



Lewis Center
for Church Leadership

Leading Ideas

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Leadership Vignette

Moving in Faith to a New Location by David Abbott

In 1996, Belfast United Methodist Church in Belfast, Maine, with an average attendance of 50 each Sunday morning, was discerning whether to remain in its current facility or relocate. The church building, constructed in 1858, needed a variety of repairs and lacked adequate parking. As their newly appointed pastor, I became part of the team God had placed at Belfast at this critical juncture.

The discernment process included a “dream session” to figure out what folks celebrated about their past, acknowledged in the present, and hoped for in the future. Out of this came not only a decision to relocate, but the foundation of a vision and goals that would guide the building process over the next five years.

Throughout the congregation, there was a real sense of faith and guidance by the Holy Spirit. There was never a negative vote cast as we moved through the decision-making process. As various committees developed plans, I served as encourager, cheerleader, visionary, and optimist, reflecting theologically at each step in the journey.

Funding a \$1.5 million building was a major challenge for a congregation with an average operating budget of just \$70,000 and only \$35,000 in the bank. But talk of phasing or scaling back the project came to a halt when a church member boldly proclaimed, “If God wants this new facility built, the money will be there.” This call to faith had a lasting impact on the project, even when we faced the disappointment of not being approved for a denominational loan. With a successful capital campaign and a mortgage from a local bank, building commenced.

In June 2001, we were ready to move to our new facility. It was important that people understand what was happening and that the sacredness of the old facility be carried to the new location. We began worship in the old facility and used an old kerosene lamp to carry the flame from the old building to the new one. Each person was asked to carry something of significance as we processed in a long line of cars, stretching over one-half mile, to the new facility. Once there, we continued our worship by lighting candles with the flame carried from the old building.

Once in the new facility, we reminded ourselves that the building keeps the snow off the church – but it is not the church itself. And we focused our energy on building new Christians. Our evangelism efforts have been successful and we now have an average of 175 in worship.

We are still working to complete the facility, but we are at least two to three years ahead of our schedule. The uncompleted areas, including the sanctuary, remind us that our congregation is a “work in progress,” as is each of us in our individual journeys of faith.

David Abbott (djabbott@adelphia.net) became pastor of Belfast United Methodist Church in Maine ten years ago upon finishing seminary.