

## **God's Grace in Closing a Church**

When I first started at the Presbyterian Church of Le Sueur, we had about 30 people in worship. Even so, we were a mighty congregation, filled with ideas and hope. Unfortunately, as time went on, more and more people in our aging congregation passed away. The 30 became 25, which then became 15, until it finally hovered at around 10 people. About two and a half years after I started, our session had a retreat to talk about the future.

As we sat around that table, we looked at the options. And then, one of our session members dared to say it. She said that no, it isn't time to look at the future. It isn't time to revitalize. It isn't time try the latest new church initiative. Instead, it's time to start the process of closing our doors. And as she said it, no one responded in the way that you might expect. No one broke out in anger or fury. Instead, quite the opposite happened. An overwhelming feeling of relief and even peace flooded the room. Someone had finally had the courage to say it like it was.

Over the next two and half years, we went through the closing process. We grieved, we shared stories, and we did one last program for the community. Finally, on January 28 of 2018, we had our final service.

So the question remains, where is God in closing a church? If I may be so bold to say, in numerous ways. I saw God's hand in how people finally had the courage to name the reality before us and to make plans accordingly. No more exhausting, emergency surgeries; instead, we could simply take the time to breathe and to let go.

I saw God's hand in the legacy that we left behind. I saw God in the pastors our church had raised up and in the money we could leave to our community. Yet perhaps most importantly, I saw God's hand in what lied ahead of us, after the closing.

As Christians, we believe in a Jesus of resurrection. We believe in new life, even after death. And at the Presbyterian Church of Le Sueur, I saw that. Local congregations received our former members with joy. On a personal level, God provided me with a new opportunity for ministry. Yet most miraculously, I saw it in how that building, that building that once went by the name of the Presbyterian Church of Le Sueur, remains a place of worship to this day. And it's a bustling one, at that.

You see, long before our church closed, a Hispanic Congregation had been renting space from us. After we closed, they continued to rent the building from the presbytery. And just last month, they posted an amazing video about a women's retreat that they just held. In watching that video, my heart filled with joy. Our old sanctuary was bursting at the seams.

Closing a church is not easy. And yet, I want to give a word of encouragement. If your congregation has concluded that it's time has come, fear not. God will not abandon you. And I can assure you, you will see new life ahead. Amen.