

Keith Seat: “When We Get to Carroll Street”: The Future is Now

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Here we are at our new building on Carroll Street! Isn't it great to finally be here? What a remarkable journey it has been. We can now officially retire the phrase “When We Get to Carroll Street”!

I was asked to preach the first sermon at Carroll Street, and I have been working on this sermon for a while... At first, all I could think of was what this sermon was not about. This sermon is not about how to build a building; I hope that this is a one-time event for me and for Seekers, at least for a good long while. I remember our architect and construction manager having a good laugh on more than one occasion about some painful experience and how next time I would know better...ha, ha, ha.

Nor is this sermon about management principles we have picked up along the way – although there were some notable ones, like recognizing that most busy Seekers feel that they do not have the luxury of getting anywhere early, which results in meetings starting late since not everyone is lucky enough to arrive when intended. However, inviting people to gather on any pretext 15 minutes before the start time helps to give

people permission to aim a little earlier (which may be a great tip for future gatherings).

Fortunately, I had some extra time before we got to this point of worshiping here, and have some thoughts about the subject of this sermon. In its simplest terms, I want to talk with you briefly, about how we got here, where it is we have gotten to, and – what I care about the most – where we go from here.

I. How Did We Get Here? Lessons along the Path to Carroll Street

Let me begin with a few thoughts about how we got here, which is not my main point today, but is a very interesting topic and can help us appreciate where we've come to. This will not be a recitation of the many challenges we overcame to get here – just to detail the issues of the last week to get the DC government's authorization to use the building today could take our entire time this morning.

It has been a long path. I have felt called and have been working with others on finding a home for Seekers for most of the last decade:

- It was in 1995 that Marjory, Diane Willkens and I strategized and negotiated to see how Seekers might be able to stay in our home at 2025 Mass. We had meetings and discussions with Gordon Cosby and Bill Branner, but did not find a way to be able to stay at 2025 due to the high market value of that property and the need of [Church of the Saviour](#) communities, ultimately, to obtain that value for their own undertakings.
- In 1996 and 1997 Molly, Pat, Doug Dodge and I comprised

the Homemakers Mission Group and worked intensively with Seekers to consider all possible alternatives for our home. The conclusion was that we needed to find and purchase our own building. After extensive efforts and a review of all sorts of buildings (including a morgue in which a body was on the embalming table), we found a suitable building at 1101 Penn., but Seekers did not proceed with it because of a lack of sufficient consensus in the community. The Homemakers Mission Group disbanded and there was no plan for how to proceed. This was probably the low point in the whole process, but turned out to be a good thing since the building at 1101 was half a million dollars more expensive than Carroll Street and was further away from home for most Seekers.

- The Carroll Street property had been briefly on the market in late 1998, was off the market for some time, and then came back on the market in the fall of 1999. After some hesitation about whether it could actually work for us, there was growing interest that blossomed into a full discernment process within the community, with Seekers teams set up to arrange for numerous studies of the property from every angle, including professional evaluations of environmental issues and what it would take to renovate the space in various ways. Despite uncertainties and serious initial questions within Seekers, the process unfolded much more easily this time, and by the time that the final decision was made to purchase this building at Carroll Street there was near unanimity within Seekers.
- We purchased the building on February 9, 2000, with the formal closing transferring title to Seekers. I thought the hard part was over. All that remained was to sort out the details of the renovation, hire a good contractor and move in a few months later!
- We were big on process and inclusion and formed many teams to work on all the issues relating to Carroll Street, from relations with the surrounding community to

decorating the building when it was renovated. The Building Development Team had the responsibility for developing the architectural plans and getting the building renovated. The Team worked well together over many, many months. We involved the entire community in dreaming about how to improve the space in light of its possible uses, and by late 2000 turned those dreams into concrete plans with the help of our very special architect, Sarah Woodhead. (The project went on so long that we went through three architects – the first one we chose, Sarah, changed jobs...twice, while the second one retired in the midst of helping us, which sent us on to the third one.) Making good decisions in a group process can be tricky. You probably know the old saying that a giraffe is a horse designed by a committee. We have a couple of those sorts of long-necked quirks in the building, but surprisingly few.

- After the plans were developed, the next snag was that contractors wanted almost twice as much to do the work as our architects thought they would, which was terrible news and hung us up for a while. During that time, as we looked everywhere to try to find a suitable contractor, Manna began Providence Construction, its new for-profit arm to deal with projects such as ours, and we were finally on track again. Providence began working with us in August 2001, even before we had nailed down the details of our contact with them.
- We moved all our collected furnishings and things out of Carroll Street in late September 2001 and held Seekers work parties to do the demolition work in October. That was a definite high point, and there were times later in the process when it might have been helpful if we had kept a sledgehammer and a little extra rubble around to pound on!
- During the long renovation phase, Peter, Deborah and I (with Glen documenting each step on video) met weekly with our construction manager as one snag after another

slowed progress. In recent months, as the pace quickened, other members of the Servant Leadership Team also have been part of the regular meetings to oversee the renovation. As you have no doubt noticed, it is actually not over yet, as there are a number of tasks that remain to be finished that were not required for the Certificate of Occupancy, which has been the focus of all recent work.

- What a lot of challenges we've had to overcome: we had lead paint and asbestos in the building; we had to get permission to erect a party wall; the masonry wall in the lower level turned out to be wood; the elevator pit leaked; weather delays; personnel changes; subcontractor issues; PEPCO delays; inspection and Certificate of Occupancy challenges; and just this last week, we had the failure of a subcontractor to get a needed inspection before drywall hung us up. After all that and much more, here we are!

So what does all this mean for us today? Have we learned any important lessons in this? One thing it means to me at a gut level is that we have come a very long way and have a substantial investment in this place from which it is now time to obtain the benefits by using the building fully for the purposes and dreams that we envisioned. I would also say that I have learned a fair bit about patience; listening to people; shaping decisions gently; moving forward without pushing too much; and when we are stuck and other things have not worked, to push a little to help the group get where it wants to go.

We have also learned that it is sometimes a good thing not to know all the problems that lie ahead, because we might not have had the courage or fortitude to proceed if we had known all that was ahead of us. And, in at least a passing nod to

our lectionary gospel reading today, we've tried to heed Jesus' words and resist the urge to want to "call fire down from heaven to destroy" those who were standing in the way of our progress!

More than anything else, I think we have learned to work together and to trust each other as we deal with nuanced issues and complicated logistics. The faithfulness of so many was required to bring us here – almost everyone at Seekers was involved in some meaningful way. I particularly appreciate the ongoing showing of love and support by the community for all of us in the trenches. There was remarkably little impatience, even though the delays were long and often hard to explain.

II. We Have Arrived! Where Are We?

I next want to share a thought or two about entering the "Promised Land." My daughters will tell you I'm a natural to talk about this, as I am known for counseling against getting one's hopes raised too high only to be disappointed. I do not know how it was for the Israelites, but I would guess it would be hard not to be disappointed for anyone entering the Promised Land with high expectations of abundant milk and honey. So many hopes and expectations for so long, and when you finally get there you find that milk still turns sour and honey makes a mess and attracts ants.

We have waited so long and put so many hopes, dreams and expectations on this place. It has not been literally 40 years, but often feels like it. We need to trust God and work diligently to be faithful to what we are called to do and who we are called to be here. Sometimes that may be to push forward to achieve the dreams we've had for this place, and

other times it may be to let new visions emerge while letting go of old dreams that have gone sour or attract too many ants.

At the same time, this building certainly must not be an idol for us. We dreamed, we worked hard, we spent lots of money and this building is special. Nevertheless, as the song goes, the church is not the building. We need to make sure that we keep focused on our mission to be church and recognize that this building is merely a tool which we should not hold too tightly, but expect that it will get used and then renewed over time.

We have put a lot of effort into Carroll Street because we wanted to make it useful, but beyond that, we wanted to make it nice and beautiful. Frankly, I have had a more than a few feelings of guilt or concern as the effort and dollars became greater and greater, wondering whether we should have found ways to be more economical in order to channel more time and money into missions or programs that are more worthwhile. Nevertheless, it finally came to me that what this is really about is that we are building our home together; this is the place where critically important aspects of our lives occur. Rather than treating this space like a mere institution where the goal is to get maximum square feet for minimum dollars, we are lavishing attention on creating this space. We have given this building the focus and care that others devote to creating their individual dream homes.

This is the dream home of our church community. Sometimes it is called our headquarters rather than home, but it amounts to the same thing – a place where we gather to support each other and move from here into the challenges of daily life outside these walls, taking the good news to people that we have a

home where they are welcome.

III. Where Do We Go From Here? The Future Has Arrived.

My final point today is what I really want to emphasize, which is to consider where we go from here. If we had five dollars for every time we have heard or thought “When We Get to Carroll Street...” we could easily pay off all the renovation costs for the building. We have put a great deal of focus, dreaming and expectations for the future into this building, in addition to our financial resources. I am so pleased that we are at the point where those dreams can begin to move from vision to reality.

What does this building mean to us as we look forward?

Fundamentally, this building embodies our faith in Seekers' future. It is evidence of our belief that God will work through this faith community now and for many years in the future. Our tangible commitment to the ongoing life and vitality of our church community cannot now begin to be known.

Second, this building invites us to be who we really are – and who we really want to be – both as individuals and as a community. It provides opportunities for involvement and connection as we care for the space, and a greater ability to be of service to the world around us.

Third, talking about Carroll Street is really shorthand for

our transition into a more fully separate and mature second-generation Church of the Saviour congregation. As long as we stayed at the original C of S building at 2025, we were similar to grown children living at home. Now that we are gone from 2025, we have both the freedoms and responsibilities of being on our own. More importantly, we continue to grow and develop as we discern how to be the kind of church community that is good news and can fulfill the needs of people in the 21st Century.

We have had many dreams for this building, and it is time for them to take flight. Working together to create this space brought out the best in us. Now it is time to work together to use this space in ways that will enhance our lives as a Christian community and bring hope and help to the world around us.

My spiritual director cautions me that you cannot force things to happen and cannot compel dreams to come to reality. I am sure that is true, but we can provide the right conditions and nurture new calls to help them take root. This building is intended to provide the foundation or platform on which many calls can be built and extend out to the world. I'm personally interested in working to help people actualize their calls and dreams for this space.

Now that we have this building as an investment in our future, my hope is that we can shift much of the focus and attention that it took to develop this building to other calls to strengthen our inward lives together and to broaden our outward focus in the world. I pray that we will ever deepen our relationships to God and within this community, so that we will be a growing group that is vibrantly in the tradition of

the Church of the Saviour. On the outward front, I look forward to us doing many things to further Seekers' call to the world to be peacemakers, seek justice and care for creation.

My personal sense of call to helping bring peace through mediation to those involved in disputes remains as strong as ever, and I shifted to a full time focus on mediation about six months ago. My Growing Edge project is proceeding with significant energy. I look forward to continuing those conversations with you. I also do want to find ways to assist as a resource on legal and practical aspects of new calls that are taking form within Seekers.

Conclusion

We have completed a long journey to get here to Carroll Street today, and it has been a journey with a meaning for us well beyond the building that has resulted. It has shown us that we can persevere and sustain our energy to achieve our goal. This long effort has involved the whole community in a big way, which shows us that we can work well together on complex tasks. After the long journey, we are tired – I am tired – but it is the sort of tired that comes at the end of a good race, one that makes me energized for the many races that lie ahead of us. The future is now.

Amen.