

MERGING TWO CHURCHES

A CASE STUDY WITH 20 QUESTIONS

BY

**REV. DR. RICHARD E. VISSER, DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
AND**

REV. CAROL E. VISSER, MA

**25 THORNTON WAY, APT. 204, BRUNSWICK, MAINE 04011
207-798-4670**

cvisser15370@yahoo.com

OCTOBER 15, 2007

MERGING TWO CHURCHES: A CASE STUDY WITH 20 QUESTIONS

	<u>PAGE</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
QUESTIONS BEFORE CONSIDERING MERGER	
1. How can you organize to study the situation?	2
2. What are your area's population and economic trends?	3
3. What challenges face your church?	3
4. What is the growth potential of your church?	4
5. What are the options for your church?	5
6. What do you feel is God's will?	6
7. How can you judge the mood of the people?	7
QUESTIONS WHEN CONTEMPLATING A MERGER	
8. How can you select a church with whom to begin merger discussions?	8
9. What core values would you accent when considering merger with another church?	9
10. How may you proceed with a preferred church to discuss merger possibilities?	9
11. What arrangements should be clarified before beginning a merger trial?	10
12. What are ways to publicize your process?	11
13. How do you evaluate the merger trial?	11
QUESTIONS WHEN CULMINATING A MERGER	
14. If the merger trial seems successful, what is the next step?	12
15. What is the significance of declaring intent to merge?	13
16. How do you select a name for the possible newly merged church?	13
17. How do you address theological, denominational, pastoral leadership, and organizational matters?	13
18. How do you deal with building and financial matters?	15
19. How can you officially consummate the merger?	16
20. What can be done to enhance the long-range success of the merger?	17
CONCLUSION	18

APPENDICES

	<u>PAGE</u>
A. First Baptist Church: Goals and Objectives 2003 through 2005	20
B. Eleven Challenges Facing First Baptist Church	23
C. Changing Times	24
D. First Baptist Church: Ten Building Options	25
E. Some Thoughts	26
F. Questions to Other Churches Regarding Possible Merger	27
G. Poll: With Which Church Would It Be Best to Consider a Merger?	28
H. Straw Poll on Several Choices	29
I. First Baptist Church: Five Options for Future	30
J. Desirable Church Building Characteristics	37
K. Core Values Proposed by First Baptist Church for Merged Church	38
L. Core Values Proposed by Bethlehem Covenant for Merged Church	39
M. Suggestions for Merger Arrangements	40
N. Merger Trial Arrangements	41
O. Usual Bethlehem Covenant Scheduled Events	42
P. Merger Possibility Timetable	43
Q. Church Name Survey	45
R. Proposed Core Values for the Merged Church	46
S. Reflections of Ongoing Pastor	48

MERGING TWO CHURCHES – A CASE STUDY WITH 20 QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Can you go back home again? On May 1, 2003, my wife, Carol, and I began our second ministry at the First Baptist Church, Warren, Pennsylvania. We were called as intentional co-interim pastors for a three-year period. I had previously served as senior pastor of the church for seven years, 1973 through 1979.

Much had happened since we last made Warren our home 24 years before. The church and community had declined. We were called to help the church decide what to do. Could it return to better times?

Carol and I are American Baptist ministers. I was ordained in Massachusetts in 1962 and Carol in Pennsylvania in 1999. We served churches in Maine, New Hampshire, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania over the years. After 20 years in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, we thought we were retiring, but God apparently had other plans!

When we arrived in Warren, we did not know what to do. Church members were discouraged. Time was short, as were finances and the number of workers. Although we had been away for 24 years, we knew just about everyone in the church. This obviously showed a lack of church growth. Decline was evident. How should we and the church proceed?

Many churches today are in decline. Church growth experts tell us that probably no more than 15% of churches are growing. If you are in the other 85%, you may identify with our situation.

This article is a case study of what happened. We had no idea at the beginning that our church would merge with another. We were just trying to revive First Baptist, Warren. We did not know where this effort would lead.

When we came to the point of exploring the merger option, we found that very little is written on this subject. Much of what is available is negative. For example, some analysts say that after two churches merge, ensuing worship attendance is no greater than the larger of the merging churches. As you will see, our merger was much more successful.

Material is organized into 20 practical questions. These questions were asked, consciously or unconsciously, as we went along. Perhaps you are asking these same questions. If so, we hope that our answers “in real church life” are helpful.

We are most grateful for the openness and support given by many: Rev. Donald Girdwood, Northwest Area Minister for the American Baptist Churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware; denominational staff from the Great Lakes Conference of the Evangelical

Covenant Church; Rev. Michael Poindexter, pastor, and lay leaders and members of the former Bethlehem Covenant Church, Warren, Pennsylvania; lay leaders and members of the former First Baptist Church, Warren, Pennsylvania; Realtor Allen Sowers; and pastors and others in the Warren community who helped with prayer, action, and general support.

QUESTIONS BEFORE CONSIDERING A MERGER

1. **How can you organize to study the situation?**

Immediately a Long-Range Planning Committee was appointed representing the various areas of church life and key families of the church. We arrived on May 1 and the Planning Committee's first meeting was on June 9!

After continuing education, which included church attendance records, twenty church growth principles, and an article, "How Big Do You Want Your Church To Be?," the 12-person committee divided into 4 study teams: Community Needs, Internal Needs, Building Feasibility, and Church Organization.

Team job descriptions were as follows:

- (1) Community Needs – Study the needs of the Warren community and recommend which ones our church could help meet.
- (2) Internal Needs – Make recommendations to enlarge the quality and number of programs to benefit church members.
- (3) Building Feasibility – Evaluate our building needs, identify who might be interested in the possibility of purchasing, leasing, and/or sharing; and evaluate the ministry and financial cost ramifications of the available choices.
- (4) Church Organization – Study our church's constitution/bylaws and suggest needed revisions.

The Long-Range Planning Committee and teams met frequently and with such diligence that they were able to present a long range plan of 5 goals and 38 objectives for 2003 through 2005 (See Appendix A) at a special church business meeting on September 17, 2003. This plan was approved, along with a revised constitution/bylaws to be instituted for a one-year trial in 2004.

Why did this happen so quickly? Looking at it from a vantage point several years later, the speed with which this process took place seems unbelievable. The people were obviously ready to try to make something positive happen, Carol and I had their trust from our previous positive pastorate with them, and I had gifts and experience in administration, long range planning and constitution writing.

The approval of the goals and objectives got the ball rolling. Eventually, 31

objectives out of 38 scheduled by October 2005 were able to be attained or disqualified by that date.

The Long-Range Planning Committee continued meeting to address the next questions asked in this section. On October 22, 2003, the church met to elect officers and approve the budget for 2004.

I think the lesson is that it is important to be organized and attempt to move ahead in a positive way.

2. **What are your area's population and economic trends?**

In the Warren Times Observer daily newspaper on April 6, 2004, it was reported that the Warren County public school student enrollment had dropped from 12,000 in the 1970's to 6,078 in 2004. One week later, on April 13, 2004, the newspaper noted that the population in the County had declined from 47,682 in 1970 to 43,863 by 2000. (In the March 17, 2006, edition the newspaper reported the population further declined to 42,470 in 2005.) Other reports indicated that the manufacturing base was eroding. Several industries closed their doors or cut back in the number of people employed.

Warren County's location is away from major cities and interstate highways. The city of Warren's population was only about 11,000, surrounded by small townships. It is 60 miles from Erie, Pennsylvania, 90 miles from Buffalo, New York, and 150 miles from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. All indicators forecast further economic and population decline, so the church could not expect any population growth to help fuel church growth.

3. **What challenges face your church?**

We have already discovered that the church was facing the challenges of a declining population and economic base in the community. In a presentation to the area Oil Creek Baptist Association in the fall of 2004, I reported that when we returned to Warren after 24 years we found "4 Bad B's:"

- (1) BATTLES – Members had done battle with pastors and among themselves. Persons left the church to join 13 other churches in the community. The last pastor was asked to leave. Average attendance since 1979 had declined by 95 each in Sunday School and morning worship, down to 28 and 66 respectively.
- (2) BUILDING – Needed repairs and improvements to the building had accumulated to an estimated cost of \$200,000, and the winter gas bills averaged \$1,300 per month. The facility was only partially handicapped accessible. Sixty-six older persons worshipping in a sanctuary with a

capacity for 300 tended to be discouraging. Furthermore, the church parking lot off a busy downtown street had spaces for 32 cars. Using the suggested figure of 2.2 persons per vehicle, this meant that there was room for only 70 persons to find parking off-street.

- (3) BUDGET – Financial giving in 2002 was the same as it was in 1979. In order to meet the deficit budget in 2003, \$36,000 was taken out of reserves. Giving had increased 17% so far during 2004, but the projected deficit was still \$24,000. At the end of 2003 we only had a total of \$168,000 left in all of our funds.
- (4) BURNOUT – It was hard to find people to fill boards and teach Sunday School. No one wanted to be part of a new Pastoral Search Committee.

Perhaps your church faces challenges like these. It is good to write out the challenges for discussion. We put together a list of “Eleven Challenges Facing First Baptist Church, Warren” (See Appendix B), and discussed them at the Long Range Planning Committee, board, and church business meetings. Another document for discussion was “Changing Times” (See Appendix C). We found it to be very important to involve as many people as possible in the discussion and decision process.

4. What is the growth potential of your church?

When we presented to various groups the eleven challenges facing our church, no one disputed the fact that the challenges were real. We were the only American Baptist church in Warren County. Within a radius of 3 miles were 29 other churches: Assembly of God, 3 Baptist, Christian Missionary Alliance, 2 Church of God, Church of the Nazarene, Episcopal, Evangelical Covenant, Free Methodist, Full Gospel, 3 Lutheran, 2 non-denominational, 2 Presbyterian, 2 Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, United Church of Christ, 4 Methodist, and 2 Wesleyan. A Southern Baptist Church had recently closed. (Two years later one of the Baptist General Conference churches also closed, and 2 United Methodist churches merged.)

With all of these other churches serving a population of perhaps 18,000 people, where was our niche? At least half of the churches were larger than we. Many had better buildings. Some had large endowments. Some especially served the socio-economically upper class, some the lower class, others the middle. Most were at least conservative theologically. Many had community ministries. As a rather small, mainstream, middle class, evangelical church, did we have a unique calling to “go all out” for? We were trying to think “outside the box” and use our imaginations. We were praying, planning, and working, but our growth efforts were not having any success. Was God trying to tell us something? How could we continue as we were?

We would shortly wind down, running out of people and finances. The potential for decline and death was much greater than the potential for growth. Most members were realizing that some painful decisions had to be made.

5. What are the options for your church?

For several years discussion had centered on the condition and cost of our downtown church building. This 1926 building was quite large (15,600 square feet, with an auditorium seating 300 and a gym.) In 1995 the local Salvation Army had offered \$425,000 for the building. The church voted down the offer, and the Salvation Army built a new \$1 million edifice one mile away. Apparently the church had not discussed enough what they would do if the building were sold, but many now regretted the negative vote.

At first, then, options centered around the building. "Ten Building Options" (See Appendix D) were put together in January of 2004, along with "Some Thoughts" (See Appendix E). These were discussed in various venues, and a local Realtor gave advice.

Discussion also began to arise about partnering with another church in some way. I was authorized to contact three other churches' pastors to see if there was any interest. There was not. (One of the churches closed 2 years later.) An announcement then was made at the January 2004 Warren Ministerial Association meeting, and 4 pastors indicated an interest in confidentially talking to us about possibilities.

A Merger Possibilities Exploratory Team of 3 key church laypersons was appointed. Carol and I were asked to conduct preliminary interviews with each of the four interested pastors, using "Questions to Other Churches Regarding Possible Merger" (Appendix F). One pastor withdrew, one expressed some openness, and the other two were quite interested. A preliminary list of "Merger Core Values" was put together by the Team and approved by the Long Range Planning Committee. The Team then confidentially interviewed the two most interested pastors in their church buildings, so Team members could also tour the buildings. By March 2004 the 3 Team members unanimously agreed that Bethlehem Covenant Church would be their preferred choice if the church decided to attempt a merger. The pastor of the second choice, First Church of God, was appraised of the situation and thanked.

In the meantime, some members indicated a desire to try downsizing, which included holding worship services in the church lounge. A straw poll secret ballot taken of the attendees at a Wednesday night Bible study and a Sunday worship service indicated a slight majority preferred downsizing over merger.

As a result, the Diaconate Board voted to try downsizing during the month of April 2004 by worshiping on Sundays in the lounge, where the seating capacity was about 75. The downsizing trial drew mixed reviews, at best.

Things were starting to come into focus. At its April 22, 2004, meeting the Long Range Planning Committee prepared a ballot for the church to choose among 5 options, as follows:

OPTIONS FOR FUTURE

Please check the option you would most prefer and support:

1. _____ Keep going as is
2. _____ Downsize in our present building
3. _____ Downsize elsewhere and sell our building
4. _____ Merge with Bethlehem Covenant Church and sell our building
5. _____ Disperse to various churches, sell our building, and distribute assets

6. **What do you feel is God's will?**

The title of my sermon at our first worship service after our return to Warren on Sunday, May 4, 2003, was "Our Eyes Are Upon You," based on II Chronicles 20:1-17. The story is dramatic. King Jehoshaphat's enemies are the Moabites, the Ammonites, and some Meunites. The combined army against Jehoshaphat is vast. He is greatly alarmed and relies upon the Lord for wisdom, proclaiming a fast for the people.

The people of Judah come together from all over to seek help from the Lord. King Jehoshaphat leads the people in prayer: "O God, You are all powerful. You have worked wonders in the past. We know, if we cry out to You, You will save us again. Our problems should have been dealt with earlier. O God, we are powerless in ourselves to face the challenge confronting us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You." Then, with singing and praise, a great battle is won.

I went on to say: "Today we have a vast army of challenges before us as a church. What are some of the possible solutions? Is the solution to call experienced pastors

to give answers? We pastors hope to help, but far more is needed. I urge you to follow Jehoshaphat's example: (1) Realize that we have genuine needs in many areas, (2) Retreat to prayer and fasting, (3) Recall God's past blessings, (4) Remember the source of all wisdom and power ("We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You." – II Chronicles 20:12). (5) Remain faithful on the job, and (6) Rejoice in the outcome, before it even happens. God will bring the victory!"

In my annual report at the end of 2003, after reviewing some accomplishments, I wrote the following: "We have some tremendous challenges ahead, however. I believe that some important decisions will need to be made about our church's future. Let's pray together that we will sense God's will and have the faith and courage to do it!"

In a survey conducted in 2002 by the interim pastor who preceded us, out of 8 qualities, the church was judged weakest in "passionate spirituality." We tried to change this by constantly urging members to ask the question, "What does God want us to do?" Our emotions and preferences had to be adjusted as needed through the desire to seek and do God's will. I cannot say we fully succeeded doing this, but it was our constant prayer. Weekly noontime prayer meetings were held during Lent in 2004 to accent this.

7. How can you judge the mood of the people?

In this question the word "mood" is used intentionally. When important decisions are to be made about sensitive issues, they are often more emotional than rational. It is important to determine how people are feeling in order to develop a listening posture.

Continual feedback through a Long Range Planning Committee who represented a cross-section of the church was very helpful. We also conducted a number of straw polls of the membership (See examples in Appendices G & H). Some members thought we conducted too many straw polls, but we would rather have received that complaint than hear people say that their feelings were not being heard.

Our goal was to make the church a learning organization. We were thankful that previous pastors had laid some groundwork, and we sought to build on that. We knew it would be very important for people to make educated decisions. We tried to preach pertinent and thought provoking sermons and write occasional information pieces. We often conducted continuing education times as part of the agenda at council, board, and committee meetings. We also put progress reports into the monthly newsletter.

Finally, the Merger Possibilities Exploration Team and Long Range Planning Committee put together a list of five options for the future of the church, giving relevant information and listing pros and cons for each option (See Appendix I). These were distributed to the members on Sunday, April 25, 2004.

The three Merger Exploration Possibilities Team members and we two pastors each chose one option, whether we preferred it or not, to present to the congregation before the people voted at the quarterly church business meeting on April 28, 2004. The Long Range Planning Committee reported that its members unanimously recommended option #4, "Merge with Bethlehem Covenant Church and sell our building." Forty-one members voted to approve this option and 4 voted not to.

The question might arise, "Why was a specific church merger possibility recommended at this time, when merger discussions still had a long way to go? Weren't you jumping ahead of due process?" The answer is that we received input that who the possible church was would greatly influence whether people would vote for the merger option or not. The Bethlehem Covenant Church at its quarterly business meeting on Sunday, April 25, 2004, had voted to be willing to discuss merger with us, so this further opened the door.

QUESTIONS WHEN CONTEMPLATING A MERGER

8. How can you select a church with whom to begin merger discussions?

- (1) Based on our experience, the first step is to have a Merger Team of key, respected church leaders appointed.
- (2) The second step is to formulate a list of core values that you would hold to and seek to maintain in a merger (See Question #9).
- (3) If you are considering whether to use another church's building, rent, or build anew, make a list of "Desirable Church Building Characteristics" (See Appendix J).
- (4) Seek churches with whom to discuss the merger possibilities. This can be done through a general announcement or by contacting individual church pastors.
- (5) From those who respond, select the pastors with whom you desire to have a

preliminary interview and ask them to send you copies of their annual reports, bulletins, and other helpful information.

(6) Formulate questions to ask each pastor (See Appendix F: "Questions to Other Churches Regarding Possible Merger").

(7) Conduct a confidential interview with each of the possible merger pastors at his or her church building. Express your core values and see how they react.

(8) Narrow down the possibility list to two or three churches.

(9) Take a straw preference poll of a larger group of church members, briefing members as to each possible church's strengths and weaknesses. (See Appendix H).

(10) Have the Merger Exploration Team recommend to a larger responsible church body the preferred church with whom to continue merger discussions. If possible, this recommendation should be unanimous.

(11) Have this larger responsible church body vote on the Merger Exploration Team's recommendation.

(12) Have your church congregation vote on the larger responsible body's recommendation, and report the result of the vote to the preferred church and the churches not preferred. Note: If your church does not have a congregational church polity, other steps may need to be taken.

9. What core values would you accent when considering merger with another church?

Core values should be written at least for the following ten areas: Basic theological beliefs; church government and organization; denominational affiliation; pastoral selection arrangements; name; worship style; ministry emphases; building and grounds needs; financial arrangements; and stewardship program. (See Appendices K & L.)

10. How may you proceed with a preferred church to discuss merger possibilities?

(1) Have each church appoint key lay representatives to a joint Merger Team.

(2) Discuss core values.

(3) Hold some joint worship services, Christian education experiences,

ministry and social events, etc., and evaluate peoples' experiences and reactions.

- (4) Analyze each church's attendance numbers, financial giving amounts and reserves, building and grounds situations, pastoral arrangements, and core values.
- (5) Discuss reasons for considering merger.
- (6) Write down initial thoughts of what arrangements might take place if the churches merge. (See Appendix M: "Suggestions For Merger Arrangements").
- (7) Consider recommending a merger trial.

Our church did all of the above with our preferred choice, Bethlehem Covenant. We even held several events, including a joint vacation Bible school, with our second choice, First Church of God.

Our 3-person original Merger Team and our 2 pastors continued to represent us when the Joint Merger Team was formed with Bethlehem Covenant. Positive feelings continued through events such as several joint worship services, Wednesday Bible studies and prayer, youth activities, a Sunday School picnic, and Joint Merger Team meetings.

The Joint Merger Team on June 17, 2004, recommended that we conduct a merger trial beginning on Sunday, September 12, 2004, at the Bethlehem Covenant Church building. This was approved at our July 28, 2004, quarterly church business meeting by vote of 42 to 1. Bethlehem Covenant members also voted to approve the trial.

11. What arrangements should be clarified before beginning a merger trial?

- (1) What activities will be scheduled together?
- (2) What church building will be used?
- (3) How will the offerings be handled?
- (4) How will the financial costs be divided up?
- (5) How will the annual stewardship campaign be held?
- (6) Where will each church's executive councils, boards, committees, and men's women's and youth groups meet, and which will meet jointly?
- (7) Who will staff the Sunday School, nursery, Children's Church, and youth group?
- (8) Who will oversee the publishing of each weekly church bulletin and monthly newsletter?
- (9) What will be the preaching schedule?

- (10) Who will be the musicians?
- (11) Where will the pastors have office space?
- (12) Who will do the secretarial work?
- (13) How will greeters and ushers be provided?
- (14) When and how will the joint merger trial committee begin the process to evaluate the success of the trial and the prospects for merger?
- (15) What will be the possible timetable for future events and benchmarks?

In our situation, the merger trial arrangements (See Appendix N) were coordinated and agreed upon under the direction of the Joint Merger Team. Bethlehem Covenant also provided a list of their usually scheduled events to be worked into the unified schedule (See Appendix O), and First Baptist proposed a "Merger Possibility Timetable" (See Appendix P). Each church's Christian Education/Formation and Diaconate boards decided to hold joint meetings with their counterparts.

12. What are ways to publicize your process?

As mentioned earlier, progress reports were put into the monthly church newsletter. We periodically updated our denominational staff and fellow ministers in neighboring American Baptist and Evangelical Covenant churches.

We also tried to keep the community abreast of what was going on. The local newspaper heard of our discussions, asked for interviews, and published several articles. We gave brief progress reports at the Warren Ministerial Association meetings and a smaller ministerial prayer group. Of course, we had to be very discreet in what information we shared publicly.

13. How do you evaluate the merger trial?

Our Joint Merger Trial Committee met on September 30 and November 18, 2004, and asked the following questions about the ongoing merger trial:

- (1) Are the attendances good?
- (2) Are the finances improving?
- (3) Is there a positive comfort level with the worship style?
- (4) Are the building and grounds adequate?
- (5) Do the people from the respective churches mingle with each other?
- (6) Are there enough programs and workers?
- (7) Are the board and committee members and other church leaders working well together?
- (8) Does there generally seem to be a good at-home feeling of togetherness?
- (9) If there are any major concerns, are they manageable?
- (10) Are each church's members' responses from the secret ballot polls indicating a definite preference for moving towards merger?

The Joint Merger Committee felt that questions 1 through 9 could be answered positively. During the trial, the attendances of people connected to First Baptist for Sunday School was almost the same (36), for morning worship was 5% less (61), and for midweek service was 30% more (22) than before the trial. Deficit spending was trimmed. There was some concern about whether the Bethlehem Covenant building was too small, but the size of the property (about 4 acres) could provide room for expansion. Overall, there were no major concerns.

At the First Baptist quarterly business meeting on October 27, 2004, feedback on the merger trial was solicited through a preference poll. Thirty members wanted to continue the merger trial, one preferred to discontinue the merger trial, and three persons checked "other," writing further ideas. At a special business meeting on December 8, 2004, First Baptist members voted 31 to 6 to schedule a January 26, 2005, vote on "intent to merge" with Bethlehem Covenant.

Bethlehem Covenant had met on November 7, 2004, and a poll was taken to see how their members felt about "continuing the joint ministries with First Baptist with the very real possibility of fully merging together in the near future." Twenty-six voted in favor, 2 voted to discontinue, and 2 were undecided.

All in all, voting in the churches indicated that 85% of the members were in favor of continuing along the merger path.

QUESTIONS WHEN CULMINATING A MERGER

14. If the merger trial seems successful, what is the next step?

When our church was working its way towards possible merger, it was pointed out that the process was like steps taken towards approaching marriage: (1) "Dating" – interviewing and spending time with churches who might become possible merger candidates; (2) "Going steady" – picking one church with whom to spend exclusive time, as in a merger trial; (3) "Engagement" – declaring a commitment of intent to plan and work towards eventual merger; and (4) "Marriage" – culminating the merger by making it publicly official.

We were now deciding whether to be "engaged." On January 23, 2005, Bethlehem Covenant members voted 33 to 1 to "declare intent to merge." On January 26, 2005, First Baptist members voted 40 to 5 to "declare intent to merge with Bethlehem Covenant Church and be dually aligned with American Baptist Churches and Evangelical Covenant Church denominations." We had taken the engagement step.

15. What is the significance of declaring intent to merge?

To use the dating, going steady, engagement, and marriage analogy, declaring intent to merge authorizes the respective parties to prepare for the wedding. As with any marriage, it is best to discuss various matters and come to common understandings before the time of the actual merger.

Decisions need to be made in the areas of theological beliefs, denominational affiliation, pastoral leadership, organizational structure, building and financial matters, and choice of name for the merged church. Declaring intent to merge puts these decisions in motion.

16. How do you select a name for the possible newly merged church?

In March of 2005 suggestions for a name for the possible merged church were solicited. Thirty-five names were suggested (See Appendix Q). The top six preferences in order were: Baptist Covenant, Pleasant Community, Faith Community, Riverside Community, Pleasant Unified, and The Bethlehem Covenant Baptist. The most common six words or combinations were: Community, Pleasant, Baptist/Covenant, Unified, Christ, and Faith.

How could the selection process be narrowed down? The Joint Merger Team realized that names that highlighted “Baptist” and “Covenant” were contrary to First Baptist’s adopted core value of “creating a new church with a non-denominational and appealing name.” Denominational labels might be turn-offs for people who would otherwise attend.

The Team decided to present the above reasoning at a joint church meeting after worship on Sunday, April 17, 2005, and ask members to choose a name from the other top preferences: Faith Community, Pleasant Community, Pleasant Unified, and Riverside Community. This process was agreeable to most of the 62 members present, and, in a run-off, 46 (74%) voted for the name to be “Pleasant Community Church.”

17. How do you address theological, denominational, pastoral leadership, and organizational matters?

We found that the best way to begin handling these matters was to have the Joint Merger Team take the list of merger core values suggested earlier by each church and work out a unified list (See Appendix R). A definite theological discussion point for us was baptism. First Baptist held to believers’ baptism by immersion and a dedication ceremony for infants and young children. Bethlehem Covenant allowed for a choice between that arrangement or infant baptism by sprinkling,

with confirmation later. How was this difference to be resolved? We ended up with an agreed upon core value that "choices of infant baptism, child dedication, confirmation, sprinkling or immersion baptism be made available."

Other accepted merger core values included: "Dually-aligned with both original denominations, and participating as much as possible in their programs;" "Considering pastors from both denominations when needing new leadership;" "Women in leadership and ministry accepted;" and "Maintaining a representative, efficient, and unifying organizational structure and constitution."

The above last mentioned core value required a joint constitution/by laws task force. This was made up of 2 lay representatives from each church and the respective pastors. The Task Force held 9 long meetings, including 2 with the Joint Merger Team, to put together a proposed united constitution/by laws.

Would we keep two separate church membership lists or one? From our research we discovered that some federated churches even kept 3 lists: one for each original church and one for the new church body! We strongly decided to emphasize unity by recommending only one unified membership list.

What would be the organizational structure of the newly-merged church? Thankfully for us, American Baptist and Evangelical Covenant local churches' organizational structures can be quite similar. For instance, each of our churches had three ministry boards (Christian Education/Formation, Diaconate, and Trustee), an overseeing and coordinating entity (Church Council/Executive Board), and a layperson leader (Moderator/Church Chairperson). We compromised by continuing the three boards (Christian Formation, Diaconate, and Trustee) and by having an Executive Council and Church Chairperson, along with several committees.

Denominational staff and an attorney gave us legal input and feedback to help us complete our task. On August 14, 2005, by a vote of 74-0, the two churches together unanimously approved the proposed constitution/by laws.

The pastoral leadership issue deserves some discussion here. In our situation, my wife and I, as co-interim pastors at First Baptist, definitely would be leaving shortly after the merger planned to be consummated. The Bethlehem Covenant pastor, who had begun his ministry in November of 2003, would be staying on as the merged church pastor. But what happens when both pastors are inclined to want to continue on in some pastoral role? Finances and the size of the merged church may not make such an arrangement possible, so who would do what, etc.? Much prayer, discussion, and negotiation may be needed to resolve this important situation before the merger vote.

18. How do you deal with building and financial matters?

On July 27, 2004, First Baptist had voted without opposition to put its church building up for sale. It was in a residential and historical district that would allow for offices but not outright commercial enterprises. It was appraised for \$225,000 and drew little interest. Finally, an Ohio independent church pastor who had conducted concerts and evangelistic services in Warren came to town and offered \$185,000. On October 5, 2005, First Baptist voted unanimously to sell the building to the Ohio pastor for that price with the net proceeds of the sale to be put into the church building fund.

It was decided that the items in the building, after disposal of unusable materials, would be distributed in the following priority: (1) Bethlehem Covenant Church; (2) Sale to members; (3) Yard sale to incoming church and public; (4) Auctioneer; and (5) Donation to incoming church. Historical materials were retained and stored at Bethlehem Covenant Church.

We held our final celebration worship service in the First Baptist Church building on Sunday, October 23, 2005, followed by a fellowship time in the lounge. Pictures of days gone by were displayed. Videos were shown. Several long-time members shared testimonies of precious things that had happened in the building.. First Baptist building commemorative plates were sold. It was an emotional day.

Just before Christmas (2005), however, church leaders were informed that the building sale could not be finalized because of insufficient financing. The Ohio pastor later came back in March of 2006, after the merger, and the church on April 26, 2006, voted 41 to 1 to sell the building to him through a land contract for \$150,000.

Although it was a difficult and emotional decision, it is obvious that the members' choice was to meet in the Bethlehem Covenant building. The sanctuary seats 150, Christian education and fellowship facilities were crowded but adequate for the time being, the cost of utilities and maintenance is low, and there is plenty of room for expansion on the level 4-acre lot.

Furthermore, the building is located on the main road in Pleasant Township, in an attractive neighborhood 2 miles from downtown Warren. Only 3 other churches are in the township: one moderate-sized Lutheran, a Full Gospel and an Allegheny Wesleyan, both small.

No doubt, other church merger situations will find the building decision more difficult than we did. Some may decide to leave both original buildings and rent or

build anew. Although our building decision was almost unanimous, at the last minute one of our prominent members changed his mind and said we should keep the First Baptist building and leave the Bethlehem Covenant one. People are unpredictable and sentiment can be strong about such things.. Once again, the best advice is to accent prayer for clear thinking and for God's will to be done.

We agreed to support our denominational mission programs as equally as possible and merge our financial assets. In 2005, the year before the actual merger, the First Baptist budget was about 50% greater than Bethlehem Covenant's. This matched the ratio of our separate membership and attendance statistics. Each church added up its financial assets and had its property appraised. The total assets' ratio came out to be about 60% Bethlehem Covenant and 40% First Baptist, the opposite ratio of the separate annual giving budgets.

What if, for some unforeseen reason, we should decide to "unmerge" or dissolve? How would assets be divided and distributed? To address this possibility, an article, "Division or Dissolution," was put into the unified constitution/by laws. It states that if a division or dissolution plan "is adopted to be effective prior to January 1, 2013, forty (40%) percent of the assets of the corporation shall be distributed to the American Baptist Churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware or its designee and sixty (60%) percent to the Great Lakes Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church or its designee; thereafter the distribution shall be in equal shares to the same entities." In this way, as predictably as possible, after 7 years of merger the total residual assets and the annual giving assets from the original churches' members would equalize, thereafter making a 50/50 distribution fair. Obviously, we hoped this provision never would be needed.

19. How can you officially consummate the merger?

The first step is to engage knowledgeable and experienced legal counsel. We were able to get legal help from Rob Hall, a staff member of the Evangelical Covenant denomination, but it was also essential for us to have a lawyer knowledgeable in Pennsylvania state laws and regulations concerning non-profit corporations. A bonus for us was that we were able to engage the services of Thomas A. Tupitza, Esquire, from Erie, Pennsylvania, a past president of the American Baptist Churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware. He is a law school graduate of Harvard University. He knows church polity and has experience in merging churches.

Attorney Tupitza said we had two choices on how to officially consummate the merger: (1) One church could dissolve its corporation and consolidate with the other, or (2) Both churches could dissolve and consolidate to form an entirely new

corporation. The Joint Merger Team chose the second option, even though the process would be more expensive in legal costs. The reasoning was that each church should have equal status in the "consolidation," which is the legal term for merger.

A call for a business meeting to vote on the legal steps for consolidation was drafted by the attorney as follows and mailed to each church's members:

**FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, WARREN, PA
CONGREGATIONAL MEETING ON CONSOLIDATION**

A congregational meeting will be held at 6:30p.m. on Wednesday, October 26, 2005, at Bethlehem Covenant Church. The purpose of the meeting is to consider the adoption, upon recommendation of the Church Council, of the Plan of Consolidation with Bethlehem Covenant Church to establish the Pleasant Community Church of Warren, Pennsylvania (the "Consolidated Church"). The Plan of Consolidation includes establishment of the Consolidated Church effective January 1, 2006, on which date the separate existence of First Baptist Church and Bethlehem Covenant Church will cease; the adoption of Articles of Incorporation and a Constitution and Bylaws for the Consolidated Church; and the election of the initial Executive Council, officers, boards, and committees of the Consolidated Church. Action will also be taken on a proposed 2006 budget for the Consolidated Church and on any other business that may properly come before the meeting.

The above was the call to First Baptist members. The call to Bethlehem Covenant members had a different second sentence: "The purpose of the meeting is to consider the adoption, upon recommendation of the Executive Committee, of the Plan of Consolidation with First Baptist Church to establish the Pleasant Community Church of Warren, Pennsylvania (the "Consolidated Church")."

At the business meeting, Attorney Tupitza explained the Plan of Consolidation and answered questions. Members then voted overwhelmingly to adopt the Plan of Consolidation, to become Pleasant Community Church. The Bethlehem Covenant vote was 17 to 0, and the First Baptist vote was 29 to 1. This vote approved the Articles of Incorporation, including the election of officers and boards and members for 2006. A budget of \$131,129 for 2006 was unanimously approved by a combined vote of 49 to 0. Our attorney could now complete his legal work, and the merger ("consolidation") would be official on January 1, 2006. The churches' financial officers would now need to meet to work out the consolidation of accounts.

20. What can be done to enhance the long-range success of the merger?

Most mergers are not successful for church growth. Some members will attend the newly merged church for only awhile, if at all. First Baptist had 4 families who quit

coming, despite our best efforts to retain them. All seemed to miss our old building.

It was hard for them to adapt to new people and surroundings.

What we attempted to do was focus on the future. An envisioning weekend for church leaders was led by Evangelical Covenant Church denominational staff on Friday night and Saturday, January 13 & 14, 2006. It was entitled "Dream Again," and monthly follow-through meetings would be held.

Eventually six priorities were adopted by the church: Meaningful Worship, Gift-Based Ministry, Reaching the Non-Churched, Being Children and Youth Oriented, Christian Direction, and Authentic Community.

New and focused outreach ministries to the community were contemplated. An analysis of community needs indicated many single parents were in the area. A ministry with them and their children was begun at the local YMCA.

Ideas were brought up as to how to put the church acreage to better use. Plans were begun to enlarge the church building, and a large multi-purpose room was contemplated. A part-time youth director was hired.

All efforts should be made to keep the merger momentum going by strengthening the church fellowship and reaching out to others. (See Appendix S: "Reflections of Ongoing Pastor, Rev. Michael Poindexter").

CONCLUSION

Is the merger to form the Pleasant Community Church a success? The short answer is "so far, so good.." The merger officially took almost 3 years, but it is still in process.

During the last full year of the trial (2005), after the intent to merge had been declared, average attendances were down about 5% from the total reported from when the churches met separately before the trial. Averages during the next year (2006) declined another 5%, but now seem to have leveled off and are showing signs of growth. This is far different from most situations, where average attendances after the merger are reported to be not much higher than those of the largest church before the merger.

Generally members who dropped out of our merger are people who do not like new things and are challenged in social skills ability. No more than half of these are attending elsewhere. This is obviously regrettable, but probably unavoidable. Genuine efforts were made to keep in contact and encourage them.

Leadership responsibilities in the new church have been distributed quite equally. Predictably, because its membership was larger, the number of First Baptist former members in leadership roles is slightly higher than those from Bethlehem Covenant. New people have joined and also taken on leadership responsibilities. Assimilation has gone quite smoothly.

For the first time in many years, the annual budget is balanced, without taking from reserves. The pastor's salary is raised to a more respectable figure. Total mission giving is up considerably, and the budget includes money for evangelism and community ministries.

In short, two churches have probably been saved from decline and eventual closure. There is no longer a survival mentality. Much prayer and work lie ahead, but there is a spirit of optimism and hope. Thanks be to God!

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, WARREN, PENNSYLVANIA

Our mission is cheerfully to give, go, and grow together so that people will become lovingly devoted followers of Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 9:7; Matthew 28:19-20; John 21:15-19).

Goals (5) and Objectives (38); 2003 through 2005

The following designations in the left-hand margin indicate which Church groups are responsible for administering the respective objectives:

C – Church Council
D – Diaconate Board
E – Education Board

T – Trustee Board
LR – Long Range Planning Committee
ST – Stewardship Committee

I. Administration and Stewardship – To make the most of our people, facilities, and financial resources. (8)

- (LR) 1. By October 2003 – update our Church's organization and constitution.
- (ST) 2. By October 2003 – conduct a PAMM cheerful giver campaign.
(PAMM – prayer, attendance, ministry, money)
- (C) 3. By April 2004 – update job descriptions for staff, board members, greeters, ushers, etc.
- (D) 4. By April 2004 – organize parish health program.
- (LR) 5. By April 2004 – decide whether to stay in the building at our present location.
- (T) 6. By October 2004 – if we stay at our present location, establish a building master plan.
- (T) 7. By October 2004 – if we stay at our present site, repair parking lots.
- (ST) 8. By April 2005 – conduct an estate and financial planning seminar.

II. Prayer and Worship – To have a spiritual passion cultivated by vital prayer and worship. (6)

- (D) 1. By October 2003 – begin a children's Kristal bell choir.
- (D) 2. By October 2003 – begin a children and youth song interpretation team.

- (D) 3. By April 2004 – organize an e-mail prayer chain.
- (D) 4. By April 2004 – establish a task force to work on recommendations for having a more contemporary worship service.
- (T) 5. By October 2004 – set up a system to project announcements, songs, etc. for worship service.
- (D) 6. By April 2005 – conduct a prayer seminar.

III. Christian Education – To provide interactive discipleship training and leader development. (7)

- (E) 1. By October 2003 – appoint a “winsome task force” to identify persons as prospective members and prayerfully cultivate them towards the goal of winning them for Christ and the Church.
- (D) 2. By October 2003 – have regular men’s meetings.
- (E) 3. By October 2003 – begin a process to establish at least one new Sunday School class/small group each year.
- (E) 4. By April 2004 – conduct a “Discover Your Spiritual Gifts” study.
- (E) 5. By October 2004 – develop a mentoring program for leader development.
- (E) 6. By April 2005 – have fully activated library.
- (E) 7. By October 2005 – conduct a living wills seminar.

IV. Community Outreach – To reach out in Jesus’ name to serve the needs of our world. (10)

- (D) 1. By October 2003 – continue and seek to increase involvement in Baptist House (Chautauqua), Community Concerns, County Fair ministry, County Jail ministry, Meals on Wheels, Red Cross Bloodmobile, The Sharing Place, and Watson Home ministry.
- (D) 2. By October 2003 – seek to financially support mailing of “Jesus” video to homes in County.

- (E) 3. By October 2003 – investigate the possibility of having “Kids Hope” mentors and/or other volunteers to minister to elementary school children.
- (D) 4. By April 2004 – enlist Habitat for Humanity volunteers.
- (D) 5. By April 2004 – enlist volunteers to assist in the Don Mills Achievement Center programs.
- (D) 6. By October 2004 – seek to establish a PAWS group to visit in nursing and assisted living homes. (PAWS – pets are working saints)
- (E) 7. By October 2004 – have a supervised physical exercise group.
- (E) 8. By April 2005 – host a 55-Alive safe driving course.
- (D) 9. By April 2005 – sponsor someone to participate in a short-term mission trip.
- (D) 10. By October 2005 – develop a strategy for members intentionally to join community service organizations as Christian witnesses.

V. Advertising and Communication – To make people knowledgably aware Of our ministries.

- (D) 1. By October 2003 – regularly place Church notices on community TV channel 11 and in newspaper.
- (D) 2. By October 2003 – enlarge and increase news and publicity in the Unifier monthly newsletter.
- (D) 3. By October 2003 – develop and augment a plan to have more active bulletin boards.
- (D) 4. By October 2003 – make available an updated visitors packet.
- (T) 5. By October 2004 – set up and keep updated a Church website.
- (ST) 6. By April 2005 – consider conducting a capital funds campaign.
- (D) 7. By October 2005 – produce a pictorial church directory.

6. Church building that is expensive to maintain and needs capital improvements.
7. Projected annual budget deficit of almost \$24,000.
8. Older Church membership with long-term leaders who comment about "getting tired" in the work.
9. Questions raised as to whether our Church is unique enough in the community and it is good Christian stewardship to expend resources necessary to maintain the Church as a separate entity.
10. Experience has shown that when a church has a capital funds campaign, it usually can raise up to 2 to 3 times its current level of giving. Taking into account our current annual giving of approximately \$100,000 with a budget deficiency of \$24,000, our maximum capital fund campaign potential would be no more than \$200,000.
11. If we continue in our present financial pattern, our Church will run out of money in 4 years or less. In other words, we cannot continue as we are.

January 2004

CHANGING TIMES

1. Twenty-five to thirty years ago, First Baptist Church had 120 to 140 in Sunday School and 160 to 180 in worship, including many children and youth. We conducted a capital funds campaign and a building improvement program. Times have changed, however.
2. In Warren our youth and young adult population and number of good-paying jobs have declined.
3. Our church members have died, moved away, or dispersed to at least 13 other churches in the area: Youngsville Evangelical United Methodist, Salvation Army, Wesleyan, First Presbyterian, First Lutheran, First United Methodist, Good News Community, Calvary Baptist, Grace United Methodist, First Church of the Nazarene, First Church of God, Epworth United Methodist, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance.
4. Our church's attendance in Sunday School has declined to 25 to 30 and in worship to between 55 to 75. This has resulted in deficit budgets.
5. How have other churches in Warren coped or grown?
 - 1) Large endowments such as the ones at Trinity Episcopal, First Presbyterian, First Lutheran, and First United Methodist. (First Baptist has NO endowment.)
 - 2) For churches our size, less staff. (Part-time pastors and fewer support staff persons.)
 - 3) Smaller, less costly buildings. For example, Bethlehem Covenant, where gas bill is only \$900 a year. (Our gas bill during this past winter has been \$1,300 a month.)
 - 4) Some churches have put their energy and money into programs that provide outreach opportunities, such as contemporary-style worship and community ministries.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, WARREN, PA**TEN BUILDING OPTIONS**

Current financial situation: Annual operating fund deficits of \$24,000, plus deferred maintenance and improvements.

- I. Keep our building.
 1. Lease part to another group – Net income \$24,000.
 2. Have another church merge with us – Renovation cost of \$200,000.
 3. Keep on as only occupant (and quickly grow numerically and financially, or employ only a part-time pastor) – Renovation cost of \$200,000, plus maintenance and utilities annual cost of \$24,000.
- II. Tear down our building.
 4. Build new building on present site – Demolition and building costs of \$700,000 plus maintenance and utilities annual costs of \$18,000.
- III. Sell our building for \$225,000.
 5. Lease part back – Assets of \$200,000, less lease (including utilities) annual cost of \$24,000.
 6. Lease another (or share facilities) – Assets of \$200,000, less lease (including utilities) annual cost of \$24,000. (or \$12,000 if sharing facilities.)
 7. Purchase another – Assets of \$200,000, less purchase cost of \$400,000 (net cost \$200,000), plus maintenance and utilities annual costs of \$18,000.
 8. Build new – Assets of \$200,000, less land acquisition and building costs of \$700,000, (net cost \$500,000), plus maintenance and utilities annual costs of \$18,000.
 9. Merge with another church – Retain assets of \$200,000, plus realize support staff annual savings of \$24,000, and maintenance and utilities annual savings of \$24,000.
 10. Let members disperse to various churches – Distribute assets of \$200,000, plus realize annual budget savings of \$125,000.

SOME THOUGHTS

1. It is impossible for us to maintain our present building unless we greatly increase our financial giving.
2. It is not good stewardship for us to maintain our present building by ourselves unless we grow in the size and number of ministries of our congregation.
3. It is estimated that the current capital fund campaign capability for us is between \$180,000 and \$270,000 (2-3 times our annual giving level of \$90,000)..
4. It is difficult for us to know whether Warren's economic situation will really improve and population increase.
5. It is difficult to know what geographical area will be the best location for a church building.
6. It may be best for us to do something only on a temporary basis until some of the above issues are clarified or become clearer.
7. It is prudent for us to perform only essential repairs and improvements on our present building until and if we determine that we are going to retain it.

QUESTIONS TO OTHER CHURCHES REGARDING POSSIBLE MERGER

1. What are you church's views on:
 - (1) Biblical authority
 - (2) Baptism
 - (3) Church organization
 - (4) Denominational structure
 - (5) Women in ministry
2. What are some things your Church does well?
3. What are some things in your Church that you would like to improve?
4. What are your Church's attendance averages?
5. How are your Church's finances? What is your approach to stewardship?
6. What outreach ministries do you have to the community?
7. What is the size and condition of your Church building?
8. Would you be interested in merger discussions?
If so, could our Church maintain some identity through the Church name, a continued relationship with the American Baptist denomination, denominational mission support, continuing some designated funds, periodically considering pastoral leadership from the American Baptist denomination, etc.?

POLL: WITH WHICH CHURCH WOULD IT BE BEST TO CONSIDER A MERGER?

First Baptist is considering the possibility of merger with another church. From what you know, with which church would it be best to consider a merger? (Please check top 2 choices.)

- _____ Christian and Missionary Alliance, 74 Kinzua Rd. (Route 59)
- _____ Bethlehem Covenant, 673 Pleasant Drive
- _____ Calvary Baptist, 445 Conewango Ave.
- _____ First Church of God, 1111 Madison Ave.
- _____ First Church of the Nazarene, 907 Pennsylvania Ave., East
- _____ First Presbyterian, 300 Market St.
- _____ First United Methodist, 200 Market St.
- _____ Grace United Methodist, Pennsylvania Ave. East & Prospect St.
- _____ North Warren Presbyterian, 200 South State St.
- _____ Wesleyan, 604 Fourth Ave.
- _____ Other _____

Thank you!

STRAW POLL ON SEVERAL CHOICES

1. What would be the order of your preferences for merger among the following churches? These appear to be the closest to First Baptist in the policies of baptism, church government, and ecumenical spirit. At this point, these churches have not indicated a willingness to merge. (Some ways that they differ from us are noted after each church.) Please number "1," "2," and "3," with "1" being the most preferable, "2" next preferable, and "3" least preferable:

_____ Bethlehem Covenant Church, 673 Pleasant Dr., 2.6 miles away
(choice between infant baptism and believers' baptism by immersion)

_____ Calvary Baptist Church, 445 Conewango Ave., .8 miles away
(no women deacons or women preachers)

_____ First Church of God, 1111 Madison Ave., 1.7 miles away
(have Pastoral Advisory Council instead of Diaconate Board; no formally recorded membership – people have voting privileges if they are professing Christians and have attended in the past 6 months, whether they have been baptized or not)

2. Our Church must change. What would be your choice among (1) formally merging with another church, (2) having our members disperse to churches of their own choosing, or (3) downsizing staff and meeting areas to have a balanced budget? Please number "1," "2," and "3," with "1" being the most preferable, "2" next preferable, and "3" least preferable:

_____ Merge

_____ Disperse

_____ Downsize

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH: FIVE OPTIONS FOR FUTURE

OPTION # 1 – KEEP GOING AS IS

POSSIBLE ENABLING MOTION – That we keep going as is.

PROS

1. Location
2. Large roomy vestibule/foyer
3. Nice comfortable sanctuary with pipe organ, piano, raised pulpit area
4. Space for separated class rooms, library, and offices
5. Nice kitchen with adjoining lounge for dinners and meetings
6. Gymnasium with adjoining kitchen for youth and/or adult activities
7. Five restrooms
8. Paid staff including full time Pastor/Pastors, secretary, choir director, organist, and janitor
9. We can continue to work, hope, and pray for numerical and financial growth.

CONS

1. Building too large for size of congregation
2. Building very expensive to maintain and heat
3. Building and grounds in need of some costly repairs, and, if we do nothing, they will continue to deteriorate. Would probably need to conduct capital funds campaign for major repairs and improvements, estimated to cost \$200,000.
4. Upper and lower floors not handicapped accessible
5. Congregation aging faster than new younger members joining
6. With aging congregation, number of volunteers to help with maintenance and/or operations declines.
7. With limited finances, resources, physical energy, and number of workers, it is difficult to sponsor and present attractive programming for new member prospects.
8. Would need to activate Pastoral Search Committee in 2005
9. Without substantial growth in membership, and operating as we have been with disbursements exceeding revenue, and doing the maintenance and repairs that would be necessary to stay operating, our finances would last about 3 to 4 years, maybe less. At that time we would probably be forced to disband.

OPTION #2 – DOWNSIZE IN OUR PRESENT LOCATION

POSSIBLE ENABLING MOTION – That we downsize beginning on June 1, 2004, initially saving approximately \$9,000 annually, as follows (see page entitled “Downsizing Proposal” for specific details).

PROS

1. Save approximately \$9,000 a year in salaries and utilities
2. Lower gas bills by not using sanctuary
3. Smaller room provides fuller sound in singing
4. Choir doesn't have to wear robes
5. Less formal worship
6. More togetherness with less vacant seats
7. Convenient to restrooms, Sunday School rooms, kitchen, office, bulletin boards, etc.
8. Could still use sanctuary in summer, if volunteers clean it

CONS

1. Volunteers doing secretarial and custodial tasks may grow weary after awhile, and would need a coordinator.
2. Pastoral Search Committee would need to be activated in 2005, and it may be hard to find qualified part-time pastor.
3. No money available for eventual major repairs and improvements on building and grounds, estimated to cost \$200,000
4. Beautiful sanctuary, including piano and organ, not used and not heated during heating season will deteriorate.
5. When worship is in lounge rather than sanctuary, it probably would be less appealing to newcomers.
6. In order to make lounge more suitable for long-term use as a worship center, would need to spend approximately \$15,000 for more comfortable chairs, new carpet, etc.
7. Using lounge lessens classroom space.
8. Crowded for greeting time
9. More volunteer help is needed to setup and take down for various activities.
10. Lounge would be hot to use in summer, and window air conditioners and fans would be noisy.
11. Probably would not be long-range solution

DOWNSIZING PROPOSAL

PROBLEM: If current deficits of at least \$24,000 a year continue, First Baptist Church, Warren, PA, will be out of money in approximately 4 years. (In 2003 our operating deficit was \$36,000.)

THAT THE CHURCH DOWNSIZE BEGINNING ON JUNE 1, 2004, INITIALLY SAVING \$9,000 ANNUALLY, AS FOLLOWS:

- 1) With the possible exception of summer months, close off balcony classroom, sanctuary, and downstairs; meet in lounge for worship services (saving on need for custodial services and approximately \$2,854 annually in energy costs)
- 2) Lessen work hours for custodian and secretary to average 15 hours each week (cutting custodian's salary from \$8,355 to \$6,000 to save \$2,355, and cutting secretary's salary from \$8,073 to \$6,000 to save \$2,073. Total savings \$4,428 annually).*
- 3) Eliminate organist's position (saving \$4,318 annually), and employ a pianist for \$2,600 annually. (Net savings of \$1,718 annually)
- 4) Do no major repairs or improvements to the Church building, and cut out all non-essential spending.
- 5) Continue to work towards numerical and financial growth. If needed growth or a merger does not occur by April 2005, activate the Pastoral Search Committee to begin the search for a part-time pastor who will begin in May of 2006, when Pastors Dick and Carol leave (saving an additional \$15,000 or more annually).

* Cuts can be made by having volunteers do snow and ice removal on walks, lawn mowing/grounds-keeping, floor washing, restroom cleaning, vacuuming, dusting, minor maintenance, bulletins/newsletter/board minutes publication.

OPTION # 3 – DOWNSIZE ELSEWHERE AND SELL OUR BUILDING

POSSIBLE ENABLING MOTION – That we downsize by selling our building and finding another location to meet (purchase property and build, purchase another building, or lease another building).

PROS

1. We can stay together as a congregation.
2. It could be an opportunity to start anew – a new beginning for FBC.
3. With the right location, building, and programs we could have an opportunity for growth that we haven't had for many years.

CONS

1. This option has many more questions that cannot be answered until we give it a try.
 - a. Can our current property be sold for a fair price? We need the money from the sale of this property to start anew.
 - b. Can a new property suitable for us be purchased or built?
 - c. If the 2 questions above can be accomplished, it is still not sure that we would be successful in starting over.
2. This option would require a great deal more work and effort on the part of all members than the other options. Unless you are willing to serve on 1 or 2 of the following committees, this is not an option for you.
Committees required could include:
 - a. Selling property
 - b. Acquiring new property
 - c. Building committee
 - d. Disposal and acquiring of furnishings
 - e. Capital fund raising
3. The Pastoral Search Committee would need to be formed and start functioning in 2005.
4. Does this community really need another church? How do you feel about our chances of being successful in a new start? This is either a positive or negative, depending upon your belief.

OPTION # 4 – MERGE WITH BETHLEHEM COVENANT CHURCH AND SELL OUR BUILDING

POSSIBLE ENABLING MOTION – That we explore merger with Bethlehem Covenant Church, and, if the exploration is successful, sell our building.

PROS

1. Theologically compatible
2. Organizational structure almost identical to ours
3. Would meet building needs, (has 8 class areas, sanctuary seats 150), with attractive, well-maintained, appropriately-sized, very energy-efficient building on beautiful, large lot.
4. Almost half (30 persons) of our regular attendees live south of the Allegheny River, so site would be easily accessible to them.
5. Would blend with slightly smaller church than we are, so we would not be “swallowed up”. Their 40 average attendees and our possible 60 would make a functional 100 average attendance for worship and service.
6. Other Covenant churches are nearby in Scandia, Sugar Grove, Ludlow, Kane, and Jamestown.
7. Espouses all of our “merger core values”
8. Would meet budget needs, providing for budget of approximately \$150,000 which could allow for full-time pastor, some support staff, sufficient programming, and appropriate missions budget.
9. Our Church could provide opportunities to meet some of their needs such as for men’s group, women’s circles and Association meetings, music ministry, etc.
10. Proceeds from the sale of our facilities could enhance their building by possibly adding baptistry, elevator, more restrooms, larger vestibule, air conditioning, projection system, etc. Would not need capital funds campaign.
11. They have new young pastor who is progressive and outreach oriented, so we probably would not need to activate Pastoral Search Committee in 2005.
12. Positive reaction to the community’s problem of declining population and financial resources.
13. A way towards fulfilling Jesus’ prayer in John 17:20, 21, and 23 when He prayed: *“for those who will believe in Me..., that all of them will be one.”*
“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.”
14. Would enable us to have a new beginning and fresh start.

CONS

1. Would miss our old building
2. New location 2.6 miles from present one
3. Would allow for choice of sprinkling for infants and confirmation for youth
4. Won't exclusively be an American Baptist church, but also will have obligations to Evangelical Covenant denomination.
5. Would take a period of negotiation, give and take, compromise, adjustment, and blending with others.

**OPTION #5 – DISPERSE TO VARIOUS CHURCHES, SELL OUR
BUILDING, AND DISTRIBUTE ASSETS**

POSSIBLE ENABLING MOTION – That we disperse to various churches, sell our building and distribute assets.

PROS

1. We won't have to worry about Church finances, maintaining our building, calling a pastor, filling church offices, etc .
2. We can go to any other church we choose, without feeling obligated to go together.
3. Our remaining financial assets can help other Christian causes.

CONS

1. After 170 years, our Church will no longer have any identity in the community.
2. Longtime friends and co-workers will go their separate ways.
3. There will not be an American Baptist church in Warren County.
4. Dispersing brings legal matters about dissolving the corporation, distributing assets, etc.

APPENDIX J

DESIRABLE CHURCH BUILDING CHARACTERISTICS

1. Assembly area able to seat 150 persons and suitable for audio-visual presentations
2. Kitchen and fellowship area to serve 100 persons
3. Adequate vestibule area
4. Ten class areas, including nursery, library, and choir rooms
5. Church office and 2 staff offices
6. All floors handicap accessible
7. Handicap accessible restrooms
- 8.. Zoned heating and cooling systems, with air conditioning available at least in office and class areas
9. Off-street parking for 40 cars
10. Visible location within 3 miles of downtown Warren

APPENDIX K

CORE VALUES PROPOSED BY FIRST BAPTIST FOR MERGED CHURCH

1. Holding to basic beliefs such as the authority and trustworthiness of the scriptures, and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
2. Practices of child dedication and believers' baptism by immersion available.
3. Two churches merging to create a new church with a non-denominational and appealing name.
4. One originating church not overwhelming the other.
5. Dually-aligned with both original denominations, and participating as much as possible in their programs, combining mission offerings as appropriate according to category and dividing mission giving equally.
6. Considering pastors from both denominations when needing new leadership.
7. Most members from both churches feeling comfortable to join.
8. Membership and financial assets merged.
9. Financial assets we bring being able to enhance the building and ministries of the new church.
10. Generous amount of parking spaces available.
11. Designing and implementing a representative, efficient, and unifying organizational structure and constitution.
12. Women in leadership and ministry accepted.
13. Striving for creativity and excellence in worship and outreach.
14. Conducting an annual wholistic stewardship program.

CORE VALUES PROPOSED BY BETHLEHEM COVENANT FOR MERGED CHURCH

1. Commitment to Local Mission
 - a. Significant budgeted line item designated for evangelism and outreach events.
 - b. Establishment of Evangelism and Outreach Team to advertise and plan two evangelistic and outreach oriented events per year.
2. Commitment to Quality Worship Services
 - a. More modern flavor of music and instrumentation added to traditional worship.
 - b. Addition of more high tech audio/visual equipment to sanctuary.
 - c. Addition of drama to worship services.
3. Commitment to Children and Youth Ministry
 - a. Increased budgeted line items for both areas.
 - b. Facility upgrades or additions having these two groups highly in mind.
 - c. Willingness to consider hiring a part-time youth director once merger is complete, or at least paying for periodic training for lay youth leader.
4. Commitment to Young Family Ministries
 - a. Small groups
 - b. Alpha
 - c. Something more than Sunday mornings
5. Commitment to establish a committee from the newly merged church to evaluate community needs and potential outreach we could do to reach the un-churched, beginning in Pleasant Township, and reaching out to surrounding areas.
6. Commitment to establish a committee from the newly merged church to assess facility upgrades, additions and parking, while taking into consideration the recommendations from the community needs and outreach committee.
7. Commitment to think and act in non-traditional ways to do ministry.
8. Commitment to "Freedom in Christ" affirmation of Evangelical Covenant Church.

Goals and Dreams

- a. Increased young family membership and participation
- b. Vital small group ministry with various leaders
- c. Vibrant youth and children's ministry with own facility
- d. Increased use of land for ministry purposes

Potential Purpose Statement -

"We exist to....

- a. Build relationships with people who don't have a relationship with Christ.
- b. Help people become more intimate in their relationship with Christ.
- c. Equip and encourage people to use their skills, gifts, and resources for Christ.
- d. Care for the physical, spiritual, and relational needs of Pleasant Township, Warren, and vicinity.

Mission Statement: "To Know Christ and To Make Him Known"

May 2004

APPENDIX M

SUGGESTIONS FOR MERGER ARRANGEMENTS

1. Lay leadership initially be drawn equally from both former churches.
2. Membership be completely merged.
3. Church be dually aligned with American Baptist Churches, USA, and the Evangelical Covenant Church.
4. Church have denominationally neutral name.
5. Pastoral leadership drawn from available pools of both denominations.
6. Pastoral leaders attend denominational events on an equal basis, if feasible and beneficial.
7. Lay persons participate in denominational events as preferred and beneficial.
8. First Baptist Church building be sold after "intent to merge" declared.
9. Unless prevented by legal restraints, all financial assets of the former churches be completely merged. (First Baptist would probably be able to bring \$300,000 in assets and \$90,000 in annual income.)
10. Mission giving be divided equally between both denominations. (Approximately \$6,500 annually to each)

APPENDIX N

MERGER TRIAL ARRANGEMENTS

1. Begin Sunday School and worship jointly at Bethlehem Covenant Church on Sunday, September 12, 2004, for an indefinite period.
2. Begin joint Wednesday night program at Bethlehem Covenant Church on Wednesday, September 15, 2004, for an indefinite period.
3. Each church's offering envelopes will go to the respective church.
4. Split loose offering half and half unless a gift's intention is otherwise.
5. American Baptist World Mission Offering will be received in October and Covenant World Relief Offering in November through designated envelopes made available to all.
6. Each church pay its own staff expenses.
7. "40 Days Campaign for Cheerful Giving" will be conducted jointly in October and November.
8. First Baptist's council, boards, and committees may meet at Covenant Church, perhaps jointly with respective Covenant groups.
9. Men's and Women's groups may meet jointly at Covenant Church.
10. Split common expenses half and half, such as for bulletins, Christian education, meals, evangelism, stewardship materials, etc.
11. First Baptist make a \$200 contribution each month towards utilities and maintenance.
12. Pastors split preaching responsibilities half and half between Pastor Mike and Pastors Dick/Carol.
13. Don Lyle, First Baptist choir director, lead choir.
14. Covenant Church provide organist and pianist, Jon Erickson and Kathy Neal.
15. Pastors Dick and Carol retain office space at First Baptist.
16. First Baptist secretary type bulletins and newsletter at First Baptist.
17. Churches provide greeters and ushers jointly.
18. By the end of October 2004 evaluate success of trial and prospects of merger.

August 2004

APPENDIX O

USUAL BETHLEHEM COVENANT SCHEDULED EVENTS

Monthly

Communion – 1st Sunday of the month
St. Joe's Soup Kitchen – Every 4th week (August 17th)

September

Pregnancy Support Center Walkathon

October

Great Lakes Mission Festival

November

Samaritan's Purse – Operation Christmas Child
Covenant World Relief
Thanksgiving Vesper Service

December

Salvation Army Bell-ringers
St. Lucia Sunday
Sunday School Christmas Program
Gifts for shut-ins
Yulotta Service (Christmas Eve)

February

Covenant Children's Home
Covenant Women's Sunday

April

Maundy Thursday Service
Easter Service

May

World Mission Sunday

June

Great Lakes Pulpit Exchange Sunday
Church picnic at Mission Meadows

August 2004

APPENDIX P

MERGER POSSIBILITY TIMETABLE

1. Sunday, May 16, 2004, 11:00a.m.- Joint worship and lunch at Bethlehem Covenant.
2. Sunday, June 20, 2004, 11:00a.m. – Joint worship and picnic at Mission Meadows, hosted by Bethlehem Covenant.
3. Sunday, July 4, 2004, 10:00a.m. – First Baptist Co-Pastor Carol Visser preach at Bethlehem Covenant.
4. Saturday, July 10, 2004, 12:00p.m.- Joint picnic at DeFrees Pavillion, hosted by First Baptist.
5. Wednesday, July 28, 2004, 6:30p.m. – Quarterly meeting of First Baptist. Vote on joining with Bethlehem Covenant for Sunday School and Worship on trial basis beginning Sunday, September 12, and on putting First Baptist building on market.
6. Tuesday through Saturday, August 10 to 14, 2004 – Joint booth at Warren County Fair.
7. Wednesday, September 8, 2004, 6:30p.m.-Joint prayer meeting at Bethlehem Covenant followed by joint choir rehearsal at 7:30p.m.
8. Sunday, September 12, 2004, 9:30a.m.-Rally Day beginning joint Sunday School trial at Bethlehem Covenant followed by worship at 10:45a.m.
9. Wednesday, September 15, 2004, 5:30p.m.-Joint Wednesday night program begins at Bethlehem Covenant with supper.
10. Thursday, September 16, 2004, 7:00p.m.-Joint “40 Days Campaign For Cheerful Giving” Committee meeting.
11. Sunday, September 19, 2004, 8:30a.m.-Joint Men’s Prayer Breakfasts begin at Bethlehem Covenant.
12. Sunday, September 19, 2004-Deadline for first joint Unifier newsletter.
13. Sunday, September 26, 2004-Joint “Invite a Friend” Sunday.
14. Wednesday, October 6, 6:30p.m.-Joint Cheerful Giving Campaign Kick-Off Banquet.
15. Friday and Saturday, October 15 & 16, 2004-American Baptist Churches of PA & DE Biennial at Avalon Hotel, Erie.

PROPOSED CORE VALUES FOR THE MERGED CHURCH

- 1.. Goals and Dreams
 - a. Increased young family membership and participation
 - b. Vital small group ministry with various leaders
 - c. Vibrant youth and children's ministry with own facility
 - d. Increased use of land for ministry purposes
2. Purpose Statement: To glorify God through the power of the Holy Spirit by:
 - a. Building relationships with people who do not have a relationship to Christ.
 - b. Helping people become intimate in their relationship with Christ.
 - c. Equipping and encouraging people to use their skills, gifts, and resources for Christ, and
 - d. Caring for the material, spiritual, and relational needs of people in Pleasant Township, Warren County, and throughout the world in the name of Christ.
3. Mission Statement: "To Know Christ and Make Him Known" by cheerful giving, going, and growing together so that people will become lovingly devoted followers of Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 9:7; Matthews 28:19-20; John 21:15-19).
4. Holding to basic beliefs such as the authority and trustworthiness of the scriptures, and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
5. Commitment to "Freedom in Christ" affirmation of Evangelical Covenant Church.
6. Choices of infant baptism, child dedication, confirmation, sprinkling or immersion baptism made available.
7. Dually-aligned with both original denominations, and participating as much as possible in their programs.
8. Considering pastors from both denominations when needing new leadership.
9. Maintaining a representative, efficient, and unifying organizational structure and constitution.
10. Conducting an annual wholistic stewardship program.
11. Women in leadership and ministry accepted.
12. Commitment to local mission.
13. Commitment to quality worship services.

14. Commitment to reaching people of all ages and conditions, with a special emphasis on children, youth, and young families.
15. Commitment to adult ministries.
16. Regularly evaluating community, church, and building/grounds needs, then adjusting programming and facilities accordingly.
17. Commitment to think and to act in non-traditional ways to do ministry.

March 2005

REFLECTIONS OF ONGOING PASTOR, REV. MICHAEL POINDEXTER

Dick and Carol have done a great job of summarizing and describing in detail the process of our two congregations merging into one. There is not much, if anything, that I can add in regards to how the process happened. What I can contribute, though, is in regards to the mentality or motivation behind merging and in regards to how the merger has progressed over the last year and a half, May 2006-October 2007, the time from Dick and Carol's retirement to the present.

One thing I would say about merging is that anyone considering merger must not go into it primarily for the reason of avoiding dying out as a church body. Obviously decline is the setting out of which consideration of merger springs. That is just the nature of things. However, some how, congregations must not let their desire to survive be their primary motivation to consolidate. Merger cannot be consummated out of a survival mentality. Instead, one's motivation must be a desire to better do ministry. And not to do ministry better in order for the church to grow, but to do ministry better in order for God's Kingdom to grow. This is an aspect of church growth, whether it be via merger or some more traditional method, that needs to be distinct and consistently highlighted to any congregation, but especially to ones considering merger. Do we want our church to grow? Yes. Will it grow if we emphasize evangelism and outreach? More than likely. However, our desire to grow in order to avoid extinction cannot be our main motivation. Our desire to do ministry simply because we are called to minister should be our motivation.

So while it's almost inevitable that the idea to merge with another congregation will come from the ugly reality that one is dying, that same impetus cannot remain the primary focus for either congregation throughout and after the consolidation process. If the primary purpose behind a merger is to prevent the doors from closing, then that same survival mentality will permeate into the newly merged congregation and eventually lead that congregation down the same road of decline. In my opinion, leadership must acknowledge this from the very beginning of the process and consistently reinforce it.

In our case, I think it is very critical for us to maintain our focus on the six core values that we established as a newly formed church (Meaningful Worship, Gift-Based Ministry, Reaching the Non-Churched, Being Children & Youth Oriented, Christian Direction and Authentic Community.) These six values are not our doctrine, but rather our priorities as a church. So much energy and time went into completing the merger that many members were tired and ready for down-time following it. It was almost as if there was a sense that the merger was the end we were pursuing. However, it was not the end, but rather the means to the end. The end goal is increased ability to better reach out to and minister to our community.

Due to this tiredness, it would be extremely easy to slip back into comfortable, familiar ways of doing church that require less creativity and effort. But if we were to do that, we would soon be back in the same position from which we came; a church struggling to connect with its community and gradually dying out due to lack of outreach and due to a lack of new faces. The same motivation for us to merge in the first place, a desire to grow and to be a vital influence in the community, needs to be the same motivation following merger. Our core values help us maintain that focus.

It is true that our attendance has declined following the official merging of the two congregations. There are several reasons for this, such as people moving from the area due to lack of employment, death, and even marital divorce. But in addition to these reasons, I believe with some there is a discomfort with our focus on being outreach oriented and oriented toward children and youth. These two items seem to push people beyond their comfort zones.

In regards to this latter reason, there have been changes to the style of the worship service in order to appeal to younger families. Such changes in worship include adding video projection, a mixing in of contemporary music and instrumentation to the traditional hymns, and including items within the service for children. For some there has had to be a change in their thinking about how worship is done. This change, I believe, has contributed to some of the attendance decline.

We began an outreach to single parents in January 2007. We hold it once a month during the late fall and winter months. In addition to this, we have begun a Wednesday evening children's outreach. Traditionally, our Wednesday evenings consisted of dinner followed by breaking into small groups for adults, children and youth. But this fall, 2007, the Christian Formation Board decided to add an aspect of outreach to what we do by providing transportation to and from church for children and parents who live in a subsidized apartment complex a few miles from the church. Instead of breaking into small groups, we decided to do a corporate worship. The problem, if you can call it a problem, has been the response we have gotten from the apartment complex. The response has far exceeded expectations! Due to this, we have had to focus our attention and energy toward the children. This has left some older adults feeling left out.

Despite all this, in our first full year of being a merged congregation, 2006, we had 13 people join the church. In 2007, no membership class has been provided because of me being extremely busy with other areas, but 3 new families have been attending all year.

I believe the future of Pleasant Community Church is hopeful, and I'm thankful and sometimes bewildered that God has allowed me to be a part of it. This definitely was not something I had planned when I came here to serve Bethlehem Covenant Church as my first calling. At the same time, it will take much work staying focused on our priorities and continuing to educate and remind people of why we exist as a church.

October 2007