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Finishing With Grace: A Guide to Selling, Merging or Closing Your Church

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Finishing with Grace

A Guide to Selling,
Merging or Closing Your Church

Linda M. Hilliard & Reverend Gretchen J. Switzer



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Table of Contents

III	A Prayer for the Church
IV	Prologue “What Is Going to Happen to Our Church?”
1	Chapter 1: How Many Churches Are Really Closing?
6	Chapter 2: The History of Grace Church
12	Chapter 3: Autonomous and Hierarchical Systems
15	Chapter 4: Facing the Truth Not Everyone Will Make the Journey Going Deeper: Isn’t a Church Supposed to Live Forever?
21	Chapter 5: Determining the Future Disagreements About the Future Long-term Processes Done Early Are Best Appreciative Inquiry Spiritual Discernment Going Deeper: Considering the Unthinkable
37	Chapter 6: Merging or Closing? Let’s Have Them Join US (Do We Fit?) Yes – We Will Merge! Going Deeper: Anger and Sadness
44	Chapter 7: Selling Your Building The Practicalities Going Deeper: Whose Fault Is it, Anyway?
53	Chapter 8: Let’s Get Organized Forming Teams Going Deeper: Support/Spirituality Team

60	Chapter 9: Forming a Physical Asset Team The PAT Role Going Deeper: What to Do with a Past That Haunts You
71	Chapter 10: Creative Memory-Keeping
76	Chapter 11: Communications Your Members Community Going Deeper: Dealing with Conflict
83	Chapter 12: Finishing Well: Final Considerations Personal Journeys Through a Church Closing
90	Epilogue: What's Next?
131	About the Authors: Linda M. Hilliard and Reverend Gretchen J. Switzer

Resources

93	Using the Study Guide	97	Spiritual Discernment
94	Study Guide Prayer	99	Liturgical Resources
95	Appreciative Inquiry		

Special Stories

9	The Congregation's Decision	40	An Empty Building
10	Tearing Down Your Home	50	Renters in Our Own Home
18	An Unshared View: Merging	55	Church Staff Severance
22	Sitting With Nora	59	One Person's Trash, Another Person's Treasure
26	The Man With the Plan	64	Bentwood Chairs
32	The ZBA	68	The Pipe Organ
35	Community Anger at the Church Sale	80	The Disenfranchised

Prologue

“What Is Going to Happen to Our Church?”

By Gretchen

If you have picked up this book, then you are probably with a community of faith that is struggling to stay afloat. The first thing we want you to know is that you are not alone. The Christian church in the United States has been in decline since the 1960s. Current statistics, outlined in Chapter 1 of this book, show how many congregations are being forced to close their doors.

So, indeed, there are many like you who know exactly what it feels like to love your church and see its demise on the horizon. The emotions that realization can evoke within us are often more powerful than we anticipate. The ending process is fraught with memories of family members and friends. “This is where we had little Jimmy’s funeral.” “I remember every moment of Samantha’s baptism here.” “I always dreamed of getting married in this sanctuary.” Many of us grieve the loss of our community of faith as deeply as we might grieve the death of a dear, deep friendship. The potential loss of our church home can also cause our faith to waver a bit, no matter how strong it really is. “How could God just abandon us? How could God allow this to happen to us when we have tried to be so faithful?” There is anger toward God, and toward those we believe “caused” the problem in the first place, whether that was an unskilled, unaware or abusive pastor, an inexperienced or dishonest treasurer, or that bunch of folks that we see stubbornly holding the church back from moving forward. There is a danger of becoming mired in a “blame game” rather than facing the realities of the current situation in which you find yourselves. Closing your church doors elicits fear, grief, anger and blame, and these feelings need to be addressed if the congregation is to truly celebrate what you have meant to the community and to each other.

I once heard a theologian say that one of the problems we have as people of faith is remembering that God does not want us to fail. God does not want to judge us and find us lacking. God wants us to succeed in every way possible. Christ is our biggest cheerleader. What we must remember is that “success” in a spiritual context means “faithfulness.” Having to close your church is not a “failure,” unless you let go of your faithfulness along the way. We can be faithful and successful even as we close. There have been many marvelous examples of this in the Boston area Roman Catholic churches that were closed by the diocese following the clergy sex abuse scandal. What these people have understood is that God is with them every step of the way, that the end of a community of faith is not the end of faith itself, and that God loves us and stands with us even during unthinkable challenges.

Study Guide – Prologue

See Study Guide Prayer and Overview, pages 93 and 94

- Why is your church reading this book to begin with?
- Are you just beginning to think about the life that lies ahead for your community of faith?
- Are you just realizing that the future may not be as secure as the past?
- Are you in the middle of following through on a decision you and other church members have already made and want to know how to proceed?
- Has your congregation found itself in a panic and you are scurrying around trying to figure out what to do with a church home you can no longer afford or which can no longer sustain your community of faith?
- What scares you about the potential changes your church may undergo as the future unfolds?
- What excites you about the potential changes your church may undergo as the future unfolds?

Chapter 1

How Many Churches Are Really Closing?

By Gretchen

When we talk about closing church buildings and re-sizing congregational facilities, we must first acknowledge that these sorts of actions happen in a variety of ways depending on the tradition or denomination of the church in question. For mainline Protestant churches, there was what is often referred to as a “heyday” in 1950s America. Churches like Grace Church (see Chapter 2) were quite literally bursting at the seams. Nearly everyone you knew went to one sort of church or another. The church tended to be the center of active members’ social lives. Not only were there extremely large and active Sunday school programs, with extra staff to run them, but vibrant youth groups filled with 20 or 30 teenagers who met every Sunday evening. These churches were filled with tireless women’s groups, men’s breakfast groups, Bible Studies and the like. Often the pastor of a large church was revered and respected not only by his parishioners but also by the larger community. Clearly, that was a different time.

Many pastors, church members, theologians and sociologists have tried to explain what has happened to the mainline church since the heyday of the fifties. Since the sixth decade of the 20th century, the mainline church has been in continual decline, not only in terms of the number of members, but also in terms of money, general resources, and leadership. Add to this profound downturn, the increasing awareness and acknowledgment of clergy who abuse church members and their children in unimaginable ways, and you see an “institution” destined to struggle for its very survival.

When many of us were growing up, we were under the impression that churches didn’t close. Sure, factories closed and stores went out of business and people moved away and new people came, but the church was something eternal, unbreakable. The church around the world had survived two world wars and the

Finishing With Grace

Great Depression. In fact, it had seemed, throughout previous generations, that the church was the one thing that could be counted upon to remain the same.

There have been changes

Over the last fifty years, a number of things have changed in American society that have affected Christian churches, Protestant and Catholic alike. Prior to World War II, women were the backbone of the church. Because they did not work outside the home, most of them were available to run the Ladies Auxiliary, plan the next bake sale, teach Sunday School and prepare church dinners. The women of the church raised the funds that came into the church beyond the congregation's own tithes and offerings. When women became part of the American workforce, the church, like many non-profit organizations, lost the help and support inherent in the work of those dedicated, devoted volunteers.

In the late forties and the 1950s nearly everybody went to church. Some estimates indicate that 80 percent of the U.S. population at the time were church-going Christians. Churches were known for their exemplary preachers and exceptional mission work. Forty years later, Gallup polls indicated that only 40 percent of the U.S. population considered themselves "churched." Many of those individuals now belonging to churches describe themselves in a variety of ways: Pentecostal, evangelical, "born-again," fundamentalist. The mainline Protestant church's numbers have been in decline since the 1960s; in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Roman Catholic church saw a decline in worship numbers as well as a decrease in financial support from the laity. In recent years, it has even been observed that the theologically conservative Christian movement has begun losing people as well.

In preparing this book, we have researched mainline church closures in the United States in recent years. At this time, there is no central clearinghouse, so to speak, for this kind of information, but a precious few studies do offer some insight into church closure statistics.

Denominational denial

Denominations, on the whole, seem to be in a certain amount of denial. Most do not keep “death records” for congregations. Instead, denominational families tend to focus time, energy and money attempting to resurrect and revitalize weakened congregations. Churches that merge (within the denomination) or federate (melding of congregations from different denominational backgrounds) are not generally recorded as closures even though one church in that formula often does close its doors in the process. We also observe that many denominations are resistant to the idea that it may sometimes be necessary for ministries to end and that there may well be times when certain formerly viable ministries reach a point of “completion.” Our personal experience with this is that judicatories are not always helpful when asked to offer spiritual, moral or financial assistance to a congregation that is struggling to stay afloat and hasn’t the human or financial resources to re-grow its membership.

Professional opinions and study results vary widely when it comes to how often congregations may be closing their doors, whether they are disbanding or moving to a facility that is more suited to the smaller size of a declining congregation. As noted by Beth Ann Gaede in *Ending With Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, church growth guru, Lyle Schaller, has suggested that as many as fifty to sixty U.S. Protestant churches close weekly. (Gaede, p. 78).¹ These statistics are further confirmed by Paul Nixon in *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*.²

In 2006, church consultant Andy McAdams, director of Pastor to Pastors Ministry, a division of Church Dynamics International (www.churchdynamics.org), offered his own shocking statistics. With 30 years of local church ministry behind him, Andy McAdams now consults with churches all over America in order to help them become healthy, dynamic, disciple making churches. Look at just a few numbers McAdams has collected and compiled:

- Only 15 percent of churches in the United States are growing and just 2.2 percent of those are growing by conversion growth.

Finishing With Grace

- 10,000 churches in America disappeared in a five-year period (2000-2005).
- Only 45 percent of the U.S. population attends church regularly.
- The number of people in America that do not attend church has doubled in the past 15 years.
- No more than 38 percent of the population attends church at all and that's in the Bible belt. The next highest is the Midwest at 25 percent, West 21 percent and the Northeast 17 percent.
- The vast majority of churches have an attendance of less than 75 members.
- There are almost 100 million unchurched Americans. They have either left the church or never connected for some reason.
- The median adult attendance per church service in 1999 was 90 people, which is slightly below the 1998 average of 95 adult attendees: in 1997 it was 102. There seems to be a slight gradual decline.
- Giving to charities increased in the past decade, yet giving to local churches has decreased.
- In his book, *Who Shall Lead Them*, Larry Witham said, "20 percent Of U.S. churches have no future"
(*From The Condition of the Church in America*)³

In 2008, a purely statistical study was published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.⁴ Authors Anderson, Martinez, Heogeman, Adler and Chaves found that between 1998 and 2005, less than one percent of churches closed. This number seems encouraging until one realizes that even though one percent seems a small number, it still tells us that 10 out of every 1,000 churches have closed each year for the last seven years. Even this number is staggering when you think of how many Christians in those churches have been left without a church home. This study, entitled *Dearly Departed: How Often do Congregations Close?* suggests quite convincingly that the reason the number of church closures often seems deceptively low is because unlike other organizations, churches can decline in size and ministry but will often continue to live in that weakened state for long periods of time because they have a large endowment, lowered costs or in some cases a generous benefactor who makes the church's life pos-

Finishing With Grace

sible. It cannot go without mention that some of these tiny congregations meet and worship in huge Gothic buildings in cities. The cost of yearly maintenance in these circumstances can easily rival the compensation package for a pastor, running well into the tens of thousands of dollars annually.

The lower number of individuals in the pews is rivaled only by the clergy shortage in the Protestant church as a whole. In a 1998 article in the *Virginian-Pilot*, Liz Szabo writes that as church memberships decline, congregations are finding themselves unable to pay a living wage for a full-time pastor.⁵ The whole church is profoundly affected by the rapid rate at which older clergy, ordained in the heyday of the church, are now retiring. Neither can we ignore the impact of the fact that the average age of those graduating from seminaries to pursue parish ministry is now 40 to 55 (Vail, *United Church News*, February 2001)⁶, with decidedly shorter careers ahead of them than those who came before.

Declining congregations may not let go until the last member dies of old age, a long-term pastor retires or dies, the money finally runs out, or a serious conflict puts them “over the edge,” disabling them permanently.

The statistics we have available to us may suggest certain patterns, but fluctuate wildly across the spectrum. Regardless of the varying numbers, we do know and must remember that for each congregation that faces closing, moving or merging, this is not about statistics but about people, about souls, about God and eternity, success and failure, grace and fear.

Endnotes, Chapter 1

1. Beth Ann Gaede, editor, *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations* (Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute, 2002) p.78
2. Paul Nixon, *I Refuse to Lead A Dying Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2006) pp 9-11
3. Andy McAdams, “The Condition of the Church in America,” 2006 www.churchdynamics.org
4. Shawna L. Anderson, Jessica Hamar, Catherine Hoegeman, Gary Adler and Mark Chaves, “Dearly Departed: How Often Do Congregations Close?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2008): 321-328.
5. “Protestant Churches Face Clergy Shortage,” *The Virginian Pilot* (Landmark Communications, Inc.) 6 December 1999
6. “Clergy Shortage Loom As Average Ages Rises,” Tiffany Vail, *United Church News: Massachusetts Conference Edition*, <www.macucc.org/uccnews/feb01/clergyshort.htm> (February 2001)

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