*Ending Well*

By Pastor Ronald Bouwkamp

What needs to happen after the decision is made to end the congregational ministry? What should the church do? How does it end its ministry well? What happens to our membership? Who else should be involved? What happens to the church’s property and other assets? How can this be a “Legacy Church” that leaves a legacy of ministry for others to continue?

These questions do not represent all of the many questions that might surface when a congregational ministry decides to close the church doors; however, it does answer many of the key questions to assist a church in ending well.

*Ending Well* will give the church guidance in navigating through some uncharted waters

with the assistance of others who have helped churches in a similar situation.

The Process of Closing a Church

***For the Council and Legacy Churches Coach/Other Designated Individual***

1. **Initial Meeting**

To discuss and communicate Council’s recommendation concerning the closing. Let’s

talk about...

##### The difficulty of closing a church.

##### What it has been like for council members.

##### Resources/process to inform the council’s recommendation:

##### Review information on *The Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational* *Development* by Rev. George Bullard. <http://www.sed-efca.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/stages_of_church_life_bullard.pdf>

##### A MUST READ for the council -- *Legacy Churches* by Stephen Gray and Franklin. Dumond <http://www.amazon.com/Legacy-Churches-Stephen-Gray/dp/1889638781>

##### *The Autopsy of a Deceased Church* by Thom S. Rainer. <http://www.amazon.com/Autopsy-Deceased-Church-Yours-Alive-ebook/dp/B00JPOY9H2>

##### Have congregational members read “Legacy Churches” after the council is finished with their reading. This will be helpful for the congregation’s understanding of its history, current situation and options.

1. **Membership and others connected with the congregation**

##### Generations

##### Shut-ins

##### Geography

##### Non-attending members

##### Past and present for the congregation

1. **Areas of concern**

##### Membership

##### Celebration of what has happened here

##### Recognition of service and commitment

##### Elderly

* + - 1. Pastoral load and continued visitation
      2. Connection with family members

##### Non-attending members – lapse of membership

##### New church home(s)

* + - 1. Openness to growing through the unfamiliar
      2. Church family characteristics
      3. Geographic location of members
      4. Communicating about areas of service for connecting to new ministries at the new church home

##### Ministerial credentials of any pastor or associate processed to another council

##### Property

* + 1. Church building
    2. Parsonage
    3. Smaller items – giving or auctioning for a kingdom cause
    4. Need for the continuation of Corporation Trustees
    5. Legal advice
    6. Insurance
    7. Utilities
    8. Articles of Incorporation

##### Historical records

* + 1. Make arrangements for the transfer of all records of the church to the custody of Heritage Hall and Calvin College.
    2. The church in classis receiving the membership records should also become the designated church given access to these records for future purposes.

##### Classis

* + 1. Consult with the Classical Church Visitors on the closing process.
    2. Inform the Church Visitors concerning the vote of the congregation.
    3. Ask for the approval of the classis.

##### Legacy

* + 1. Need for continuation of the Trustees after the last service.
    2. Think of positive contributions. Consider how would God use us in this time of our ministry.

##### Calendar

* + 1. Wait to set these dates until the committees have reported on their work and the time that they might need.
    2. Determine a specific date been set for the dissolution of the congregation.
    3. Last worship service date.

1. **Appropriate committees**

##### Membership

* + 1. Review all memberships
       1. For transfer or a statement of membership for affiliation with another denomination.
       2. Seek help from the family of a person who might have a difficult time making a change of membership – such as a person losing mental abilities.
       3. For those that might be lapsed.
    2. Find a council that is willing to receive memberships prior to the date of dissolution. If this is a larger number of members, then work through the following:
       1. Select from the closing church at least two office bearers with gifts and interest in providing pastoral care for members whose membership is going to be held with the receiving church. This assumes they are willing to become members of the receiving church and will act under the general supervision of that council.
       2. Ask the receiving church council about appointing these care elders/deacons as either term-limited or adjunct special office bearers for purpose of caring for those transferred and those who will be considering transfer. It is important that they be included in council and related gatherings to report and access ministry services for this group. These leaders of the former congregation might also share about the abilities and service areas of the members of the former congregation so that their gifts are used in the receiving church.
       3. Consider setting intentional evaluation time(s) of six months and/or year to assess what has happened or is happening with this group and what next steps should be.
    3. Ministerial credentials of any minister of the Word or commissioned pastor processed to another council
       1. Check with the denominational office about any ministerial credentials that might be related to the closing congregation. Do not just rely on memory.
       2. Use Article 17 of the Church Order for release from the call to this church due to the disbanding of the congregation unless the minister of the Word is retiring or the church is already without a pastor.
       3. The use of Article 17 also guides for the acceptance of another call and provisions of severance.
       4. Use the modified ministerial credential for transfer to another council for supervision of doctrine and life.
       5. The council that holds the minister’s credentials shall publicize the minister’s availability.
       6. Consult with the Church Visitors from classis on these transitions.
    4. Consider:
       1. Making a form for requesting the change membership. Such a form would include: the reason for the form; blanks for the name of the congregation that the person(s) will be changing to; allow for the listing of all of the names in the family; the date when this needs to be filled in; and a place for a signature and date of signing.
       2. Listing of how a member has served to help with reconnecting to the new congregation.
       3. Inviting representatives from other congregations to give a presentation about the goals, ministries and character of their fellowship for informing our members to help with their decision on which congregation to transfer to.

##### Worship and celebration

* + 1. Celebration
       1. Review the records of the congregation for details or an impression of how God has used this ministry.
       2. Give a report at a celebration event for sharing God’s goodness through the history of the congregation.
       3. Recognition of faithful service and commitment.
    2. Worship
       1. Advertise the times of worship and celebration.
       2. Invite former pastors and others who might have had a very significant role in the life of the congregation.
       3. Plan the final worship service(s). See resources.
    3. Consider having a worship service followed by a noon meal and then a time of recognition of areas of faithful service.

##### Legacy Options

* + 1. List missionaries, mission organizations or other causes that have been funded by the congregation. Determine whether funding will continue from the assets. Determine how this communication will take place.
    2. Make a listing for kingdom causes and percentage of distribution for any funds. These organizations should have broad support by the congregation.
    3. Present the above as a motion to be approved by the congregation.
    4. See Church Order references.

##### Historical items and records

* + 1. Work with Heritage Hall at Calvin College for the depositing of historic items and records of the congregation.
    2. Find a church council that is willing to authorize access to these records in the future and so inform Heritage Hall.

##### Legal - property – corporate

* + 1. Seek legal advice on dissolving the corporation.
    2. Operate according to the congregation’s Articles of Incorporation and By Laws.

##### Work with a realtor for selling the church facilities, parsonage.

* + 1. Consider discounting or giving church properties to another Christian organization
    2. Sell or give items with a specific pickup date so that church operations can continue

until that pickup date.

* + 1. Seek a congregational vote of approval for any congregation distribution of properties or plan of distribution for smaller items.
    2. Items, which have significant monetary value, should be given to organizations that share the same Kingdom concerns for which the items were originally purchased or given.
    3. Items given to the church belong to the congregation and not to the donor. Such items may be sold in an auction at which the donor might be the highest bidder. Other ways of selling might also be used.
    4. Consult with the Church Visitors of classis concerning property and funding distributions.

1. **General advice**

##### Use the full official name on any papers.

##### Be sure any papers are signed with the position title and not just a personal name.

##### Consult the classis and seek its advice.

##### Legal-financial

* + 1. Determine that legal contacts have been made for insuring that all things are done properly.
    2. Make correct announcements.
    3. Resolutions adopted.
    4. Reports filed with the state as may be required.

1. **Final Report to Classis should include:**

##### List of the transfers of membership that have taken place and details about continued pastoral care.

##### Date of final worship service.

##### Processing of historical materials.

##### Current ownership status of properties that have been owned by the congregation. List what happened to the assets or funds from the assets.

##### Name the continuing trustees of the corporation who are authorized to sign papers for any remaining assets and distribution of funds.

##### Sample --- Final Report on \_\_\_\_\_Christian Reformed Church \_\_\_\_\_ has now closed its ministry, holding a final worship service on \_\_\_\_\_. This was a time of celebration and remembering God’s faithfulness through almost \_\_\_\_\_ years of ministry to members and community. The following committees were formed \_\_\_\_\_. The church facilities \_\_\_\_\_ parsonage \_\_\_\_\_. The council members have continued on as Trustees of the Corporation after the final service for working with \_\_\_\_\_ and signing \_\_\_\_\_. The funds will be used for \_\_\_\_\_. Some members have transferred to other fellowships, but most have transfer to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Pastor care will be done by \_\_\_\_\_. The membership records have been sent to \_\_\_\_\_. There is strong appreciation for \_\_\_\_\_. The Council thanks \_\_\_\_\_.

Respectfully submitted,

Closing Coach,

1. **Church Order of the CRCNA 2014**

**Article 17**

* + - 1. Ministers who are neither eligible for retirement nor worthy of discipline may for weighty reasons be released from active ministerial service in a congregation through action initiated by themselves, by a council, or jointly. Such release shall be given only with the approval of classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, and in accordance with synodical regulations. —Cf. Supplement, Article 17-a
      2. The council shall provide for the support of a released minister in such a way and for such a time as shall receive the approval of classis.
      3. A minister of the Word who has been released from active ministerial service in a congregation shall be eligible for call for a period of two years, after which time the classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, shall declare the minister to be released from the ministerial office. For weighty reasons the classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, may extend the eligibility for call on a yearly basis.
      4. In some situations, the classis may decide that it cannot declare the released minister eligible for call after the minister has completed the process of evaluation and assistance. The classis, with the concurring advice of the synodical deputies, shall then declare the minister to be released from ministerial office.

**Supplement, Article 17-a**

*Provisions regulating release from ministerial service in a congregation*

##### If a classis decides a released minister needs evaluation and assistance before accepting another call, it shall specify at the time of release what is required before the minister is declared eligible for call.

##### The classis shall appoint an oversight committee of no fewer than three persons to plan and monitor an evaluation of readiness for the ministry that focuses on professional competence and personal/ emotional status. An evaluator or evaluators mutually agreed upon by the classis and the oversight committee shall conduct the evaluation. (Pastor-Church Relations is able to recommend appropriate evaluators.) Classis shall determine who is responsible for any costs of evaluation or stipulated personal counseling.

1. The committee, composed of both laity and clergy, may include one council member of the congregation involved in the separation.
2. The committee, in consultation with the interim committee of classis, shall develop specific expectations for the minister and shall monitor progress toward established goals. The issues addressed shall be determined by concerns raised by the council and the classis in collaboration with the minister.
3. The committee shall present a progress report at each regularly scheduled classis meeting.
4. After it has received the report of the evaluator(s), the committee shall make a recommendation to classis regarding the minister’s eligibility for call.

##### The minister shall participate in the evaluation and assistance process as follows:

The minister shall consent to the release of a detailed report, with recommendations, from the evaluator(s) to the oversight committee.

In addition to the evaluation stipulated above, the minister shall engage in any personal counseling required by classis with a therapist mutually agreed upon by the minister and the oversight committee.

##### Based upon the recommendation of its oversight committee, the classis shall make the final decision concerning the minister’s readiness to be declared eligible for call.

##### If the classis does not declare the minister eligible for call, it shall, with the concurrence of the synodical deputies, release the minister from office.

##### With the approval of classis, a minister who has been released from service in a congregation may transfer his/ her membership and ministerial credentials to a neighboring council within the classis during the evaluation process. If classis declares the minister eligible for call, the council that holds the minister’s credentials shall publicize the minister’s availability.

With the approval of classis, a minister who has been released from service in a congregation may transfer his/ her membership and ministerial credentials to a council in another classis after the classis in which the separation occurred declares the minister eligible for call. The council that holds the minister’s credentials shall publicize the minister’s availability.

**Note:** Councils and classes should take note of the regulations regarding “release from ministerial service” adopted by Synod 1998 (see Acts of Synod 1998, pp. 392-96) and as amended by Synod 2010 (see Acts of Synod 2010, pp. 915-16).

Article 38d. When a council and congregation decide to disband or revert to unorganized status, the approval of classis is required. If any distribution of assets is required, the congregation and council shall consult with classis. —Cf. Supplement, Article 38-d

**Supplement, Article 38-d**

If a church has diminished to fewer than forty-five active confessing members or shows that it lacks a sufficient number of members who can provide leadership, or it can no longer meet its financial obligations or there is no prospect of continued growth, then a classis should consider that these are sufficient indicators for it to begin discussing with such a congregation whether it is still appropriate for it to retain organized status. (*Acts of Synod 2005,* p. 763)

**Supplement, Article 32-d**

1. ***Model Articles*** *of Incorporation for Churches in the* ***United States***

**In the Event of Dissolution**

In the event of the disbanding of this church and the dissolution of this corporation, the church’s remaining assets, if any, after the payment of its debts and expenses, shall be conveyed as the Board of Trustees may propose and as the affirmative vote of a majority of the members shall determine, subject to each of the following:

1. The Classis must approve the disbanding of this church and the dissolution of this corporation;
2. The Board of Trustees shall receive the advice of the Classis in formulating its proposal for property distribution;
3. The vote of the members shall be in accordance with the provisions of paragraph B of Article VII of these Articles of Incorporation; and
4. All remaining assets must be distributed only to one or more organizations which qualify as exempt organizations under Section 501(c) (3) of the Code.
5. ***Model Articles*** *of Incorporation for Churches in* ***Canada***

In the event of the disbanding of this church, with the approval of classis, and dissolution of this corporation, its remaining assets, if any, after the payment of its debts and expenses, shall be distributed to, and only to, one or more charities in Canada that are registered with Revenue, Taxation Canada for the purposes of the Income Tax Act of Canada and have objects similar to this corporation, in the manner proposed by the council, upon consultation with classis—and approved by the affirmative vote of a majority of the members of the church.

**References**

**Risking Mission --- to close or continue**

<http://www.lss-elca.org/Redesign/wp-content/uploads/Documents/Risking_Mission.pdf>

**The Life Cycle** and Stages of Congregational Development Rev. George Bullard. <http://www.sed-efca.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/stages_of_church_life_bullard.pdf>

**"Legacy Churches"** by Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond <http://www.amazon.com/Legacy-Churches-Stephen-Gray/dp/1889638781>

**Closing congregations ELCA**

<http://www.lss-elca.org/Redesign/wp-content/uploads/Documents/Closing_Congregations.pdf>

**Final Worship Service**

Service – United Church

[www.united-church.ca/files/planning/theme/worship\_closure.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/planning/theme/worship_closure.pdf)

Service – Evangelical Lutheran

<http://www.liturgybytlw.com/OccChs/ChClosing.html>

Service – Presbytery Closing or Amalgamation

<http://presbyterian.ca/?wpdmdl=300&>

**Attachment:** Christian Reformed Church in North America Credentials for a Released Minister