"I am more afraid of my own heart than of the pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great pope, Self."

- Martin Luther

Ministry is more about what can’t be taught than what can

by Loren Seibold, editor, Best Practices

I was talking to a young man a few weeks ago about his desire to go into ministry. He’s got talent, a good mind, deep faith, and some familiarity with the vocation since he not only grew up a pastor’s son but has also served admirably in his local congregation. What attracts him to ministry? He loves preaching, and does it well. He’s a good Bible student. He has a faithful heart for the Lord. He’s got organizational ability. "What don’t you like about it?" I asked. To his credit, he understands himself: "All the relationship stuff", he said, by which he meant visiting, working with the church board, managing church conflicts, and generally keeping people happy.

It led me to reflect on the difference between what draws us to ministry, and what actually is required to do it. When we entered ministry, the stated motive was that we were "called". But as we’ve matured, pastors who are honest and insightful have unpack that call and realize that in addition to the promptings of the Holy Spirit we may also have been drawn to ministry because we liked the neatness and logic of theology, enjoyed being up in front, and liked having the title “pastor”. (There’s nothing wrong with admitting that: a Divine calling in recognition of spiritual gifts and personal satisfaction is solid Pauline theology).

In ministerial education, theology is a large part of what one learns, and even though the curriculums now include more practical training, it’s very difficult to teach someone "the relationship stuff", which is the greatest part of what pastoral ministry is about. As anyone knows who has served on a personnel committee, with its balcony view of pastors at work, you can’t teach common sense. Nor can you teach a good pastor and his wife how to survive the soul-gutting criticisms and conflicts to which some church members will subject them. In spite of all our good efforts in higher education, field education, and ministerial internship, creating successful parish pastors is still an uncertain art.
Theology and preaching are easy. They're fairly well defined activities. They're satisfying. It's the rest that's hard: the crises you can't anticipate; the effect on your family; loneliness; some church members looking at you like you're perfect (you knowing very well you aren't); others searching for anything in you they can criticize - in short it's a complicated vocation. (A psychologist pointed out to me once that the church is an almost perfect laboratory for projection: if there's something troubling in one's own life, there are lots of opportunities for projecting one's feelings on to others. It's no accident that the most rigid, critical, hurtful people, those who lambaste the pastor for wrong theology, often have the most broken personal lives.)

All of which is to say that wannabe pastors need to know (and some who have been doing it awhile need to be reminded) that mastering "the relationship stuff" is probably more important than anything we learned in school.

What's your experience? Comment on this article at our Facebook page:

**Best Ideas for Ministry**

**Praying Through Conflict**

It is no secret that families, church boards, churches, and even denominations face differences in opinions that can flare up into conflict. Daniel Hoover has developed a simple prayer strategy that he employs when he senses conflict is just around the corner. "The prayer is carefully constructed to reaffirm that everyone is on the same side, we are together seeking God's solution to the problem, not to be right or to win over someone else" To watch Daniel's testimony and to find his email address go to the Best Ideas On Demand Channel.

**Planning Sermonic Year**

Pastor Gordan Jinas had trouble trying to decide what he would preach from week to week in his church. He wanted to stay on top of things and also provide a well balanced spiritual diet for his congregation. He has developed a systematic approach where each quarter he covers a variety of needs so that over the year his congregation gets a good balance. Watch him give his approach on the Best Ideas on demand channel and get his email address so you can let him unpack it a little more for you personally.

**Singing Door to Door on Mother's Day**

Luis Prieto has found a novel way that his members can make contacts in the Spanish community. Groups of church members go door to door serenading the mothers of the community on Mother's Day. To watch Luis' testimony and to find his email address go to the Best Ideas channel.

**The Refocus Program**

Pastor Ken Blundell is using the Refocus Program to help his members look back at their history and life to see what God has called them to do in ministry. It has given them insight in their lives. Soon the whole church will look at its unique calling as well. To get Ken's email address and to watch his best idea go to the Best Ideas Channel.

**Reading for Pastors**

Constitutional challenge means NYC congregations can no longer rent public school space. Quote: "The congregations, mostly small Christian groups without their own buildings, are packing up their folding chairs and sound systems and moving their worship services to movie houses, off-Broadway stages, community centers, synagogues or Seventh-Day Adventist churches - anyplace that might be free on Sunday mornings."

Video: Great clip from Adam Hamilton about how he makes visitors into church members.

He's a fantastic preacher, with a proven record for growing churches. Only one problem: he just got out of jail for sex crimes against minors. Should some sins keep a preacher out of the pulpit for life? Christ Tabernacle Baptist in
Jacksonville didn't think so, and invited Darrel Gilyard to be their pastor, even agreeing to keep all minors out of church services, and not allowing Gilyard to do counseling or any other kind of pastoral work.

**Study:** Facebook may lead people to compare their lives unfavorably with others. "Those who have used Facebook longer agreed more that others were happier, and agreed less that life is fair, and those spending more time on Facebook each week agreed more that others were happier and had better lives. Furthermore, those that included more people whom they did not personally know as their Facebook 'friends' agreed more that others had better lives."

A lot of people text the initials without registering its meaning. **However, one church is reclaiming "OMG" for God.**

In Virginia, the Episcopal Church has won its lawsuit against breakaway congregations, taking back $40 million worth of property that the judge said belonged to the denomination, not the congregations. But it may prove to be costly litigation for the denomination. **According to one analysis,** "The departing congregation, that has inhabited the large Falls Church complex, reports a church membership of just over 2,000 and probably features an average Sunday attendance of at least that figure. The congregation that will be moving back into Falls Church reports - after 61 transfers from other Episcopal congregations in the last three years - a membership of 178 with an average Sunday attendance of 74."

**To the Point**

*Ellen White quotes on gentleness and extremism. Thanks to Tom Hughes.*

Let not individuals gather up the very strongest statements, given for individuals and families, and drive these things because they want to use the whip and to have something to drive. Let these active, determined temperaments take the Word of God and the testimonies, which present the necessity of forbearance and love and perfect unity, and labor zealously and perseveringly. With their own hearts softened and subdued by the grace of Christ, with their own spirits humble and full of the milk of human kindness, they will not create prejudice, neither will they cause dissension and weaken the churches. (3SM 286.3)

You must and will, if a Christian, win the respect of believers and unbelievers. You need the love of Jesus in your heart, then you will love all for whom Christ has died. Be universally kind, because Christ was kind. You will make your life fragrant with tender love and will give to all the milk of human kindness. A sour word will not answer, because you misrepresent Jesus. Much wisdom and strength, prudence and patience, are essential. Do not venture to be domineering, but be kind, that you may succeed upon religious principles which will call into exercise the graces in the character of forbearance, self-denial, and resolution to resist temptation. (12MR 108.3)

If we individually possess these traits of character, who accept justification by faith, there will be no extremists. Christ never erred in His judgment of men and of truth. He was never deceived by appearances. He never raised a question but what was clearly appropriate. He never gave an answer but what was fitting and right to the point. He silenced the voice of the cavilling, shrewd, and cunning priests by penetrating through the surface and reaching the heart, flashing light into their consciences, which annoyed them, but they would not yield to conviction. Christ never went to extremes, never lost self-control, or the balance of mind under any excitement. He never violated the law of good taste and discernment when to speak and when to keep silent. Then if all who claim to see the precious golden rays of the light of the Sun of Righteousness will follow the example of Christ, there will be no extremists (1888 671)

The example of Christ is before us, ever to keep the law and the gospel closely connected. They cannot be separated. Let calmness and self-possession be cultivated and perseveringly maintained, for this was the character of Christ, while We hear the vehement expressions of false religionists who make bold pretensions, who talk loud and long, saying, "I am holy, I am sinless," when they have not the least foundation for their faith. We hear no noisy protestations of faith, nor do we see tremendous bodily contortions and exercises in the Author of all truth. (1888 672.1)

**News, Ideas & Reminders**

**Humor:** Which library do you preach from?

**Humor:** Who’s got the living water?

Oakwood University's Bradford-Cleveland-Brooks Leadership Center presents the **Third Annual Conference on the Art and Craft of Preaching**, February 26-29, 2012 at OU. Keynote by Elder N.C. Wilson. Email info@BCBLC.org.

**Previous resource links:**
- The Hope of Survivors, ministry to victims of pastoral sexual abuse
- iFollow website
- NAD NewsPoints (formerly Friday Fax): by email, or on a web page.
- Adventist Parenting e-newsletter
- The one Project
- Facts with Hope, evidence-based health messages for bulletins
- NAD Volunteer Screening Guidelines and Screening Form
- The digital Andrews Study Bible
- Adventist Family Ministries
- REACH North American Resources Guide
- Adventist Meetings Speaker Registry
- World Life Expectancy website
Upcoming NAD Events

Do you have an event you’d like to invite NAD pastors to? Send details to BestPractices@Ameritech.net.

The ACS Outreach Leadership Conference is sponsored by the Adventist Community Services - Washington, the North Pacific Union Conference and NAD Adventist Community Services. It will be held at the Washington Conference Office in Federal Way, Washington on March 2-4, 2012. Participants will hear challenging speakers and choose from 30 training seminars. For registration and more information: www.washingtonconference.org/ACS.

Nonprofit Leadership Certification Program

- Southeastern Conference: 1701 Robie Ave, Mt. Dora, Florida 32712,
  - Session I, June 3-7, 2012
  - Session II, September 23-27, 2012
- ACS Outreach Leadership Conference, Washington Conference Office
  - March 2-4, 2012

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Movie house as chapel: NYC congregations, evicted from schools, seek new space for worship

JIM FITZERALD  Associated Press
First Posted: February 11, 2012 - 12:38 pm
Last Updated: February 11, 2012 - 12:38 pm

NEW YORK — Scores of religious congregations are scrounging for cheap space in New York City as they prepare to be evicted, on constitutional grounds, from rooms they've been renting at public schools.

Like most people seeking decent new quarters in the city, they're finding the process expensive and disruptive.

"That's an extra $10,000 we'll be spending on rent that we could have spent on reaching the community," said David Miller, executive pastor at the evangelical church Morning Star New York.

The congregations, mostly small Christian groups without their own buildings, are packing up their folding chairs and sound systems and moving their worship services to movie houses, off-Broadway stages, community centers, synagogues or Seventh-Day Adventist churches — anyplace that might be free on Sunday mornings.

The exodus was prompted by the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal in December to consider an appeal of the city's ban on worship services in schools. The city policy, arguing separation of church and state, was upheld by a federal appeals court.
Congregations have been ordered out after this Sunday, which means they need new places by Feb. 19. They have been in the schools since 2002.

Several pastors say they haven't found anything they can afford and are hoping for last-minute help from the mayor, the state Legislature — or the Lord.

"We are praying to God for an answer," said Pastor Rick Del Rio of Abounding Grace Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side. "We are hoping He can change someone's mind. Maybe the mayor's."

Miller said he expects his rent for three Sunday services to more than double from the $10,000 a month he paid the schools.

"Being a nonprofit that relies on member contributions, sudden and dramatic increases can be challenging," he said.

One Morning Star service has already been moved to the AMC Orpheum movie house on the Upper East Side; one is going to a Seventh-Day Adventist church, whose members meet on Saturdays; and one is opening in an Off-Broadway theater.

James Park, senior officer of the Korean-American New Frontier Church in Manhattan, said the cost comparison is "not even close" and he fears rent for three Sunday services will quadruple. His church plans to use two synagogues and is hoping for Fire Department approval to use a vacant storefront as well.

"These churches are running into the harsh reality that in New York City, it is difficult to find reasonably priced facilities," said Jordan Lorence, an attorney who argued the churches' side in the court case. "They are very expensive in Midtown, or they're nonexistent in some of the poorer areas of town, where the churches do their work."

Minorities make up the congregations of many of the churches being evicted, said city Councilman Fernando Cabrera, who is pastor of a Bronx church that's not affected.

"There's Koreans, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, African-Americans," said Cabrera, who was arrested last month while protesting the city's stance. "They're staples in our community and they provide a volunteer base that the city can never pay for."

Lorence said the court ruling means the city has the power to ban worship in school buildings, "but they don't have to."

"The mayor could end this with one word," he said.

That doesn't seem likely. The city is opposing a bill in the state Legislature that would force it to allow worship in schools. The measure passed the state Senate but is not expected to get through the Assembly.

It's possible an agreement could be reached that would "blend some of the opposition and some supporters into something that's consistent with previous Supreme Court decisions," Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said recently.

However, the Assembly adjourned for the week and no resolution was expected before the churches' last legal worship service in schools. Lorence said Thursday that he will seek an "11th-hour"
injunction in federal court Tuesday.

Lorence, from the Alliance Defense Fund, was the lawyer for the tiny Bronx Household of Faith during the 17-year battle that ended with the Supreme Court's refusal.

The Household of Faith, which had been paying $600 a month, is moving its Sunday service into a Christian halfway house for men, but Pastor Robert Hall worries the space won't be big enough.

"It's comfortable for 50 to 60 people," he said. "We're pushing 100. We don't want to go to two services; that's not in the interest of our church. There's a new storefront nearby, sitting empty, but that would be more than what we need and the cost would be prohibitive."

At least 54 congregations are affected.

More churches became alarmed last month when the city Housing Authority announced it was reviewing leases with all groups, including churches, that rent space in its buildings. But the Housing Authority said its review had nothing to do with the schools decision, and Lorence said some churches have already been given new leases.

Some pastors using the schools say principals will miss them.

"John Jay High School was very happy to have us and they're sad to see us go," said the Rev. Matthew Brown of the Park Slope Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn. "We purchased a scoreboard for the school, we painted hallways and classrooms, we organized the library on weekends, we tried to give the teachers gift packages every year."

Brown's congregation moved last week into a nearby Baptist church.

"We are forced to rent afternoon space, which means we lose morning worship time, and that will be a test," the pastor said. "We're a congregation of young families and Sunday morning worship is a cultural thing, a scheduling thing."

Park said his Korean-American congregation had invested $100,000 at P.S. 11, donating air conditioners, repairing the sound system and funding scholarships.

"We thought it was a long-term place for us," he said.

Del Rio says he's paying about $1,500 a month to use an auditorium and two classrooms at P.S. 34 for four hours every Sunday.

"What I'm being offered are storefronts that would cost $4,000 to $10,000 a month," he said. "We can't do that and still do our work with the marginalized people down here. We're the most stable part of families' lives and now they're being threatened."

Not all the affected congregations are Christian. Rabbi Steven Burton says his Congregation Shaarei Shalom in the Bronx will have to find a new place for High Holy Days observances.

"But we only used the schools once a year," he said. "We don't have to worry about it until September."
Movie house as chapel: NYC congregations, evicted from schools, seek... http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/51ba10201c8a4238aaa98e320d6...
Former Jacksonville megachurch pastor Darrell Gilyard preaching at Christ Tabernacle Baptist Church.

Published: February 4, 2012 - 3:15pm | Updated: February 6, 2012 - 11:11am

By Jeff Brumley

Former Jacksonville megachurch pastor Darrell Gilyard is back in the pulpit less than two months after his release from prison for committing sex crimes against minors.

Gilyard, 49, said he accepted the late January offer to preach at Christ Tabernacle Baptist Church because he needed money and felt God calling him back into ministry. Being a registered sex offender was making it hard for him to get jobs in prison ministries or working with ex-offenders, he added.

Search Northeast Florida sex offenders

About 150 attended his first service on Jan. 29 — up from a normal attendance at that church of five to 10, Gilyard and the church’s lay leaders said Friday.

“It was refreshing and invigorating,” Gilyard said of giving his first sermon in four years.

They said the arrangement is mutually beneficial because the 25-year-old congregation on North Davis Street had become almost as broke as Gilyard had become since completing his three-year state prison sentence on Dec. 28.

“He was down on the ground, and the church was down on the ground, and we both needed to get up,” said Deacon Paul S. Newman Sr.

Gilyard said he initially intended to decline the offer because he didn’t want to subject the church to negative press or go through it again himself. He also didn’t want to violate the terms of his three-year probation, which include avoiding contact with minors.

“I was scared to death,” he said.

But he acquiesced when the church agreed to bar minors from the services and accepted his refusal to perform any kind of marriage counseling or other pastoral work.

In 2004, Gilyard admitted to fathering the child of a woman who had accused him of raping her during a 2004 counseling session, according to court records.

Gilyard said his probation officer OK’d his arrangement with Christ Tabernacle. The Florida Department of Corrections confirmed Gilyard remains in compliance with his probation as long as minors aren’t present when he preaches.

“I’m simply preaching,” Gilyard said on Friday. “I’m not the pastor of Christ Tabernacle.”

Gilyard’s detractors have said he shouldn’t be the pastor of any church or in any kind of ministry leadership. Lay and clergy alike have argued his sexual indiscretions, with minors and adults, biblically disqualify him from spiritual leadership.

Tiffany Thigpen Croft wrote on her blog, Let’s Stop Pastor Darrell Gilyard Together, that she prays for Gilyard and for any females that come into contact with him.

“I will pray that God keeps you from being able to violate one other female soul in your time on earth,” Croft wrote in a January post. “I pray that every possible opportunity is available for the girls/women in your future path to not be confused by your charms and your misuse of their trust.”

Christ Tabernacle Trustee Eloise Bolden said the church is ensuring that by holding a separate youth service for minors. She added that she and other church leaders there are aware of Gilyard’s past but believe he should be forgiven and offered another shot at ministry.

“We are a group of Christians who are not afraid of controversy,” she said. “He needs and wants to preach and we need somebody to minister to us spiritually — so why not him?”

Gilyard committed his sex crimes against two girls at Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Jacksonville, where he had been the pastor since 1993. At the time, he was also a nationally known preacher, having been mentored by some of the biggest names in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Gilyard said he feels he’s being called back into eventual church leadership and feels liberated by the fact that everyone knows about his criminal background.

“The only person God cannot call is the person who refuses to acknowledge, abhor and abandon his or her own sin,” he said.
Church leaders said they see God's hand in Gilyard's availability and willingness to preach Christ Tabernacle.

"Knowing what this pastor has done for one congregation, we felt he could do for this congregation," Newman said, referencing Gilyard's leadership in growing Shiloh from around 200 to 12,000 during his tenure there.

The arrangement came about after a mutual friend of Newman's and Gilyard's connected the two parties.

They wouldn't say who that was, but Deacon Elliott Chatman said it was more than coincidence that Gilyard became available just when the congregation needed fresh leadership.

“It’s the first time in my 70 years that I can say I saw a miracle happen,” Chatman said.

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Related Links

Tiffany Thigpen Croft's blog
Study: Why Facebook is making people sad

As Facebook becomes a more powerful influence in our digital lives, researchers are looking into how the social network changes our perception of the lives of friends and family members.

According to a new study (http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/cyber.2011.0324) conducted by sociologists Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge at Utah Valley University, research showed a correlation between a Facebook user’s disposition about their life and the amount of time spent on the social network. Approximately 425 students were asked to identify how much they agreed or disagreed with statements like “Life is fair” and “Many of my friends have a better life than me.” In addition, the students were asked about how much time they spent on Facebook, their number of Facebook friends as well as how many of those friends they had actually met in person. The researchers also attempted controlling for factors like relationship status, gender, religious beliefs and race.

more that others were happier, and agreed less that life is fair, and those spending more time on Facebook each week agreed more that others were happier and had better lives. Furthermore, those that included more people whom they did not personally know as their Facebook “friends” agreed more that others had better lives.”

Published in the Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking journal, the study also concluded that people that spent less time socializing on Facebook and spent more time with real-life friends were less likely to be unhappy. Since Facebook users are far more likely to depict the happiest times of their lives through carefully curated photos rather than catalog depressing events, many users are more likely to believe that happiness is a constant in their friend’s lives. An earlier study conducted last year by the American Academy of Pediatrics also found that children and teenagers can develop "Facebook Depression" when being overwhelmed with positive status updates and photos of happy friends.

In Case You Missed It:

- Google introduces Google+ lite for teenagers (http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/google-introduces-google-lite-for-teenagers/)
- Engineers from Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace collaborate to challenge Google’s Search Plus Your World (http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/engineers-from-facebook-twitter-and-my-space-collaborate-to-challenge-googles-search-plus-your-world/)
- Hey Gowalla users, this is what the Facebook deal means for you (http://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/what-the-facebook-acquisition-means-for-gowalla-users/)
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JUSTIN R. MOEN (HTTP://WWW.DIGITALTRENDS.COM/USERS/JRMNICE/) 35 DAYS AGO

In reply to Mike Tijerina (http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/study-why-facebook-is-making-people-sad...3 of 7 2/28/2012 2:09 PM)

The subjects were all students. Ah, yes, let's ask 425 highly connected, stressed, drunk, depressed,
insecure (jobs) homesick, in-debt and/or horny students if they agree/disagree that "Many of my friends
have a better life than me." Everyone has a better life than you when you're in college:-) Not a very
broad cross-section of the user base, in my mind, and thus a more accurate title should read:
"Depressed or not, students still use Facebook."

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MIKE TIJERINA 36 DAYS AGO

Kind of a gud thought wud be glad
if allows fb fuk too smthng lyk 'gamer' movie typ
a section/group only to fuk . Hit the gal u lyk n happy lol

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Study: Why Facebook is making people sad
http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/study-why-facebook-is-making-people-sad...3 of 7 2/28/2012 2:09 PM
"Everyone has a better life than you when you're in college?!?" Where in the hell did you go to school? Sounds like you should have left the library long enough to experience the socialization en masse that typifies most people's tertiary educational experience. Least problematic in this study is the composition of the test group... 425 students is a pretty fair sample and in many ways is an accurate representation of the typical Facebook demographic... and it cost NO money to get them to take the survey (bonus).

PLAY TIME  36 DAYS AGO

Uh No!

GER HER  37 DAYS AGO

Sad that I didn't create it!!! $$$

They say in real life the grass isn't always greener on the other side. Imagine that, it rings true for online life too. Or imagine if you could control what others see and know about you therefore allowing you to edit your life as you live it. I mean with that in mind we all should be living like rock stars on our profiles.

NANCY WYSE  37 DAYS AGO

Correlation doesn't prove cause and effect! But if fb makes you sad you should delete your account.
True, correlation ≠ causation, but if every study had to adhere to what appears to be your criteria for causation, empirical studies would be pointless. From my reading of the study, the explanatory framework for the correlation (i.e. the independent variable) is legitimate and accurate.

In reply to Nancy Wyse

Exactly! I see no evidence that Facebook makes you sad, only heavy users of Facebook are more sad than those not using it lots.

Facebook can make you equally happy if you thought broadcast and ignore most of everything else which is going on around you... ;)

so true! sometime back i used to have a main fb account where i do all my stuff, but i felt it was causing more damage than any other thing, so i close it and then created an account just to play or comment in other sites that require fb, i wasn't total sure why i closed it but this gives me the right idea. Besides fb is more gossip than other thing!

Good thing us Google+ users have Hangouts, so if we're feeling glum all we have to do is start a Hangout and use our live webcam to chat face-to-face with all our contacts as if they were in person. The reason why Facebook users are sad is because there is no way to experience what those people would be like if you talked to them in person.

Thank you, Google, for finally making social networking as much like real-life socialization as possible!
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IT TOOK only three letters for a church to become the talking point of the neighbourhood.

The ‘OMG’ (‘Oh My God’) sign on St Paul’s Anglican Church in Dandenong Rd, Caulfield North, has become the subject of photos, laughter and an internet frenzy.

>> Have you seen a funny church sign? Tell us where below.

The Rev Howard Langmead said the sign was put there to “catch attention and be unexpected”.

“People have been stopping to photograph it.

“People forget what they are actually saying when they say ‘OMG’.

“We’re reclaiming ‘oh my God’ for the church.”

After a post on Twitter, the church received phone calls of support from interstate.

Mr Langmead said the church’s signs, which include two large billboards, had encouraged people to visit.

Another billboard at St Clement’s Anglican Church in Brighton Rd, Elsternwick, is read by tens of thousands of
motorists every day.

Its festive-season message, which is about to be replaced, says “Christmas starts with Christ”.

The Rev Rowan Fairbairn said people were worried that the church was changing the sign and were concerned it would be removed completely.

“People anticipate what’s next.

“We have a few ideas in the pipeline, some quirky ideas from some quirky brains,” he said.

“It’s really just a way for people who are sitting in their cars, staring ahead, to stop and reflect.”

>> Have you seen a funny church sign? Tell us where below.
For the past five years, the remaining members of several Episcopal congregations in Northern Virginia have been worshiping in borrowed basements and empty houses while praying to return to the prominent sanctuaries where they married, baptized their children and buried their parents.

Now, after a prolonged and bitter legal battle with former members who broke away and took with them more than $40 million worth of church property, the Episcopal Church and the members who stayed with the denomination are on the verge of taking back their buildings, which include some the faith’s largest, most prominent churches in the region.

After a judge’s ruling last month in favor of the Episcopal Church, settlement talks are underway for a massive property swap that would bring to an end the most expensive litigation — and perhaps the most watched — in Episcopal Church history. While the breakaway congregations still can appeal, both sides said they are trying to work out the details of the property turnover.

“Everyone is moving on the assumption that they need to be prepared to move,” said Scott Ward, attorney for the Falls Church congregants who broke away.

The two sides are so close to a settlement that the Falls Church members who remained with the Episcopal Church and have been meeting in a Presbyterian church basement across the street are planning Easter services back in their old church, a large, historic property. Members of St. Stephen’s Episcopal in tiny Heathsville on the Northern Neck are mapping out the prayers they will say and the music they will play as they march down the street to reclaim their building.

The bishop of Virginia’s Episcopal diocese, the country’s largest, laid out a plan in his annual address late last month to reclaim the church buildings. He called the plan Dayspring, a scriptural reference to a new day, which he believes is upon the diocese.

“It is not overstating the case to say that this is one of the most defining moments in all of our 400-year history,” Bishop Shannon Johnston said.

When the conservative congregations voted to leave the Episcopal Church in late 2006 and early 2007, the
case drew worldwide attention. The breakaway members said the denomination had grown too liberal in its theology, and they objected to its ordaining gay clergy and celebrating same-sex relationships, among other things. They chose to become part of the booming, conservative Anglican Church of Nigeria, a separate branch of worldwide Anglicanism. The Episcopal Church is the American branch.

The vast majority of the members who belonged to the old congregations chose to split with the Episcopal Church. Lawyers representing the breakaway groups argued in court that they had legal claim to the properties. In the early months after the split, the conservatives threatened to have Episcopal priests arrested if they set foot on the properties.

Meanwhile, Episcopal blogs across the country slammed the conservatives for joining forces with a Nigerian bishop who is an outspoken opponent of gay relationships.

Last month, Fairfax County Circuit Court Judge Randy Bellows sided with the Episcopal Church in a ruling that cited Virginia real estate law. In his 113-page opinion, Bellows said the deeds and other documents show the properties belong to the Episcopal Church. He ordered the seven breakaway congregations to leave every single dollar and item that existed before the split to the denomination.

The breakaway congregations are now accounting for prayer books, robes and artwork and preparing to leave centrally located, sprawling complexes for the likelihood of a rented high school gym. The future is in limbo for four preschools that operated in the buildings.

As the thousands of conservative members prepare to vacate churches where they also have strong ties, members said their relocation plan is taken from a Bible verse that commands: “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Carol Jackson, a lay leader at the Falls Church congregation aligned with the Church of Nigeria, said she and her fellow members are trying to view the court loss through a divine lens.

“We’re all here because God wants us to be. In a secular world those aren’t very wise words, but that’s what we think is true,” she said.

Meanwhile, the Episcopal members who had left their old pews after the votes are eagerly anticipating their return to houses of worship that hold special meaning.

“All three of my children were baptized there,” said Deborah Miller, a 59-year-old nurse who joined the original Falls Church congregation in 1982 and stayed with the Episcopal group. “I buried my dad there. We’ve been to funerals of dear friends there. I have shed so many tears in that building, for joy and for sorrow. It’s within the fabric of who we are. It’s a holy place.”

Although the case appears close to resolution, the damage to relationships among family members and friends who grew up in the same congregation but chose different sides is evident, members said.

“We were at church all the time, as were our kids,” Miller said. “We were completely involved. Then all of a sudden we didn’t see them at all.”

Sandra Kirkpatrick, a lay leader at the 30-member St. Stephen’s Episcopal, which held services on the lawn of a small house lent by a supporter, described it this way: “We just act like people who just know one another. We don’t socialize. If we run into one another at the Food Lion, we ask about one another’s kids and health, but very little to-and-fro-ing.”
After being caught in rain and heat, St. Stephen’s members built an enclosed porch for their services. There has been an upside to their struggles, Episcopal members said.

“The price was that our church experience continued on outside that building and was extremely rich,” said Paul Miller, Deborah’s husband. He was a worship leader at the Falls Church congregation before the split and continued working there, even though he chose to worship in the basement across the street with the few remaining Episcopalians.

With rifts so deep, the possibility of speedy healing seems unlikely.

“The other day someone asked me, ‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could all worship together on Easter?’” Kirkpatrick said with a chuckle. “It would be, but that’s not going to happen.”
The years-long property battle between Virginia’s Episcopal Diocese and congregations that departed from it looks to be about settled. As anyone who has been following can attest, the Episcopal Church and the congregations that have departed from it have been engaged in some epic legal battles. I wrote about one angle in this fight a few months ago for the *Wall Street Journal* Houses of Worship column. That piece began:

When the Church of the Good Shepherd in Binghamton, N.Y., left the Episcopal Church over disagreements about what the Bible says about sexuality, the congregation offered to pay for the building in which it worshiped. In return the Episcopal Church sued to seize the building, then sold it for a fraction of the price to someone who turned it into a mosque.

While I was researching that piece, which was about how some congregations that are permitted to buy their buildings (even if they already payed for them once already) must promise to disaffiliate from the Anglican Church, I heard other stories about what happens to the buildings that are taken by the Episcopal Church and its dioceses, always in the name of the Episcopal members in the area. Many are sold or shuttered, unable to keep up with basic maintenance expenses. One was leased to a dog kennel, I was told. Keep that in mind.

The *Washington Post* reported on the local version of this legal battle. Here in Northern Virginia, some of the congregations had been around since before the Episcopal Church even existed. They thought they might have a better claim to the property than some of the hundreds of other congregations in the country that divided or left the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church has spent upwards of $22 million in these legal battles in recent years and this Virginia fight was also expensive. But the Episcopal Church prevailed and gets to keep the properties of local congregations that are now affiliated with mainstream Anglican churches in Africa.

The story is headlined “*After prolonged legal battle, Virginia Episcopalians prepare to reclaim property.*” Here’s how it begins:

For the past five years, the remaining members of several Episcopal congregations in Northern Virginia have been worshiping in borrowed basements and empty houses while praying to return to the prominent sanctuaries where they married, baptized their
children and buried their parents.

Now, after a prolonged and bitter legal battle with former members who broke away and took with them more than $40 million worth of church property, the Episcopal Church and the members who stayed with the denomination are on the verge of taking back their buildings, which include some of the faith's largest, most prominent churches in the region.

The story is very well written and covers the basics of where things are in the legal dispute. Attorneys explain that everyone is operating under the assumption that the congregations need to be prepared to move. We learn a lot about the winning side — the Falls Church Episcopal folks are planning Easter services and St. Stephen's Episcopal members are planning the prayers they'll say as they march to reclaim their building. The bishop in the area says this is one of the most defining moments in the diocese's 400-year-history. We get a summary of the nature of the dispute and where the departing Episcopalians went, albeit a summary laser-focused on homosexuality as opposed to larger disagreements on Scripture. The legal dispute is summarized with an economy of words (much more challenging than it looks, I assure you!). And we learn that the breakaway folks are now having to account for prayer books, robes, artwork in preparation for leaving their "sprawling complexes" and figuring out what to do with the schools the congregations run.

And while we learn that "the vast majority" went with the departing congregations, I'm kind of surprised how little of that comes through in the story. Take this snippet, for instance:

As the thousands of conservative members prepare to vacate churches where they also have strong ties, members said their relocation plan is taken from a Bible verse that commands: "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Carol Jackson, a lay leader at the Falls Church congregation aligned with the Church of Nigeria, said she and her fellow members are trying to view the court loss through a divine lens.

"We're all here because God wants us to be. In a secular world those aren't very wise words, but that's what we think is true," she said.

Meanwhile, the Episcopal members who had left their old pews after the votes are eagerly anticipating their return to houses of worship that hold special meaning.

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Great quotes and a very nice job of talking to people about the moves they're about to face.

But let's just look at the numbers here. The Episcopal Church reports "Average Sunday Attendance" as a key figure for congregational health. The departing congregation, that has inhabited the large Falls Church complex, reports a church membership of just over 2,000 and probably features an average Sunday attendance of at least that figure. The congregation that will be moving back into Falls Church reports — after 61 transfers from other Episcopal congregations in the last three years — a membership of 178 with an average Sunday attendance of 74.

No way around it. That's an attendance of less than 4 percent what the Anglican congregation sees.
Or look at the budgets of the respective congregations. The Falls Church Anglicans reported disbursements of about $6.1 million in 2009. Of that total, just under $800,000 (or 13%) was for building and maintenance alone. Another 13 percent was for general administrative costs, including fixed costs for utilities and salaries for staff and clergy. If you look at page 26 of the Falls Church Episcopal congregation’s report, total income was just $233,641. That’s less than 4 percent of the Anglican congregation’s disbursements. So to just pay for the physical plant they will be taking back over, they’ll have to triple their income. And that’s before they even begin to pay for clergy or other staff. And that doesn’t leave any money for the many activities that are currently being run out of the Falls Church plant.

So here are some journalistic questions. What’s the plan here? Are they really going to be able to keep the physical plant running? Is the Diocese going to help them out? How much? Are other congregations going to sponsor them?

And what is going to happen with the schools? The Falls Church Day School is run by the Anglican vestry and I’m assuming it can’t be run if separated from its parent congregation. But am I right? What’s the plan? Does the diocese have a plan to allow the day schools to keep operating in their current location or what? Are the children going to be kicked out mid-school year? And where will they go? Will the Anglicans be able to keep schools going as they scramble to worship in school gymnasiums?

And another thing I wonder is about another one of the “losing” congregations, Truro. It’s a sister congregation to the Falls Church and has a significant physical plant with a large “average Sunday attendance” to support it. When it left the Episcopal Church, I believe the entire congregation left. There is no Episcopal congregation with a competing claim. What will happen to that building? What is the diocese’s plan there? I don’t even think that’s the only one of the “losing” congregations without a competing claim. I believe that is also the situation for Church of the Apostles in Fairfax. So what happens to that building?

If this story were more about the theological battles in play, these questions might be less important. But the whole point of the story is that the remnant congregations with few members are about to take over these huge physical plants that currently serve large congregations and flourishing social ministries. Now, maybe I should just be patient and wait for the follow-up. Maybe this is just the first in a series of stories about what’s going to happen. But is Falls Church Episcopal about to be sold to the highest non-Anglican bidder? Will the diocese be in a position to subsidize it heavily?

I’m sure the Diocese thought about these questions when it waged its huge legal battle, but what are the answers? Did journalists ask these questions?

Written by: Mollie on February 15, 2012.