

The Impact of Relocation on Churches in the South
Atlantic District

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Sometimes we may wonder if pastors think to themselves, "Dear Lord, why didn't you put a section in the Bible that deals with this subject?" We know that they would not make a statement such as this to doubt God and his divine wisdom when it comes to his holy process of inspiration. However, there are some things that we deal with in our ministries that cause us to admit, "I don't have a clue!" Maybe it is God's way of humbling us. Maybe it is God's way of waking us up. Personally, I think it is God's way of leading us to realize that he is really the one at work in our churches, and that we are his chosen tools which he uses to work through. We weak, human, "jars of clay", as Paul tells us, are filled with sin. Yet at the same time, we have been bought with the blood of Christ and have been selected and trained to do some very special work- to shepherd God's precious lambs and to carry and proclaim the precious treasure of the Gospel of Salvation. That's one thing we can be confident of. There are some very practical things in our service to God that may lead us to just the opposite of feelings though.

This paper will attempt to deal with one of the subjects that may leave some pastors with a feeling of nervousness in their stomachs. But may God bless us as we take a look at the process called "relocation".

Open up your Scriptures please to 1 Timothy 7:5, which reads, "Here is a trustworthy saying: If the church with which God has entrusted you grows stale, if no new members are coming in (that is not to say that the present members are not trying nor growing spiritually!), and no new programs are able to be implemented; if no new buildings are able to be built as a result of less than average initial land acquisition and a lack of space to grow, (Paul sometimes likes to run on, mind you) then Timothy, I charge

you- pack up your people, sell your property, move to a new place and, by the grace of God, START OVER!” Wouldn’t it be nice to read encouraging words such as these sometimes? But there is a little problem here. Unless you are reading from a Bible that I am yet to familiarize myself with- 1 Timothy 7 *doesn’t exist!* So why do some churches feel the need to relocate? What motivates people to get together as a congregation, discuss this option of selling their current property, packing up all of their past, and moving down the street, into the next neighborhood, all the way across town, or even into the next town altogether?

First of all realize this, it is not as though the church president or pastor wakes up one morning, stretches, opens the window and shouts aloud, “It’s time to move!” Relocation is not a last minute, let’s go in “with gun’s a-blazin’” decision made by only a select group of people in the church. A very complex process is undertaken with every relocation, involving many different people as well. Whereas it is hardly ever the first step, when it happens, it is seen as either the necessary step, or to some, the *only* step.

So why take a look at relocation? Why spend an entire paper discussing it? What this paper intends to do is to take a look at three congregations specifically located in the South Atlantic District (SAD). The three churches are Living Word, Mobile, AL; Lamb of God, Huntsville, AL; and Our Savior, Hendersonville, NC. The first two of the three have been through the relocation process and are now settling into their new location. The last of the three is going through the process as we speak (April 2001).

What we intend to do is consider how the relocation process effected and affected each of these churches and what led them to make this important, life-changing decision- both for them, and for the members of their church. I think it’s important to delve into

this quite interesting and equally complex world of relocation. You see, it is not just some type of phenomena particular to the SAD. Many other churches in our Synod have relocated, or are considering the process at this very moment. Some of the questions we will ask are: “Why should we do it? What are the blessings that come as a result of it, or are there any that have been seen at all? What risks do we take in relocating? Who is there to help us? Is there a set pattern that the Synod follows in going through a relocation process?” and these serve only as the “tip of the iceberg”.

In the course of the process of writing this paper, I sent out questionnaires to the current pastors at each church to gather their input on the whole relocation process. It is important to remember as you read through this that the representing words of the pastors are just that- representing. The pastors do not directly quote their laymembers, although their thoughts and words do contain information that was gleaned from them. It is my prayer that someone in the future will continue discussing and questioning this important subject not only with the pastors, which truly does serve well as a paper in and of itself, but also with laymembers and layleaders as well. Now, while we are on the subject of the pastors, let us take a brief look at the ones who participated in the making of this work. The pastors who worked personally with me on this paper are John Boggs, James (Jim) Turiff, and John Qualmann.

THE “MINISTERS OF RELOCATION”

It would actually be rather easy to summarize the experiences of the three pastors whom I interviewed. They all began their ministries as tutors. Two of the three (Pastor Boggs and Turiff) began their service to their Lord at what is now Luther Preparatory School. Pastor Qualmann began his at what was formerly known as Northwestern

College. After their stint of being institutionalized, John Boggs and Jim Turiff received their call to where the Lord now has them serving. John Qualmann however, went on to Plymouth Nebraska where he served until receiving the call to his present parish in Hendersonville, North Carolina. It is interesting to note the prior experience that each of these pastors has had with relocation. Besides moving around in college and at the Seminary, their relocation experience is absolutely zero. What a truly interesting plan God has had for not only these three congregations, but also for their shepherds as well. Now, with the proper introductions out of the way, we begin our look at the impact of relocation in the SAD.

FACTORS BEHIND RELOCATION

When one thinks of churches in the SAD, they cannot ignore the fact that our work as a church body down there has not been going on all that long. It is not too difficult, therefore, to realize how moving a church that is in some cases no more than 30 years old from its present location to a new one could be rather challenging, to say the least. I could even imagine it as outright strange to some who live in Wisconsin, when we think of having some churches that have been in their present location for over a hundred years. Lamb of God was built in 1971. Living Word has been around for at least the past 26 years. Between the two of them, we see the years adding up to what would still be considered a relatively “middle-aged” church here in the North. So what would lead these churches and their people to pack up their church lives and head to a new location? What would possibly lead people to take the place where they have spent so much time in worship of their Savior to change it all and head across town or even to the next one over? The answer- many things!

Although Our Savior was relocated in April of 2001, although the congregation of Living Word has been relocated and worshipping in a Lodge since January of this year, and although Lamb of God has been worshipping in a school since August of 1999, the relocation process began long before. With that in mind, we ask the looming question, “Why did they do it?” The answers from the pastors varied, but all of the congregations seemed to be running in the same direction- they were looking for a way to better serve their Savior and his Gospel ministry by reaching out not only to themselves, but to the world that the Lord commissioned them to. What a wonderful God we have who leads us in his grace to make such life changing decisions! What a wonderful God we have who leads us to take a critical look at ourselves and our congregations and ask, “All-right, Lord, what can we do to serve you now?”

For one congregation, the Lord led them to see that although they have been a physical entity for some time, they did not grow *physically* for the past 26 years. For one, they realized that their pastor was the only one who lived in the zip code of their church. They also discovered that the church that he did serve at was built well after the community in which it was built was, somewhat making it difficult to be the “community church” that they so desired. Yet another found itself caught in the jaws of the “poor location” trap and realized, with the District Mission Board’s (DMB’s) help, that it was time to move on- with a full-time pastor as a welcome addition.

The consensus from all three pastors unanimously joined at the last point though- poor location. One rested on all of 2.7 acres, which *included* the parsonage. A second church was purchased and ended up with the poor fortune of having a bypass built around it, while located in a flood plain (being built behind an electrical substation didn’t exactly

aid in the outreach process either). With West Mobile's forecasted growth, with South Asheville's (NC) population on the rise, and with concentrations of members living in ever-increasing-in-size neighborhoods miles away from Lamb of God's former grounds, the choices were becoming fewer and fewer as the thought process continued for these congregations. Renovating buildings, which couldn't physically grow anymore, seemed like a poor choice. Being surrounded by Southern "mega-churches" didn't seem appealing either. So, with property value on the rise (one of the church's property value was approximately \$500,000) and with support from our Synod's DMB equally as appealing, relocation eventually seemed the proper choice to make, once again, through the grace of God. But it didn't end there.

So many factors to weigh, so little time to do it, and as one can imagine, convincing themselves to "pack it up" and start over again was not easy for these flocks of Christ. The processes were long and well planned out, as well they should've been and the next section of this paper deals with the following question, "What process did your congregation go through in making the decision to relocate, and how long did it take?"

THE PROCESS OF RELOCATION

The list to answer the preceding question is extensive indeed, but as with any Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran (WELS) Church, the churches began with a committee. We begin this portion by taking a more in-depth look at Living Word, now in Mobile, AL.

Before Pastor John Boggs even arrived, the congregation was buzzing over what to do next to grow their flock in God's kingdom by his grace. In 1998, the congregation,

in response to several key factors, was approached by the DMB who offered some possible solutions to aid in their outreach process and work for God's kingdom. They began properly by forming a committee which was responsible for approaching the Synod to request what is called a "restart" in January of 1999. With that behind them, the Reverend John Boggs arrived in May of that same year. Dual outreach efforts began in July of 1999 and ran through March of 2000 to determine the important information with regards to the "fertility" of the present *and* proposed mission "fields". A demographic study¹ was conducted at the "proposed" largest area, and following that came a trip to Florida for a school of outreach², which had a rather large impact on the decision to relocate for both John Boggs, and later on, for Jim Turiff and their congregations. After this, two meetings were held with the DMB and the congregation finally voted on April 4th of 2000 to relocate their congregation. Many decisions were made and mulled over for quite some time, but through it all, the most important channel was being put to constant use- that of prayer. It is important for us to realize that through whatever our churches may be struggling with, Christ is struggling right along with them- working out all "for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to *his* purpose" as Paul tells us in Romans 8. At Living Word, we see that in full, as we will observe later

¹ Surveying population, nationalities, the job market and its future, religious atmosphere, anticipated growth, etc.

² The School of Outreach is an evangelism "immersion" experience designed to provide an "A to Z" exposure to congregational outreach, with the intention that strategic planning for specific congregations will result. Presentations, resources, discussion and workshop provide participants with the tools and insights for such strategic planning. Staff consulting and interaction among participants facilitate the planning. Small group "Huddles" initiate the planning process. Devotions and fellowship provide a rich spiritual atmosphere (Pastor Robert Hartman in his handout to churches participating in the *Satellite School of Outreach*- 2001).

in the section describing the blessings of relocation. Before that, though, let us observe the remaining congregations, Lamb of God, and Our Savior

Lamb of God has quite the history in their process of relocating, the same as do the other two. As with Living Word and Our Savior, Lamb of God began with committee work as well. Lamb of God began by forming a “Long Range Planning Committee” with pastor Turiff and several other lay leaders. Later, this became the “Relocation Committee”. After forming, they looked at four very different and challenging scenarios. The church could stay and renovate, relocate to Southern Huntsville, turn their church into a dual-parish, or relocate to the Madison area. With these scenarios laid out on the table, the church called in a representative from the DMB to do a demographic study of the Madison area, which turned out favorable. After this, conversations began with the DMB chairman, Pastor Larry Zahn. Six months later, a presentation was made to the congregation and the decision to relocate was unanimous. A school of outreach was attended, and the spirits of the attending members were uplifted and strengthened for the tedious process which still loomed in the future. Lamb of God was on it’s way to becoming a new church located in Huntsville, Alabama! But what of our final church involved in this study, Our Savior?

The process that Our Savior went through seems to match those listed above almost to the letter, excluding the School of Outreach that was attended by the formerly mentioned churches. Committee work, feasibility studies, and the like were extensively performed, all taking approximately 6-10 months before leading them to their current decision under the guidance of Synod officers and church leaders to relocate.

One thing that is vitally important to remember is that the processes mentioned above still continue today. When it comes to such a big event in a church's life, the continuation of analysis, question and answer, and prayer is an imperative condition that must go on throughout the life of a church, whether or not it is going through or has gone through the process of relocation. Our Savior congregation is still in the middle of the process, and looks forward to self-examination every step of the way.

We have spent some time now discussing the varied processes that the three separate church entities went through in their own relocating decisions, but still we need indulge in another factor- that of outside help.

OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENT IN THE RELOCATING PROCESS

When a congregation goes through the important and very complex process of relocating, there are many players involved. Not only is it vitally important to include the *entire* congregation, it is equally important to have the backing of our WELS leaders behind them. As we mentioned above, the Synod has appointed several bodies to support a church in the relocation process, the most important being the District Mission Board (DMB). It is truly a blessing when a congregation has the support of caring workers who make it their mission to aid in whatever way they can in the relocating process. As a vicar who served under the SAD DMB president, Larry Zahn, I can with confidence say how much of a joy, and also a prayerful struggle, it was for my supervising pastor to help with the relocation process. A lot of pressure lies with these men who are major factors in relocation. They serve as the liaison between the Synod and the congregation, and their work is as tireless for them as it is for the congregation they are attempting to advise. Pastor Turiff sent his praise to the DMB members who aided in the relocation of

Lamb of God by saying, "Five members of our DMB have been here during the relocation efforts- a great show of support!" What else does that Synodical support include though?

For Our Savior, it included the salary for a full-time called worker over the course of three years. For Living Word, it included attendance at several meetings which gave their congregation insight, discussion, and encouragement along with "restart" money which was allotted to pay the pastor's salary and to help in defraying "outreach expenses". God willing, they will also be applying for "mission status" in the summer of 2001, and will make a four-year "Mission Program Agreement" at that time as well. This is just one of the blessings that came as a result of "walking together" as a Synod.

Alone, relocation would be an even longer and more tedious process than it already is. With help from abroad, it is made more expediently and with extra financial support that would otherwise make it all the more difficult, to say the least. It makes one appreciate the help and support even more when one considers the other tasks that face our DMBs with mission work and observation of other local congregations (to name only a couple) on their itinerary as well! Time, money, instruction, care, and most importantly, prayer all went into the process of relocation by our Synod leaders, particularly on the DMB, and it was not in vain. In our next section, we see the blessings that have come as a result of the relocation process and its impact on these three congregations at home, or should I say, at their "new homes", in the SAD.

STRUGGLES AND BLESSINGS THAT CAME AS A RESULT OF RELOCATION

When we take a look at the impact of relocation on these churches in the SAD, we cannot help but spend the focus of our paper on the struggles and blessings that came as a result. That, after all, is the most important factor. To answer the question, “Does relocation work?” we will probably have to wait for several years, and even there several factors remain (e.g.- congregation’s continuing zeal, accuracy of surveys, etc.). To take a current look at where the congregations stand is fair and attainable however. But, to begin with the “good news” would certainly spoil our excitement later, so now we give proper respect to the reality of the struggles and trials that they went through first.

It is probably rather obvious to imagine the many hardships that these congregations went through in the tedious process of relocation.³ Hesitancy to commit from “long-time” members, attempts to establish oneself in a new and growing community, selling “their” church and starting from scratch, a lack of participation from members, lack of space for Bible class and fellowship activities, the lack of availability at the location where you are worshipping, and even the sometimes grueling process of tearing down and setting up worship furniture and the like can ruffle the feathers of even the “most solid” Christian- including the pastor! Another very large struggle comes when selling the property of the former location takes longer than expected, and even may still be going on right now! This must lead us to think, “Was this really a good move?” “Will the Lord still work through us even though we seem to be facing so much opposition?”

³ To refrain from causing offense, we refrain from naming the congregations individually, but will attempt to generalize their unique struggles in a collective way.

The answer to those questions, “Absolutely”. Take a look at the Lord’s work at these three churches and join them and me in rejoicing to our Lord and Savior, the Good Shepherd of his church!

At Lamb of God, Pastor Turiff reports,

Worship attendance to be up 50% in the first 9 months of its new location! That happens to be “more members in a month than in the entire life of this church combined”. His members are seeing more excitement in their roles as God’s priests, in the opportunities for them to serve. Some are finding out that what they thought was once an intimidating service-evangelism- is something that they can do themselves to help out the church! They have gone from being a church of 58 baptized members to 75! People that are coming and attending their services are coming back and visiting again! To God be the glory!

All we can respond with is “Amen”. What of the others though?

Pastor John Boggs wrote,

People who were not as active for many years have become instrumental in leading the relocation charge by canvassing, helping set up, attending Bible classes, and teaching Sunday School. On Easter Sunday, we had an adult confirmation class of four individuals- the most ever for a Sunday in the history of either Living Word or Saving Grace. It has also provided me personally with renewed direction for my ministry- no longer asking, “Should we or shouldn’t we?” but rather focusing on what needs to be done. Our attendance for worship on Sunday mornings continues to be on the rise...in the light of Christ’s Great Commission.

Once again, to God alone be the glory and praise, what blessings we have seen! But we are not finished yet.

Pastor John Qualmann wrote,

We had 190 people at our opening service. We had 212 people at our Easter celebration. On that same day- 5 baptisms (3 being adults) were performed. Eight adult confirmations were welcomed on April 22nd and they are receiving 14 new souls into their membership as well. Two infant baptisms for prospect’s children were performed in March as well!

What more can we do than join the angel throng in Revelation and sing, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

With these statements we see only the beginnings of the impact of relocation on these three specific churches that call the SAD their home. The long-term impact still remains to be seen, but may we keep them in our prayers as they attempt to bring the gospel to the world! Not only do the churches go through wonderful blessings and equally as wonderful challenges though, the impact of relocation is seen and felt in the shepherds of those flocks as well. In our final chapter, we conclude with the impact that relocation has on the ministers called by God to serve through these interesting times.

THE IMPACT OF RELOCATION ON THE MINISTERS OF GOD

Besides the extra miles on cars, the busy “every member visits” which increase in frequency and occurrences, besides the hours that seem to fly by in planning and prioritizing, the pastors interviewed had other things to say as to the impact that this process had and still is having on their ministry.⁴

For starters, one pastor wrote, “I learned to smile, to keep my mouth shut, and let the Lord work it out.” Another said, “It’s added a lot of excitement, plenty of challenge, and a handful of headaches and countless joy!” Yet another added, “I have a feeling of accomplishment...congregations must have a vision for the future or some other congregation will come along with a vision and your pastor will go with the call where he can see his gifts and abilities fitting in. ‘See you next Sunday’ - a week to week vision

⁴ Once again, we write this respecting the privacy of the pastors and their various opinions.

doesn't cut it." So we see excitement and aggravation, joy and sadness, accomplishment and failure is something that we will all face in our ministries, wherever they may be, and relocating churches and their called workers are certainly not immune to them in the least bit.

Although some of the pastors are currently seeing excitement and maybe even a small amount of doubt in their members, their hopes and dreams of ministry in God's kingdom is always before them. Yes, some members may leave the church in response to the actions of the whole congregation and that is discouraging. However, realizing God's purpose in it all and through them (the pastors) all, the shepherds mentioned in this paper are working on preparing themselves, and the flock with which God has entrusted them, for years of service in these special days of rebirth and renewal in their joint ministry to God's people- to all people!

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Synod's process of relocation is continually being revised. New methods are discovered, problems are uncovered, and the work in God's kingdom continues, come trouble and blessing alike! Pastor Turiff's comment to this was,

The WELS is patient and is willing to admit that it has learned a bit about planting missions in the past 30-35 years. It's great that they have been willing to implement some of that knowledge here. Otherwise, we may have lost our toehold in the northern part of Alabama.

Even those in our synod who have been working on the DMB and other vital committees to this process must admit, "maybe it's time to do things a little differently." After seeing the fruits of those modest decisions, we can hardly disagree.

Relocation is rarely the first step that congregations jump on when their church seems to be struggling. It is my prayer, though, that this paper has shown the impact that relocation is able to have on the ministry that is carried out in churches of the WELS and that it leads us to broaden our horizons when it comes to implementing the Great Commission that our Savior gave to his disciples, as well as us in the last chapter of Matthew's Gospel which tells us, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Is relocation the best way to carry out Christ's commission? Is it the best and most efficient way to revive congregations? Is it the greatest blessing that we could ever have hoped for in the SAD and throughout our Synod? All of these and other questions will be answered in time alone. What we do know and our confident of is that God will work through these congregations, wherever they may be, to carry out his work which he began in them. I would like to close with a quote from Pastor John Boggs,

At our kickoff service this Sunday, I talked during the sermon about not getting distracted during the relocating process and forgetting what's most important about ministry. That is something we will daily be challenged by- remembering that the ministry of Saving Grace is proclaiming the message of salvation, not just to have meetings, build up a building fund, or come up with neat gimmicks. Everything we do must be done in the light of Christ's Great Commission (cf. above).

To God alone be the glory, and may the ministry of saving grace remain our focus indeed!