

When Is It Time to Close?

Every organization has a life cycle. It starts with a vision that draws people together to create something new. As people rally around this 'labor of love,' they recognize the needs they can address and programs are developed to meet those needs. As these programs grow, so does the need for more formalized administrative responsibilities. Once these structures are in place, people tend to become very comfortable with how things are going. When this happens, new ideas are shot down, energy fades, feelings are hurt, and people end up leaving. With fewer people, programs get cut, financial stability declines, administrative positions are slashed, and all that's left is a very small group of people with very little money. The only way to address the situation is to either end the life of the organization or start again with a new vision.

Some congregations have the energy and interest necessary to start again with a new vision, and so they embark on the processes of revitalization, transformation, and visioning. Most congregations do not have this level of energy or interest in trying something new – and there's nothing wrong with that. Choosing to 'die with dignity' is a very honorable decision that deserves great respect. It is not easy to let go.

The decision to close a church is never easy – and it should only be done as a last resort. If your church is just starting to consider that possibility, the first step is for your church to go through a book study using *Autopsy of a Deceased Church – 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* by Thom S. Rainer (2014 B&H publishing group) as the primary text. It contains short chapters, discussion questions, and suggestions for getting the church back on track. All churches would do well to review this text periodically in order to avoid the death of the organization.

If the possibility of closure is a bit more imminent, the next step is to use the following questions as 'conversation starters' in your church. Using a few at a time, these questions can be used in session or committee meetings, small groups, newsletter articles or bulletin inserts, or simply placed on the tables during a coffee hour or fellowship time. The list could be given to each member to read over and pray about on their own in preparation for a congregational meeting, dinner, or retreat. Use them anywhere that could spark a constructive conversation or in any manner that would best meet the needs of your congregation.

1. Describe the overall mission/purpose of the congregation. What is the vision for your church over the next 5 years?
2. Describe your experiences in securing worship leadership.
3. What percentage of the budget is used for mission projects? What was it 8 years ago?

4. Does the congregation's current giving level fully fund the operating budget? How much shortfall/excess is typical for this church? How do these numbers compare to what they were 8 years ago?
5. How many people currently attend? How many attended 8 years ago? What is the average age span of attendees?
6. How many session members are there? Is the church able to meet the Book of Order requirements in this area (3-year terms, rotating classes, etc.)?
7. What are three primary issues faced by the congregation?
8. How many children have been baptized in this congregation in the past 5 years? How many new members (outside of confirmations) have joined in the past 5 years?
9. What types of faith formation activities (bible studies, Sunday school, forums, etc.) are provided by the church? Who leads them?
10. Describe the new programs and mission/outreach projects developed by the congregation in the past 3 years.
11. What percentage of the congregation is involved in hands-on mission projects?
12. Describe the worship experience in this church: is it a true encounter with God, the primary weekly program, or a weekly social gathering?
13. Is worship attendance growing, plateauing, or declining? How long has this been the case?
14. Describe the physical condition of the facilities. What percentage of the budget is used for building maintenance/operations?

Once these conversations have taken place, allow the congregation to pray together, sharing any doubts, fears, and thanksgivings around this process and its insights. When you are ready to enter into a conversation with a presbytery representative, please call 701-772-0783. Your congregation does not have to go through this alone.