The last Sunday: When its time for a church to close

by Angie Mabry-Nauta in the January 7, 2015 issue

On an average day in the United States, nine churches close their doors for good.

This isn't often talked about, partly because it's not exactly breaking news. Church professionals know the trends: church membership and religious affiliation are declining. Relatively few churches are growing.

It's particularly hard to talk about your own church's demise. It's not easy to say what sometimes needs to be said: "It's time for our church to close."

On the first Sunday of Advent in 2013, the Reformed Church in Plano, Texas—where I had been a member for 16 years—celebrated the beginning of a new church year as usual: royal purple and evergreens, a single lit candle on the wreath. Then, right before the benediction, the two copastors asked everyone to be seated as the members of the church's consistory approached the podium. Their somber faces reflected a decision that the congregation knew was coming.

After much prayer and deliberation, said John Weymer, the vice president, the consistory had decided that the church would close at the end of January 2014.

"We made the decision that we felt was best for the church and its members," Weymer said. "We had the choice to keep limping on as a dying church, or to close our doors with dignity while we still can. People need a vibrant faith community, one that can care for them, challenge them, and disciple them—all for the purpose of

sending them out into the community in mission. We have been unable to provide that for quite a while now."

The easier choice would have been to hang on—hang on to memories of what once was, to the good that yet remained, to outside chances of survival, to the tightly knit groups that were like family, to the "what ifs." A church's tougher choice, the one of the narrow gate and the road less traveled, is to recognize that it cannot shepherd its flock adequately and to avoid becoming a stumbling block in people's faith journey. If courageous church leadership includes knowing when a church's death is best for its people, RCP's pastors and lay leaders fit the bill.

"The church's bias has always been that you do whatever you can to keep a congregation going," noted Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, former general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. "This is neither a healthy nor correct Christian theological approach. Death is never the last word, and the new is always seeking to break in."

But how does a group of church leaders come to such a no-turning-back decision? How have other churches done it?

When Rosemont Community Church in Tucson, Arizona, contacted John Cameron Foster in 2011, the congregation was worshiping with about 50 people in attendance. Foster is an interim minister trained specifically to help churches in crisis and transition. His task, he says, was "to give Rosemont one more chance to become viable."

Foster led the church through a program aimed at helping a congregation take an honest look at its past, assess its present, and discern its future. Eventually he asked whether the congregation thought it could make necessary changes and "move into a positive future." Many people, however, wanted instead to continue with things the way they were, maintaining that they didn't need a pastor and could get by on pulpit supply.

"The hardest thing for a dying church to do is change graciously," Foster said. He describes a "three-legged stool of viability": critical mass, financial viability, and vision.

"Sadly," he said, Rosemont's leadership "did not want to own up to" the church's lack of viability in all three areas.

Everything changed in September 2013 when, at the RCC consistory's request, representatives from the classis—the RCA middle judicatory—met with leaders. Through a two-hour conversation, the consistory came to understand the breadth and depth of the church's circumstances. Three months later, it voted to close the church.

Foster describes closing a church as one of the hardest pastoral experiences he's had. "Call it a funeral to the tenth power," he says.

Edie Lenz closed a church in her first call out of seminary. When Lenz came to Church of the Good News in 2002, the RCA mission church near Chicago's Wrigley Field had already seen urban redevelopment and gentrification begin to scatter its congregants and partner organizations. Economic and demographic changes soon brought the church to a crossroads. Would it make radical changes in its vision and mission to accommodate what was happening around it? Or would it follow its people out of the community?

In a 2007 classis-wide assessment, church-health experts visited CGN to gauge its health and effectiveness. They suggested closure.

Lenz believes that it was neither the ongoing money issues nor this outside recommendation that led CGN to decide to close. The church's leaders—those who were left—were overburdened and overwhelmed. "We did not have a full consistory, and those in leadership on consistory were not all actually leaders," Lenz recalls. "There were several who did their best, but they really were not equipped to serve. It is exhausting to keep going knowing that you carry the load mostly alone." Church of the Good News held its final worship service in May 2008.

Nearby Bethlehem United Church of Christ closed the following year. During Wayne MacPherson's 17-year tenure as senior pastor, neighborhood changes took their toll, as did a building in need of renovation. Programmatic ventures—new worship practices, evangelism efforts—were unable to attract new interest. In 2008, with giving and membership down and an aging remnant remaining, Bethlehem's leadership met with the UCC Illinois Conference to explore their options.

In April 2009, a consultant led a group from Bethlehem in discussing the congregation's history and remembering its accomplishments. She also helped them begin discerning possible scenarios. Three emerged: merge with another church, share the building with another church, or close. "There was no blame," MacPherson

recalls, “and there was relative calm.”

The congregation tried both merging and sharing, to no avail. That August, it voted to close. “We felt a sense of freedom once the plan to close was set because no more decisions had to be made,” said MacPherson. “Also, the remaining members formed themselves in a different way as the remnants. Their mind-set seemed to be, ‘We’re the ones who are left, so let’s be nice to one another.’”

Each of these three churches suffered long-term membership decline. Each engaged in an assessment process, with help from judicatory leaders. Two experienced significant leadership challenges. All made painfully brave decisions to close rather than limp on.

Before my church in Plano closed, a team of leaders spent two years researching the church’s situation, gathering statistics spanning a decade. They visited other churches to gain perspective. They made themselves available to the congregation for questions and comments. All the while they reported to the consistory and the pastors.

The team’s findings were painful. They revealed a church in long-term decline and in need of radical change if its ministry was to continue. Yet worship was vibrant, and a faithful band of 135 members remained strongly committed to their church. RCP’s leadership discerned the facts, felt the resistance, and ached for better days. The tension immobilized them.

Something had to give, and eventually one member of the lay team rose to the occasion. A child of the church since sixth grade, now a husband with children of his own, he sent an e-mail to the whole team.

“It is with great pain but clear vision I write that I believe RCP needs to close,” he wrote. “Our vitality is all but gone, and we are merely surviving, rather than thriving for Christ. This isn’t what church is supposed to be about.”

It was difficult to read. Several church leaders got angry. But, Weymer says, this e-mail was a catalyst to more open discussion of the issue at hand.

Two months later, church leaders hosted three forums in which members were presented with the hard facts—and with five possibilities for RCP’s future:

1. Make no change. RCP would continue operating as it had been. Depleted funds would force the church to close within six to nine months.

2. Restart. RCP would close its doors and sell its property. A small, dedicated group would then become part of a new church—new name, new location, new identity, new DNA.

3. Relocate, rename, rebrand—but without actually closing RCP.

4. Make new ties. A different denomination might be better situated to provide local support. RCP could join as a stand-alone congregation or merge with an existing one.

5. Close. RCP would set a date to close its doors. A final sermon series and a closing worship service would celebrate 35 years of ministry and mourn its end. Church leaders would assist members in finding new church homes.

These options were presented as independent from the course to be taken by the pastors, who were discerning their own options. Before the benediction on the Sunday following the forums, the pastors announced that they'd be leaving. They would stay to lead worship and provide administrative support only until they were called elsewhere. The consistory would assume responsibility for pastoral care and RCP's remaining ministries.

When the pastors shared this news, a deep silence filled the air. Sniffles and throat clearings sounded overamplified. A palpable awareness of the church's mortality grew.

The next week RCP's leadership conducted what would be the final congregational survey. "Would you be willing to commit to the next phase of RCP's ministry without our copastors leading us? Please specify how you will serve."

A range of responsibilities was listed: making coffee, leading a small group, inviting friends to worship, serving on the leadership board, nothing at all. The consistory needed to know what energy, if any, RCP had for continuing without a pastor.

The survey's results were the final nail in RCP's coffin. More than 70 percent said to shut it down. The leadership made the plans, and soon made the Sunday announcement.

Church closure is painful. Not talking about it is tragic. Guilt and shame may prevent a church from sharing the wisdom it has gleaned from the process, wisdom that instead remains locked behind the shuttered doors. The following suggestions, gleaned from those quoted above, are hardly exhaustive but may be useful.

For pastors:

- Take care of yourself. If you don't, no one will—and you will have nothing to give.

- Love and feed your sheep. Be prepared for an increase in emotional tension after a church decides to close. Some will blame one another; others will blame you. Tongues that are typically still might fly with vicious speed. More than ever, pour out love upon the congregation.

- Work with your denomination. Judicatories exist to support their member churches. A pastor is not expected to close a church alone and shouldn't try to.

- Preach resurrection. The congregation needs to hear about life beyond the church that is dying. Death does not defeat God's children, and it doesn't defeat God's church. When a church dies, new life sprouts elsewhere within the body of Christ.

For congregations:

- Keep your pastor(s) through the end. Releasing the pastor may seem like an obvious solution to money problems. But struggling churches need a consistent pastoral presence. RCP's pastors led and served until the last day, offering a life vest in an uncharted, turbulent sea.

- Keep giving. As Bethlehem UCC grew short on money and volunteer energy, people felt taxed and unable to give more. This is common in dying churches, and it's understandable. Yet 150 people chose to stay and give through Bethlehem's end. It's a gift to savor God's continuing activity through a dying yet beloved faith community.

- Rejoice that the body and mission of Christ are bigger than your congregation. Your church may be dying, but God is not. God's call to worship and mission does not cease.

“What we need is a real letting go,” commented Granberg-Michaelson—letting go “of the past, of our fears, of power, of tradition. . . . It’s too hard to break through the present when the church is on life support and the concern is keeping the doors open.” The alternative: cling to resurrection and to the life of the larger body of Christ. This may make it possible to allow a church to die when it is clear that its time has come.