

A Building Committee ExitUs

November 20, 2005

First Congregational UCC, Asheville, NC

In our story, the Children of First Congregational were a happy people, growing together in service of the Lord. They lived in a place on Merry-mon Avenue, which means “Place of Merriment”, and every week they would pray and laugh, worship and sing. Their warmth and joy attracted others to join. They grew and grew, until their little building could hold them no longer. The stairway would not hold travelers going up and down at the same time. Their children were forced to meet in a tent on the cold floor. We won’t even talk about the lines for the women’s bathroom.

The Lord said, “I have seen the misery of my people...I have heard them cry out...I have come to bring them into a good and spacious land flowing with milk and honey...So now go...Let my people go...” (Excerpts from Exodus 3)

You’ve heard this story before? Well, then you know there were terrible plagues that fell upon the land and tests of faith given to the people. The people knew not where to go but they were a faithful and diligent people. They appointed a Task Force to go out into the wilderness to find a place for a church that would be centrally located. The Facilities Task Force studied and searched and walked and worried. For two years and over 52 properties did they seek this place to no avail. They grew weary.

The Children cried out, “Where can we go? There are no church buildings for sale and no parcels of land upon which we can build!”

The Lord heard their prayers. God led Joe Perkhauer, who wasn’t even on the Search Committee, to a place called Piney Mountain, which means Place of Longing. The Search Committee was filled with joy. The Children bought the land and once again they were hopeful.

Then Joe Hoffman said, “Let us appoint a Building Committee whose job it will be to give us a new place to dwell.” And the people said, “Yes! Let us find a group of hard-headed people that we might build a new place to dwell!”

So they called forth Michael and Janet, Virginia and Kelley, Mary and David, Elizabeth and Hazel. Only Hazel was not hard-headed. If you had worked on the Building Committee the last four years, you would know this is true. In a good way. And Hazel was their spiritual presence. And the hardest heads of all were Michael and Janet. And Janet said, “We will only go where we are meant to be,” and Michael said, “We do this because we care for each other.”

The children said “but we have only this small building on Merrymon Avenue and the inheritance left us from our ancestors. Joe, and other wise leaders, Russell, Dorri, Greg and Susanne, said, “Let us also have a Capital Campaign Committee, so that we may measure all our gold and silver, and build a new church.” And thereby Beth and Ed led the congregation to give their commitments to the making of a new church. And the Lord’s presence was felt, even among the Children’s children, who all gave

generously. And yea, even though only one church in one hundred can raise more than twice its annual budget, so it was with these Children. And it was the first miracle.

The Building Committee was faithful and diligent. They met every Sunday before worship and often on Fridays. They shared their joys and concerns. On some occasions they ate and drank wine. They became learned in the ways City Ordinances and UDO requirements, retaining walls materials and steepened slopes. They studied and scrutinized, visualized and reviewed. They quarreled and compromised. And they grew to love each other well.

Then they sent out for a Site Preparation Bid and lo, the bid came in exceedingly high. The Building Committee wept and prayed. “Oh Lord, we cannot afford \$1.6 million to grade our site. We will have no money left to build our church!

And God heard their prayers.

A pregnant engineer redesigned the parking lot to lie with the curve of the mountain and reduce the amount of grading. The new plan came in at \$1 million dollars and that was the second miracle.

With promise and hope, the Children sold their beloved home on Merrymon Avenue and came to dwell among foreigners at a place called Kenilworth, which means “Be Quiet and Move Quickly.”

Then came new trials. The children could no longer see one another’s faces and they dwelt in darkness. Their beloved Cindy and Penny moved to a faraway land, though news of them came frequently from travelers among them. Changes came to the Building Committee. Tadd came for a year, then Cindy. Kelley departed, but only a while, then also came Doug. The Executive Board had conflicts and sadly, some of the leaders of the children left. Still, all the while, the committee labored.

Then the Building Consultant asked for more silver and gold but the Children said, “No more money!” The Architect said, “Then we must make the building smaller, 60 cubits by 60 cubits.” The BC knew these words to be true. They worked even harder. Finally, they asked the Building Consultant to render unto them a quote for the cost of the smaller building.

The Building Consultant rendered an estimate that was forty percent over budget, The Building Committee cried out, “No! We have no more money to give. Get us another plan!” They studied and scrutinized, envisioned and revised. They reduced the number of floors to the building and withheld all amenities and again, sent the plan for bid. Again, they waited and prayed, hoping this time to have a third miracle.

The estimate came in again, more than a half a million dollars over the budget.

“What can we do? We have a congregational meeting on Sunday and we are to vote on a contract!”

By now, the Building Committee was weary and worried. They gathered the people and told them what had happened. The Children were gracious and blessed the Building Committee. All present shared their wisdom and asked the BC to find out what went wrong.

Now a man named Joel who was wise in the matters of building came forward and offered his services. He said, "I can find out what went wrong. I will use my staff."

And Moses took his staff and threw it on the ground. Oops. Wrong story. And so Joel took up his staff and they did ponder the building plan. And when they were done, Joel said, "Much time was wasted designing a building which was unaffordable from day one." To this the Architect responded, "I need more silver and gold."

The Building Committee gathered together the Tribe of Elders known as the Project Steering Committee. Kathryn and Joe, Sandra and Mark, Janet, Michael, and Joel, for Horace was far away. They told the story of how the Architect demanded more silver and gold.

"Then it is finished. We have no more silver and gold."

"What will we do?!"

"We must rebid the construction plan," spoke Kathryn. "But we must not sit idly by. We must have options."

And God heard their prayers and made known to them a place called Oak Street. Joel told them of the impending sale just three days hence.

"Let us go see this place called Oak Street," said Joe. "I know their pastor. I will arrange a visit."

They met there the next day and they were overjoyed. For Oak Street was spacious and place of great beauty.

"We must move quickly."

"But we cannot make this purchase without the knowledge and wisdom of the Children upon a called meeting with two weeks advance written." On the day before the Sabbath Michael said, "I have an idea. Let's make the offer contingent on congregational approval." So then did Mark and Kristy scribe the contract which Bob blessed. Joe called the children late into the night and said, "We must gather tomorrow after worship. Bring yourselves and your children, for this is the day the Lord has made possible."

And so it came to pass that the Children turned away from the place of Longing and bought the beautiful place on Oak Street which means, "Place of Deep Roots and Leaky Roof." And it was the third miracle.

So quickly was this move that the Children did not have time to prepare, as if they had to make bread without yeast. And Cindy and Elizabeth, Joe Conn and Pam, spent many hours packing boxes, cleaning and making phone calls. They said, "All who are skilled among you, come and make everything the Lord has commanded." (Exodus 35:10) Laborers and leaders came hence: Janice, Diane, Brenda, Ed and Cindy Sturdivant. The workers were too numerous to count but be they blessed!

And Greg came forward, along with Joel and Doug, and they spent many hours with contractors. And Kathryn and Greg said, “And we must make this building so that all may come,” and they conversed with those learned in elevators. All of the Children scurried and scrubbed, planned and prayed, labored and loved. And none grew weary, for their hearts were filled with joy.

And when they were done, the Children held hands and praised the Lord for bringing them home. And God said, “I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions and your old men (and women) will dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17)
(Begin with a couple of members of the building committee, to announce one of the following. Then have individual members of the congregation stand where they are seated and chime in with the rest.)

“I see possibilities for urban ministry!” (David Bair)

“There is room for Room in the Inn!” (Elizabeth)

“And a kitchen for Hospitality” (Virginia and Kelley)

“Music for celebration” (Cindy)

“There will be a building on solid foundation!” (Doug, Joel, Greg...in unison)

“A new playground and a memorial garden” (Mary)

“...where we can co-mingle” (Michael)

“An Alternative Christmas Market open to the community” (Meg Word Sims)

“A labyrinth (Elva Hunt)

“An Open and Affirming Sign. A beacon for the community.” (Horace)

“A place to dance!” (Smitty)

“A place to act!” (Lee Storrow)

“A progressive faith presence in downtown Asheville.” (Noel)

A place to pray and laugh, worship and sing, and grow... (Joe Hoffman)

And Michael did say to the Lord, “Lord, we don’t know what the last four years was about, but we have built a community. And that is the most important building of all.” (Janet)

“Amen” (Michael)

Janet Stephens and Michael Hester
Building Committee Co-chairs, 2001-2005