executive Presbyter, and interim ministry colleagues persuaded her otherwise. The most important role of an interim pastor is to help the church live into God’s future.

It was helpful for these pastors to talk with the senior minister of Harvest Community Church. He helped them see that the real issue in a merger is not ecclesiology, but missiology. Healing divisions in a church is a waste of time unless a mission heart is instilled in the people. Otherwise, the church will continue to be internally focused and a new set of divisions will emerge next year.

The tricky question for both merger processes, of course, was who else would be on the Vision Team! They understood that for trust to be firm, the same criteria for nominations must apply to each pair of churches participating in the merger. The criteria were simple, but crucial:

- Broad credibility as a leader across the diversity of each congregation;
- Experience in long range planning and organizational development;
- Strong spiritual disciplines including prayer, Bible study, and regular worship attendance;

The Vision Team for each merger process would include current pastors. Team members might or might not already hold offices in the local church.

In addition to these criteria, each pair of churches agreed that every team members would be held accountable by their home church to the four basic categories of credibility.

- Each needed to have a “mission attitude” that placed the greater good of the Realm of God above the needs of their own institution, and wholeheartedly endorse the vision (theme song, inspiring image, and mission statement) of their congregation. This was a bit of a problem at Pine Street as controllers who resisted the visioning process wanted to lobby for their candidate for the committee. This was blocked.
- Each promised live up to the integrity of core values and bedrock beliefs that was the consensus of their congregation. This caused a stir at St. Anonymous, because (unfortunately) some of the best strategic planners among the members were in fact skeptics regarding the essential of faith. One of the persons appointed courageously took on a steep learning curve regarding church doctrine.
- Each promised to use or acquire whatever skills were necessary to create a proposed strategic plan that was relevant, realistic, and missional. This challenged people at Open Door Fellowship, because they had few members with senior management experience. A continuing education plan was developed to help these representatives learn about demographic and lifestyle segment research; and to “read up” on organizational theory. St. Anonymous actually gave money to Open Door Fellowship to facilitate the necessary continuing education.
- Each promised to work patiently, productively, and respectfully with colleagues on the committee. This proved to be the most challenging for leaders at Faith Temple. These leaders were not used to the collegiality of true teams. They had always worked in top-down “program silos” that rarely communicated or coordinated with other leaders. They needed to overcome habits of conflict avoidance, and learn new skills for conflict reconciliation.

Both Vision Teams began their work with a weekend retreat at a neutral site within the urban mission field, but outside any of the four church facilities. They elected their own chairperson and secretary, and promised to update each church board (and relevant judicatories) on the progress of their work.

It was generally assumed that the future board of any future merger would probably be based on this original ad hoc committee ... but that issue would only become clearer by subsequent events.

Facing Reality

Critical Momentum, Critical Mass

Both merger conversations started because both pairs of churches were in spirals of decline and/or financial trouble. The pastors recognized, however, that decline and financial struggle were only a symptoms of deeper issues as churches failed to thrive. The dialogue about trust identified **positive** shared values and faith convictions. Facing the reality of their situations, however, forced them to dialogue about **negative** behavior patterns that are also called “corporate addictions”.

For example, Wesley, Faith Temple, and Pine Street all had to own up to the “sacred cows” of their buildings, memorial objects, and other outdated technologies that cost money to carefully preserve. These did nothing to encourage church growth, especially among younger generations, and dominated the agendas of many meetings that should have focused on other programs. Any change to property caused enormous conflict. Some “sacred cows” actually discouraged participation by younger generations, multi-ethnic groups, and other publics that were growing in the mission field.

A second reality to be faced by all the churches was the extraordinarily low participation of adults in any structured midweek program of faith formation. Lack of accountable adult spiritual disciplines not only hurt giving, but it reduced volunteerism and undermined evangelism. This was hard to face especially by the leaders of Faith Temple and Pine Street because the Baptist and Presbyterian traditions had always stressed adult spiritual growth. The current lack of participation might be explained by the wide disbursement of members across the city, but how did this situation arise in the first place?

There were some especially difficult “reality checks” for some churches in each merger conversation.

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

These churches had very different practices regarding worship, stewardship and outreach. Wesley emphasized classical music and the visual art in educational worship; Asbury emphasized gospel music and dance in more inspirational worship. Wesley raised money by pledge, and invested in outreach through financial grants and board leadership. Asbury raised money by tithe, and invested in outreach through hands-on service and non-profit partnerships.

At this point, the Vision Team had another very instructive conversation with a consultant. She taught them how to do a comprehensive systemic analysis of the life and work of a church. They were able to see beyond programs, to see the processes and habits that were unique in every church.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

Both these churches had to face the “revolving door” problem that leaders had allowed to persist in their churches. Visitors would come, but not return. New people would join by confession or transfer, and fail to attend. Weddings and funerals yielded little interest in the church. These churches had habit of poor follow-up to create opportunities to mature new and renewed Christians translated into chronic volunteer burnout (Faith Temple) and chronic financial deficits (Pine Street).

Although it was not the most important factor, the age of regular participants in worship and church programs strongly influenced critical mass. Wesley and Pine Street had the higher median age in each of their merger pairings. In the 90’s this meant that they had the most bequests, but that income stream dried up in the new millennium. Asbury and Faith Temple had younger median ages in each pairing, but their more ethnically diverse participants had less disposable income ... which was being eroded even further in the new millennium.

The general consensus of the pastors and boards was that, unfortunately, the churches should have begun a conversation about merger a decade earlier. Then they could have pooled their strengths. Now there was a serious

question whether even merger would provide sufficient resources to sustain critical mass. And certainly they would have to face the deeper issues that brought them to this impasse in the first place.

At this point, the Vision Team had a very constructive meeting with the leaders of Harvest Community Church. Whatever their points of agreement or disagreement about the theory and practice of ministry, the one thing at which Harvest Community excelled was their ability to sustain critical momentum. They had mastered the art of both organizational and missional growth, and were able to offer invaluable coaching around the processes of seeker sensitivity, adult faith formation, volunteer deployment, and risk management. Their insights helped the Vision Team see their strengths and weaknesses in a whole new way. They began to see how a merger could help them address their weaknesses and build on their strengths. The Vision Team saw the advantages of working with an outside consultant who knew how to adapt the learnings from on church and apply them to the politics and practices of other traditions.

Breaking Control

Surrendering Privileges

The first crisis in the merger conversation caught the pastors and Vision Team by surprise. They celebrated the growing self-esteem, seeker sensitivity, and mutual respect that were building in and between each church. Each congregation began to put into practice clear expectations for positive behavior patterns, teach bedrock beliefs, and align decision-making to vision and mission. Yet this was precisely what some individuals and families in each church actually feared and resented. “Controllers” are influential personalities that want to shape the church around their personal preferences, tastes, lifestyles, convictions, and opinions. Once the church focused God’s vision, they lost power.

The crisis of control progressed in a predictable pattern, although each church experienced peaks of stress in different ways.

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

Wesley struggled most with “denial” and “turf protection” (the first and second stages of control). Two key families and strong financial givers simply would not admit that the church was in trouble; that the neighborhood was changing; and that the church should adapt in order to bless strangers to grace. They felt a strong sense of denominational superiority, and feared that merger would undermine their control of remaining trust funds of the church.

Perhaps ironically, Asbury also struggled with “denial” and “turf protection” for opposite reasons. Two or three of the founding members refused to recognize that their church was in trouble; that African-American publics were diversifying; and the church should adapt to more complex multi-culturalism. They feared that what they perceived as a grass roots movement would be taken over by wealthy power brokers in the historic church. They felt that their authority to interpret the spirit and influence tactics might be diminished.

Wide participation and personal diligence in the trust building and vision discernment processes went a long way to break the churches out of denial and turf protection. The pastors wisely enlisted the help of strong supporters of the merger conversation who were also friends to the controllers. They were able to speak faithfully and reasonably with the controllers to have open eyes toward the mission field and open hearts to other churches.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

Pine Street Presbyterian and Faith Temple struggled most with “inflexibility” and “dithering” (the third and fourth stages of control). Two trustees at Faith Temple wanted to delay the merger conversation and insist that even small decisions be made by consensus of the entire congregation, knowing full well that they could always sway a minority for a negative decision. Meanwhile, two members of the Pine Street board who were active in denominational committees interpreted denominational polity as narrowly as possible, and insisted on judicatory approval to even allow merger talks. They were motivated by fear that a merger would give too much power to the local congregation and undermine denominational public policies.

The leaders of each church got into the habit of sharing inspiring stories of externally focused churches and successful mergers in worship, newsletters, and fellowship gatherings. These inspiring stories motivated participants to insist that the churches “get on with it” and develop a serious strategic plan despite the objections of a minority. The more people became “results” oriented rather than “process” obsessed, the less they dithered. Fortunately, regional denominational leaders who were more aware of the challenges of the postmodern world, and who were more open to creative thinking in organizational development, cautiously encouraged the congregations to continue the conversation.

The power of control did not cease, however. Each church suffered “denigration” and “hostage taking” in greater or lesser degrees. Two families decided to withhold their financial contributions, but continued to attend. Several controllers announced their intention to leave the church (and take their financial contribution, the choir,

their Sunday school class, etc. with them) if the eventual merger strategies did not meet their approval. The pastors of Wesley and Faith Temple were safe from denigration, with long tenures and great respect, but individual board members found that their faith was questioned in some quarters.

The young new pastor of Asbury, and the interim pastor of Pine Street, felt more pressure. The office of the clergy in both these churches had lost credibility through past conflicts and embarrassments. Each church had unconsciously empowered powerful personalities to evaluate clergy with narrow “litmus tests” of ideological agreement or dogmatic purity.

Control issues did delay and sidetrack merger conversations for a time. However, the momentum for trust and vision was hard to stop. A clear majority of members and adherents from each church saw the potential to become a real blessing in the name of Christ in the community. The leaders were encouraged to keep talking and develop a serious proposal for the future.

Hope

Opening to God's Grace

The conversations about merger was now gaining momentum in each pairing of churches. The staff and boards were now fully engaged. The members and stakeholders in each congregation were regularly updated and invited to comment. Every worship service in every church included earnest prayers for spiritual guidance and wisdom for the leaders. The stress level was going up, but so far this was a good thing. It meant that people were paying attention and thinking about the true cost of discipleship. The churches were weak, but God was strong. It was crucial to seek God's will for each church individually and collectively.

The trouble was that none of the churches had a clear vision or particularly memorable mission statement. Their statements were either generic denominational slogans or vague intentions to worship, educate, and serve. As a result, there was no overall goal with which to align all activities, nor clearly defined measureable outcomes with which to evaluate success. It was difficult to do any strategic planning.

The Vision Team led each pair of churches through similar discernment processes. In addition to personal and corporate prayer, the discernment process included prayer walks through the surrounding neighborhoods, prayer triads lingering in public places to listen and observe, focus groups to understand the questions and needs of the diverse downtown publics, and interviews with social service and health care agencies.

In each merger conversation, each church was asked to add three things to the conversations about merger: a theme song that powerfully expressed the motivation and *raison d'être* of the congregation; an inspirational image that captured the values and beliefs of the congregation; and a revised mission statement that was memorable and useful to measure success.

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

Wesley celebrated a traditional hymn by Charles Wesley ("Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"); and chose a classic image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd (based on a stained glass window above the altar). They reduced their long, pedantic mission statement to a variation of the denominational statement: "Community, Communion, Compassion".

Asbury celebrated a traditional hymn by Charles Tindley ("Stand by Me"); and chose a contemporary painting of "Christ Healing the Sick" by Romeo Beardon (an African-American painter and jazz musician). They let the youth group write a new mission statement that was highly motivational and memorable: "Christ SO BIG he can embrace all your friends!"

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

Faith Temple unhesitatingly chose a camp song that they sang after every children's story in worship: "This Little Light of Mine". A classic Sunday School image of "Jesus with the Little Children" accompanied it. Their revised mission statement revealed their educational emphasis and linked the church to their charter school: "Shaping Future Disciples of Jesus Christ".

The music director at Pine Street composed an original song for the congregation entitled "I've Seen the Light". The refrain was "Jesus knows your name/We can guarantee!/ He commands, you obey/ He'll set you free!" They also chose the well-known image of the "Laughing Jesus" as their inspiration (perhaps in reaction to the congregational split they had previously experienced). Their mission statement was still fairly intellectual: "Think ... with the mind of Christ, Love ... with the heart of Christ, Serve ... with the might of Christ."

The spiritual discernment processes deepened the faith and raised self-esteem in each of the churches. In the weeks to come, the songs, images, and statements were shared and celebrated repeatedly in the worship, Sunday schools, small groups, and board meetings of each participating church. This built mutual understanding and respect. Many questions about faith, strategy, structure, and leadership remained ... but an intuitive and heart-felt bond began to be forged among the congregations.

As the listening strategies among the neighborhoods continued, members and leaders of each church began to see opportunities for outreach and witness. They began to think of others more than themselves, and to focus on community health and development more than just institutional survival.

Compatibility

Demographic Research, Lifestyle Compatibility, and Mirroring the Mission Field

The Vision Teams managed to avoid one of the most common mistakes in merger conversations. They did not plunge into strategic planning and start comparing the internal programs and assets of each church to the other. Instead, they started by comparing the proportionate representation of lifestyle segments in each church to the real proportionate representation of lifestyle segments in the mission field.

Thus, from the very beginning, each team declared its intention to fashion a merger that was externally focused. Future program planning would be based on relevance to the mission field, and not on accommodation to the previous habits of individual churches. This was clearly a bold move on the part of each team, and it made each congregation nervous. At the same time, this encouraged each congregation to believe that the merger would try to preserve **the best and most effective** ministries of each congregation.

The teams used the best demographic and lifestyle segment search engines to do their research into the urban environment. They were able to identify 10 year trends, predict the migrations of lifestyle segments across neighborhoods, anticipate the kinds of ministries that would be most relevant, and also anticipate the kinds of spiritual leaders that would be most helpful. They reality tested their research by interviewing social service, health care, police, municipal planners, board of education planners, businesses, and other key players that shaped the neighborhoods surrounding the churches.

In order to do comparative research effectively, each Vision Team needed to re-draw the boundaries of what would become the new mission field of the new church. This was more difficult than they expected. Neither church could define the new mission field for the merged church based on current locations of members ... but for different reasons.

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

These two churches were caught up in a vast flow of urbanization that covered a large area. Their memberships were actually scattered over multiple zip codes and even several counties; but the overwhelmed transportation infrastructure blocked active participation in the church. Therefore, the Vision Team drew the new boundaries for the mission field based on a 20 minute drive time to get to the church. This roughly paralleled the maximum time people were willing to travel to schools, hospitals, and recreational centers.

They further refined the boundaries of their new mission field by scanning for population density of distinct lifestyle segments. They heeded their consultant's advice, realizing that the merged church would only thrive if they focused on the seekers within their reach, rather than the members beyond their reach. Even then, diversity was a daunting challenge.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

These two churches were situated in an urban core that had a high population density, but which was limited to a small area proscribed by beltway highways, canals, railroads, and industrial areas. Church participation tended to draw people within a 10 minute walk of the church; church membership tended to include people who commuted to work for as much as 40 minutes, and connected to the church because of family roots or past activity. Neither a 10 minute walk time, nor a 40 minute drive time, defined the primary reach of the church.

Therefore, they used the beltway and bus routes to define an area that was primarily urban (not exurban or suburban), that included a larger diversity of lifestyles. When they plotted membership and adherent locations, they realized that a large band of publics lay between their current local and regional database, and that untouched area represented the real potential for congregational growth.

One of the most interesting insights was that each church, in both merger conversations, tended to over-represent and under-represent different lifestyle segments. Despite the fact that all of them claimed to be welcoming, it

became clear that each of them was exclusive in their own individual ways. This was not really a theological issue, but a social bias. Each church unconsciously repeated the homogeneous habits of Christendom. They tended to attract only those seekers who already resembled the members.

Moreover, some lifestyle segments are less compatible with other lifestyle segments, and this tended to be mirrored in church participation. That meant that church development and community development needed to go hand in hand. The healthier the church, the healthier the community would be. The more peaceful and respectful the cross-cultural community, the more the church would grow in numbers and impact. The principle of homogeneity so strongly embedded into the life and work of each church needed to be replaced by the principle of heterogeneity: respect for cultural diversity.

A second interesting insight was that three of the churches (Wesley, Pine Street, and Faith Temple) tended to over-represent a lifestyle segment of aging, white, economically stable, moderately well educated, childless married couples that was in fact decreasing in the surrounding neighborhoods. The fourth church (Asbury) tended to over-represent only a few of the many African-American micro-cultures in the community ... and failed to connect with emerging Hispanic and Asian populations that were growing in their midst. Despite their desires to reach different kinds of people, each church struggled to establish a credible bond with the publics currently living in their neighborhoods in daily living. Any merger would have to minister to both the declining core of veteran members, and the emerging diversity of seekers currently alienated from the institutional church.

Despite the post-Christendom imperative for cultural diversity and inclusivity, the Vision Teams realized that an institutional church cannot be all things to all people overnight! They would need to make strategic choices to prioritize the lifestyle segments they most wanted to reach. The motivation, however, had to be clear.

If the motivation to reach the public was simply based on **attraction** and the desire to perpetuate a historic institution, then the conversation on merger was doomed to failure. Each church would only want to attract people on their own terms and to perpetuate their own traditions. On the other hand, if the motivation to reach the public was based more profoundly on an urgent desire to **bless** people, then the conversation about merger would gain momentum. Merger would not be based on institutional need, but divine calling. And this, they all agreed, was a mission purpose that transcended any single institution or tradition.

Setting Priorities

Measureable Outcomes

The Vision Teams were coming to the end of their mandates. They had built a foundation of trust among the partners for each merger. They had assessed the effectiveness of the churches for **critical momentum**, and identified the challenges to **critical mass**. They had guided the churches to focus and find new hope by surrendering to God's purpose.

Now that the Vision Teams understood compatibilities between the churches and the wider community, and between the lifestyle segments that comprised each church, they turned their attention to the priorities for each church to accelerate church growth and positively impact the community.

Once again they had to carefully avoid being drawn into a premature discussion of specific programs and tactics. This was difficult because impatient members in all of the churches demanded answers about leadership deployment, program development, and (most of all) property sharing. Yet this was not yet the time for strategic planning. Instead, this was the time to compare strengths and weaknesses in the organizational systems of each church ... and to set some overarching goals or outcomes for any future merger.

The Vision Team needed to answer more urgent questions. Was the merger conversation itself worthwhile? Would any merger really matter? Would the merger really lead to growth in membership and participation, and would it really make a difference in the surrounding urban community?

The Biblical goals for any and all churches were clear enough. God required the church to multiply disciples and bless the world in the name of Christ. Exactly how this would define the measureable outcomes for a merged church in this community was an open question.

The Vision Teams used a simple image of discipling process to guide their investigation. (Faith Temple and Pine Street were helped by another conversation with the staff at Harvest Community Church. Wesley and Asbury were helped by a webinar with a consultant.) It was based on the sub-systems of critical momentum used when they initially faced the reality of current church life. Now a similar template would be used to imagine a future church life. Any successful church merger would need to connect seekers with believers, and people who are in need with people who can really help. To that end, the six basic sub-systems for critical momentum were simplified. All this would be led by a core team, and be based on a clear consensus for values, beliefs, vision, and mission that would be the foundation of trust for the new merged church.

Encounter Christ:

- Experience God
- Grow in Faith
- Discern Call
- Equip Disciples
- Send Servants

The Vision Teams defined measureable outcomes for each of these six sub-systems to sustain critical momentum. They wanted these outcomes to challenge the commitment of the church, but still be achievable. They wanted these outcomes general enough to encourage lots of creativity, but clear enough to provide definite expectations. In other words, they want to guide the direction of future strategic planning, but not tie the hands of the future ministry team leaders.

At first some Vision Team members balked at any conversation about measureable outcomes. It seemed like something a business might do, while a church would be much more tolerant of individual desires. Yet in their previous conversations with social service and non-profit leaders about lifestyle expectations, they quickly learned that non-profits must also define measureable outcomes in order to train leaders, refine programs, and get results. They also learned that non-profits and churches had to define measureable outcomes somewhat differently than business.

Outcomes were measured not only by statistics, but also by gathering stories from the mission field and intentionally gleaning feedback from mission partners.

The Vision Teams soon realized they faced another big challenge. Their previous research into lifestyle compatibilities convinced them that the revised mission fields involved in both mergers were simply too diverse for any single merged church to address. Trying to identify outcomes in each of the six-subsystems would inevitably force the outcomes to become unachievable and too vague. This would in fact undermine future strategic planning rather than help it, because no clergy leader and staff, and no single set of programs, could fulfill all of these priorities.

Whatever outcomes were defined to measure the success of each merger would probably only be useful for about three years. After that, priorities would need to be revisited, and new measurable outcomes defined, on an annual basis. The new merged church would grow one lifestyle segment at a time (rather than one member at a time), as the church multiplied expanded its reach across the mission field. And the lifestyle mix of the mission field was constantly in flux.

Stress Management

Living Between Grief and Promise

As the Vision Teams shared their comparative insights about the surrounding neighborhoods and current church membership, stress levels within the churches they represented went up. People inevitably pondered the connections and disconnections between current programs and emerging needs. They also began comparing hidden membership needs, tastes, and comfort zones against diverse community challenges, opportunities, and expectations. Was a healthy and faithful balance possible? How far outside their comfort zones would church members need to go?

Clearly, in order for any future merged church to grow, each church would have to give something up. Indeed, in order to be relevant to the mission field, all the churches would have to make changes. This was a real “gut check” time in the merger conversation. Churches would need to grieve the loss of some programs and some members, in order to fulfill the promise of new programs and new people. At this time there was renewed lobbying in each merger conversation a congregation to pull out of the merger conversation.

There are a number of key questions that need to be answered in the process of a merger. These questions force churches to recover and identify the real heart of the church, their unique place in God's plan to bless the world, and their essential courage for change.

- What is it about our experience of God that is most relevant to this community?
- Can we give seekers a good reason not to despair about the future?
- With our first breath and our last penny will it be "God's Mission" or "Me First"?
- Can we let go control, and allow others to use our assets to achieve God's purpose?

Each pair of churches stepped up with real courage for change. The representatives on the Vision Team were able to confront their own churches. If the church were to pull out of this merger conversation, they could not simply return to the status quo. There had to be a genuine alternative for strategic partnerships and a strategic plan. Simply stated: If this merger isn't a good fit, what other kind of merger would make sense?

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

The first two questions were most stressful for this merger conversation. These questions forced the participating churches to directly confront their separate racial, economic, and educational stereotypes. Each church tended to focus on how different they were. “Your experience of God is different than our experience of God! Your life situation is different than our life situation! Your issues and answers are different from our issues and answers!”

However, a more profound understanding of diversity through lifestyle segmentation helped them get beyond their stereotypes.

Yes, there were differences between church memberships, but there were also differences within church memberships. Younger generations were already crossing racial, economic, and educational boundaries in their relationships. There were degrees of difference among once homogeneous publics, so that attitudes, world views, behaviour patterns, and lifestyle preferences varied even among people who shared a racial identity, economic status, or educational attainment. And lifestyle segments were already drifting from historic kinships and exploring new kinships,

So the supposed differences became less significant. Instead, church members discovered that they all shared fundamental anxieties about emptiness and meaninglessness, fate and death, guilt and shame, loneliness and abandonment. They also discovered that God was bigger than any of their preconceptions, and that there was plenty of room for people to experience God in different ways and belong to the same church.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

The second two questions were most stressful for this merger conversation. Faith Temple was already quite open to different experiences of God, and Pine Street was already aware of the universality of fundamental anxieties about life. They struggled over issues of radical generosity and surrender to God's mission.

A merger demands radical sacrifice, but the members of both these historic churches would only go so far. The percentage of their giving, you might say, varied between 3% (Pine Street) and 10% (Faith Temple), but it was still just a percentage. Most of their wealth in time, talent, and money they kept to themselves. They expected the church to support a balanced lifestyle, but a merger demands an unbalanced lifestyle. It is a lifestyle that is radically generous, and causes you to reshape your personal priorities.

The members of these churches had long histories of honoring membership privileges. Neither church was quite ready to go too far out of the box of their comfortable routines. Sacred cows abounded: sacred properties and technologies, sacred personalities and offices, sacred programs and reserve funds. Many members were unwilling or unprepared to surrender personal control to God's mission.

A more profound commitment to 24/7 spiritual practices, and a better understanding of Biblical stewardship, helped them get beyond these reservations. Role models for sacrifice and surrender emerged from each church. Some of these role models were 90 year old veterans who remembered and still practiced the spiritual disciplines of the past; and some were teenagers who set new benchmarks for extreme living and social service.

The Vision Teams in each merger needed to take time and intentionally honor the grief many church members felt about the past. The pastors and lay leaders helped people understand that a merger was not a judgement on their incompetence or seeming faithlessness, but rather another strategy to emulate the continuous learning and absolute faithfulness of their ancestors. The trouble with grief is that implies guilt. The more leaders removed the guilt, the easier it was to grieve.

Furthermore, the Vision Teams needed time to embed the new hope. The pastors and lay leaders needed to repeat the mantra of hope, and multiply the stories of positive change in the histories of each church. Their good work to define a theme song, inspiring image, and motivational mission statement for each church bore fruit. Unity shifted from membership privileges to mission mindedness.

The New Board

Credible Leadership for Critical Mass

The time had come to make a decision. Each pair of boards had made a decision to support a merger in principle, and had appointed a Vision Team to explore the possibilities and prepare the way. Each Vision Team had guided the conversations from trust to truth, and from truth to hope. They had uncovered the compatibilities of one church to another, and the wider community. And they had defined the priorities or measureable outcomes that would define a merger's success and ensure that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts.

Now each pair of churches needed to make a decision to support a merger in practice. The decision-making would be done in several stages. In this first stage, each congregation would be asked to approve several things. (For some churches, this would also require the approval of the relevant denominational body).

- 1) Affirm the desired outcomes of a merger defined by their respective Vision Teams;
- 2) Elect and appoint a new board for a new church;
- 3) Approve the time-limited continuance of paid program and support staff (including ordered ministers) until a staffing plan was developed by the new board and approved by the congregation (and relevant judicatories).
- 4) Approve the time-limited continuance of the trustees for each church, until an asset management plan was developed by the new board and approved by the congregation (and relevant judicatories). Former trustees might be included among the trustees of the new church, but would not be able to serve consecutive terms.

The details of the strategic plan, including the development of a staffing plan and the distribution of assets would then be developed by the new board, assisted by staff currently in place. Recommendations would then be brought before the congregations and relevant judicatories by the new board for final approval as the second stage.

At this point, the decision-making agenda varied between the two merger processes. The churches involved needed to affirm a new name and mission statement. The timing, however, may vary based on the decision-making habits of the churches involved.

Merger #1: Wesley and Asbury

Wesley and Asbury were both Methodist churches, with an episcopal style of decision-making. In other words, decisions like this tended to be made first, and the future board was recruited to align the church with the mission. Therefore, at this time the Vision Team proposed the new name and mission statement for the new church, and it was approved simultaneously with the election of the board.

Merger #2: Faith Temple and Pine Street

Faith Temple and Pine Street embraced a more conciliar style of decision-making. True, the “congregation” and “Presbyterian” methods were somewhat different, but in decisions like this the congregation relied on their boards to recommend decisions to their constituencies for approval. Therefore, the decision to approve a new name and mission statement was not made at this time, but deferred for consideration and recommendation by the new board once they were installed.

The decision about a new name and mission statement will be explored in the next chapter.

A transition from multiple boards in multiple churches, to one board for a new church, is somewhat complex and always stressful. Each Vision Team found it helpful to consult with experts outside the church to educate, train, and facilitate the process. Wesley and Asbury were guided by denominational leaders for their Conference, but also

relied on an outside consultant familiar with contemporary board models for non-profit organizations. Faith Temple and Pine Street did not have the same denominational support, so they relied on an outside consultant and also the advice of Harvest Community Church that had a reputation for an innovative board model.

Most churches are actually quite blind to alternative models of organization. They have lived so long with the same methods of decision-making that they assume it is the only way to manage a church.

There is, after all, more than one way to organize a church. Choose the model that is most effective delivering the mission; most familiar to the merging churches; and most easily adapted to any denominational requirements.

1. Council or Board?

The Pine Street and Faith Temple decided that a “council model” would be best for the merged church. People would generally sit on a board because they led different program areas. This would reduce some of the power politics that dogged each church in the past, improve communication and coordination, and hopefully allow the strongest programs from each church to maintain continuity into the merged church.

Wesley and Asbury decided that a true “board model” would be best for the merged church. People would sit on the board because of overall management expertise, experience, and maturity. This was the habit of both churches. It would provide overall unity of integrity and purpose, but allow considerable freedom to pastors, staff, and teams to develop unique ministries.

2. Task Management or Policy Governance?

Both mergers believed that “policy governance” was the best organizational strategy. They wanted the council or board to refrain from micro-management, and focus instead on establishing policies that would set measurable goals, describe decision-making habits, and protect executive limitations. These boundaries would free teams to do whatever worked, but still protect church integrity and safeguard members, adherents, and the general public.

Moreover, both mergers believed that the mission effectiveness of the merged church depended on an ability to interface with other social services and non-profit organizations in the urban core. Most of these already operated with policy governance boards.

Finally, both mergers believed that the actual management of a church should be delegated to a core leadership team. The team would be led by the senior pastor. They would have authority and responsibility to manage a discipling process (volunteers, programs, and assets) in any way that best accomplished the mission of the church, provided they honored the boundaries and policies of the council or board.

3. Representative or Nominated?

The tendency in a merger is to design a board of former leaders from each church in equal representation. The theory is that this would build confidence that each constituency would have an equal voice, and eventually shape a new united identity. In practice, however, this strategy prolongs separate identities, undermines unity, and makes even small decisions fractious, tedious, and time-consuming. Both mergers knew this from listening to stories of failed mergers. Therefore, the churches decided to elect a new board.

Pine Street and Faith Temple wanted to move to a council model based on leaders of each program area. Since the program areas of the two churches generally paralleled each other, the committee recommended that leaders and participants in each program, for each church, gather to get to know one another and the programs of each church. Once they knew and understood each other, they would vote as one group to elect the ministry area leader, who would also sit on the board.

Wesley and Asbury wanted to move to a board model based on general organizational expertise. The committee developed common criteria for board leadership, including such things as spiritual disciplines, expertise or experience in long range planning and policy development; maturity to mentor emerging leaders;

and ability to network with social service and nonprofit agencies. Nominees would submit a written profile describing their suitability that would be circulated among both churches. As one group people would elect the new board.

In addition to these decisions, the committees explored additional limitations or requirements that denominational bodies might have to shape a board. This included representatives to judicatory meetings, the role of the pastor on the board, and the focus and limitations for personnel committees.

Both mergers embraced policy governance. Their members were all tired of too many meetings and micro-management, and they felt that a more decentralized model that gave real power to ministry teams might honor the greater diversity that each merger entailed. Whether or not board members functioned as a council or true board, the nominations criteria in both mergers was the same. Committees would use them to choose chairpersons who would sit on the council; congregations would use them to choose board members directly.

The nomination process for the new boards were much the same as for the Vision Team with some new expectations:

- Experience with Policy Governance;
- Skills in strategic planning and asset management;
- Skills in systems of evaluation and accountability;
- Ability to network with leaders in other sectors of the community;
- Commitment to spiritual disciplines;
- Readiness to mentor emerging leaders;

The nominations criteria were made very clear to the participating conversations, and candidates were identified well in advance of congregational meetings for prayer. There would be no nominations from the floor.

Once the new board was approved, the old boards of each church were thanked and dismissed. Some of these were nominated and did join the new boards, but this was based on the new criteria for nominations. Board members did not “represent” their original congregations. They represented the merged church.

The new temporary status of paid staff did not come as a surprise. Personnel committees within each church has indicated that mergers would bring staffing changes in the annual reviews. This gave some staff plenty of time to seek other positions if they chose. The Vision Team wanted to be clear, however, that all staff were give the same status, and that the boards of the merged church would develop a comprehensive staffing plan rather than deal with each position piecemeal. This would maximize the cooperation and communication necessary for the merger to succeed.

Once formal decisions were made by the churches and judicatories to approve the mergers and new boards, both mergers celebrated together in a single worship service. They recognized and prayed for the new boards of each new church, asking God’s guidance as they entered the next phase of strategic planning.

The New Identity

The Symbol of a New Beginning

The timing of the decision for a new name and mission statement can vary from merger to merger because of the different decision-making habits of the participating churches. For example, Wesley and Asbury came from a tradition of Episcopal decision-making, and it made sense that the new name and mission statement would be approved at the same time that the new board was elected. However, Faith Temple and Pine Street came from a broad tradition of consensus building, and it made sense that their new name and mission statement would be recommended by the new board after it was elected, and then recommended to their constituencies. In any case, this often requires further denominational approval.

A new name does not simply come from the brainstorming of the new board. It emerges as the new board prayerfully reflects on the values, beliefs, identity, and mission of each participating church. Earlier in the merger process, these were encapsulated in an inspiring image, a theme song, and a mission statement. Together this is what is often called “DNA” ... the unique identity of this particular organism of the Body of Christ.

The new board of each merger prayerfully discerned the revised DNA. This becomes the corporate culture of the new organization. The values, beliefs, vision, and mission are articulated in words, modeled in deeds, and revealed in lifestyle starting with the new boards, and transferred to the emerging leadership teams and memberships. As each board clarified the new DNA of each church, the new name and mission statement became clear.

Both boards immediately rejected keeping the original name of any of the original churches. They felt that a new church, representing a new beginning, was not well served by any lengthy, hyphenated name. For example, a name like “Faith Temple on Pine Street” would not be memorable, workable, or (most importantly) motivational for future generations of church members. Or for example, a “Wesley – Asbury Memorial Church” would be too too confusing ... and perhaps intimidating ... to many of the lifestyle segments currently under- or unrepresented in the churches.

The new boards in each merger knew that this would disappoint some members who were most concerned about heritage. They also knew that they couldn't just invent or impose any name by themselves. Therefore, they went back to the theme song, inspiring image, and mission statements redeveloped at each church as they built a foundation of trust. This stimulated prayer and discussion about a new name.

They believed that the new name should unambiguously reveal the vision of the new church rather than the history of the previous churches. The new name should be inspirational to the members, defining exactly what they felt called to proclaim to the world. And it should be attractional and affirming to seekers, expressing exactly what they were longing to find or experience.

Similarly, they believed that the new mission statement should communicate clearly the blessing(s) they yearned to convey to the public. And it should be immediately relevant to the physical, relational, and spiritual needs of the lifestyle segments in their primary mission field.

Merger #1: Church of the Good Shepherd (formerly Wesley and Asbury)

The board chose the name “Church of the Good Shepherd”. They were cognizant that the metaphor of the Good Shepherd was prominent in the identity of each church. The Good Shepherd gathering the flock was a stained glass image high above the altar and dominating Wesley's sanctuary. The Good Shepherd that rescues the lost sheep and protects them from predators was a key concept for the social conscience of Asbury.

They also chose a mission statement that was an abbreviated version of Asbury's mission statement, and implicit in the more intellectual version of Wesley's mission statement: Christ SO BIG he can embrace all your neighbors!” The brevity and lettering of the statement suggested that such a mission statement could easily fit on the side of a bus, the back of a park bench, or the billboard along the interstate.

The name and mission statement were approved by acclamation in the congregations, and subsequently by the Bishop, who led a worship celebration. The news was immediately released to the press.

Once the new name was announced, the congregations ceased using the old names, and began worshipping jointly every Sunday. Since the former Wesley and Asbury churches were located about 15 minutes away from each other in the expanding urbanization of the area, the worship site was rotated monthly between the two buildings until the asset management plan was approved.

Merger #2: Faith Community Church (formerly Faith Temple and Pine Street)

The new board elected from the credible leaders of Faith Temple and Pine Street recommended the name: “Faith Community Church”. This did not just preserve the name of one church, but communicated the clear commitment of both churches to faith formation and Christian maturity. The new board realized that both downtown churches had a clear heartburst for their surrounding neighborhoods ... but the mission field today was much larger than just Pine Street.

They also recommended a mission statement that was less about programs and more about results; and that appealed to the gut more than to the mind. They felt that they needed to break a public misperception that their churches were old fashioned and elitist. They recommended the mission statement: “Loving Our City with All Our Heart, Mind, and Strength”. They felt the verb implied activity rather than passivity, and that the statement echoed the Great Commandment.

True to its conciliar tradition, the new congregation accepted the name whole heartedly, but debated the mission statement. It was eventually shortened to “Loving the City with Heart, Mind, and Strength”. Some felt that the reference to “our” city was too condescending and exclusive of other faith traditions, and the phrase itself had too many words.

Once the new name and mission statement were approved by the churches (and by the Presbytery to which Pine Street belonged), the outdoor signs and weekly worship bulletins were immediately changed to proclaim the emerging organization and celebrate its potential for community impact.

Once the new name was announced, the congregations ceased using the old names, and began worshipping jointly every Sunday. Since the former Faith Temple and Pine Street were located so close to each other in the urban core, the worship site was rotated weekly between the two buildings until the asset management plan was approved.

Asset Management

Resourcing Teams and Ministries

The mergers that had been approved in principle, and then were approved in practice, now needed to merge in fact. A sense of pride and confidence was also emerging. Each pair of churches (Wesley and Asbury, Faith Temple and Pine Street) had discovered that they were indeed willing to pay the cost of discipleship, and could be faithful to follow God's mission in new ways. They were willing to change attitudes and traditions, organizations and leadership teams. And now they felt a deeper trust that would help them change properties, technologies, and financial strategies.

All four churches were warned at the very beginning that discussion of what would happen to property, facility, and money in a merger would be very difficult. However, the mutual respect and sensitivity that had been generated over the past months made this conversation easier than feared. They had built trust and focused mission. They had set priorities for leadership and program. Most importantly, they had already reduced the power of controllers in each church. This meant that discussion of assets could be calm, respectful, and (most of all) missional.

Merger #1: Church of the Good Shepherd (formerly Wesley and Asbury)

The biggest challenge for Church of the Good Shepherd was that neither the former Wesley property nor the former Asbury property were particularly suitable. Aside from limited parking, they were constructed in such a way to make renovations very difficult. Neither sanctuary had particularly good acoustics. The space was not versatile enough to offer the worship options the board envisioned. The offices were cramped. The nurseries were located in the basement or near exit doors that could not be secured.

The Wesley property did have a good traditional pipe organ, but it would probably not be versatile enough as an instrument for future worship. Good Shepherd could sell the organ to another church, and use the income to purchase keyboards and other instruments. The Asbury property did have gymnasium, but such space was hard to maintain and unsuitable hospitality and fellowship ministries that would need to be higher quality.

The denomination could transfer ownership of the Asbury property to another ethnic church in need of space; and could sell the Wesley property at a good price to a developer to build condominiums. The real challenge was to locate a suitable, affordable place for Church of the Shepherd to move that would center them in the primary mission field. They ultimately found an opportunity to purchase a renovated former home improvement box store. It would provide excellent parking. An architect related to the Conference could design it to suit their needs. Best of all, a member of the former Wesley Church was a director on the board of that corporation, and could arrange acquisition at a good price!

Reserve funds and financial accounts could be merged fairly easily, and the trustees from each former church organized the process. However, Asbury carried a significant debt left over from the building of the gymnasium ten years ago. The Conference was able to help the church discharge much of that debt, and reassign the rest from the bank to the denomination.

The asset management proposal for Church of the Good Shepherd was now shared with the church and their denominational parent for approval. The board and trustees could now follow through with changes related to state government requirements and non-profit status.

Merger #2: Faith Community Church (formerly Faith Temple and Pine Street)

The biggest challenge for the new Faith community Church was property. Each former church was located on highly visible corners in the downtown, and each church struggled to provide adequate parking. And of course, the members of each church loved their building. The new board paid for professional engineers to thoroughly evaluate each building. The engineers concluded that the Faith Temple property was in much worse condition, and would cost more in renovations, than the Pine Street property. The new board would recommend the sale of that building, with the congregation centering on the Pine Street location.

In the end, this was good news for the Charter school of the former Faith Temple. Not only were there better facilities at Pine Street, but the income eventually generated from the sale of the Faith Temple property would provide significant capital infusion for their ministry. On the other hand, this was stressful for Pine Street, because they had to terminate the lease of a number of fledgling ethnic churches housed in their building. They would do whatever they could to relocate them.

Moreover, the new board of Faith Community Church needed to update a number of technologies (including audio systems in the sanctuary and plumbing in the washrooms). And Plans were developed to remove, relocate and preserve a number of “sacred” objects (stained glass, sanctuary furniture, and archives) from Faith Temple.

There were reserve funds held in trust by both former churches that needed to be brought under the supervision of the new church. Lawyers who were already members of Pine Street volunteered to undertake the necessary legal procedures. The most complex task was to protect the financial “fire wall” between the church and the Charter School (which was separately incorporated and received state grants and public donations).

The sale of the old Faith Temple property might take some time, given the economic realities downtown. For the time being, it could be rented to various religious groups and social service groups, and the sanctuary could still be rented for concerts. The good news was that Faith Community Church could sell the “air rights” to a developer who wanted to protect several corporate buildings near the church.

The asset management proposal for Faith Community Church was now shared with the church and their denominational parent of the former Pine Street Church for approval. The board and trustees could now follow through with changes related to state government requirements and non-profit status.

Building a Core Team

Competent Leadership for Critical Momentum

The two mergers had now been approved **in principle**, and then **in practice**, and then **in fact**. The surrounding community, church members, state, and denomination now considered the merger accomplished ... except in one further way. They needed to be united in ministry. Up to this point, the program and support staff from the former churches had been carrying on with the understanding that all offices were time-limited. Now the time had come to finalize a staffing strategy.

The essential identity and purpose, and basic organizational structure, of two new churches became clearer. **Church of the Good Shepherd** had chosen a board model and **Faith Community Church** had chosen a council model. Both models would focus the board or council on sustaining the critical mass of the church. In other words, the board and council would make critical decisions to grow membership and participation, manage financial resources, update facilities and technologies, build and network with mission partners, mentor emerging leaders, encourage creativity, communicate within and beyond the church, and protect the core values and bedrock beliefs of the church, and align everything and everyone to the vision God gave the church ... and nothing else.

However, there was much the board and/or council could not do, and would not attempt to do. The task of sustaining critical momentum for the church would be entrusted to a Core Team. This team would run the day to day, week to week, year to year ministries of the church. Together the board/council and leadership team would define measureable outcomes in a changing world, but the board would refrain from micro-management. They would delegate both responsibility and authority to the leadership team to achieve the measureable outcomes in any way that worked (within the policies and executive limitations defined by the board.)

Critical Momentum is basically about sustaining a “discipling process”. Earlier the Vision Teams for each merger had used a similar concept to define measureable outcomes for the new church. A Core Team for a “discipling” process requires a designated leader who can oversee each critical step required to grow a seeker into a servant and a member into a volunteer.

The Core Team consists of leaders who each take responsibility and authority to manage one step in the journey of spiritual and missional growth. This leader would innovate and evaluate the tactics, build and train their own teams, coordinate with other leaders, network with related agencies and partners, and general ensure that the outcomes expected by the board/council and senior pastor were achieved.

Earlier the two pairs of churches had approved the first stage of the mergers. This included the continuance of the existing program and support staff from each church until a new staff strategy was devised. However, the design of a Core Team is not just a staffing strategy, but a leadership team strategy. Some leaders are paid full or part time, while others may be unpaid even though they share the same responsibility, authority, and accountability of paid staff.

Merger #1: Church of the Good Shepherd (formerly Wesley and Asbury)

The Church of the Good Shepherd (formerly Wesley and Asbury) required a staffing strategy that could both model and develop the bi-racial character of the new church, and also relate to the growing multi-cultural population of striving singles in the emerging mission field. The new board proposed the following staff configuration:

- The senior pastor of the former Wesley Church was retiring anyway, and recommended that Church of the Good Shepherd ask the Bishop to appoint a veteran African-American minister with strong administrative and preaching skills.
- The part-time youth pastor from the former Asbury Church would be hired as the full-time youth pastor for Good Shepherd. However, in order to connect with the diverse mission field, they needed to retrain this youth pastor to specialize in small group multiplication. Their goal was not to create a youth ministry, but to multiply cross-generational affinity groups.

- The new church needed musical leadership that could competently include multiple musical genres and instrumentations. The former paid music director from Wesley was too narrowly focused on classical hymnology, and the former unpaid choir director from Asbury was not available for extra training or additional time. They proposed that both be replaced by a younger music professional that they found outside the Conference from a national search.
- A combination of early retirements and extra training would allow the church to reduce secretarial support staff to a full time position supplemented by a team of volunteer receptionists. Since they anticipated moving into a completely different space (more on that later!) the board of Good Shepherd decided to contract with an independent custodial service.

The former churches both had strong lay visitation teams, and they expanded the “Steven Ministries” program from the Wesley Church to delegate most of the chronic care-giving to laity.

Merger #2: Faith Community Church (formerly Faith Temple and Pine Street)

Faith Community Church (formerly Faith Temple and Pine Street) required a staffing strategy that supported their strong emphasis on faith formation, and interfaced well with the social service agencies downtown. The new board proposed the following staff configuration:

- The senior pastor of the former Faith Temple was near retirement, and announced his intention to move to a smaller church in another state where he could be closer to grandchildren, and the minister at Pine Street was an interim anyway. The board proposed calling a new pastor who was an excellent expository preacher, and also an adjunct faculty member at the nearby college. He also had experience developing non-profit organizations and understood policy governance.
- The part time Christian Education Director from Faith Temple would be made full time in the new church. Her salary would be supplemented by the Charter School through grants to that separately incorporated non-profit. This would allow the new Faith Community Church to afford a half-time Youth Minister, with the hope of expanding the position to full time in five years.
- The underpaid Music Director from the former Pine Street was so talented, and had such a reputation in the arts community downtown, that they encouraged him to stay with the new church and proposed a higher salary to ensure his tenure. He would also be integrated into the curriculum of the Charter School as a music teacher.
- Secretarial and custodial staff were sorted out easily. The big challenge, however, was that the church needed to boost hospitality in order to get traction for growth in the urban core. They proposed stretching their budget to hire a part-time Christian with experience as a restaurateur, who really understood how to welcome and honor guests. She brought her experience training hospitality teams to the new church.

Caregiving demands would continue to be high in the urban core, but the church couldn’t afford paid chaplaincy. Fortunately, there were two retired, active ministers in the neighborhood who volunteered to oversee wedding and funeral ministries.

In order to meet the challenge to develop a staffing strategy, Faith Community Church was forced to build a more experienced and better trained Human Resources Team than either church had formerly known. None of the people from the former Personnel Committees were asked to continue. Instead, new team members were recruited with a much higher accountability to excellence. Some emerged from within the membership; some were borrowed from the board of the Charter School; and the chairperson was recruited from the nearby city hospital administration (and she was Roman Catholic).

The staffing strategies were approved by the two new churches, and implemented with the assistance of relevant judicatories.

Strategic Planning

Traction and Steering

The Core Teams in each new church needed to develop a strategic plan for future ministries. This was accomplished with the active collaboration of the former Vision Team members. After all, it was the Vision Teams from each merger conversation that defined the basic measurable outcomes that would make the mergers successful.

The strategic plan was intentionally built on the foundation of trust, clarity of vision, and contextual analysis that prepared the churches for merger. The plan was also created with the Policy Governance model in mind. This meant that the strategic plan did not have to identify every single tactic to be used by the new churches. Tactics could be delegated to teams. It did mean that key strategies needed to be identified that would give the new churches traction and direction for the immediate future.

The Core Teams for each church pairing evaluated the programs from their respective former churches. They wanted to merge and accelerate programs that were working well; improve on programs that were important but less effective; initiate new ideas to achieve the outcomes defined by the Vision Team; and terminate tactics that were no longer relevant or effective.

In order to do this, they used a simple model for traction and steering. These were the “mechanics” that would move the vehicle of the church forward. Certain programs would give the church “traction”. These would engage the targeted lifestyle segments, inject the power of the Holy Spirit, grip the road, and move the organization to positively impact the world. Other programs would give the church “steering”. These would mature Christians and concentrate outreach, and equip servants for faith witness and social service. The simple idea is this: better traction, greater impact; clearer direction, increased growth.

Traction

The Core Teams in each new church explored how effectively each former church was getting “traction” in the community. They looked specifically at programming for hospitality, worship, and small groups (or other forms of significant spiritual conversation that integrated lifestyle and faith). Then they explored the quality of care giving throughout the church.

Merger #1: Church of the Good Shepherd (formerly Wesley and Asbury)

The Core Team for Church of the Good Shepherd discovered that each former church had struggled to get traction for different reasons. Wesley had struggled with radical hospitality, but midweek fellowship groups and study groups were quite strong. Asbury had strong hospitality, but there were few midweek small groups. The result was that visitors came to the former Wesley church via midweek group relationships, but then felt ignored by the congregation as a whole; and visitors came to the former Asbury church because of their outreach but failed to go deeper into faith formation.

There were quite different styles of worship in the previous churches, but the real issue was not so much about style as purpose. Worship at Wesley had been informative, but tended to satisfy curiosity rather than generate urgency. Worship at Asbury had been motivational, but tended to draw people into advocacy without disciplined spiritual growth. The “Aha!” moment came when the Core Team realized that the Sunday morning habits of each church only led to friendly chatting about family, weather, and sports during post-worship refreshments. There were few truly significant conversations about God, life, mission, and so on. The new strategic plan needed to reshape congregational habits.

The new church required several layers of trained greeters before and after worship; a worship service that was more inspirational, with strong musical rhythms and down-to-earth coaching about faith and daily life; and multiple choices for high quality refreshments that would encourage people to linger longer so that they could make connections for midweek small groups. Follow-up on visitors would need to combine face to face conversations and social media.

Mid-week small groups must become the cornerstone of Christian education and faith formation, instead of classic Sunday school. Neither church was very experienced in this method. So the merged church would need to adopt a model of designated and well trained small group leaders. They would need to develop a variety of study and affinity groups, with the common goal of serious spiritual growth.

Finally, the Core Team recognized that the lifestyle segments comprising the original two churches were actually diminishing in the mission field. In order to be relevant to the emerging multi-cultural singles, they would need to develop a second worship service that was completely different in message and format than the more traditional service. Message, music, place, time, and leadership would be different in each worship option. One option needed to be very inspirational and presentational; and the other option would need to focus on coaching tips for daily living and be more dialogical.

Merger #2: Faith Community Church (formerly Faith Temple and Pine Street)

Meanwhile, the Core Team of Faith Community Church discovered that the systemic strengths and weaknesses of the previous two churches were actually quite similar. They could now gather more resources to overcome these weakness and build on these strengths.

The original two churches were really not as friendly as they thought they were. Their people all tended to gather as cliques, making it difficult for newcomers to fit in. They needed to learn how to be sensitive to generational differences; intentionally respectful to men, women, and alternate lifestyles; and at least learn to welcome and give basic directions in Spanish. This was why the Core Team included a paid leader with a background in hospitality planning from the restaurant business.

The original two churches also assumed their worship was more inspirational and engaging than it really was. In fact they both blended worship as educational and care giving ... and the didactic order of service with long announcement was frankly boring. They needed to combine education with more inspiration in order to be more relevant to the lifestyle segments of the mission field. This meant more music in multiple genres and instrumentations; more still and moving images; and updated technologies to do it.

The issues of brokenness were huge in the urban mission field, and the Core Team decided that the church would need to add an additional healing service during the week. This worship option would not be a “preaching” services so much as a “praying” service aimed toward people who were physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally broken and looking for wholeness and hope.

Ironically, the greatest weakness in both churches was the inability of the laity to be confident and courageous in engaging newcomers in conversations about faith and other serious life issues. Sunday morning refreshment time was notable for the lack of significant conversations about matters of substance, and chatter about sports and the weather. An additional team of “minglers” would need to be trained and deployed to introduce visitors and members, and to kick start conversations that mattered.

Steering

The second strategic synergy was about how each new church could “steer” toward the outcomes of a clear mission. Each Core Team looked specifically at Christian Education, Outreach Ministries, and Evangelism. Then they explored the intentionality for leadership accountability among staff and volunteer leaders.

Merger #1: Church of the Good Shepherd (formerly Wesley and Asbury)

The Core Team focused on membership training, signature outreach ministry, and mentoring for emerging leaders. Several more priorities were identified:

Membership training in the past had been Bible-based in both former churches, but tended to focus on polity, doctrine, and public policy. The Core Team recognized that the priority in the postmodern world needed to be on spirituality, lifestyle, and conversation with culture; rather than theologies, ideologies, and confrontation with culture. And it would probably need to be offered in smaller, incremental programs ... with options for time, place, and media.

Asbury had always wanted to develop a youth ministry as a signature outreach, but did not have the financial resources or managerial talent to create a comprehensive ministry that could offer options to the full diversity of young adults in the mission field. The merger now provided the resources to develop this major mission. This was why the staffing plan boosted the Youth Minister to full time, and retrained him in small group ministries.

Intentional mentoring for emerging lay leaders would need to be added by policy to the expectations of board membership and team leadership. Each board member would be expected to mentor at least three emerging leaders in spiritual life at any given time; and every team leader would be required to have an apprentice. Evangelism and spiritual disciplines needed to be emphasized, because former members of Wesley Church were timid about sharing faith; and former members of Asbury church were vague about deepening faith.

The committee began to compile a list of education and training goals that would be needed to help members of each church understand and implement these shifts in priorities.

Merger #2: Faith Community Church (formerly Faith Temple and Pine Street)

Once again, the Core Team identified common weaknesses and strengths in the former churches, and developed a strategy for future mission.

Both churches had strong Christian education programs for all ages that could be merged with relative ease. However, adult Sunday schools had uniformly plateaued and stagnated. Some of these would need to be terminated so that new ones could flourish. There were also serious concerns about the nursery and pre-school ministries. Training was poor, equipment was old and broken, and security was lax. An all new leadership team needed to be developed, and any future space would need significant budget to make it secure and “state of the art”.

Both churches had signature outreach ministries for which they were known in the community. Faith Temple housed the Charter School, and while it needed a cash infusion to upgrade technologies and materials, it was supported strongly by young families and single parents. Pine Street had a reputation for music and the arts that would need to be sustained by professional staff. These outreach ministries could work very well together. In fact, the merged church could add a free music lessons and develop a community youth orchestra and choir; or expand into specialized tutoring for High School students.

Both churches had groups of matriarchs and patriarchs who were mature in their faith and informally mentored emerging generations. The challenge was to make this more intentional, and then sustain this through future generations as the elders passed on. The pastor would need to be freed from many visitation and pastoral care responsibilities, and minimize the number of administrative meetings, in order to invest energy teaching and mentoring groups of adult members. The core team developed a list of education and training goals. They recognized that they would need to look outside both churches . . . and perhaps beyond their denominations . . . to learn “best practices” from growing churches in urban contexts across the country.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for both core teams concerned the “hubs” of the two wheels.

Traction rotates around excellent care giving, but in all four previous churches this had become too pastor-dependent. Both Good Shepherd and Faith Community would need to develop a more sophisticated network of lay visitors and recommended counselors.

Steering rotates around leadership accountability. There was widespread misunderstanding and fear of strong accountability. Both Good Shepherd and Faith Community needed to create credible nominations processes; friendly and collaborative practices of oversight; and ongoing coaching for paid and unpaid leaders.

A New Beginning

Seven Years Later

So what happened? Church of the Good Shepherd and Faith Community Church did succeed. They were able to combine the spirituality, volunteer energy, and physical resources of the former churches to sustain **critical momentum** and **critical mass**. Each church did grow spiritually, numerically, financially, and missionally.

The relative peace and unity of each church was notable during their annual meetings five years later. Occasionally there were tense and heated discussions, and as always there were concerns and complaints. Overall, however, the meetings were calm and respectful and the discussions were intelligent and faithful. Each new church had embedded their core values and bedrock beliefs, vision and mission, well. The unity of the church no longer depended on former properties, separate histories, or tribal “sacred cows”.

The lay leadership had shifted. Church of the Good Shepherd had chosen a board model, with three classes elected for three year terms. Therefore, after five years, only a few board members had played similar roles in the former churches. Faith Community Church had chosen a council model. Since representatives from committees to the council tended to change more often, after five years no one on the council had played a similar role in the former churches. Some volunteers who had been very active five years ago had stepped away; and some volunteers who had never been very active had stepped up; and some new members had stepped forward.

The staff leadership had evolved. Church of the Good Shepherd was still a Methodist Church, and the ordained minister had been appointed to the newly merged church was in due course replaced. This time, however, the appointment was just as sensitive to the needs of the mission field as to the wishes of the membership. The church was much more articulate about their core values, beliefs, vision, and mission to ensure that a newly appointed pastor was appropriate for a bi-racial, multi-cultural congregation.

Faith Community Church still maintained its tie to the Presbyterian Church, and would follow Presbyterian procedures regarding the dismissal or call of ordered ministers. That hadn't been an issue yet, because the pastor who was called to the new church continued as the leader, and planned a long-term ministry. Other staff had changed, but these transition were much smoother and less stressful than many members remembered from their former churches. This was because the identity and purpose of the church was now transparent and accountable, and programs were not dominated by controlling personalities.

The cultures of the churches had morphed. Faith Community Church still attracted lifestyle segments with strong priorities for Bible-based education, and strong support for the arts. The influx of younger families via the Charter School and new music programs had lowered the median age of the church. This meant that more contemporary learning methodologies, and additional computer, video, and audio technologies, were being introduced into the worship and educational life of the church. It no longer had a reputation for being “boring”, but it still had a reputation for being “profound”.

Church of the Good Shepherd had lost a number of people from lifestyle segments that were middle class baby boomers. A few were angry about the change, but most respected the change and chose this moment to move their membership to churches closer to home. On the other hand, Good Shepherd gained more people than it lost. These tended to be multi-cultural, and included quite a few singles, couples, and single parents. Interestingly, almost all of the older, wealthier, members stayed ... and with enthusiasm.

The theology of the churches had morphed. Church of the Good Shepherd was still Methodist, but with a strong seeker-sensitive characteristics and a rather independent frame of mind. This made some of its relationships in the Conference a bit troubled, but the sensitive support of the Bishop helped. They sustained a strong sacramental focus, albeit manifested in different ways. Faith Community Church gradually drifted toward congregational independence. Members and leaders grew more and more troubled by top-down theological changes and public policies from denominations, and their relationships with both Baptist Federations and Presbyterian denominations waned. On the other hand, they sustained a strong sense of “classic Christianity” that was Biblically literate, led by an eldership, and functioned by consensus. Their Presbyterian ways kept them in the Presbyterian fold.

The reputations of both churches grew. Faith Community Church was known for its Charter School, educational ministries, and reformation ideals. Partnerships strengthened with the education, long term health care, and arts sectors. Church of the Good Shepherd was known for its addiction intervention ministries. Partnerships strengthened with urban core non-profits, health clinics, government family service agencies, and counseling centers.

Nothing is perfect. Neither church will become, or expected to become, a “mega-church”, although both churches are considering expanding to multiple sites. There are still breakdowns in critical momentum, most notably in the disciple making step for discerning call . . . but radical hospitality, life-shaping worship, and social service has clearly improved. Financial resources are still a challenge. Both churches still face high utility costs, and both churches have added paid staff. However, they are managing assets with an eye to mission rather than maintenance, and have slowly introduce annual fund raising strategies.

It’s all good. Especially when the church leaders look around and see that several other churches in their community have actually closed over the last seven years. No doubt the future will bring many surprises and challenges, but both churches are more confident that they will not only survive, but thrive.