

CHURCH CLOSING WORKSHOP 2014

OVERVIEW

- Late 18th to early 19th century, large decline in churches, with closings, especially in New England.
- Late 19th to early 20th century decline as well. Currently in same pattern, though with varying reasons.
- Often connected with economy (there was a “Great Depression” in the church in the 1930’s).
- Always emotional.

LEGACY

A term that I’ve used and which churches seem to find particularly helpful, is “legacy.” What kind of legacy does your church have today and, if you choose to close, what kind of legacy will you leave for the future?

DISCERNMENT

- Discernment Process – story telling, fleshing out the history, uncovering hopes and needs, saying things out loud, no assumptions, uncovering myths.
- Long term review – possibly follow lectionary cycle, with worship/education/ communication emphasis on life of church. Perhaps a shorter term process...
- Letting go of the past and claiming the present situation, without blame or fault.
- Options may be:
 - Continue present ministry in present location by
 - Increased revenue/sharing facilities with another congregation
 - Revitalization (explore models for continuing ministry in new ways)
 - Sell building and relocate to growing area (would also require revitalization)
 - Merge with another congregation
 - Close and provide a different kind of blessing to others
- Framing the question: “God, what is your desire for our future?” Etc. Whatever is, must be asking God, not ourselves. Otherwise you will find pretty human answers.
- “Exploring” or brainstorming of possibilities for what might happen. Asking questions like, “If money was not an issue, what do we feel God is calling us to?”
- “Improving” on ideas, “Weighing” options, “Closing” on a choice or choosing, “resting” with choice before action. (Do we derive more consolation than desolation from the choice?) Continuing the good work of the church – its legacy.
- “Guiding Principle” for the congregation’s discernment (mission, vision, covenant, other). It guides all discussion and against which all decisions are measured.
- Remembering – re-membering, putting the pieces of the church’s story together.
- Part of history conversation is about “rooting” their story in scripture, faith, and heritage.
- Letting go of personal desires and obstacles to moving forward.
- Try to set aside fear.
- Belief that “our church is supposed to survive” as opposed to other churches. Sense of “losing.”
- Notion/fear that closing means failure or that our faith/church are somehow “disposable” because the church is closing.
- Anxiety, alienation, and despair. Stages of death (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Not always in order and not all at same pace.
- Need leadership that can, with help, set aside the anxiety and grief of closing, in order to see more clearly the Spirit’s guidance. Survival mode is not conducive to visionary thinking.
- Too many churches put off questions of viability until it’s too late for many options and may well be too late to do things the way they feel called.

- Possible plan: First phase of discernment by whole congregation. Next phase by appointed leaders, if enough people left to separate. Leaders will form recommendation for next steps.
- Survey/questions to define viability. (Meets regularly for worship, reaches out to members and community, cooperate with wider church body, etc.)
- Preliminary survey (“Ending with Hope” pp. 23-24) May highlight issue(s). Additional survey (“Ending with Hope” pp. 26-27).
- Discernment process: Handy list in “Fear Not, Little Flock” (beginning page 9). Also good questions for, “If we continue here, what might God want us to do?”
- Listening throughout. Everyone has a voice. Nobody is more of a member by virtue of longevity or service. May have more pieces of the story, but not a greater portion of ownership of the decision.

REVITALIZE

- If revitalize, how?
- A sense that God has called you to continuing ministry.
- A willingness on your part to change.
- A belief that you have sufficient resources to continue and a clear need for your ministry.
- Cannot simply be an alternative to closing. Must be what God has called them to.
- NACCC consultants available.

MERGE

- Merger will fail if it is only seen as a way of continuing a church. It will more likely thrive if seen as an opportunity to do the ministry God is calling you to.
- Successful merger requires everyone to get away from old thinking and former survival mode.
- Merger possibility: in a real sense, you exchange 2 deaths for 1 life.
- Focus on a blending of traditions and identity or the complete rebirth of a whole new ministry for both.
- Takes time to go from “us/them” to “we.”
- Should aim for new pastor, not retention of either existing pastors from merging bodies.

CLOSE

- Church as living organism with a life cycle of birth – life – death. We cannot always choose our end. Eternal life is only offered to individual people, not to institutions.
- Closure is not failure, any more than death is a failure.
- Members and staff will go through different stages of grief/loss in different ways and some may never reach acceptance.
- Vote to close: high probability of chaotic emotions, second-guessing, blaming...may not have unanimous vote.
- Pastor or leader(s) need extra support as you go through process.
- Encourage members to find a new church.
- Set date for closing worship.
- Sample closure motions “Fear Not, Little Flock” (beginning page 18).

CLOSING WORSHIP

- The closing ritual is a celebration of life, hope
- Possible elements:

- Release pastor to new call
- Release members to new church(es)
- Thanksgiving for years of ministry
- Thanksgiving for those helped by assets
- Possible formats for closing worship (“Fear Not, Little Flock” pp 32-33) and below
- Nothing should leave the building until after closing worship – don’t want it to feel different in that way.

DISSOLUTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF ASSETS

- In addition to your faithful history, this will be your legacy
- Arrange for disposition of assets.
- Where can they go and where not? No gifts or free stuff. Set fair market value and people pay. Sample in “Fear Not, Little Flock” (pg. 29). First dibs to family that gave item. Reasonable severance to pastor, but not large gifts.
- Must be consistent with church’s governing documents (check your articles/bylaws for a dissolution clause)
- Must be consistent with law.
- Possible recipients:
 - NACCC, through Congregational Foundation
 - Congregational Library
 - State/Regional Association
 - An important mission/non-profit
- Legal assistance for dissolution is recommended.
- Hold aside small fund to pay for unforeseen expenses.
- Confirm that you do not have “hidden” debt, like grants repayable to the NACCC

HELP IS AVAILABLE!

- Opportunity to hold a vicinage council at some point during process, either to help in discernment if cannot come to a decision, or to offer guidance after decision is made.
- NACCC consultants are available: contact an NACCC executive for assistance

RECOMMENDED READING:

Gaede, Beth Ann, editor. *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*. Alban Institute, 2002.

Williams, Dena. *Fear Not, Little Flock*. Self-published by the author, 2012. (www.edensedge.net) \$5

WEB LINKS:

Congregational Library – archiving (<http://www.14beacon.org/for-churches/closing-donation>)

*United Church of Canada – Closing Ritual ideas (http://www.united-church.ca/files/planning/theme/worship_closure.pdf)

**Note: this is just one resource I found by doing a simple internet search for “liturgy for closing a church” - there are many more available.*

**WHEN IS IT TIME
TO CLOSE MY CHURCH?**

God knows.

Overview:

Cyclical – every 100 years

Financial – can be connected to economy

Emotional – touches us deeply

CLAIM YOUR LEGACY

Discernment...

Options may be, but are not limited to:

Continue present ministry in present location.

- Increase income through leasing space
- Revitalization

Buying time?

Options may be, but are not limited to:

Sell building and relocate to growing area.

- Is this what God wants for/from you?
- Will your current ministries be needed in a new area or will you have to change?

Revitalization opportunity?

Options may be, but are not limited to:

Merge with another church.

- Is this what God wants for/from you?
- Cannot simply be a way to “stay alive”

Are you willing to change?

Options may be, but are not limited to:

Close, provide a different kind of blessing to others.

- Significant sense of loss
- How to claim your legacy?

A Discernment Process:

- Framing the question: “God, what is your desire for our future?”
- Brainstorming the possibilities.
- Choosing an option
- Continuing a **LEGACY**

A Discernment Process:

- Establishing a “Guiding Principle”
- Re-memembering your past
- Rooting your story in faith and heritage
- Letting go of obstacles

Obstacles to Discernment:

- Fear
- Sense of failure
- Grief
- Survival Mode
- Unwillingness or inability to change
- Too few left

Discernment tools:

- Who will do the discernment?
- How long will you take?
- Surveys
- Viability
- Lots of listening

**Choosing to wait
or to move...**

Revitalize?

The option for revitalization assumes:

- A sense that God has called you to continuing ministry.
- A willingness on your part to change.
- A belief that you have sufficient resources to continue and a clear need for your ministry.

Merge ?

The option to merge requires:

- God's calling, rather than survival.
- Blending of two or birth of something new.
- Willingness to work hard.
- A fair amount of time.

Close?

The decision to close...

- Painful emotions – sense of failure or loss.
- Life cycles apply to institutions.
- Requires a full discernment process.
- Ongoing support for all, including leaders.
- Hope – celebrating past and identifying a legacy.

Closing Worship

Elements of a Closing Ritual for your church:

- Celebration of Life – message of hope.
- Claiming history and legacy.
- Release of pastor and members.
- Note: remove nothing from church beforehand.

Dissolution & Distribution of Assets

CLAIM YOUR LEGACY

Notes on distribution of assets:

- Congregation decides on distribution.
- Where can assets go?
 - Non-profits
 - Not members or staff
- Consistent with church's bylaws.
- Consistent with the law.

Possible recipients:

- NACCC, through Congregational Foundation
- Congregational Library
- State/Regional Association
- An important mission/non-profit
- A combination
- Any non-profit or combination you choose

Other thoughts on dissolution:

- Legal assistance is recommended
- Set aside a small fund to cover expenses
- Check for “hidden” indebtedness, such as loans or grants from the NACCC

Help is available!

- Vicinage Council
- Consultants
- Resources
- Support

**Thank you and may God
bless your church!**