

Zombie Church

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My first congregation was located in a diminishing rural area, but after a year, we were growing. We began a youth group. Families and young members began attending. More people started commuting from the larger city to attend the church.

Then the local governing body put a minimum salary in place that was 10k above what I made. I applied for a grant that got me enough money for the next three years, but a struggle at the church arose between those who wanted to “go out with a bang” and those who wanted to hold onto the little bit in the bank account. There was an idea that having money in the bank was going to keep the church alive for an eternity. So I got a better job. (And yes, it was a better job at a more stable church. I don’t want to spiritualize it too much by saying it was God’s calling.)

When I look back, I’m sad about how it all went down. Not to overblow my importance, but it was as if the church didn’t buy the prescription medicine that they needed to live well, because it would cost too much. The medicine was too risky. Instead they figured they would live with the disease for a longer time. They couldn’t get beyond that fear of losing the church in order to spend money on ministry.

I was reminded of that difficult position last week. We had [UNCO East](#), so my head is still buzzing from ideas, friendship and exhaustion. (If you wanted to attend, there is still a chance to sign up for UNCO West.)

One of the discussions that often surfaces at UNCO is **how to close a church**. Or when the church is Old Yeller. Or when you have a zombie church (endowed, but with no life). I’m always thankful that people have a safe space to be able to talk about what to do when a congregation is at the end of its life. I didn’t feel like I could have that conversation with my first church. And when I attend many conferences, it’s embarrassing to bring up that struggle to close when it seems like every one around you is doing so well.

Closing a church is like eating the last slice of bread—somehow if you eat the last slice, you’re responsible for consuming it all (never mind that someone else ate the

last 27 slices). A church can be declining for forty years, but if a pastor comes in and starts to talk about closing a congregation, then she *closed the church*. Many people don't want to be that pastor.

Many members feel anxiety as well.

- They bring it up when we need to stop having certain programs. ("But if we stop having Wednesday night dinners, our church will close!")
- When they need to let go of personnel. ("If we don't have a full-time janitor on our staff, then we might as well pack it up right now!")
- When they need to hire staff. ("I know we need a youth leader. But we can't afford one. If we get one, then we'll have to use the money and the church will close!")
- And so people talk around it or allow it to be a threat. ("We have to do what she says. If we lose her pledge, we might as well say goodbye to the whole endeavor!")

In all of it, we allow the anxiety to loom in the air like a toxic gas that we think we smell but we're too afraid to do anything about it.

At UNCO, Joe Martinoni, a church leader and Senior Consultant for Mars, Inc., had a great way to combat this. He said to set metrics for congregations:

Set the markers, and then make it a point to live with gusto. Don't have endless talks about dying, until you get to that point. When a church lives with the fear of dying, then it's difficult to make decisions, imagine creative ministries, think about the next generation, or invest in the future, without that fear tainting us. But if we set those markers, we can say, "We're not going to talk about dying until we get to this point."

We came up with a sort of financial barometer. You set the needle where you want to start having the financial conversation. Until then, you direct your time and energy into the work of your long-term goals. Our goal was to free ourselves from that paralysis. But the question and the answer are unique to each church.

Joe has talked about writing something further, so if he does, I'll point you to the discussion. Until then, what sort of things have you done when the church is on the edge of those important decisions? How have you continued ministry in the midst of these conversations?