



Choosing the Ludicrous

How two churches became one at the bar and bait shop

DON BOSLEY

First, we should probably discuss procedure. There are ways to do these things, and there are ways to do these things. *Folks, we think we finally have a pretty good pastoral candidate. And, well, he comes with a building and some people...*

Now, it's possible that no one from Westside Covenant Church ever actually spoke these words in the summer of 2010, but the tale has taken on minor mythical proportion now and there's no way to stop it. The important thing to note is that there are many approaches to initiating a church merger, and not all of them are exactly conventional.

In my hometown of West Sacramento, California, it recently pleased God to throw an unconventional wrench in the direction of two small congregations that never suspected what God was up to. Next thing you know, Westside and River of Life Church had come together to form the new Lighthouse Covenant Church, looking every bit like two longtime friends to whom the idea of marriage had suddenly, inexplicably, occurred.

It's one thing to befriend someone, and quite another to enter into a shared life covenant with them. In a Christian culture that commonly celebrates a church's "unique DNA," the idea of adjoining to someone else's unique DNA can set off a five-alarm panic. Would we have to change worship styles? Would we have to change buildings? Wait, can we still drink

coffee in the sanctuary?

If you want to find out what sacred cows you're protecting, just propose a church merger—and watch the stampede.

For both Westside and River of Life (ROL), the unexpected road to a church merger blasted straight through those types of fond, familiar identity markers. Bit by bit, as the altar slowly piled higher with "essentials" that really weren't, the emerging story of Lighthouse became a story of deference, preference, and trust. And from that process emerged not just a new church, but an inborn calling.

West Sacramento isn't the only city in America with an identity crisis, but it's one of the few where the crisis is self-inflicted.

With their burg cleanly separated from metropolitan Sacramento by a river and a county line, the city founders nevertheless decided to keep the name West Sacramento when they incorporated in 1987—forever sentencing the city to its big brother's shadow and its residents to a never-ending explanation that, no, we're actually not part of Sacramento, thank you.

I grew up in West Sac, then a lovable mutt of a town that had spent more than 100 years as the sin sidekick to the City of Sacraments. West Sac was best known for its brothel hotels and bars back then, and indeed as a kid I caught the school bus in front of a rundown

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bar and bait shop. It was the kind of place you'd want to think about planting a church.

And people did. The church-planting blitz hit full-force in the late 1990s, with several upstart congregations populating schools and pool halls. By the summer of 2010 I was the bi-vocational pastor of one of them—River of Life, which met in the same bar-and-bait-shop building I'd known as a youth. "Happy Hour: 10 a.m. Sundays," was one tagline we briefly considered.

River of Life was just finding its feet again after a season of transition. The beloved planting pastor had retired, leaving me—his deer-in-the-headlights associate—as the next one up. Moreover, ROL had just gone through a painful split with its parent church in Sacramento. Nondenominational, isolated in the rural south of the city, and now gun-shy about deep partnership with anybody, our tight group of seventy had circled the wagons to heal.

By day, I was the director of a Youth For Christ teen center in downtown West Sac, where another one of those church plants had taken up residence on Sundays. Westside Covenant Church had been planted in 2002 by First Covenant Sacramento, but by 2010 the fledgling congregation had collected some battle scars. The planting pastor had moved to a new calling, a season of fissures and tension had followed, and an eighteen-month pastoral search was dragging on with few candidates and increasingly fewer resources to attract them. The fifty remaining congregants were weary, worried, and wondering.

"Sometimes," a Westside leader confided, as we closed up the teen center one night, "it feels like we're just putting on a show for ourselves."

The tipping point arrived in disguise—literally. Westside staged a harvest outreach featuring pumpkins, bounce houses, and costumed volun-

teers all around the 12,000-square-foot teen center. When the event was mentioned to the people at ROL, dozens of volunteers showed up to help.

The two groups enjoyed it so much that they planned another joint outreach for Mother's Day the following spring, and then one for Father's Day.

"Our people get along so well," said Westside interim pastor Phil

onto something.

Did churches even do that? I knew nothing about church mergers. Church splits, I knew about. Churches absorbing other churches, I'd

heard about. But an equal-partnership marriage, sharing all resources and responsibilities and authority—that must be harder than it seemed, because I'd never met anyone who had done it.



Members of River of Life welcome members of Westside Covenant to their new church home at the former bar and bait shop.

Sommerville at one of the outreach planning meetings. "It's too bad the denominational stuff gets in the way, or we could just merge these churches!"

He laughed. I laughed. We shook hands and went home. And I didn't sleep.

Now, sometimes I'm slow to pray about things because I'm foolish. And sometimes I'm slow because, in my experience, prayer has a way of putting you on the hook. The minute you mention something out loud to God, you sort of have to take it seriously. And who could take this seriously? Merging churches! Phil had been kidding. What a yukster, that Phil. Or maybe he meant it. Maybe he was

At some point that night, prayer could no longer be avoided on the subject. My inquiry was sheepish, almost apologetic. God answered with a vivid reminder that suddenly dropped on me like an anvil. Just six months earlier, I had prayed in tears for God to heal our orphaned River of Life and bring us a trustworthy, righteous covering. And Westside—it hit me—was part of something called the Covenant.

My eyes grew wide, and so did Phil's when I called him several days later. It turned out he had been praying as well. Could a merged church actually work? It would require

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wounded River of Lifers to trust the Covenant. It would require Westsiders to leave the teen center, relocate to a former bar, and then approve their former landlord—me—as their long-sought pastor. It would require congregants on both sides to fruitfully blend every ministry, from music to children’s to missions. It was, in a word, ludicrous.

But the thought simply wouldn’t be quiet, in our hearts or our prayers. After a few weeks, Phil and I agreed to share the ludicrous idea with church leaders. They raised the same

she froze, closed her eyes, and slowly began nodding her head in humble concession. It was a sequence experienced by nearly everyone, on some issue or another, over a period of many weeks.

In the middle of it all, the Broderick Christian Center—the city’s only homeless shelter—burned down.

It happened on a Sunday morning, even as I was preaching out of Matthew 25—Jesus separating the sheep from the goats on the Day of the Lord, according to how each person has cared for “the least of these.” Miles away, the center was aflame and being reduced to ashes, injuring no one but destroying a longtime source of consistent daily food for the poor.

“This is it!” exclaimed one of ROL’s leaders, her voice breathless on the phone a few hours later. “This is our sheep-and-goats moment!”

All the churches in West Sacramento knew it. Within twenty-four hours, many of them had met together to formulate a plan. Within forty-eight hours, volunteers from nearly a dozen different churches were gathering daily at the teen center to make lunches and get them out to the homeless. The remarkable collaboration went on for six weeks, while the Broderick program regained its footing.

Among those passing the mayo on the sandwich line virtually every day were volunteers from River of Life, volunteers from Westside, and me, the teen center director who was being proposed as their merger pastor. Predictably, some deep conversations materialized over the cold cuts. Testimonies were exchanged at the bagging station. Suddenly, members of both congregations were commonly praying for one another about issues that had nothing to do with church mergers. Personal stuff. Deep hurts

and heart desires.

Day by day, the ludicrous was becoming the obvious.

After months of meetings, prayer vigils, shared sandwich making, joint worship services, and dialogue with Covenant officials, the churches conducted their separate votes on the proposed merger on October 24, 2010. There was just one “no” vote between them. That evening, with a combined worship band in full swing, River of Lifers welcomed Westside members to their new home with flying confetti and joyous embraces. The name “Lighthouse” arrived via corporate prayer a few weeks later.

Intoxicating as it was, the merging of the churches wasn’t God’s greatest accomplishment in that season, as any charter Lighthouse member will now tell you. In prying us loose of every identifier that wasn’t of God, God transformed hearts and attitudes in some permanent ways.

These days I watch amazed as once-fearful saints now help the nearby Nazarene church with a vacation Bible school, or the Southern Baptist church with a monthly meal for the needy, or the Presbyterian church with an outreach to hungry children. They sort of do it naturally, not as part of any Lighthouse church strategy. Someone did a count recently and discovered that Lighthouse was in direct partnership of some sort with thirteen other West Sacramento churches or ministries, at locations all over the city.

Three years ago, the merger helped strip us all of our need to own every ministry, dictate every ministry, espouse a particular church flavor, or wave a particular church brand. On the other side of that, we have found the freedom to live fully into our role as kingdom servants.

“You know, it’s funny,” said one of our ministry leaders recently. “Westside and River of Life both persevered through some real tough times. In the end, we actually discovered that God wasn’t asking us to hang on, but to dare to let go.” ■



Members of the two churches light a unity candle as they merge to become Lighthouse Covenant Church.

eyebrows, did the same quick calculations, went skeptically into the same prayers—and similarly couldn’t shake the idea. The process repeated itself with wider circles in both camps, with cautious intrigue growing by the day.

With every conversation, someone’s personal holy ground was unmistakably threatened. River of Life’s worship style was a little rowdier, Westside’s a little quieter. Who would have to compromise more? Westside was passionately vested in global missions, River of Life in local missions. Could the same level of commitment be kept to both? Westsiders would have to travel four miles further south to get to the former bar for worship. River of Life would have to let go of its cherished, prophetically anointed church name.

“Not the name!” gasped our prayer ministry leader, Becky, a woman much loved and respected for her sensitivity to the Spirit. Not two seconds later,