

And Now We Are in the New Building ...

A “First Person” Case Study by Bill Northrop, Executive Pastor, South Hills Bible Chapel, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Super Bowl XL

“Pitch 39 Boss Reverse Pass” was the play and as soon as Executive Pastor Bill Northrop saw the Pittsburgh Steelers run it in Super Bowl XL, he knew his life had just gotten much, much more complicated.

It was a trick play with the wide receiver executing a reverse, taking a handoff from the running back who had taken a pitchout from the quarterback. Then while appearing to continue the reverse, the wide receiver was to pull up quickly and heave a pass downfield to a waiting receiver. It was a razzle-dazzle play you drew up on the sandlot playing football with your buddies.

The wide receiver, Antwaan Randle-El, executed the play perfectly and threw a 43-yard bomb to a wide-open Hines Ward. Randle-El became an instant local hero. It was the turning point of the game and it was the first time a wide receiver had thrown a touchdown pass in a Super Bowl.

The problem was, Randle-El, a strong believer, was due to speak at the South Hills Bible Chapel the following Sunday. He had been booked several months ago and the event had been widely publicized in the community. Services held in the Family Life Center were already filled to capacity each Sunday and the church’s new facility would not be open for three months. It was simply impossible to handle the surge in attendance that one play had wrought.

It was February 2006 and thus began a year of challenges, changes and adaptations for South Hills Bible Chapel that would continue all year long.

Humble Beginnings

South Hills Bible Chapel is an independent, non-denominational church located in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, an affluent group of suburbs a short distance south of downtown. The church began in 1964 as a home church with deep roots in the Plymouth Brethren movement.

From the beginning, the church had to deal with the challenges of growth. They quickly outgrew their home location and soon began a series of moves to ever-larger rented

facilities. By the mid-1970s they had purchased a seven-acre property and that remained their home for the next twenty years. They added to it and expanded it over the years as they continued to enjoy modest growth.

The critical event that changed their future occurred in 1985 when they hired their first pastor. Up to then, male lay leaders handled all aspects of operating the church. However, the continued growth was beginning to stretch what they could handle as an all-volunteer organization.

As soon as John Munro accepted the call as their first pastor, the growth accelerated. Munro was a Scotsman who spoke with an engaging lilt. While in his 30s, he had left a law practice in Scotland to attend Dallas Theological Seminary.

Four years later in 1989 he brought on Dr. Ronald Moore, as an assistant pastor. The two had been friends while in seminary and Moore moved his family from Texas to join Munro. When Munro left the church in 1993, the elders called Moore to be their senior pastor.

By the time Moore became senior pastor, the church had already vacated its property for its Sunday morning services and had begun meeting in a high school auditorium. They had also begun an active search for a larger piece of property on which they could build a permanent, and much larger, facility.

In late 1995, they moved into their new facility situated on a 19-acre parcel just a few miles from their previous location. The building included a 750-seat Family Life Center which would serve as their worship center, cafeteria, gymnasium and multi-purpose room for the next ten years. Later stages would include more classrooms, a commercial kitchen and a dedicated Youth Activity Center.

In 2004, they broke ground on their largest and most significant expansion. They would build a 1,400-seat worship center adding 15 more classrooms, several hundred more parking spaces, a recording studio, and a large space dedicated for the children's ministry. In all, the expansion would add 53,000 square feet to their campus, effectively doubling their size to just over 100,000 square feet. The \$9 million expansion would also add substantially to their debt load. Move-in would occur during the spring of 2006.

Moving In and Moving Up

This last expansion was part of a multi-stage building strategy conceived in the early 1990s when the church moved its Sunday services to the high school. After four and a half long years at the school, the staff and congregation were excited to move into a permanent facility.

No sooner had they moved in than attendance growth pushed them to add a second service only four months later. The growth was even more remarkable since the Pittsburgh region was not growing and was actually experiencing a modest decline.

Though firm attendance figures were hard to come by, regional church attendance appeared to be declining even more precipitously. The Catholic diocese went through a painful church-closing program shuttering the doors of many of its smaller parishes; many mainline Protestant denominations reported of struggling congregations.

Yet the growth machine continued to chug along at the church and by 1999 the church needed to add additional classrooms and a youth activity center for its burgeoning growth in children's attendance. It also added a commercial kitchen to be able to cater large church-wide gatherings.

The Big Dig

By 2005, what had been just an artist's rendering was slowly, so slowly, taking shape. The congregation committed \$3.8 million for the building. A local bank provided the balance of the funds. Retiring the bank debt would come from future capital campaigns.

The new building would really be an addition to the existing building with the two buildings tied together. Hired for the project was a prominent regional contractor who was also a member.

The building process was a huge undertaking. Built on soil which was poorly compacted and unable to withstand the new building's weight, it was a long effort to prepare the soil for building. Consequently, there was a long period of prep work, with a lot of construction vehicles on and off the property daily, but little visible progress.

In stepwise fashion, excavating was done, the soil was compacted, pilings were sunk, a foundation was poured and the superstructure began to take shape. The process moved painfully slow.

Nevertheless, in time, major portions of the building were completed. Once under roof, multiple contractors converged on the project and the inner portions of the building moved forward more quickly.

Early on in the project, the congregation wistfully thought they would be holding 2005 Christmas Eve services in the new worship center. A delay in pouring the foundation due to the soil put that to rest. The new focus was Easter 2006 which occurred in mid-April. Delays on finishing critical portions made that dream unreachable. By March 2006, the staff prepared for one more Easter in the Family Life Center.

By this time, Sunday morning attendance had surged past the Family Life Center's capacity. In January 2006 a Saturday evening service was added. Even with that relief, it left those attending on Sunday morning with a standing-room-only situation; many people were standing along the back wall of the Family Life Center, unable to find even a single empty seat.

That Easter service was an unusually crowded affair. Closed-circuit connections were created in overflow rooms to accommodate the usual Easter surge. The congregation took the situation in stride. The building was nearly complete. Move-in was May 6. The pressure was growing to get into the new building and move forward with the next, newest and biggest chapter of the church's history.

New Building, New Opportunities

The "addition" would be larger than the original building, more than doubling the square footage available for ministry. The long construction phase provided the staff and congregation ample time to prepare for the transition from a gymnasium to a tricked-out worship center.

Weekly staff meetings became challenge meetings as the staff brainstormed over new opportunities. They also began preparing mentally for larger ministries and a larger scale to everything they would do. It was a long process but the staff responded well and as move-in day neared, readied itself to hit the ground running.

The move-in began an unprecedented whirlwind of staff activity as plans-on-paper transitioned to ministry-in-motion. Quickly major changes occurred and new ministries swirled into life.

These included opening a Starbucks-style café and moving the children's ministry location. Scheduled for the fall were three concerts featuring nationally-recognized artists. A fourth concert would eventually be added. Billy Graham's daughter, Ruth, came and headlined a women's conference in October. A bookstore was opened. The teen ministry renovated and moved into the now-vacant Family Life Center, changing meetings nights in the process. The Sunday morning program for Junior and Senior high was changed. A large group of lay leaders were identified and began an ongoing training program.

Renovations of offices in the original building took place and five of the eight pastors changed offices as did most of the administrative staff. The office manager became the Communications Director and another staff member filled her old position. During the summer, the High School pastor preached for the first time filling in for Senior Pastor Ron Moore. In the fall, the High School Pastor began taking seminary classes by extension. The Junior High pastor, a gifted musician, began leading worship on a fill-in basis. In the fall, he recorded his first CD and his band opened for one of the concerts. The church hired a Men's Ministry director to help grow a quickly expanding men's program. Earlier in the year they hired a woman to direct the women's ministry. They hired a manager to oversee the bookstore's operations.

The elders continued a reworking of the church's governance model to reflect the new reality of what the church had become. The by-laws were re-written. One elder resigned and another took a sabbatical to concentrate on the church's 2007 capital campaign. Three men began the interview and application process to become future elders.

Growing Pains

As excited as the staff was to be moving on what had been a long run-up, the congregation was not as ready for the changes they encountered. Complaints arose about the café and later the bookstore over the appropriateness of mixing secular and sacred practices on a Sunday morning. Some thought the long-anticipated Worship Center wasn't "churchy" enough, feeling it more resembled an auditorium than a house of worship. Others wrote letters about the lack of a cross in the Worship Center. Those complaining were clearly a minority but dissatisfaction from a vocal minority could not be ignored.

Students and parents revolted over changes in the Junior High and Senior High programs, particularly for moving off its traditional Wednesday night to Saturday. The change was necessary due to a terrible overcrowding situation on Wednesday. They did not like the changes to the Sunday morning programs either.

Some questioned the wisdom of paying the thrice-divorced daughter of Billy Graham to speak to the women of the church. While the last two concerts were sellouts, raised were concerns over the first two poorly attended concerts which lost money.

Added design changes brought the building in over budget. This left portions of the building unfinished. While all of the building space was usable, not all the rooms and hallways had carpets or sound equipment. One large unfinished portion had just bare concrete floors, cinderblock walls and exposed pipes and wires. Almost immediately, certain rooms in the building began to sink due to the much worried-over bad soil. The rooms were safe to use, but the sinking floor was visually disconcerting and not what people expected of a brand new building. Portions of the building below grade leaked badly during heavy rains.

And Still They Came ...

On Monday after the Super Bowl, quarterback Ben Roethlisberger appeared on the David Letterman show. On Tuesday, Pittsburgh hosted a parade and 250,000 people showed up choking downtown streets. Schools emptied out and adults skipped work. People stood 30 deep to catch just a glimpse of Steeler players passing by. It was a town gone wild and Randle-El was due in church in a few days, once on Saturday night and twice on Sunday morning.

That week the staff converted larger rooms in the building as overflow rooms and pulled cables for closed-circuit connections. Extra ushers and volunteers were scheduled. Police were hired for crowd control. Newspapers and TV stations arrived and set up shop. On Saturday night, the Family Life Center filled 30 minutes before the service began and people were shuttled to overflow rooms. By the end of the weekend, 2,800 people had come through the doors, double the church's normal weekly attendance.

It was the beginning of a year of extraordinary growth. All year long the Lord continued to send new people through the door. Children's ministry attendance would grow 40%. The Men's Ministry took off. Weekend service attendance would grow by 20%. It was, by a large margin, the biggest year of growth in the church's history.

During the 2006 Christmas Eve services, more than 3,100 people showed up, a number more than 10% greater than the Randle-El service. It was crowded but manageable. Now snugly ensconced in the new Worship Center, services went off without a hitch.

In less than a year, the church had adapted and could shrug off 3,000 attendees that only 10 months earlier had set it off in a tizzy. It had been a long, hard year...exhilarating in many ways, exhausting in others. Yet the Lord had been good and had continued to bring new faces and new families through the door. The staff had survived the year. The stage was now set for the future.