

COLLEAGUES:

“Who is my neighbor?” may well be the question that determines whether your dream of a new building is fulfilled.

Congregational leaders frequently assume that “selling the congregation on it” will be the hardest part of a plan to relocate or expand the physical plant. Once members are on board, the conventional wisdom says, who else could possibly object? Fund-raising and construction dust will be the major challenges remaining.

More and more congregations are discovering, however, that communication with the neighborhood is critical. Most members of congregations commute to worship—from their home in one neighborhood to the neighborhood where the sanctuary is located. Few people living around your congregation’s building have any idea what goes on inside—including your plans for expansion.

So when it’s time for a new parking lot, a larger building, a soccer field, or even new landscaping, most neighbors are taken by surprise. And most of us don’t like surprises.

In this issue of *Clergy Notes*, we explore how neighborhood relations can smooth the way—or inhibit—your plans for construction. You’ve probably got your own story to tell. If so, I’d like to hear it. Let’s keep in touch.



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WHEN CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS BECOME DESTRUCTIVE

The house at 942 Fletcher Avenue is an odd reminder of the bad blood that can develop because of a construction project.

In the mid-1980s, the church next door—Calvary Tabernacle—built a new \$5 million sanctuary. Calvary also planned to buy several homes along Fletcher Avenue and raze them to make way for more parking space.

But the owner of 942 Fletcher, whose family had lived in the neighborhood for a century, felt a deep attachment to it and refused to sell. When the church tried to negotiate with her, she rebuffed its offers and then went public. She showed up at hearings and wrote letters to the editor, decrying Calvary's "demolition of a historical area to make way for a sea of parking lots."

The church's plans went forward as scheduled. Today, 942 Fletcher is separated from Calvary Tabernacle only by a driveway. A parking lot wraps around the house, stranding it between the church building and a wide expanse of asphalt.

Congregations often run up against strong protests when they propose to expand their facilities or move to a new location. In Baltimore, tension between congregations and neighborhoods is so common that the Montgomery County Council recently established a special task force to mediate conflicts involving church construction.

One reason for the rising tension is an expanded sense of mission on the part of congregations. "They're not just churches anymore," says Tammara Tracy, Pike Township Administrator for the City of Indianapolis. Increasingly, congregations have family centers, counseling centers, schools, child-care centers, gymnasiums and ball fields. These facilities attract a steady flow of traffic throughout the week, multiplying the potential for conflict.

In 1997, Traders Point Christian Church in Pike Township filed a request for re-zoning of 50 acres of land near the church, on Lafayette Road. There, the church intended to build a new 3,000-seat sanctuary, a community center, and a sports complex with several ball fields. The project would create 120,000 square feet of building space and 1,200 parking spaces to accommodate thousands of church-goers each Sunday, with hundreds more using the community center and sports complex each weekday.

The Traders Point Civic Association organized strong opposition to the plan, noting that the church had been a good neighbor but "this is not the location for Traders Point Christian Church to fulfill its dreams of a regional mega-church." The Association argued that the proposal would harm the neighborhood and lower property values by increasing traffic and noise pollution. The city's Metropolitan Development Commission agreed. Traders Point is still looking for a place to build its new church.

Most congregations will never build a facility of the size that Traders Point proposed, but most that propose any construction project will encounter some level of opposition, according to Tracy. Congregations that have cultivated a relationship with their neighborhoods have a good chance of success. Those that have no ties and poor communication with their neighbors are likely to struggle.

"When a church hasn't built for 20 years, and hasn't been communicating, it comes as a shock to the neighborhood when the church wants to double the size of its plant," said Tommy Rosson, vice president of church marketing for Manlove Church Marketing. "The residents of a neighborhood want peace and quiet, and in this context churches are basically commercial enterprises."

There are many successful models for keeping the channels of communication open. Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, for example, hosts what it describes as the largest private festival in the city. Held the weekend after Labor Day, it attracts 12,000 people and features live music, Greek food and wine, a dance troupe, and a bazaar. To its immediate neighbors, Holy Trinity gives a special pass allowing them to leave and return without paying another entrance fee—a privilege not given to most people. The annual festival gives neighbors a chance to tour the church's building and learn more about Greek culture in a festive atmosphere. It also adds to the church's reputation as "a stabilizing force and a refuge open to the public," said Matt Albean, chairman of the festival's organizing committee.

Even if a congregation has worked hard to build up good will and has the support of most neighbors, the opposition can be energetic and vocal. The only way to counter it is with honesty and openness.

"I would be very transparent about the growth rate," Rosson said. "I would highlight the benefit of the congregation to the community, showing the need, why you're doing it, and how you're making the community better through your facilities. The neighborhood isn't asking you to change your theology. They're just asking that your presence not become too burdensome on Sunday mornings. Nothing will hurt your

growth more than having the people of your neighborhood not like you.”

Ted Slutz

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH TAMMARA TRACY

Tammara L. Tracy is one of nine township administrators for the City of Indianapolis. “We’re basically a liaison between the neighborhood, neighborhood organizations, individuals, and the government,” Tracy says. According to the city, the job involves “educating the public on zoning ordinance interpretation and land-use issues,” and representing public concerns to the appropriate government officials.

Township administrators are particularly useful to congregations planning to build in a new location. “We can help by talking with them early on,” Tracy said. “If they’re going through the research process, and they’ve narrowed it down to two or three locations, that would be an appropriate time to come in and talk about the pluses and minuses of their proposed site.” Here, she talks about congregation building programs from a city employee’s perspective.

Clergy Notes: How often do you see a zoning controversy that involves a congregation?

Tracy: Almost every church case that comes through, there’s some controversy. If they’re going to do a homeless ministry, neighbors say they don’t want homeless people in the neighborhood. If they’re doing day care, people say they don’t want the traffic and the noise. It all depends on how the church is taking its mission. But almost every one is contested.

CN: How often do congregations lose these zoning disputes?

Tracy: Churches are very hard to get denied. They’re already a step ahead, because of freedom of religion issues. So, a neighborhood would have to prove that the establishment of a church on that site is going to harm the neighborhood, and that harm must outweigh any arguments about restrictions on freedom of religion.

CN: Congregations are often cast as the anchors of community life. Why would a neighborhood resist the idea of having one nearby?

Tracy: Typically, neighborhoods don’t see it as a good thing to have a lot of churches around them. It’s like commercial development—you can have too much. It’s not always good to locate right next to other churches. If there are several churches in a small area, it’s pretty obvious that most of the people in those congregations don’t live in that neighborhood. So, what that neighborhood has to bear is traffic generated by other neighborhoods.

Disputed projects typically involve the expansion of a large church like Traders Point [see related article.] Another common source of conflict is the ‘starter’ church. A group buys a house and renovates it as a church, and doesn’t get approval for it. A neighbor will turn them in to the zoning committee, and they have to go through the zoning process.

Moving a church into an existing residence is probably the worst-case scenario for everyone. You have all the construction problems, and the building has to be retrofitted to comply with the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] requirements. It’s usually a contentious battle—a lose-lose situation. The neighborhood loses a residence, and potentially it inherits a lot of problems. The church goes in trying to help a neighborhood and be a stabilizing factor and a community asset, and ends up with a damaged reputation in the community.

CN: What advice would you give to congregations planning a construction project?

Tracy: I would hope they remember that they're inserting themselves into a community. Many times, they get wrapped up in what they need and lose sight of the fact that their presence is going to affect other people.

If I were putting together a checklist, I'd suggest that they find a reputable real estate agent, look at as many sites as possible, look at what's around the site, define their mission and how they want to execute it, talk to city staff, and then go talk to neighborhood organizations. They should get to know the area and what kind of issues they would confront there.

Are they going to have enough parking to accommodate their members? Will they have enough land for buffering? People don't want to see a parking lot go in next to their backyard. If they're going to have ball fields, will they be lighted? Will they sell concessions? Each of those elements has some negatives to it. Think ahead.

RESOURCES

Township administrators work for the Division of Neighborhood Services in the Department of Metropolitan Development. Their phone numbers are listed in the city-county section of the phone book's "blue pages." Information about the role of administrators, as well as contact information, can be found on the city's Web site at: www.indygov.org/dmd/townships/townadm.htm.

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Several publications have recently covered conflicts between congregations and neighborhoods. See, for example:

The Christian Century, 1 March 2000, "City Puts Limits on Church," available online at: <http://www.christiancentury.org/>

The Baltimore Sun, 15 January 1999, "Montgomery Panel Intervenes in Church Matters," available online at: <http://www.sunspot.net/>