

GOOD NEWS ~ FOR A CHANGE



THE STORY OF A CHURCH AMALGAMATION

We called it “weaving” – bringing together the strands of four small, struggling Anglican churches and creating from them a fabric that would be stronger and more colourful. Our aim was to become a creative, vibrant and alive church that we now call East London Anglican Ministries (ELAM). The whole process – six years in the making – was one of the most complex, difficult, and yet ultimately rewarding tasks that a church could do.

To understand ELAM, you have to understand the special character of the east end of London, Ontario, Canada. It’s the working class, do-it-yourself side of town. Like the rest of London, it’s served – one might even say over-served –

by Anglican churches that sprouted like doughnut shops as each new area of the city was developed.

By 1996, four of the churches in the east end – Resurrection, St. Barnabas’, St. Matthew’s, and St. Timothy’s – chose to face the fact that attendance had fallen away since the heyday of church-going. We were struggling with finances and with vitality.

Instead of giving up, we opened ourselves to transformation by God and made a leap of faith into our future.

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What was Tried Before

Amalgamation was not the first attempt by our founding churches to renew themselves. We previously tried sharing clergy, forming a two-point parish, closing a church, and setting up shared ministries.

St. Matthew's and Resurrection began the amalgamation of their two churches in 1996. St. Barnabas' and St. Timothy's, along with another church named St. Mark's, started talks about somehow working together in 1997. When these three churches asked Resurrection-St. Matthew's to come talk about their plans, the idea soon sprang up to amalgamate all these churches, although St. Mark's soon withdrew.

Getting the Ball Rolling

Most people recall first hearing about amalgamation at a meeting, perhaps of the Wardens or Vestry or Board of Management. Someone – usually someone with credibility in the eyes of parishioners – had the courage to put the topic of amalgamation on the table.

Our Motivations

In a nutshell, we were looking for better stewardship of our resources.

Money was a big factor, although ultimately not the most important.

Members noted that what money we had often went to the upkeep of our buildings. Despite that, these facilities – which were between 40 and 105 years old – were no longer adequate. They lacked wheelchair-accessibility, parking, and room to expand. The bathrooms in a couple of them were sources of some black humour.

“We wouldn’t have had any children or young couples or anybody else in the church except a bunch of us old fogies cleaning out as we closed the church. So I think this scared a lot of us and (we) said, ‘Let’s get out of here.’ ”

Not much money was left over for outreach or the kinds of programs that add zest to a church.

Congregations were shrinking or at least not growing. The smallest was down to 20 adults and one child at Sunday worship.

And some members had a suspicion that our diocese, the Diocese of Huron, might eventually close their church down if they didn’t come up with a viable plan for their future.

“I think we thought if we had a bigger group, we would have more spirit, more fun. We would have more variety.”

So in a way, amalgamation was a strategy to take control of our own destiny.

Once we took that step, all sorts of new possibilities jumped out at us – a bigger choir, a larger Sunday school, more spirit. Those ideas provided yet more motivation.

Having a Say

There are those who might wish a bishop would come from on high and just order them to change. But we always felt a process driven by the lay people would be best. With all the sacrifices and upsets that are inherent in amalgamation, the people must know that they have made the decisions and have ownership of the process. In itself, this was a major change for the Anglican Church, which is often clergy-centred.

We started by holding special Vestry meetings at which members were asked to vote on whether their church would even get into discussions about amalgamation. About 18 months later, when those discussions resulted in *Weaving a Vision Together*, a document outlining the vision for this new church, Vestry members had a final opportunity to vote for or against amalgamation. (You can read more about the visioning document in the next section.) This two-stage vote gave the church leadership the confidence to know it had the backing of members before it

launched into talks and yet allowed members to have a clearer idea of what they were getting into before making a full commitment.

Weaving a Vision Together was based largely on the work of four Cornerstone Committees. The Cornerstones Committees were patterned after the book *Where's a Good Church?* by Don Posterski and Irwin Baker, which says people see an effective church as one that has the cornerstones of orthodoxy, community, relevance, and outreach. Each committee had representatives of the founding churches and together they did an enormous amount of research and brainstorming over a period of almost a year

Farther down the line, our architects, ironically called Cornerstone Architecture, were also keen believers in input from members. Cornerstone made use of *Weaving a Vision Together* for ideas about church design. A core Building Committee of clergy and lay people had a variety of subcommittees to deal with specialized areas. And the whole congregation was given a say on details like the floor plan, colour scheme, and pew design.

As we went along, we found one other advantage to having this kind of widespread input: We learned not to rush into decisions. Our worst mistakes were usually made in haste.

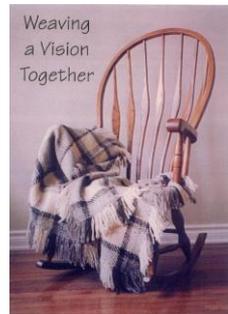
Vision

It was tempting to rush into the nuts and bolts as soon as we began talking about amalgamation. Where would we locate a new church? Who could get us a deal on windows and doors?

But we resisted and instead started by creating a vision of the kind of community of faith we wanted to be. What kinds of ministries and programs did we want? What kind of staff and material and equipment would we like to do those? How did we see ourselves fitting into the community? Eventually we realized that we had reached a tipping point: we were no longer an amalgamation of four churches; we were instead planting a new church.

The result of this brainstorming was a report called *Weaving a Vision Together*, which was presented to Vestry members before the final decision on amalgamation was made.

This report (and a follow-up called *Weaving a Vision Together, Part 2*, which filled in more detail) was extremely useful in guiding our decisions on everything from setting up programs to hiring clergy and staff to designing our new church.



“It has meant a real effort to redefine what ‘church’ means in the world today and to accept the responsibility to live that vision.”

The visioning document was also helpful in keeping the amalgamation on track when disagreements arose.

Communications

Communications was a job for everyone to make sure all members could usefully participate in the creation of this new church.

We started with written updates to cover amalgamation matters. Regular newsletters always contained the most recent news on amalgamation.

Later we learned that not everyone absorbs information the same way. Besides these written reports, some also needed verbal announcements or even graphic presentations to help them understand what was happening. Sometimes information had to be repeated over a long period of time before some people retained it.

Leaders were often frustrated with the constant job of counteracting rumours. This was especially difficult when the rumours suggested

that information provided by official sources was incomplete or false.

There were also special requests for information from individuals who wanted to know about something that had not been addressed in the mass communications. It became clear that not all of these were addressed satisfactorily, so eventually our Communications Committee set up a question-and-answer box and handled the distribution of questions to the proper authorities.

But besides the need for leaders to provide information, there was also a need for members of the congregation to be actively engaged as recipients of information. Members were hit with a ton of information on a wide range of matters over a period of several years. They had to pay attention and keep an open mind. Some succeeded better than others.

They also had to draw on a well of patience because some of the answers they wanted were to questions that had not yet been dealt with. And they had to accept that some information, e.g., personnel matters, would be kept confidential.

Encouragement

The amalgamation seemed to heighten good and bad emotions. The thrill of seeing the new church evolve, the sadness of losing what we

had and the pain of conflict with others were just a few of the emotions we went through.

“I wrote a poem, *ELAM's Journey*, for our last service: ‘ . . . A family of God with much to be done.’ ”

We drew encouragement from:

- God, who closed the door on our past lives but opened another door
- the stories of Scripture, particularly the Israelites wandering in the desert (although we sure hoped to be in our new home in less than 40 years)
- family and friends who stuck with it through tough times
- our clergy, who endorsed the process even though it meant they would have to step aside for a new clergy team
- our bishops, who gave wholehearted support to a process led from the grassroots
- guest speakers and preachers, who told us how much our courage was admired by others in the church.
- businesses, organizations, and other churches (Anglican and other denominations) who offered assistance, such as providing meeting spaces

Many members were also encouraged by seeing growth in the activities they were interested in.

For example, the enlarged choir was able to tackle music that they separately weren't able to do before. Many now say their groups should have merged sooner than they did.

Fuller church services were also uplifting.

Rotating the services among all the churches was complicated, but it did open our minds to different ways of organizing services.

We had multiple ways of getting to know one another, including name tags, shared meals, trips to baseball games, picnics, and a retreat.

The process of visioning and planning for the amalgamation was slow, but it was designed to be open so that people could have confidence that things were done fairly, even if they didn't agree with every decision.

Milestones were signs that things were moving forward. They should have all been celebrated in big ways. Unfortunately, we probably spent more time marking the negative milestones – the closing of each church, the disbanding of one of the women's groups – than the positive ones like the start-up of new ministries or the welcoming of members of a church that had been sold into another building.

Acknowledging painful emotions was also helpful in getting people past them. Early on, we held Concerns Nights where people could bring their worries. We should have continued them,

but the theology student who was running them graduated and so they stopped too soon.

Roadblocks

The first point of disagreement was, of course, whether we needed to amalgamate. Some believed their own church was “holding its own.” Even at the church that was having the greatest financial struggle, some believed it would be best to live off its trust funds until they ran out.

But even after the majority of us agreed on the good of amalgamation, there were still many issues.

Many were worried about the number of people who would leave or were leaving. While this definitely happened and was discouraging, we also noticed that some of those who left later came back with renewed enthusiasm and that new people joined in such numbers that our membership numbers quickly recovered. On top of that, active membership seems to be up, with the creation of many new programs and ministries.

As mentioned in the **Encouragement** section, good and bad emotions bubbled during the amalgamation. Anxieties produced some wild behaviours – secrets, threats to leave if someone didn’t get their way, suspicions, accusations and blaming, gossip, rumours, panic and demands for an instant fix, going completely passive, triangulation (recruiting someone else to solve

your problem or recruiting yourself to fix someone else's problem for them).

A major problem was the “unchristian” nature of many of the disagreements as we worked toward setting a vision and implementing it. No doubt the differences of opinion were heightened by the fact that the future basis of this new church was at stake in these disagreements. An attitude of “we have to win” developed in some disputes.

“It is a grief and it's not easy.”

We noticed a pattern of people looking for ways to discount the opinions of those with whom they disagreed. One might be accused of having a conflict of interest; another might be dismissed as a “mouthpiece” for someone else's point of view; others might be ignored because they hadn't been at their church long enough to be worth listening to (“only” 12 years in one case). Some of the worst of this behaviour has been characterized as harassment. Potentials, a consultancy in church development that worked with us through the implementation phase, helped us identify these destructive patterns and counteract some of them.

Looking back, we realize we should have had a code of behaviour and a dispute-settlement mechanism at the beginning of the amalgamation. These might have prevented some of these behaviours or, just as importantly,

helped others recognize them and avoid being swept up in them.

It might also have helped to have had someone from outside our churches to act as a chaplain to the process.

Clergy

The issue of clergy succession was probably one of the most sensitive with which we had to deal.

Although it wasn't initially accepted by everyone, the consensus appears to have now developed that the clergy of the original churches should be replaced for a new church. It was necessary to find clergy with a particular set of skills to lead a church that would be substantially different from those it replaced. It was also a matter of finding someone neutral to be accepted by all and to make sure the patterns and systems of one church did not dominate the new church.

Because an amalgamation of this scale was new to our diocese, the process of clergy departure was also a learning curve for our bishops and diocesan staff. But they did recognize the need to do this and supported us through it.

There is still a difference of opinion among our members as to when clergy should leave. The majority seem to say that the clergy should leave soon after the vote on amalgamation and be replaced by interim clergy who would take the

church through the stage of implementing the vision and letting the dust settle – probably a period of one or two years. Then new, permanent clergy could be chosen.

Other Positions

As with the clergy, the church and congregations should also look at other paid positions, such as secretary and organist, as well as volunteer posts like wardens and treasurer to make sure people with the right set of skills for a new, larger church are in place.

Building

We knew early on that we would sell our existing buildings and build a new one. This was mainly because we recognized that none of our existing facilities were adequate to accommodate our vision. It was also a matter of having a location that was neutral and felt like home to all.

Surprisingly, we found it cleansing to go through the accumulated stuff in our old churches and toss much of it in dumpsters. Throw-away days were actually a lot of fun.

We did, however, retain many of our memorials. We were able to incorporate all the stained glass windows in the new building. We also have a wall where we display the old plaques and memorials. It allows families to see that their ancestors are still honoured and it gives new members a sense of our history.

Once all our buildings were sold, we found temporary worship space in a funeral home. In fact, funeral homes became our best friends. Another one provided free office space and a third offered a room for the weekly Bible study. (And yes, we did notice the symbolism of death and resurrection in all this.)

Some feel we should have kept one building until our new one was completed, but being in temporary spaces allowed us to develop new traditions. For example, we did away with the communion rail in the design of our new church.

We were blessed to find Cornerstone Architecture, which had church-building experience and whose partners were both active Anglicans. Designing the building had a grassroots feel to it. We used the material from our visioning sessions to give the architects an idea of what we wanted to do in this building and how we wanted it to feel.

Tours of several other churches were arranged for anyone to attend and give their feedback.

Besides the core Building Committee, several others were set up to deal with special areas such as the kitchen.

The architects often made presentations to the congregation to get the okay on such matters as the choice of seating and colours.

Finances

Perhaps because we were of the belief that an amalgamation would reduce our costs, we didn't initially understand that it also costs money to have a good amalgamation process.

Our amalgamation-related expenses included appraisals, printing of reports, staff severance, seminars, books, tapes, audio-visual equipment rental, guest speakers, office equipment upgrades, advertising, social events, and paying an organist for special services.

Just as we wanted an architect and building contractor for our church, we also wanted professional advice for ministries and programs. We sometimes paid for seminar leaders to come to us and for parishioners to go to workshops. We also had Potentials, a consultancy in church development, help us through some of the implementation of our vision.

Our churches had little extra money to pay for these things. Fortunately, our diocese and deaneries gave us grants for some major expenses.

But we were on the verge of construction before we had a financial plan. We knew proceeds from the sale of our old churches would cover about two-thirds of the cost of the new one. But we had difficulty judging what we could expect in terms of attendance and, therefore, income.

A Fund-Raising Team started up as soon as the plan was drawn up, but a stewardship campaign was not launched until after we had moved into the new building. We ended up short of funds to complete construction – not to mention pay for some of the ministries and programs we dreamed of having. It was about three years before we started to feel financially secure.

Governance

During the course of the amalgamation, we had representation from every church among the Wardens and the Board of Management. Initially, this meant a full slate of officers from each church, creating huge and cumbersome decision-making bodies. We reduced the numbers each year over a three-year period.

Some would have liked to have collapsed down to the normal number of Wardens and Boards of Management/Parish Council immediately. But there would have been too much work for such a small group to do. And we still needed representation from all churches to bring forward the knowledge that each had about its operations and people.

One possibility we didn't try (because no one thought of it until everything was done) would have been to split that early, large group of Wardens and Board in two: half would operate the existing churches and buildings; the other half would concentrate on the amalgamation issues.

Another governance issue we grappled with was an understanding of how an enlarged church would operate differently from a small church. One of the priests in our diocese led a workshop to help us understand the theory of church sizes. In a nutshell, a small church can have a core of four or five leaders to run almost everything while a large church needs leaders – both ordained and lay – who can delegate, equip and facilitate others to take leadership roles in many areas. This was a big change not only for some of our leaders, who had to give up control, but also for some from the congregation, who found they had to take more responsibility.

Potentials helped us design a governance structure that met our new needs. We knew this was so important that we required everyone putting their name forward for Warden or member of Board of Management to attend a governance seminar.

Attitudes

Here are some final words of advice from our members – in no particular order – about the best attitude to take into amalgamation:

- Persevere. Stay with it; stick it out.
- Have an open mind.
- Be friendly. Conflict is not worth the aggravation.
- Avoid animosity.
- Recognize there's going to be a diversity of opinions and that diversity is valid.

- Accept that you will lose some people – and that some of them will come back.
 - Support one another.
 - Pray.
 - Be willing to make sacrifices.
 - Make haste slowly.
 - Talk to one another. Take opportunities to be together and get to know one another.
 - Respect each other’s hurts.
 - Accept that the process will not be easy because it is a growth experience.
 - The joys of new friendships and a new understanding of living in the Spirit are exciting and refreshing.
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“Thanks be to God!”

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