When churches die, can they live again?

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One sees them occasionally. Abandoned church buildings in rural areas stand in mute witness of changing times. In urban areas, big brick structures, once crowded with eager worshipers, now house restaurants, community centers or even nightclubs.

Sometimes churches die. Like individuals, some may reach the end of a long and fruitful life and pass away with a sense of triumph. Others may die from years of self-destructive choices.

Every denomination in the United States has scores of churches that expect to die within a decade. No one can prevent the cultural shifts that leave behind churches unable or unwilling to adapt.

Weakened, vulnerable and sometimes paralyzed by uncertainty, membership dwindles until death seems inevitable.

Some leaders failed to prepare churches for the cultural change occurring in their midst. Other churches lacked the know-how or the resources necessary to change. Some churches simply refused to change.

Whatever the reasons for decline, once church members believe they lack the resources and energy necessary to affect a turnaround, recovery becomes almost impossible and they focus solely on survival. Unable to accept impending death as an option, church members sometimes seek someone or something to blame.

Phil Rodgerson, retired from the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, has identified classic options churches often consider when facing their own

demise. Unfortunately, 58 percent of the time, the church chooses to remain and do nothing—an approach that almost guarantees an inglorious end.

Experts insist a healthier, theologically appropriate approach is to celebrate the life the church has known, consider its options and prepare for a death that honors Christ and leaves a kingdom legacy. When a church completes its mission and dies, members will mourn, but they also will celebrate the church's ministry successes.

If 42 percent of declining churches want their ministries to survive, what can they do?

• **Let old dreams die and envision something new.**

Born in 1907 to reach a thriving, new community in south Richmond, Va., Weatherford Memorial Baptist Church had declined terribly. By 2000, the surrounding area had changed, but the church had not. Finally, the few members who gathered weekly realized they could not continue.

"We saw what was happening, but we didn't want to acknowledge it. We were in denial," lamented Ruth Guill, a former member.

In 2005, Pastor Ricky Hurst, assisted by Glenn Akins, assistant executive director of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, led Weatherford to embrace an extraordinary dream. Despite offers from other churches to buy their property, the congregation voted to give its $2 million facility to St. Paul's Baptist Church, a rapidly growing African-American congregation in another part of the city. Weatherford's gift enabled St. Paul's to minister at a second site. In the three years since Weatherford Memorial became St. Paul's South, attendance has grown to over 500.

The desire for a lasting legacy also led Weatherford Memorial to establish an endowment for mission purposes by the Richmond Baptist Association

and the Virginia Baptist Mission Board.

• Remain but develop a community consciousness that creates ministry opportunities.

Like many other urban congregations, First Baptist Church of Clarendon, now called simply The Church at Clarendon, experienced stagnation and decline. In the past 30 years, resident membership dropped steadily from 871 to 236. Worship attendance, however, has begun to climb again as the congregation has embraced a new vision.

Located in a suburb of Washington, D.C., Clarendon's property values soared making it nearly impossible for mid-level professionals to live where they worked. Firefighters, police officers, teachers and nurses increasingly had to commute long distances to work because they could not afford nearby housing. Church member Ellen Bartlett reports The Church at Clarendon decided to leverage the value of its property, tear down its aged facilities except for the main entrance and steeple, and build a 10-story structure. The church will occupy the two bottom floors while the upper eight stories will provide affordable apartments with rent based on income levels.

• Change as the community changes.

Bon Air Baptist, a growing congregation in Richmond, chose to use its size and strength to change as the community changes. Toward that end, Pastor Travis Collins is leading the congregation to reflect the racial and cultural makeup of the communities around its primary campus on Buford Road and its three other locations.

• Remain at a central location while establishing other sites for worship and ministry.

Pastor Bob Sizemore led Fairview Baptist, located in an older section of

Fredericksburg, Va., to establish Fairview at River Club. The River Club site, led by Dee Whitten, has grown to an average attendance of 550.

• **Remain, but share the use of facilities.**

Akins of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board points out that although shared use often has a community ministry component, the motivation most often is financial. For that reason, this option postpones rather than prevents further decline.

• **Refocus.**

Exercising invention and adaptability, some churches change the type of ministry they offer—shifting from a neighborhood church to a specialized ministry, for example.

• **Relocate.**

Anytime a church moves, it requires church members to abandon a sacred place. Rarely can churches relocate without experiencing disunity, Akins noted.

• **Merge with another congregation.**

Congregational mergers often create one slightly larger, weak church from two smaller, weak churches, Akins asserted.

•**Re-church.**

The established church "goes out of business" then reopens after reorganizing and retraining. The obvious difficulty, observes Akins, is that many of the people remain the same, taking the same assumptions that failed before into the new church.

Fair Park Baptist in Alexandria, Va., could see the end approaching and

chose to become a different kind of church.

To avoid the attitudes and practices that led them to decline, the church turned over decision-making to a group of trustees who brought expertise from outside the congregation. The trustees constituted the Convergence Church, specializing in ministry to Alexandria's sizeable arts community. Led by Lisa Hawkins and a leadership team she put together, the new church is gaining numbers and vitality.

Another version of this option occurs when a church gives itself to a stronger, larger church whose members fill key leadership positions. This approach can change the DNA of the new church.

• **Simply disband.**

Akins challenges churches to engage in ongoing assessment of their success within their cultural settings. He points out that every church faces many internal and external circumstances beyond its control. Church members die or move away. Businesses shut down, neighborhoods change and buildings age.

But churches can control the way they live out their faith, their worship styles and their responses to circumstances that lie beyond their control.