



Sacred Stories



Continuing a Congregation's
Legacy of Ministry



CHRISTIAN
CHURCH
FOUNDATION

Helping Disciples Make a Difference

Acknowledgements

Sacred Stories: Continuing a Congregation's Legacy of Ministry is designed to help congregations work through various issues as members decide if the congregation's visible ministries should be terminated and its witness should continue in new and different ways. Materials for this publication came from a variety of sources, including resources from the Christian Church Foundation and Church Extension, as well as the Rev. Charles "Chuck" Blaisdell.

Appreciation is also expressed to Rev. Darrel Manson, who relates his experience with the closing of Artesia Christian Church, starting on Page 15.

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” I Corinthians 11: 23-26

This sacred story is central to who we are as followers of Jesus. It defines us as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In the words of I Corinthians, we “proclaim Jesus’ death” every time we gather at the Lord’s Table. In Jesus’ death we find hope because in his resurrection we now know victory.

In your church, you celebrate this sacred story. And, you also claim many other sacred stories ... births and weddings celebrated, challenges met, lives saved, and victories won. Your church has been a gift to you and your loved ones, your community, and the world. So, if that day comes when the church can no longer “live,” it is a time of great loss; a time for grieving. Death is terribly difficult ... even the death of a church.

Much of the New Testament is devoted to letters to congregations that once existed. However, none of the churches that were started by Paul exist, today. If you travel to Corinth or Ephesus today, you will see there are no longer people even living in areas that once were thriving cities. Yet, while those churches no longer exist, their ministry, started centuries before, continues to touch us today

We know that death is an unavoidable part of life. The fact is that churches, like people, have life cycles. And death does not mean that we have failed or that we have been defeated. Death is a part of life and probably

means that God is attempting to give birth to something new. As a people of the resurrection, we must claim that, even in death, God is doing a new thing!

There is no shame in closing a church when faithful people are good stewards of their resources. There is, however, a danger if congregations utilize the resources of a previous generation to maintain a church for their own personal needs.

Is it time for your church to consider bringing to a close its visible ministry? Have you looked at demographics, considered programs on revitalization, and prayed about the legacy the congregation can provide?

If it is time to close the doors, it does not mean that the church's mission and ministry must end! We are people of the resurrection!

By contacting your regional church office or the Christian Church Foundation, a process of discovery can begin, where the congregation evaluates its past, present and future ministry, discovers the most appropriate avenue to transform that ministry, and elects the most effective way to continue a viable ministry. That may lead to a Named Permanent Fund with the Christian Church Foundation that distribute dollars for mission and ministry in perpetuity so that the church’s witness can live on! And the sacred story continues....

Knowing When

Congregations come into being for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Most Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations have been established by dedicated men and women in places of activity and growth, frequently with the assistance of the region in which they are located as well. Each is an outpost for the proclamation of the Gospel, nurturing of its members, and sharing in mission in and for the world. The congregation remains truly a church only so long as it is able to provide caring pastoral ministry and is in mission beyond its own doors.

Here are some of the signs enumerated by Lyle Schaller, parish consultant, that indicate when the local church is in serious decline:

Total Concentration on Member-Oriented Activities

When the congregation lapses into survival mode, caring only for its own well-being and providing resources only for its own programming, then you have a telltale sign the church is in trouble. “The Christian Church exists primarily for those who are not in it.” (Reuel Howe)

Excessive emphasis on the past

While pride in past achievements is good, obsession with looking back says the present and the future are being neglected.

A neighborhood church without a community constituency

By nature the church is an integral part of a community. If a large majority of members of a congregation have to travel long distances to attend church, this is often a sign of impending decline.



OGDEN, ILL. — Like many rural communities, Ogden had experienced years and years of demographical change. Ogden Christian Church, with an aging population and community in regress, was struggling to survive for the next generation.

Weekly worship attendance was less than 20 when disaster struck in 1996: a tornado severely damaged the church and nearby property.

After five more years of soul-searching, consultations with regional staff and the Christian Church Foundation, the remaining members of Ogden Christian Church decided to disband.

Using a \$300,000 insurance settlement, and selling other assets, the congregation established a permanent fund at the Christian Church Foundation. That fund, the congregation decided, would perpetually support a variety of Disciples-related ministries, including Disciples Mission Fund and Week of Compassion, and create an Ogden Christian Church Student Scholarship at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

A Rebellion Against Denominational Calls for Dollar Support

While congregations won't always be happy with the way their denomination works, neglect of support for the wider work, says Schaller, is a sign of local trouble.

A Firm Resistance to Change

Being “set in one's way” is a warning of creeping obsolescence for churches as well as people and machinery.

Recognizing the Signs

What do you do when some of the signs or conditions seem to exist?

First, seek counsel. There are several resources available to Disciples of Christ congregations. Your regional staff has experience in helping congregations assess their viability, and can put leaders in touch with potential church transformation programs. The Christian Church Foundation can provide counsel on financial matters, and Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation has expertise in related issues. All of these people can help church leaders consider the disposition of the congregation's resources. Legal counsel can provide advice on state regulations governing the disposition of property and the proper process for terminating the legal incorporation of the congregation.

Second, form an evaluation committee. The committee will work with the regional minister on a careful study of the status of the congregation. The committee should consist of the most trusted leaders and those who are able to dispassionately evaluate collected data and advice, and recommend hard decisions.

Third, conduct an assessment, preferably by an objective outside party, aimed at uncovering basic factual data upon which an objective evaluation can be made. The following are seven questions that could form the basis of such a study:

1 Has the congregation experienced a long-term and continuing decline in membership and attendance at worship services? Compile statistics from at least the last 10 years. The Year Book and Directory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

is a ready resource. Past issues of the Year Book, if not in the congregation's library, may be found in the regional office or the Yearbook office in Indianapolis.

2 What is the predominant age group of the congregation? Develop a form for active and participating members, dividing each into male and female. Then determine how many persons of each age group (70 - above, 60-69, 50-59, 40-49, 30-39, 20-29, under 20) the congregation has. Once the data is secured, the question needs to be raised: How many of those who are members are prevented by age or infirmity from giving active assistance to the work and the witness of the congregation? There comes a time when elderly people or a few people just do not have the energy needed to move forward with a vibrant and dynamic ministry that will involve others.

3 Has the congregation maintained a good level of stewardship? Look for data that will indicate the ratio of money spent on strictly local purposes (building maintenance, salaries, etc.) versus the amount invested in mission efforts locally and worldwide. Generally, a good investment in outreach is a healthy sign. A primary question to be answered is: Can the congregation afford to pay its pastoral leadership? And, what is the stewardship potential, not just the past history, of the current membership?

4 Has the community in which the congregation is located changed radically since the congregation reached its membership peak?

Information about the community is available from various professional demographic services and may be obtained

for a modest fee by contacting Hope Partnership or the regional church office. A shifting population pattern from one racial ethnic group to another, or a different economic group, presents one set of issues. The change from a residential community to business or industry constitutes another.

5 Is the congregation willing, or able, to adapt its ministry and lifestyle in order to develop ministries that will meet the needs of a changed community? If there is a change in the community, inquire of congregation members about their willingness to embrace multi-ethnic or multi-lingual ministries. Is the congregation open to “nesting” a racially ethnic congregation? Can the congregation provide special ministries or services to workers or to businesses if a change to industry from residential is the transition issue?

6 Is the present facility physically adaptable for use?

Can parts of the building be shut off? Are the heating, electrical, and plumbing expenses affordable in the current structure? Can these be fixed for use in the future in a cost effective manner? Is the

building accessible for all people, or can it be made accessible?

7 Are new efforts in evangelism and education really feasible?

Are there unchurched people in the community and does the congregation have the leadership to handle evangelism or education ministries? Is there enough “critical mass” in the congregation that visitors would want to return? List the resources of church members, and evaluate whether there are sufficient funds to conduct a ministry that will attract persons successfully.

Once the study is completed, the data should be produced in a document that is factual and without editorial comment. The document should go to the official board of the congregation and be available to the general membership so that communication lines are open. But the evaluation committee, in conjunction with its outside resource persons, should do the analysis. Then the committee must make the recommendation on its own. No resource persons should, or will, make the decision as to whether the congregation can continue to minister in that setting.

Options

There are at least five options to be considered following the study of the ministry viability. The five are:

1 Continue the present ministry in the present location.

A measure of reality is needed here; the congregation cannot rely too heavily on the heart, which would tend to obscure judgment in favor of this option. If the congregation is willing to make significant changes in its worship style, leadership and stewardship, the congregation may be ripe for transformation. However, doing more of the same is not likely going to help the congregation change its situation. Studies show that congregational transformation requires revisioning and high energy leadership from congregational leaders and pastor. It is important to take a good look — through assessment — at your congregation to see if you are a good candidate for transformation.

2 Arrange to share facilities with another congregation.

Disposing of one of two pieces of property and sharing could be a viable option. The question then becomes whether the tenant congregation can maintain a vitality when so much of a congregation's identity is wrapped up in a place of meeting. How will the new congregation and the existing one co-exist?

3 Relocate to a growing area of the community. Sometimes relocation will revive a congregation. However, relocation is tricky. It does little good to relocate an unhealthy congregation or a program that does not meet the needs of the new context. For more information on relocation, contact your regional minister or Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation.



CHATHAM, Va. — Chatham Christian Church closed its doors in 2003, ending a 156-year presence in this Virginia community.

Longtime members Jude and Rachel Craddock were among the handful struggling with the decision to close.

“We had no young people, and only six active senior citizens. No new members since 1992. The loss of fellowship was painful. The need to close was necessary while we were mentally and physically able.”

Recognizing that its ministry could continue in different ways, the congregation sold its building and assets:

- Giving 30% outright to its regional office, the Disciples of Christ Historical Society and to a neighboring Disciples congregation specifically to provide ongoing pastoral care for Chatham's homebound members;
- Establishing a permanent fund at the Christian Church Foundation with the remaining 70%. That fund now makes distributions annually to a community not-for-profit food pantry; to help establish new Disciples congregations; and to the Christian Church in Virginia.

The story of the congregation's witness is continuing although the church is closed.

4 Explore various models for continuing one's ministry in a new way.

One option may be to enter into a yoked ministry with another congregation with which you could share a minister and programming resources.

You may explore the possibility of uniting with another congregation. Blending two congregations is rarely an easy task, even if the two are from the same denomination.

Another possibility is a “parallel new church start,” in which a congregation sells its facilities and meets in a temporary location, using the majority of assets to launch a new church. In this option, the new congregation forges its own worship style, program and leadership, while the host church continues to worship and pray for one another. At the end of two years, the host church closes and members participate in the new congregation. An assessment will help leaders determine if this is a viable option. Not every community is conducive to this type of option.

Another option may be to share your facility with another congregation of a different racial ethnic background. “Nesting” a congregation can be a very exciting ministry if true partnership exists between the host and nesting congregations. The relationship must

not be that of landlord/tenant, but a covenantal relationship where the unique ministry of each congregation is affirmed and celebrated.

In some settings, a congregation may decide to “morph,” which is similar to a parallel new church start. This works well when the condition of the neighborhood has changed. The new racial ethnic church starts as a satellite ministry of the host church until it overtakes the existing church in size and budget. At that point, there is a transfer of assets to the satellite while providing a location for the host church to worship.

5 Close the doors and bless the continuing ministry.

Most members are reluctant to think of this option. Old buildings and old memories are precious. But the church of Jesus Christ never has been dependent upon buildings. And memories are to be preserved, not worshiped. Indeed, closing the church and using church assets to further ministry and to create a permanent fund at the Christian Church Foundation — providing annual distributions for ministries — may be the most positive option for some congregations as they seek to respond to God's leading to places and contexts requiring new mission and ministries of faithfulness.

When the Chapter Must End

If the decision is made to close, the memories need to be lovingly stored with the assurance of God's continued presence. How can God's kingdom be advanced even through the close of a congregation? The congregation's resources could be used to form new communities of faith, either through the creation of a permanent fund for new congregation establishment or an outright gift. Maybe the congregation would like its resources to undergird the whole mission of the church.

Here are some very important steps to be taken by the congregation and its elected leadership:

1 In consultation with your regional church staff, facilitate the transfer of members to other congregations.

The members are the most important assets. Careful attention should be given to a process by which the members of a closing congregation find their way into the fellowship of other congregations. Contact the ministers of nearby Disciples

congregations and invite them to enter into a covenant with the closing congregation to cordially welcome into their memberships the temporarily homeless members. Provide the ministers with member lists, telephone numbers and addresses. Give special attention to shut-ins and the hospitalized, preferably arranging for a new minister to visit them. If no Disciples congregations are near, approach a United Church of Christ congregation, the Disciples' "Ecumenical Partner." Provide each member with a letter of transfer for presentation when they unite with another congregation, accompanied by information about nearby congregations and worship times.

2 Secure competent legal counsel.

This cannot be over-stressed. Laws vary from state to state concerning the termination of nonprofit corporations and organizations and the distribution of assets (including not only the building and property, but also bank accounts, choir robes, organs, hymnals, etc.). There are often legal aspects which need to be taken into consideration in the termination of any contracts, e.g., with the pastor, any tenants in your building, etc. The Christian Church Foundation or your regional office can be of valuable help here.

3 Check your constitution (or charter) and by-laws.

Make certain that every step required in those documents is taken. Action may be delayed if by-law requirements are not met. One congregation discovered that the quorum requirement for a congregational meeting had not been changed from an earlier time when the membership numbered more than a thousand. Membership had dwindled to where it became difficult to gather the 50 members needed to establish a quorum to make decisions. The important thing is to follow the requirements, or change them as necessary and possible.

What to do with the building?

For congregations faced with disposing of their assets, extreme care and caution is needed. The guiding theological question as the congregation ponders selling their buildings or other assets is this: What is the most faithful, effective and efficient use of our assets for God's mission?

Why are you considering selling?

- The church needs the money for "cash flow"?
- The congregation has declined in size and/or has aged to the extent that effective ministry in the community is compromised severely?
- You are considering merging or some other form of partnership with another congregation?

The decision to consider selling a building must be driven by questions of mission. If the congregation is selling because of "cash flow" challenges, the experience of many churches is that the sale will only post-pone a decision about closure, merger, etc.

Selling the building may not always be the best answer. In some areas, property is so expensive that new congregations of any denomination have difficulty financing. To be good stewards of assets of legacies provided by past generations, church leaders need to look at all options and alternatives as they seek to dispose of property.

4 Check the status of any deeds to property owned by the congregation to make certain the property is marketable.

Often a reversionary clause, or some other restriction on the use of property, exists when a congregation has received property as a gift; this is an especially important and sensitive issue in the situation where a congregation's property includes a cemetery. Seek advice from your attorney on how to deal with any legal restrictions.

5 Carefully inventory the complete assets of the congregation.

Develop a complete inventory of all properties, bank accounts, endowments, major furnishings, supplies, materials and equipment. (A professional appraisal of the property is not advised since it is unnecessary for sale purposes and there

sometimes are legal obligations to disclose the amount to prospective purchasers.)

6 Prepare documents for the termination of ministry and for disposal of assets.

The decision to terminate the congregation and the disposition of assets should be made in separate documents. The termination document may include “whereas” phrases in which the achievements of the congregation are remembered and the reasons for the closing recounted along with the official date for ending the corporate existence. The assets disposition document should include recognition that the congregation was founded out of a concern of the larger church, that it has been an integral part of the whole church, and that the assets are disposed of with that fact in mind.

7 Official records of the congregation (Board minutes, histories, membership lists, Memorial lists, etc.) should be sent either to the regional office or to the Disciples of Christ Historical Society (7229 Main Street, Bethany, WV 26032).

An initial significant gift might be provided to the Historical Society to help cover administrative costs for archiving these documents in perpetuity. Listing the Historical Society as a beneficiary of a percentage of a permanent fund’s annual distribution also will allow the Historical Society to help maintain these documents.

The Story Can Continue

A decision to terminate its visible ministry can be eased if the congregation knows that its resources are creating new or sustaining ongoing ministries. Sometimes an outright gift can be made to specific ministries (new congregation establishment, regional camps and programs, etc.).

The sacred story of the congregation often can best continue through the establishment of a permanent fund at the Christian Church Foundation. Annual distributions from this fund can be designated by the congregation to support local outreach ministries, regional camps and programs, starting new congregations, or to the broad ministries of the church through Disciples Mission Fund and its successors. A disposition document will specify how earnings are to be disbursed.

The Christian Church Foundation is part of the team that can assist as you make decisions about the future use of the church assets, including the church property. Legal counsel will be needed to assure that any disposal of property is handled properly. It should be noted that while property and furnishings belong to the congregation, tax-exempt status permits distribution of assets only to another tax-exempt entity, not to individual members of the congregation.

Selling church real estate can be especially challenging and the sale process is often complex. It is highly recommended that professional expertise from outside the congregation be used. Realtors, engineers and attorneys can help assure that the congregation’s financial interests are protected.

Establishing a Permanent Fund

Establishing a Permanent Fund with the Christian Church Foundation is not complicated, but because church assets often are used to establish the fund, special care is needed. Foundation staff are trained to assist congregations in this process, and church leaders are encouraged to call (800) 668-8016 early in the process to schedule a free consultation with a Foundation representative.

A Permanent Fund at the Foundation is a irrevocable gift; the gift is invested in a mixture of equities and fixed income investments that are designed to meet two main goals:

- Provide a stream of income for ministry; and
- Protect the original buying power of the gift from inflation.

The Permanent Fund is guided by a Permanent Fund Gift Agreement that is completed and signed by leaders of the congregation. This letter of intent provides direction for the Foundation, in perpetuity, to distribute money for ministries the church wishes to support forever. Foundation staff can help the congregation create the appropriate wording and identify the missions and ministries that will make the congregation's legacy last for generations. This may include distributions to local outreach efforts, regional or general ministries, new church ministries through the regional office, scholarships for college students or ministerial candidates, or a variety of other efforts. Because each congregation has a different vision of future ministry, Foundation staff work with the congregation's leadership to make sure the appropriate ministries are identified and listed in the Gift Agreement.

DALLAS, TX — After almost 60 years of witnessing in the Dallas area, Greenville Avenue Christian Church closed its doors in 1982 after a series of studies confirmed it was best to close the church while it was still financially solvent.

"The members knew they could continue holding services indefinitely, using up their resources until they were gone, but prayerful consideration led them to the decision not to spend all on a failing cause, but to find ways for the church's mission to live on," wrote Mrs. Janice Tatlock, wife of the congregation's last minister, Lloyd.

And, thanks to a permanent fund carefully crafted by members, the church's witness is growing, distributing about \$40,000 a year to a variety of ministries, including Disciples Mission Fund, student scholarships at two Disciples-related institutions and the Dallas Area Association of Christian Churches to help new churches and provide programming and leadership training.

Total distributions since the church closed are have topped \$1 million, and the permanent fund's value — thanks in part to prudent invest-ing by the Foundation — remains above \$900,000.

Those once affiliated with the congregation hold a reunion annually in August to celebrate the



ongoing witness of Greenville Avenue, and to remember with fondness friends who no longer can attend the reunion because of death or infirmity. The highlight each year is the reading of permanent fund distributions to the various church ministries as those in attendance realize Greenville Avenue's legacy is providing a witness much larger than they had ever anticipated.

SAMPLE PERMANENT FUND GIFT AGREEMENT

On Jan. 1, 2024, the elected board of ABC Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), City, XYZ state, voted to give \$_____ to the Christian Church Foundation, Inc., 1099 N. Meridian Street, Indianapolis, Indiana, for the ABC Christian Church Fund. We hereby request that the Foundation administer such gift as a permanent fund of the Foundation pursuant to the following provisions:

1) We request that the Foundation use such gift to establish a permanent fund to be known as the ABC Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Fund;

2) We request that the gift be retained by the Foundation as a permanent fund and that annual distributions of income, as defined in the Foundation's Joint Investment Trust, be made as follows*:

____% to Disciples Mission Fund

____% to Christian Church regional office

____% New Church Ministries

____% Local Food Bank (as example of non-Disciples community charity)

If any of the above listed institutions cease to exist or to be affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), then their annual distributions will be divided proportionately between the remaining entities.

3) Members, friends, and others may add to this fund at any time, such as through outright gifts, memorial contributions, the remainder of life income gifts and/or bequests naming this fund as beneficiary. The Fund may also receive charitable bequests or the remainder of life-income gifts naming _____ Christian Church as beneficiary. if the charitable purposes specified in those gifts are consistent with the Fund's purposes.

4) Notwithstanding anything herein to the contrary, we acknowledge that the Board of Directors of the Christian Church Foundation shall have the final authority over the management of the gift assets and the distributions from the fund.

Signed _____

Signed _____

Dated _____

Note: Percentage of distributions should equal 100%; all distributions must go to qualified non-profits, and at least 51% of the total annual distributions must go toward institutions and ministries related to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The Closing Worship

Celebrate in an act of worship. Once the details relating to the distribution of assets have been completed, the congregation should immediately plan for a celebrative closing act of worship. Representatives of neighboring congregations, regional representatives, former members, and other ministry partners should be invited to share in this service. The life of the congregation can be celebrated with spirit and hope. The service should include some words of remembrance, expressions of joy

over the achievements of the past, an act of deconsecration of the facilities, and an affirmation committing all resources of people and property to the continuing witness of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Participants should include selected lay persons from the congregation, the minister, and representatives of the regional and general manifestations of the church. Special consideration should be given to the disposition of the communion ware; in some instances, it can be given to another congregation and dedicated for future use as part of this closing act of worship.

Here is a suggested outline of service:

The Prelude

The Call to Worship

The Hymn of Praise:

(Suggestion: "Christ the Lord is Risen Today")

The Invocation and Lord's Prayer

The Gloria Patri

A Word of Greeting and Explanation

President/Moderator of the Congregation

The Anthem

The Word of God

(Suggestion: Matthew 28: 1-20)

The Pastoral Prayer Minister

Prayer Response

Anthem or Solo

The Sermon Minister

The Lord's Supper

The Offering

The Celebration of Holy Communion

**A Litany of Remembrance, Celebration
and Deconsecrating** Regional Minister

Leader: We remember, with affection the heroic efforts of our fathers and mothers in the faith who labored to bring this congregation into being;

People: and the steady stream of men and women and young people, who, across the years have found inspiration here and who have given leadership to this congregation;

Leader: and the contributions of the regional and general ministries of the church who provided help and counsel in the early days, and support and resource over the years.

People: We rejoice in so rich a heritage and thank you, O God, for those who laid the foundation for our community of faith.

Leader: We honor and express our gratitude for those who have given pastoral leadership to this congregation and who have served in staff positions.

People: We thank you, O God, for the dedication and service of those who have answered your call.

Leader: We celebrate the victorious witness of this congregation, especially those who have been ordained to the Christian ministry;

People: and the outreaching concern of our members as we have reached beyond ourselves to undergird the work and witness of the church of Jesus Christ around the world. We rejoice that our labors have been effective and that the gospel has been proclaimed.

Leader: Since *(date)* these facilities in which we meet today have served this community of faith as a center for worship, study and service. It is replete with precious memories and stories, and we consider it an old friend. However, the erosion of the years on people and facilities has brought us to this point of the termination of our visible witness and we address ourselves to an act of deconsecrating. In full awareness of our commitment to Jesus Christ, we have expressed our willingness to close our visible ministry in this place and make available to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) our accumulated assets so that the witness of this congregation may continue in perpetuity. To that end, we join the following covenant:

Unison: Affirming our membership in the church of Jesus Christ around the world, we renew our vows of fidelity to God and prayerfully covenant: that in terminating our visible ministry, we commit all resources of people and property to the larger witness of the Church, that with affection for facility that has served us well across the years, we hereby deconsecrate it as a place consecrated to the service of God, and, therefore, make it available for other purposes, and that we individually covenant to continue to honor and serve Jesus Christ and the Church, offering our-selves willingly to whatever service God calls us to accept.

Prayer

Regional Minister

A Message from the Wider Church

General Church Representative

A Circle of Fellowship***The Benediction**

Minister

* Not every congregation will want to have a circle, but if you do, the following paragraphs describe it:

The congregation is asked to form a circle around one block of pews in the sanctuary. The minister makes some remarks about the uniqueness of the experience and the uniqueness of the circle:

“This circle speaks quietly of the unity within the community of faith that has been this congregation, a group of Christians who have endured hardships, lived through difficulties, survived tensions with Christian grace, and experienced the joys and miracles of God’s grace and abundant love. When it became evident that we need to terminate our visible ministry, we did so with dignity, commitment and Christian concern that the witness of this congregation be sustained and continued. We look back upon our yesterdays with appreciation for achievements tinged with sorrow that the decision had to be made.”

The minister then recognizes the Steering Committee for its work during the difficult process that led to the final service. Following this, remarks by selected individuals may be made. The service ends with the following comment by the minister:

“We Disciples are a Bible people and it is fitting that we close the visible ministry of this community of faith with scripture and go out from this place with the message of that scripture in our hearts:

“For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace: The mountains and the hills before you shall break into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle, and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off.” — Isaiah 55:12

A Different Resurrection: One Pastor's Perspective

By Rev. Darrel Manson

I never aspired to being the closing minister of a congregation. It's not the kind of thing most ministers want on their résumé. But it has been one of the most important and fulfilling tasks I have done in ministry.

For seventeen years I ministered to and with the Artesia Christian Church in Artesia, CA. Like many churches, its membership aged and participation slowly dwindled. It is not as though we had no mission or vision, but as

time went on, the energy for those things declined. Although we tried to keep things going as long as possible, it became evident that it was no longer viable for us to do ministry as a congregation any longer. Perhaps there might have been ways to cut back more and keep going a bit longer, but it would have only postponed the inevitable.



It was a difficult decision that had to be faced, and the people of the church faced it bravely. Even though for some it was the church they had been in most of their lives, it was clear that it was time for something else. With great sadness, the congregation voted to end our ministry together. We set a date several weeks in the future that would be our final worship service.

As their pastor, I knew it would be a time for grieving, but I also encouraged them to understand that from that point until we actually ended the ministry together a couple months later, they would be called on to serve as stewards of what God had entrusted to this congregation, including its heritage, its ministry and its assets.

We consulted with our Regional Minister who helped us understand the ways we could approach our task. The assets all had to go to other tax exempt organizations. The policy in this region is that the church property, if given to the region without instructions, would be used for new church development — either the property itself would be given to a new congregation or the money from sale would be used to start new churches. We wanted to be active in determining the ministry that would be done with the assets from the congregation. To do less, it seemed to us, would fail to live up to the stewardship that we were given by those who came before us.

The next difficult choice was what to do with the biggest financial asset, the church property. Its location was less than desirable for a church. We put it on the market thinking that perhaps a church would want it or developers would use the acre of land for apartments or houses. Because it is getting hard to have land rezoned for church use, our zoning turned out to be an important part of our asset. Because of that we got several bids on the property — going well beyond our asking price.



Even before we sold the property, we began thinking of what we would do with the proceeds of the sale. We began by making a list of the many ministries that were important to us as a congregation. Then we selected five of those to be the recipients of a permanent fund in the congregation's name to be established with the Christian Church Foundation. We wanted the annual gifts for these ministries to be significant, so we limited it to five ministries. Included in this was establishing a grant program for leadership development in the Region. Even as our congregation was coming to an end, a new ministry was born.

Even though we limited the number of recipients of permanent funds, we wanted to share our blessing with some of the other ministries as well. To do this we set a minimum amount that would go into the permanent funds, and began thinking about one-time gifts to be given to these other ministries.

Before we heard the bids on the property, we began thinking of how to divide this money. In about fifteen minutes, we had set aside \$150,000 for these one-time gifts. In all the years I had been minister of the congregation, we had never had a budget of \$100,000. And in a few minutes, we were already doing ministry beyond our dreams.

When we learned how much money we

would be getting, we began to add ministries and to increase our gifts. Through these one-time gifts we are sharing over a quarter million dollars with 17 ministries and organizations. We also set aside money for first year funds for our permanent fund recipients, so that they wouldn't have to wait a year for the first draw on those funds.

In addition to permanent funds benefiting local and regional ministries, we were able to make one-time gifts for scholarships at Chapman University and Disciples Seminary Foundation, our local Habitat for Humanity, Disciples Mission Fund, Week of Compassion, Reconciliation Ministries and regional work.

During our final worship service, rather than receive an offering, we used the offering time to announce the gifts we were sharing. Representatives from most of these ministries and organizations were on hand. It was a wonderful experience to be able to call them forward and join with them in their ministries through our gifts. Certainly it was a blessing for those who were the recipients of the gifts, but more, it was a blessing for the congregation to see that even though it was a time of grieving, there was great ministry being done and that would continue forever in our name.

We also had a great deal of other assets to share: banners, dishes, choir music,

art supplies for children, and many other things that accumulate through the years. When we discovered that Chapman University didn't have copies of the Chalice Hymnal, we gave them ours. Many of the hymnals were given in memory or in honor of people who were special to our members. We kept those bookplates in the hymnals and put in new ones to note that the books were given to Chapman by Artesia Christian Church. Now, whenever those hymnals are used at Chapman, they honor both those who were named and the church itself.

We also placed an inventory of what we had on our church website and invited other congregations to let us know what they could use. Much of our choir music went to other congregations. Our banners were sent to First Christian Church in Lompoc, where they will grace their worship space as they have ours. Our dishes were taken by First Christian Church in Bakersfield where they were given to families in need in packets of four place settings.

Throughout the final weeks, we continued to worship and praise God even though we were hurting, knowing that there was an end in sight. We continued to meet at the Table and to hear God's Good News and to seek God's will in what we were doing.

*Resurrection is not only
the hope of a final
resurrection; it is also the
new life that comes to us in
the little deaths we face
over and over.*

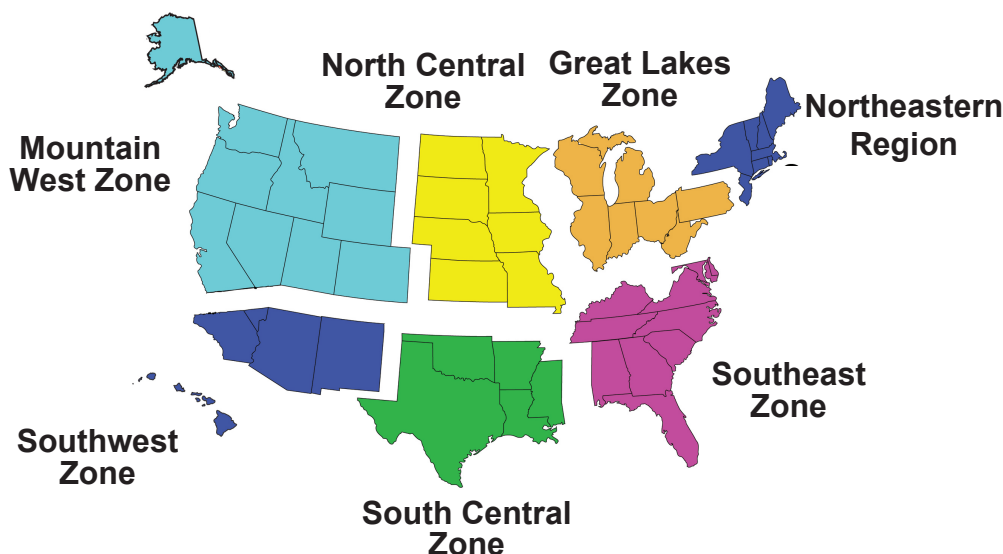
Often when church closings are discussed, resurrection is spoken of. I sometimes suspect that we speak of resurrection out of a pastoral concern — trying to keep hope alive in the midst of grief.

But I can bear witness that resurrection was most certainly a part of the closing days of Artesia Christian Church. Resurrection is not only the hope of a final resurrection; it is also the new life that comes to us in the little deaths we face over and over.

In the case of Artesia Christian Church, when we made the decision to end our ministry together, that vote was really the time of death. We saw that the ministry we had loved so deeply was no more. But immediately, we began to see new, bigger ministries that were opening before us. The days of selling property, giving away banners and dishes, making gifts and establishing permanent funds was a revitalized time of ministry. The church that had been hanging on to life, when we finally gave it up, found its new life in the resurrection that took place among us.

Because of this resurrection, the ministry of the Artesia Christian Church did not end when we closed our doors. On the contrary, in many ways it was just a beginning.

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Your Regional Minister

Your Regional Minister's contact information is available in the Yearbook and Directory published by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and on the Disciples website at disciples.org/regional-ministries/

Suggested Reading

Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations, edited by Beth Ann Gaede.

Contributors represent eight denominations and include more than a dozen pastors, lay leaders, judicatory staff, and others who have “been there”—who have helped congregations through the painful closing process. Resources include models for assessing whether a congregation should close; reflections on members’ and pastors’ experiences during closing; case studies; guidance for deciding what to do with a building; suggestions for selecting and preserving documents and artifacts; rituals for healthy closings; a survey of historical trends regarding closings; and other helpful materials. ISBN 1-56699-263-X; paper; 173 pp.



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