

Column

Long talked about and begun in late spring, the updating of the church office building – called the “Parish House” – has been an adventure. It has taken longer than expected, cost more than estimated and engaged the labor of many volunteers with varying levels of skill, including myself.

Standing on a ladder ripping out cheap late-1960s Masonite paneling, I remarked to the guy below: “You know, tearing something down is a lot easier than building something up.” He laughed and agreed.

If you think about it, no aspect of human society is exempt from this phenomenon. It is operative in family relationships, nations and churches. Several examples come to mind, the first involving the church.

I once attended the organizational meeting of a new congregation in Mississippi. As the meeting began, one woman stood up and said with remarkable candor, “I’ve torn up two churches. I’m going to keep my mouth closed this time around.” Of course, she didn’t, but the church survived in spite of her.

Sadly, this is not always the case. Many will have heard of churches, perhaps you have been in one, in which the atmosphere turned toxic. It came about because a few folk – it doesn’t take many – did what the woman I have just told about resolved not to do. They joined the demolition crew rather than the building team.

Instead of living out the Gospel joyously and enthusiastically and being actively engaged in inviting those outside to come in, these carped and complained, nitpicked and found fault. As a result, the mission of the church was diminished. Some exited through the back door and were never seen again.

The same destructive spirit can be seen in nations. In the Old Testament, we have the story of the breakup of the united kingdom overseen by King David and King Solomon. Upon the death of the later, all but two of the 12 tribes – Judah and Benjamin – revolted against Solomon’s son Rehoboam and rallied around a rival named Jeroboam.

Many of the complaints lodged against the government at the end of Solomon’s reign were just and right. and Rehoboam should have listened to the cry of the people for reform. Had he done so and pledged to be a servant leader, he would have secured the people’s loyalty and the kingdom would have stayed intact.

Nevertheless, wrecking the old order proved to be easier than building a new. Instead of the ten-tribe nation soaring to new heights, the exact opposite happened. What followed was one idolatrous king after another. Finally, destruction came in 722 B.C., when the nation of the separated tribes fell to the Assyrians and most of the people were carried away captive.

Tearing down is sometimes necessary and apparently a part of God’s plan. The preacher in Ecclesiastes says as much: “To everything there is a season . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up.”

A good fight for the right can be great fun. Even so, great caution is called for. “You don’t have to go to every fight you are invited,” as I was once told. Experience teaches us that tearing down is easier than building up.

In this and in all areas of life, wisdom from on high is needed. Reach for the wrecking bar when needed and have fun using it, but first pray and seek the mind of God.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we de sire or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us

those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. Amen. (Collect, Twelfth Sunday after Trinity)

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.