

GOD'S STORY FOR FAMILY LIFE'S MOVE TO CORNING

(Submitted by Rick Snavelly, Family Life CEO)

When God promised Moses that He would give His children the promised land, he told Moses that He would do it “little by little.” His reasoning was that by doing it this way God would be protecting them from unseen dangers. Sometimes, we desire to have it all at once, but the Lord says, “Be still and know that I am God.”

Family Life's “Building Our Future Together” project has experienced God's “little by little” promise. The overall project is huge! It is bigger than any of us can imagine, but we have a God who says He can do more than we can ask or imagine. And so, we trust Him and watch Him provide one step at a time.

In November 2016, the ministry was given an opportunity to purchase an existing building in the Corning, NY area at a price of \$1.4 million. Family Life had actually looked at this building eight years prior but the asking price was \$2.8 million and it included a run-down, no longer used K-Mart that needed to be demolished. Because the economy was bad in 2008 and Family Life's financial situation did not allow such purchases, the ministry passed on the building.

Eventually, this building was purchased by a Harley-Davidson dealership, and the property was divided with another group purchasing the former K-Mart along with additional land. The K-Mart was demolished, and a brand-new Hampton Inn was built at that site. Many times, we would drive by that area and wonder what it would have been like if Family Life had purchased this building knowing that some nice, overnight accommodations were right across the driveway.

Then in August of 2016, a broker contacted the ministry saying that a former board member had told him that Family Life might have interest in a building in the Corning area. The more the broker talked, the more I realized that this was the same building that we had looked at in 2008. He told me that the price had been drastically reduced to \$1.75 million. So, we made an appointment to visit the building with some of the board members of Family Life.

While there, I asked the broker if the local Harley dealership owned the building. That was not the case, however. The local dealership had sold to a Pennsylvania group who then purchased the building. However, they ended up selling to the Harley dealership in Binghamton. When I heard that, immediately my antennas went up because I was friends with the person who owned the Binghamton Harley dealership. I quickly learned that my personal friend, who is also a strong supporter of Family Life, was the principal owner of the building we were looking at.

A week later, I received a call from my friend who said, “Rick, I hear you're interested in my building!” That started a conversation that culminated in a proposal that came in November, but we will get to that later. At our September board meeting, the idea of purchasing the building for \$1.75 was discussed. With the plans that Family Life had already developed for property that the ministry had purchased years before just outside of Bath, we knew that we would need additional land at the Corning site to be able to accommodate what the ministry had in mind for the future.

We had been told that a 21-acre plot of prime real estate had been put up for sale adjoining the building in the Corning area. The asking price was also \$1.75 million. Frankly, I have never seen our Board of Directors so excited and unified about a potential project. One member proposed that if the ministry could purchase both the building and the property for \$2.25 million, we would see that as God leading us forward. At that point, the combined price was \$3.5 million, so we had some praying to do!

A mutual friend connected me with the owner of the adjoining property as we had lunch together. Toward the end of our meeting, I asked him if he and his group had considered what selling to a not-for-profit organization might look like. He immediately responded that he had and that he and his group liked Family Life and the things the ministry does for the community. He told me that if Family Life were interested in purchasing the property they would reduce the price to \$1,000,000!

In the meantime, my conversations with the Family Life supporter who owned the building made me realize that a purchase was something that had to be acted upon very soon. The owner shared that he had to sell the building by the end of the year. He desired for the ministry to have it, but if we could not purchase it, then they would have to find someone else because they had to fulfill their commitment to their lending institution. To “sweeten the deal” he proposed that if Family Life could come up with the money to purchase the building by the end of 2016, he would drop the price to \$1,400,000. We are now getting close to that \$2.25 million mark that the Board had proposed as a “God is in this” sign!

I wrote a letter to the landowner asking him if his group would consider coming down in price at all. A few days later I received a call from him stating that they had already dropped the price considerably and he could not go back to his partners and ask anything more. But he did tell me before ending the conversation that when we were ready to sign a purchase agreement that “there might be a little wiggle room.”

Toward the end of 2016, we were scheduled to go before the Town of Erwin Zoning Board of Appeals to seek variances for the proposed building. A few days before the meeting, I received a call from the landowner saying that he felt we needed a written agreement in place before going to the Zoning Board. I agreed but told him we needed a final price for the land. I reminded him that he had said that there might be a little wiggle room. Honestly, I was thinking he might come down \$20,000-\$25,000. There was a long pause and then I heard the words, “How does \$850,000 sound?” I did not even need to think about it because I knew that God was in this. \$1,400,000 for the building and \$850,000 for the land equaled exactly the \$2.25 million that the Board had set as the benchmark for us to move forward!

So many times, in one’s walk with the Lord there is ecstasy when we sense His leading only to be followed by what we consider a reality check. I began to wonder how it would be possible to raise \$1,400,000 in such a short period of time. It has never happened at Family Life before. One day in November, while leaving a meeting in Syracuse I received an e-mail on my phone from a business owner in Pennsylvania. The Lord had blessed them with a large sale of assets. The message said that he and his wife believed that Corning was the place for the ministry, and they were going to commit \$500,000 as a matching gift toward purchasing the building!

I was kind of glad that I had cruise control in my car driving home from Syracuse as I was flying high. But again, reality hit as I realized that even if we matched the \$500,000, an amount that we had never come close to with a year-end campaign, we would still be \$400,000 shy of what was needed to purchase the building. And I knew the Board did not want to take on any indebtedness for this purchase. So, we began to pray harder.

We held a kick-off dinner with generous donors and then sent out a letter to about 22,000 present and former supporters of the ministry telling them of this possibility. What took place in December 2016 is something I will never forget. Every day funds came pouring in either via mail or online. Some supporters donated appreciated stock, others gave from their businesses, and many gave their largest gift ever to Family Life. From the first day of that month to December 31, God provided over \$1,000,000 toward the building and the ministry was able to pay cash for the purchase!

Our agreement to purchase the land was to be finalized in August 2017. We had completely deleted the funds in this account with the purchase of the building and so we now had to produce \$850,000 to buy the land. In July, Family Life held a one-day fund drive for this purchase, and we were blown away as over \$700,000 was raised. This amount included a \$250,000 matching gift from a businessperson whose prospective deal went south and so the faith promise never came. Faced with such a shortfall, the ministry was in a precarious position as no extension of the purchase date could be granted.

But as we have repeatedly learned by experience, God is in control as our phones began to ring. Four friends of the ministry, not knowing our shortfall or our situation, contacted us asking if we could use some no-interest, short-term loans to see this purchase through. These funds, which were a huge blessing, allowed us to pay cash for the land, but most of the funds needed to be paid back by the end of the year. I remember writing the year-end fund-raising letter questioning how motivated people would get about paying back loans. And yet, the Lord spoke to hearts as gifts poured in allowing us to pay back every single loan. In fact, two of the loans were forgiven and became gifts!

Earlier in 2017, when Family Life met with both the Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals, we were told that we would be responsible for extending the dead-end road that runs in front of our building. Because of the additional traffic that Family Life events would create, it would be the ministry's responsibility to create better traffic flow. The estimated cost for this road extension was between \$1,750,000-\$2,000,000. We were told that the State would provide a grant for this as our project would create economic development.

The following year, a grant was applied for but denied by the State because Family Life is a faith-based organization. The Steuben Industrial Development Agency was assured that if such a grant would be applied for by the Town of Erwin it would go through. But once again, opposition to such a request left Family Life looking at having to pay for the entire road project. And so, we prayed fervently.

When Family Life first began the planning for this building project, the intention was for two stages. The first stage was to retrofit the current building, move into it, and then add on the large Performing Arts Center. The more we evaluated this idea, the more it became clear that a lot of extra funds would be duplicated with two stages. So, in November 2018 the Board of Directors approved the new plan of cutting down on the size of the building and doing everything in one stage. That decision forced the timeline of the road extension construction to be moved up.

The Steuben Industrial Development Agency Director contacted our local State Senator and asked if there was anything he could do. He contacted the Department of Transportation to see if they had any grant funds available for such a project. We were told by the IDA office that they had never seen such a grant made by DOT, but a month or so later, I received a call from the IDA Director. He started the conversation by saying, “I can tell you have been praying!” I assured him that I had, but I was curious why he would say that. He told me that he had just got off the phone with our State Senator who said he believed he could get the DOT to come up with \$1,500,000 for the road project. God is good!

In early December 2018, we met with Town of Erwin officials, attorneys, engineers, and IDA officials to discuss the possibility of such a grant. At that meeting, we learned that this offer was not a done deal and that a new government leadership recently elected might nix the offer. We were also told that we would not hear DOT’s final decision until the end of January. The Thursday before Christmas, I received a call from the IDA office that again began with an interesting statement of “I have a Christmas miracle!” He had just got off the phone with a DOT official who told him that they had \$1,500,000 sitting on their desk ready to move forward with the road project!

Earlier in 2018, we had to appear once again before the Town of Erwin Planning Board. They had an unwritten rule that the Town needed to see something “substantial” within the first year after they give approval to a project or else you had to reapply once again. With all the anxious moments and many months of meetings we had endured getting their first approval, we were not desiring to go through that scenario again. We appealed to the Planning Board that we had spent \$850,000 in purchasing the land and that we had gutted the entire inside of the building, but we were told that was not enough to satisfy the requirements of “substantial”. They did, however, give us an extension to the end of 2019 to do substantial work.

Initially, Family Life was told that if the road extension happened, that would be considered “substantial.” So, when work began on the road in the late summer of 2019, we were encouraged that we would not have to reapply. Family Life had to sign an agreement with the Town of Erwin stating that the ministry would pay up to \$250,000 for any costs for the road construction over the \$1,500,000 grant. We were blessed that every bid for the road project came in under that figure meaning that no funds would have to be paid by Family Life for the road. However, since Family Life did not have “skin in the game” as a result of the DOT grant, the ministry was told that this road work would not be considered part of our project. Now, we were facing having to do “substantial” work within the next three months.

The Family Life Board of Directors took a major step of faith and agreed to start site work at the facility even though we did not have the funds to pay for such work at that time. In November,

large equipment showed up at the site and began removing trees and brushes, digging retention ponds, burying wastewater tile, and scraping topsoil in preparation for parking lot material. Prayers went heavenward that the year-end fund drive would provide the necessary financial resources to pay for this major work. And once again, the Lord answered in an incredible way as the necessary funds were raised and the Town of Erwin told us regarding our work, “Now that’s substantial!”

In 2020 another big step has been taken. In July of that year, a one-day fund drive was conducted for the purpose of raising the funds to construct a sound-barrier fence between Family Life’s property and the subdivision behind it. It is our desire to be good neighbors so that those living in these homes would not be bothered by traffic noise and lights that come from those traveling to future Family Life events. The cost for this 850’ concrete fence was pretty significant. But God spoke to the hearts of nearly 2,000 listeners and they contributed enough money to not only construct the fence but also to do some additional site work on the property.

Sometimes our plans are not necessarily exactly what the Lord has in store. That was the case as our project was pretty much shut down when the world-wide pandemic continued into 2021. Though physical work was stopped on the site, Family Life used that time to interview and choose the various contractors who would oversee the project. Once that decision was made, we were challenged by our main contractors to consider demolishing the existing building and start the project from the ground up. It was determined that the building Family Life had purchased in 2016 had some major issues and the thought was that it would be more cost-effective to take it down and thus avoid many future problems.

Family Life’s year-end project for 2021 was to raise enough funds to demolish the building while completing the rest of the site work in the parking lot area. Once again, God spoke to the hearts of many people, and our financial goal was not only met but was greatly surpassed. The building was demolished at the beginning of 2022, and we were ready to go full speed ahead once the weather broke in the spring. But then we experienced a “death of a vision”!

Though nothing had been said to Family Life about the consequences of removing the existing building, once demolished we were informed by the Town of Erwin that our project would now be considered a new one and all approvals by the Zoning Board and Planning Board in 2017 were voided and new approvals had to be sought. For 6-7 months in 2022, we worked diligently seeking to meet all the new requirements asked of the ministry by the Zoning Board. However, in November of 2022 this Board rejected our plans. These plans were almost identical to those that they had unanimously approved of five years earlier. It left us speechless and wondering what was going to happen with this project in which we had already invested so much.

There are times in each of our lives that God closes a door only to open another one. And many times, the new door is actually better than the door that was closed. Our architects and engineers met with us as we went back to the drawing board and came up with a new plan to move the proposed building to a different site on the property. Such a move would alleviate some of the concerns that the neighbors had presented to the Zoning Board. After many meetings with key Town of Erwin leaders, the Zoning Board agreed to consider our new proposal. Though it will

cost a considerable amount of money to change the location of the building, we believe that the new site will ultimately prove to have many benefits.

Our trust in the Lord was rewarded as in March of 2023 we met once again before the Zoning Board. We had reached out to friends of the ministry who lived in the area, as well as local business owners, to attend this meeting and share their encouragement with the Zoning Board to approve our new plan. The meeting was moved to an alternate site in anticipation of a larger-than-normal turnout. But even the Town Fire Hall was not large enough to accommodate the 170 people who came in support of Family Life. After much discussion, the Zoning Board unanimously approved Family Life's first variance request. However, the second request was tabled until the next meeting because the allotted meeting time had run out.

It took only about ten minutes at the follow-up Zoning Board meeting for a unanimous vote in favor of the second variance request. Two months later, the Planning Board followed suit and unanimously gave their blessing for Family Life's new site plan. After a nearly two-year delay, site work began again in August of 2023 as much ground was moved, parts of the storm water management system that had previously been buried was dug up, and new catch basins and underground piping were installed. Over 5,000 tons of gravel was brought in to elevate the new site for where the building will be situated. Plus, a new dewatering system was put in place to manage any high-water table issues in the basement underneath the stage. It was truly an answer to prayer to see work being done once again with Family Life's "Building Our Future Together" project!

We truly can identify with Moses with his wilderness experience as we are patiently awaiting the Lord to provide for the next step. Family Life has been given a deadline of November 30, 2026, by the Town of Erwin to have the building completely up and finished on the exterior. The Town has graciously extended our building permit to this date also. The estimated cost to have this phase of construction completed is \$30 million. The ministry has reached out to several foundations and individuals who have been blessed with considerable wealth asking for their involvement in this building project. To date, there has not been anyone who has responded positively. Currently, we are waiting on word back from a major endowment to which Family Life has sent a letter of inquiry seeking the amount needed to meet this deadline.

We are asking all Family Life friends and partners to pray with us that the Lord, by His power, would do immeasurably more than we can imagine in providing the significant amount of funds for construction. This construction will be by far the biggest cost that Family Life has ever encountered in its history. But as we have seen God work multiple times over the course of the ministry's 68-year existence, we are trusting Him once again to do more than we can ask or imagine!