

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

November 2014 - Volume 22, Number 11

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Should We Consider Closing Our Church?

This year ten out of every 1,000 congregations will close their doors for the last time. Across the U.S., this means that more than 3,500 churches go out of business annually. Surprisingly, the average congregational mortality rate of one percent surfaces as among the lowest for any type of organization.¹ That fact is little comfort for the members, pastoral leaders, and communities who witness the death of a beloved spiritual community.

An economically viable church has enough financial and human resources to keep up its current programming, staffing, and building maintenance without depleting savings or endowments. But viability is not the same as church vitality. Strong churches enthusiastically pursue their mission, move forward based on their unique calling, and do so with abundant joy. In short, some churches remain viable but are not vital. Likewise, many new churches show great vitality but are not yet able to be financially self-sustaining. Congregations that lack viability and exhibit anemic vitality inevitably slide toward downsizing, merger, or final dissolution.

What Are the Warning Signs?

A number of opinions circulate about the correlates of at-risk churches. Careful research supports only some parts of these uncomplicated theories.

The aging church assumption. Many experts refer to a church life cycle, which equates a congregation's expected lifespan to the human lifespan. If this myth were true, the average congregation's age (counting from the year of the church's founding) would be roughly equal to the average life expectancy (currently seventy-six years for men and eighty-one years for women).

In fact, the highest rates of church closures actually occur in the first decade of congregational life (years one to ten). Closure rates decline after that and remain stable in the second and third decades of church life. Mortality rates peak again after the church lives for four decades. Closure rates drop again until a church reaches the seventy-five-year

mark when the possibility of closure climbs upward once more.² What might account for this up and down closure rate pattern?

New and young congregations (those in existence ten years or less) brave the greatest mortality risk. They most often face isolation from other community institutions as well as little denominational support. Many attract insufficient members for a critical mass of resources. The resulting combination of youth and small size places them at great risk for closure. Because religious groups differ in their church planting strategies and level of support for new churches, denominational affiliation also plays a role. Evidence suggests higher closure rates among new church plants for independent or conservative Protestant groups than for churches in mainline Protestant traditions.

In the later decades of a church's life, other dynamics present obstacles to viability. Around the forty- to fifty-year mark in a church's history, the generation of people who founded the congregation begin to disappear. For the church to continue, a new generation—typically, the children of the first generation—must move into participation and leadership. Among congregations that do not retain sufficient numbers of their first generation members' off-



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spring, closure is almost a certainty. Congregations are always at risk during generational transitions unless they attract new members unrelated to current participants. In general, participation by multiple generations points toward greater vitality. One researcher describes this generational pattern as the “half-life” of churches: half of the churches founded in any given year will not exist in another sixty years.³

The church size assumption. True—large, well-funded churches rarely close their doors. Still, size is only a surface indicator of other important vitality resources. Churches that eventually close experience declining worship attendance—either a sudden drop or a slow downward trend over many years. At some point, a congregation reaches a number that is close to or below a critical mass—the lowest possible number of active members necessary for survival. The average survival threshold is about thirty to thirty-five participants, but could be even fewer people if a congregation chooses to draw on financial reserves.

The “clear sign” or “decisive moment” assumption. Few highways to closure post a huge sign that declares “NOW.” In some cases, a crisis occurs that forces church leaders to ask, Can we continue to be a church and carry out our mission without a pastor or a building? However, in most cases the majority of congregations slowly turn inward—focusing more and more on current members’ needs, building maintenance, and meeting budget demands. Like a slow tire leak, people ignore the waning enthusiasm of volunteers until programs fall completely flat. Committees or individuals over-function in desperate attempts to administer artificial life-support to their dying church. Spiritual growth and vitality slip away long before leaders recognize the point of no return.

The Pain of Closure

Because any given church comes into being for a particular purpose, in a specific place, and supported by a unique group of people, changing circumstances can produce insurmountable obstacles to viability. Members, the pastor, and the wider church struggle to understand and perhaps accept their decision-making responsibility to close the church.

The impact on church members. Discussions about closure generate fear and stress for worshipers, which may keep members silent or delay critical conversations. Their response parallels what people go through when they lose a loved one—grief, denial, anger, and depression. Grief can also produce shame, self-blame, or the scapegoating of others.

The impact on the pastor. Leading a congregation through the process of closing its doors and ending its ministry within the community is stressful for clergy too. Regardless of the pastor’s prior work history, serving in a closing church is a threat to a clergy’s professional identity. No pastor wants to see a church close under his or her watch. First-call pastors—those newly ordained and serving as pastor in their first church—find these circumstances the most devastating. They may be the most likely pastors to leave ministry after the church closes. And when expectations for revitalization by judicatory leaders go unmet, the episode is even more painful if the church eventually closes.⁴

The impact on the community. Local residents depend on the church’s ministries (such as feeding programs) and they feel the loss too. In rural areas and in some neighborhoods the church may be the only community meeting place.

A Graceful Ending

A healthy closure is possible if members believe that the church will be resurrected in new forms as part of the universal church—through a church merger, partnerships with other organizations, or creative use of financial assets (such as a legacy trust). For example, one congregation dispersed funds to various mission projects in their final year that exceeded their total mission giving for the previous 14 years. Another church sold their building to a newly organized congregation that needed affordable worship space. The critical question is not Should we stay open? but How can we discover new ways to do ministry together?⁵

1. S. Anderson, et al. “Dearly Departed: How Often Do Congregations Close?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2008) 47(2): 321-28.

2. K. Dougherty, et al. “When the Final Bell Tolls: Patterns of Church Closings in Two Protestant Denominations,” *Review of Religious Research* (2008) 50(1):47-73.

3. Dale Jones, Director of Research Services for the Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center, 2014, email note.

4. Gail Cafferata, “The Last Pastor: Adaptive Challenges and Pastoral Well-Being among Protestant Clergy Closing Their Churches,” Association for the Sociology of Religion presentation, 2014.

5. L. Gail Irwin, *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2014).