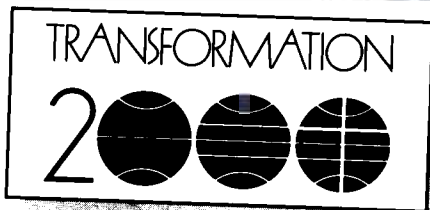


Transforming Testimonies



Congregational Challenges Cause Congregational Transformation

Then the hand of God blessed the congregation with an answer to prayers. For several months there had been no activity or interest in the sale of the old church property. In fact the congregation was days away from removing the property from the market and exploring other options, when a Baptist minister approached the congregation through our presiding elder and asked if the congregation might be interested in a "church swap."

The Union School Road Baptist Church, the year before, had experienced a congregational split that left the small, loyal flock of less than ten

Even in the best of worlds, transformation of a whole congregation might be a Herculean project, because the process normally incurs risk associated with the many personalities that are part of any congregation. These individual personalities often work to unite or divide a congregation during periods of great stress that can be part of the transformation process. The Decatur, Illinois, RLDS congregation in recent years had worked through several proposed worship style changes; these changes had fractured the unity of the congregation.

Just when everyone was beginning to breathe a sigh of relief and congregational life was beginning to approach normalcy, a developer contacted the group and asked if they would be interested in a sale of the church property to a new pharmacy coming into the area. After several weeks of discussion, the decision was made to sell the church and to build a new worship and educational building on recently secured land less than a mile from the present church building.

After long hours of serious congregational discussions over what the building should look like, what would be a functional floor plan, and finally, how much would it all cost, the small congregation realized they were faced with several serious challenges if they were to move. The congregation had not grown significantly in recent years except when a "new" family moved into town. Secondly, most of the church's active membership was retired and on fixed incomes. Not the best news for a congregation looking at a potential two-hundred-thousand-dollar debt plus increased utility costs and no plan to pay for any of it.

Finally reality set in and the congregation realized that all possibilities seemed moot, for it appeared that the congregation was doomed to stay in a dated, difficult situation. The elderly would be compelled to climb steep stairs to the sanctuary; the children would be forbidden from enjoying outdoor activities because of busy streets only inches away from their play area; and the young married couples would continue to stay home and away from church activities.

families with a large building, impossible utility bills, and a pastor's salary. The economic pressure was just too much. The RLDS church building offered this struggling congregation release from those pressures and an opportunity to grow in a neighborhood more receptive to Baptist theology.

For the RLDS congregation of Saints, the former Baptist church offered a larger sanctuary, luxurious classrooms, and a gym, all situated on three acres of comfortable, quiet Illinois prairie in the small town of Harristown, just west of Decatur.

The swap was made. Of course, there were many with concerns and many who were troubled with the wisdom of the move. Not all those doubts were easily erased, but the power of God's Spirit works miracles in every situation when allowed to do so.

In his book *Conversations with God, An Uncommon Dialogue*, Neale Donald Walsh discusses the question that perplexes many of us. He questions whether God "really" answers every prayerful request made by his children. Neale believes that God answers "yes" to every request. That is what he promised, but it is our strength of faith or lack of faith that causes the answer to become a "no." The author believes that God wants us to have what we request, but we



A facility swap with a Baptist church resulted in a larger church home for the Decatur, Illinois, congregation, allowing increased ministries to youth and community.

must act with a positive force in order to receive.

I am reminded of a humorous story that illustrates the point clearly. A very successful executive had recently lost everything. His business had failed; the banks had refused to extend his line of credit. So in desperation, he turned to God and asked for help. "If I could only win the lottery," he prayed, "everything would be OK. My business could be reestablished, and I could again enjoy financial stability." Week after week the executive prayed, and week after week there were no results. Finally God spoke to the man and said, "I need some help if I'm going to answer your prayer. You must at least buy a lottery ticket."

I don't suggest everyone who is praying for a financial bonanza should be playing his or her state's lottery, but the premise is clear. Prayers are answered because people believe they will be and as a consequence begin to adjust their lives to that reality. Prayer sets the stage for things to happen, but each of us must act before God can help.

For the Decatur congregation reality became a new church in June 1999 in the small Illinois community of Harristown. In Doctrine and Covenants 158:11a-b, God has promised all of us that when we move out in faith, he will accompany us. The Decatur Saints cashed in on this promise when they chose to relocate to this new building with all its problems and possibilities. The building did not cause a spiritual change, but it was the catalyst for change and more importantly for spiritual regeneration within the church's membership. It is true that anything could have spawned this remarkable change, but for this congregation the challenges of a move caused the walls of security to fall and for the Spirit to begin working in the lives of the congregation.

These changes brought with it a willingness to reach out in creative ways. One of the first projects the congregation undertook was a carnival for church and neighborhood children. With a full day of activities planned by the Christian education and youth ministers, the event was an outstanding success. Nearly fifty young people romped, played games,



New life has come to the Decatur, Illinois, congregation in their new facility.

and learned about Jesus for a whole afternoon. Although the adults "survived," everyone, adults and children alike, were willing to sign up for the next year and are eagerly looking forward to an even bigger event this September.

This project and a food booth at a local Fourth of July celebration has given the congregation an opportunity to witness their joy and hope for the future to this new neighborhood community. Perhaps through all these activities the one real witness of peace and goodwill comes from new neighbors. A young family is building a house in the lot adjoining the church. Offering them a key so they could use the facilities and have a place to get a drink has opened witnessing opportunities that we never believed could become available so quickly. Neighbors who had viewed us as a cult have now opened their minds and now see us as Christians. Transformation can take place even among the neighbors of Saints, when we are growing and changing into a Christ-centered community.

So what else has happened in the transformation process? Let us just say that from my perspective a congregational blessing might not have been able to produce as dramatic a change as we have witnessed during the past year. I firmly believe that if congregations working at transformation are afraid of pain, anger, and struggle, they will never experience

change. I also believe that peace does not mean the absence of disagreements, which are sometimes bitterly heartfelt, but it does mean a willingness to hear the concerns of those less inclined to change and to address those needs with compassion and with concessions in other areas whenever possible.

It is also my firm belief that joy does not mean the absence of tears. When church members have worshiped a lifetime in one building, they think they will find little joy in moving from their home of worship, but joy means having those pains and anxieties addressed and heard as real and valid by the entire body of the church. Finally, from my perspective, hope does not always mean a faithful journey to a storybook ending; however, hope does mean living each day's joy and tragedies, and then leaving them all behind for God's promise of a better tomorrow.

The Central Illinois evangelists have worked hard over the past several months to prepare Decatur's Saints for a congregational blessing, but perhaps part of that anticipated blessing came early. Perhaps the early part of this blessing has come literally to the congregation in a more concrete way.

Almost from the time the doors opened at the Union School Road address, and the former Baptist church became known as the RLDS church, the transformation process has been

pushed into high gear. Here's what has happened:

- There have been nine baptisms in one year from a congregation that generally had one or two. Of these nine, four have been adults. We have had three additional baptisms in the first month of our second year in the new church.
- Weekly attendance of the young married couples has improved. Is it where we want it? Of course not, but it is better than our previous track record.
- Approximately ten to fifteen friends of the church attend every Sunday. These are people we believe have been led by the hand of God. I compare them to the "wise men" bearing talents and gifts and being led, as it were, by the star (Spirit) that has shone over the manger (church). Their "gifts and talents" have allowed us to build a pavilion for less than half the cost of retail construction. Perhaps, most importantly, these people who came as strangers have brought a spirit and a love that has infused the entire congregation with a new desire to tell the story of a living, dedicated Christ to the entire Decatur/Harristown area.
- The Nauvoo historical site was given the cornerstone from the old Decatur worship center. This stone was an original stone from the Nauvoo Temple foundation.

Has the Decatur, Illinois, RLDS Church received an answer to a prayer for transformation? I think we can safely say that God has truly provided us with ample opportunity to begin the transforming process, not only for ourselves as members of the congregation, but also for the souls who have reached out to us and asked to be included.

Transforming hearts and minds is never an easy task and can never be totally completed. That's why for this congregation a solid, definable goal became the "pillar of fire" that led and continues to lead this congregation toward spiritual transformation. When Jesus carried the cross to Calvary, there were many painful experiences along the way. Through each he suffered. The words and doubts of the people, who had only hours before cheered his entry into Jerusalem, must have truly hurt more than the pain of a thousand nails that might have been driven into his hands, but Jesus realized what was possible because of his suffering. For the Decatur church there has been hurt as well as personal suffering but there has also been joy and hope. Through all of these emotions there has been a total triumph of the Spirit, which leaves us a stronger and more complete congregation of disciples ready to move to the next stage in the personal transformation we have each been commissioned to achieve.



The former congregational facility

For most in Decatur the transforming process has been a rocky faith journey. Most of the concerns have now been resolved. However, traveling distance, utility costs, night security fears, and congregational priorities are still issues that must be addressed. But as a congregation, we realize that we must be willing to hear the needs of our brothers and sisters and address these issues fairly. That is transformation on a congregational level and an issue this group and every other congregation must be willing to face. To transform individually and not on a congregational level does no one any good. Each transforming process must support the other if either is to be successful.

This process will bring joy, hope, love, and peace into our lives in a way we have not experienced previously. For Decatur the transformation came in the form of a new building that forced people to begin to think about who they were and what they needed. Earlier I said that Neale Walsh believes that God answers all prayers, but when he does, he also places the ball in our court and allows our agency to decide what we will do with those answers. For most people transformation comes with a cause. For Joan of Arc it was the freedom of France, for Martin Luther King it was his "dream that one day..." and for Decatur's RLDS congregation, it was a "new" church building.

What will begin the congregational transformation for you? What will God put in your path and that of your congregation that will be a challenge or an opportunity for transformation? Most importantly, how will you be transformed as a result?

—Clinton Clarke reporting



The congregation hosts an active vacation church school each summer.