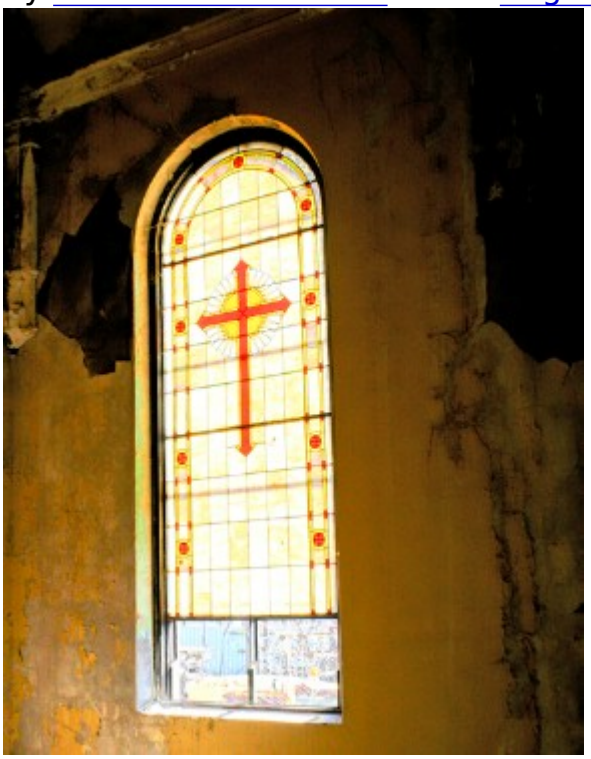
Dying to leave a legacy

by Carol Howard Merritt in the August 17, 2016 issue





When we pastors first move away and watch our hometown fading in the rearview mirror, or celebrate the end of our ministry in a particular congregation, or receive a diagnosis about the end of our days, most of us react in a certain way.

“During times of transition, we immediately review the past,” explains Claire Bamberg, director of coaching at the Center for Progressive Renewal. “We ask, ‘What have I done that matters? What will others remember me for? What will my legacy be?’” The more permanent the change, the more questions and the deeper the struggle.

Through much of history, many of us have been led to search for meaning in church. Our faith drives us to slip into ancient pews and guides us to well-worn wisdom in our liturgies, hymns, and scriptures. It inspires us to work together to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It compels us to focus our attention on something larger than ourselves.

But what happens when our congregations are in transition? What happens when the church's ministry is something we have to get out a rearview mirror to see? What if we suddenly foresee the end of our life together? Do we give thought to dying well as congregations?

Bamberg uses her background as a mental health professional and parish pastor to shepherd churches through transitions so that they can release their ministries in life-giving ways. She has developed a process that leads congregations through 90 days of prayer to discern a "bold, new decision."

Churches have three signs that indicate their long-term health: attendance, membership, and financial security. When one or more of those is weak, churches have a choice—they can tread water until they close or leave a legacy to a new ministry.

The discernment process often includes an independent appraisal by someone outside of the congregation. If the assessment contains news that the church doesn't want to face, the congregation may become paralyzed, put the report on a shelf, and pretend that nothing happened.

When Bamberg is part of that process, she asks, "If you were to stay open under the exact same circumstances, how long do you think you could stay viable?" If members are dying, and the church hasn't welcomed any new people, the congregation usually understands what's ahead. She helps members imagine and plan for "life after life."

Bamberg also asks church members to look at the demographics and growth projections of the surrounding area. Some congregations are not positioned for growth. They might be in a rural community that no longer has economic viability and where the next generation has to leave for education and jobs.

Then they look at the opportunities for ministry. How many churches of the same denomination are in the area? Does the church have a particular calling? Is it the only liberal church among conservative congregations? Is it the only church made up of an underrepresented racial ethnic group? Does it have a ministry that other congregations in the area don't have?

They think too about their building. Young adults may not be drawn to become members of a religious institution. The building may have become a ball and chain.

Could other uses be imagined for it? Could the structure become a greenhouse? A community center? Could the town buy the building for community use?

A church may be tempted to stay open until the last penny is spent, even if the ministry has not been viable for a long time. Bamberg tells congregations to think of money as energy. Some churches use their energy to run in place, like a gerbil on an exercise wheel. Eventually the gerbil runs out of steam, but hasn't gone anywhere.

In contrast, a church can use that energy to nurture new life and possibilities, or to infuse energy into another entity. Is there a vibrant new church that needs resources? She encourages people to focus on something larger, on the whole body of Christ instead of only their tiny piece of it.

I asked Bamberg to identify the biggest obstacles in her work. She responded by quoting phrases she hears: "My father built those pews" and "My grandmother gave that Bible." She named the problem as selfishness. "When we take resources that someone else can use and keep hanging onto them, what does that say about our faith? What does it say about the body of Christ?" Instead of hoarding these things, we should embrace a vow of release or a decommissioning for our churches.

Bamberg tells of a friend who knew that he wanted to leave a legacy. He got his papers in order and signed his house over to his son, then enjoyed watching the next two generations live in that home. He died in peace because of his planning and his legacy.

Bamberg encourages the church to wrestle with the same question. "What will our legacy be?" She asks because she knows that for new churches and ministries, an infusion of energy and resources can be a dream come true.