

## **HOW NOT TO CARRY OUT A CHURCH BUILDING PROJECT**

It could be argued that what has happened in Lethbridge provides a textbook study of how not to carry out a church building project. Among the many aspects that it illustrates, I offer the following:

1. Check if there are any other alternatives. Bishop Henry's reason for closing our three church and building a new one was that there was a shortage of priests. The diocese already had over 50% of its priests from abroad. What difference would it make to get a few more? Closing all three existing churches and building a new church would not reduce the work. For one thing we have about 120 funerals a year which takes up an inordinate amount of the time of our two priests. If we had only one church, the number of funerals would still be the same. We would still need two priests to conduct funeral services and look after the spiritual needs of our diverse parish.
2. Will the parish community be able to raise the funds needed for building a new church in the time frame? The decision to build a new church was made in 2007. Fund raising began in September 2008. The goal was to raise \$15 million leaving only \$5 million to be obtained on a mortgage. The new church was scheduled to open in 2012. This was not at all realistic. By 2012, the sum raised was barely \$3 million, They couldn't very well blame SOCA for this as they kept insisting that SOCA was only a small group of dissidents. In any case , it appeared that Pastor Tim Boyle would not be able to build the new church. So he was replaced by Fr. Kevin Tumback. Six years have passed by since Fr. Tumback took over. The total donated by parishioners according to the 2017 parish financial statement has grown to \$4,652,318.00, still a far cry from the \$15 million target. Yet the Congregation for the Clergy stated in their rejection of our appeal, "the process of fundraising has already begun to a significant degree and enjoys broad support." \$4.6 million after 9 years of fundraising does not justify the Congregation's commendation nor does it augur well for the parish being able to meet the financial commitments required to build, maintain and pay for the new church. Members of the committee remain optimistic, one of them assuring people that, "once the spade hits the ground, the money will come pouring in." This does not constitute sound financial planning in our opinion. We dread the possibility that we could lose our present three viable churches only to find the parish in dire financial straits in the years to come unable to meet the mortgage payments on the new church.
3. Avoid a paternalistic attitude. It is tempting for spiritual leaders to behave as if they have some divinely bestowed powers that enable them to act unilaterally when a collegial approach would bear better fruit. ("Children, I am your father and I know what is best for you...")
4. Avoid Clericalism. (see the Holy Father's advice to Chilean clergy on January 16, 2018: <https://zenit.org/articles/chile-pope-reminds-bishops-they-are-part-of-gods-people/> ) Just because a bishop or a priest has surrounded himself with a group of lay persons who support him in all that he says or does, it does not necessarily follow that they represent the wishes and ideas of all parishioners. The righteous are not always right.

5. Respect the ideas and opinions of your parishioners no matter how humble they are. As Pope Francis reminded the clerics in Peru, “The laypersons are not our peons or our employees. They don’t have to parrot back whatever we say.”
6. In temporal matters, laypersons may have expertise that should be considered and valued, not disregarded just because they do not belong to the anointed few.
7. Do not dismiss the views of those that do not support you and add injury to insult by labeling them with pejorative terms like “a few dissidents” – particularly when petitions reveal that the “dissidents” are hundreds in number and may in fact be the majority.
8. Do not start a project by announcing that three thriving, well-loved and viable churches will be disposed of for a new church that is not necessarily what the people want. If a new church is deemed necessary, obtain support for it from the people and start a building fund. When the sum grows large enough to make a new church feasible, arrive at a consensus as to what to do with the existing churches. It is clear that our parish cannot afford four churches so the community will have to make some hard decisions.
9. It appears that the decision to build a new church was made first and reasons why it was needed invented later. We were told that we needed a new Church/Catholic Complex because:
  - a. the population of Lethbridge would grow apace and the number of Catholics would grow proportionately beyond the capacity of the three churches. Ten years after the prediction, we find that in spite of the largest church, St. Patrick’s (capacity 750) being closed, the two smaller churches are coping quite well except for the 11:00 a.m. Mass at St. Basil’s which is very crowded. However, steps are being taken to add another Mass that should ease the problem. Of course, the problem would not have occurred in the first place if St. Patrick’s had not been closed.
  - b. of the parking problem in our parishes. The parking problem didn’t exist before the Bishop closed the new church. The influx of 1000+ parishioners displaced by the closure of St. Patrick’s at the two smaller churches has certainly caused a parking problem for parishioners who previously had never had to park more than a block (at the most) from any of the churches.
  - c. we don’t have enough meeting rooms. In actual fact our present facilities have twice the number of meeting rooms the proposed complex will have.
  - d. we need an industrial-level kitchen. Whether or not we needed one, the kitchen has now been downgraded because, we are told, a commercial-level kitchen would need a resident qualified chef. This is not true as there are other institutions that have a commercial-level kitchen but don’t have a resident qualified chef. The more likely reason is that costs are being cut to lower the total cost of the project as fundraising is not going as well as was expected.
  - e. we have to provide facilities for our youth, The reality is that the youth will not come to a Catholic complex on the outskirts of the city when the same facilities exist in the schools and more central locations. The only facility in the plans for the new church specifically for youth is a meeting room. That is not much of an incentive.
  - f. we need a columbarium. Now that the push to convert the basement of St. Patrick’s to a columbarium has failed, a columbarium is included in the plans for the new church but it is obviously not considered an urgent necessity as it is one of the projects deferred indefinitely. It certainly seems likely that when the plan to “save” St. Patrick’s Church was offered by Bishop Henry in 2011, his insistence that the basement would be converted to a columbarium was to make sure that St. Patrick’s would never be used as a parish Church

again. The basement was the community centre for the parishioners; without it, there would be no gathering space for parishioners.

- g.** none of the three churches has a baptismal font with flowing water at the entrance or near the altar. While this is true, many churches have found creative ways of solving the problem.
- h.** the churches are old and costly to maintain. St. Patrick's, the oldest, is 105 years old and the other two about 60 years old. Compared to some of the venerable churches in Christendom, our churches are young and with proper maintenance will last for years to come. Sadly, after Bishop Henry made up his mind in 1998 to sell the three churches and build a new one, he issued instructions that only urgent repairs and maintenance of the three churches would be approved. Interestingly enough, one of the newer churches in the diocese, 15 year-old St. Albert the Great has already cost over \$1 million in repairs – more than all three churches in Lethbridge combined have cost in repairs and maintenance from the time they were built till the present day!

I think it is true to say that however well-intentioned Bishop Henry was when he decided to build a new church, the process that he initiated was not open and transparent. The process that ensued was characterized by manipulation and clericalism that led to division and alienation. “The status quo is unacceptable,” said Bishop Henry and with those five words he dismissed any form of dialogue. Either you followed in his footsteps or else you were cast out in the wilderness. I hope and pray that no spiritual leader will ever again write a letter instructing his flock that they accept his plan or else find another church...

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