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Top Ten things to remember when closing a church



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Top Ten things to remember when closing a church

📅 August 7, 2016 👤 Jon White

For the next few weeks in the Magazine, we're exploring changing norms in the Episcopal Church. In this first piece, Howard Whitaker shares the top ten things he's learned from closing a congregation; something we're likely to see more of in the near future

By Howard W Whitaker

Whatever the 21st century Episcopal Church will look like, closing some of its 20th century remnants will be one of its major tasks. I am a priest closing a 150 year old mission church. The wardens and I are receiving many "how to" questions from others who intuit they will sooner or later be doing the same thing. I didn't get this course in seminary. It isn't included in the vestry handbook. For those who need help now, I suggest 10 principles to start.

Normalize the process for your congregation.

This is a normal—and will be an increasingly normal—life cycle event across all regions and denominations. The average life of a church is 70 years, roughly three generations... much like a family business. It is estimated that 60% of churches built after WW II will close over the next decade. The sociological reasons behind this are complex and can be easily researched elsewhere.

Frame the reality.

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Our leadership chose to, as much as possible, work with the language “expiration date” and “life cycle” rather than termination and failure. We chose to work within the time frame of 6-8 months for our “active dying.” We did not want to just to “pull the plug.” But, we were positive that we did not want a slow, agonizing death. We wanted to go out with grace, dignity—and if possible—some celebration of our legacy of ministry. It sounds good, but only time and experience will tell whether this is better than sudden death.

Message discipline will save you much grief.

Post official statements to your social media or website. Stay focused and “on message.” Keep it simple. Clarity trumps empathy. Refer gossips and provocateurs back to the statement. Avoid analysis, debate, and commentary.

Everything we know about the grief process applies to a church closing.

The finer points of Kubler-Ross’s five stages may be open for critique, but rest assured you will know them intimately in the closing of a church. The five stages are an effective leadership tool for listening to and sorting the reactions of the congregation. You will always have people at every stage. Treat each other gently.

Everything we know about the pastoral process in death applies to a church closing.

Just as people frequently die the same way they have lived, the dynamic, character, and personality—good and bad—of a congregation will likely not change much as they approach their death. We all hope for deathbed transformations; they rarely happen. If anything, people turn into caricature under stress.

This is not the time for blame or morality plays.

The official, public line is that this is no one’s fault. Focusing on the normal life cycle and changing social and cultural norms is ultimately closer to truth. Many years of intentional, but incremental decisions bring congregations to the point of death. Clergy playing the “I piped, but you would not dance” card will be unhelpful; as will the chronically aggrieved complaining that “we were fine, the changes killed us.”

Of course, every context is different.

But read what is already out there. *Ending with Hope*, Beth Gaede, editor (Alban Institute, 2002) and *Toward a Better Country*, L. Gail Irwin (Resource Publications, 2013) are a good start. This is a growing field and there will soon be more resources available.

If there is ever a time for mutual ministry, closing a church is it.

The leadership team should tightly bind one to another. Active support of the diocese, during the process is essential. Good collaboration with area clergy is quickening and will enhance continuity of care for your members. If you are not in relationship with a spiritual director, now would be an excellent time to start.

Positively and transparently seek to re-home church objects, as well as people.

The ministry and sacramental purpose of church goods from candlesticks to coffee pots does not die and the

sending forth into other congregations can be healing. Do expect some objects to be emotionally booby-trapped and land-mined.

Remember who you are.

Your congregation looks to its leaders for example and tone during this time; it's almost over; don't flake out now. Witness to our trust in God, the presence of our Lord, and our life after death.

© 2016, Howard W Whitaker. This appeared in a slightly different form as a post to the Professional Episcopalians group at Linked-In.



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Kathy Collins

🕒 August 8, 2016 7:49 am

This estimation of church life span is very US centric. My current charge in the Highlands of Scotland has a traceable Episcopal presence dating from 1540. The current church building will be 150 years old in 2018 and has had a worshipping presence for the whole of that time. The current congregation numbers 30 resident souls spread over a wide rural area and our numbers are swelled throughout the year by seasonal residents and visitors.

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James Pratt

👤 Reply to [Kathy Collins](#) 🕒 August 9, 2016 9:48 am

The rural context, whether in Scotland or North America, is quite different. My first parish was a rural, 4-point charge. While one of the churches has since closed, because the village population had shrunk to only about a dozen year-round residents, the church in the largest village has existed for about 150 years, and will endure as long as the village does, as 90% of the population were at least nominally members, and had been for generations.

In the urban and suburban context (and I doubt there is much difference between the European and North American context here), people are highly mobile, the demographics of communities change, sometimes rapidly. In such a fluid environment, all community institutions face a limited life-span.

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Paul Powers

👤 Reply to [Kathy Collins](#) 🕒 August 8, 2016 11:07 pm