

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

**The Final Amen: Designing and Implementing a Christlike System for the Closure of  
WayPointe Christian Fellowship**

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to  
the Faculty of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

by

Christopher E. Sherwood

Lynchburg, Virginia

December 2022

Copyright © 2022 by Christopher E. Sherwood  
All Rights Reserved

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

---

Dr. Benjamin Laird  
Faculty Mentor

---

Dr. Jeffrey Mayfield  
Faculty Reader

## THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

Christopher E. Sherwood

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, December 2022

Mentor: Dr. Benjamin Laird

Like a myriad of other churches across the country, WayPointe Christian Fellowship (WCF) experienced a long decline leading to a critical question: Should the church permanently close? In the case of WCF, the answer was yes, which led to other questions about how to accomplish the task while maximizing God's glory, minimizing the pain felt by those involved, and preparing the congregation to migrate to another body of believers. This thesis project was designed to enable the leaders of WCF and other church leaders to answer these questions. In this pursuit a comprehensive closure plan was created and implemented at WCF. For the purposes of this thesis, the intervention conducted was the closure plan and the effect of that plan upon the people of WCF, its key leaders, and its pastor. In surveys, focus groups, and interviews, the members of WCF showed a significant increase in positive emotional expressions and a corresponding decline in negative emotional expressions. The participants describe how their participation in the closure plan led to these results. Specifically, respondents noted the unity of the church as a key to their acceptance of the church closure process. In accepting the death of their church, nearly all congregants went on to pursue membership in other local churches. The analysis of these results leads to encouraging conclusions about the painful process of church closure.

*Keywords:* Local church closure, church death, systems, strategies, pastoral leadership

## Contents

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Ministry Context</b> .....	1
<b>Problem Presented</b> .....	8
<b>Purpose Statement</b> .....	9
<b>Basic Assumptions</b> .....	9
<b>Definitions</b> .....	10
<b>Limitations</b> .....	11
<b>Delimitations</b> .....	12
<b>Thesis Statement</b> .....	12
<b>CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK</b> .....	13
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	13
How Did We Get Here.....	15
The Decision-Making Process.....	19
Shepherding the Flock Through Church Closure.....	23
Maintaining Pastoral Health.....	28
Conclusion.....	30
<b>Theological Foundations</b> .....	31
Church: A Brief Biblical Definition.....	31
A Theology of Church Closure from Jesus and Paul.....	34
Shepherding God’s People Through Closure.....	36
<i>Shepherds Protect the Sheep</i> .....	37
<i>Shepherds Lead the Sheep</i> .....	39
<i>Shepherds Teach the Sheep Truth</i> .....	40
<b>Theoretical Foundations</b> .....	44
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	47
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</b> .....	49
<b>Intervention Design</b> .....	49
<b>Implementation of Intervention Design</b> .....	59
<b>CHAPTER 4: RESULTS</b> .....	68
<b>The Plan Brought Blessings</b> .....	69
<b>The Plan Brought Results</b> .....	72
<b>The Plan’s Impact on WayPointe’s Leaders</b> .....	79
<b>Administrative Outcomes</b> .....	84
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	86
<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION</b> .....	88
<b>Comparing WayPointe’s Experience with Other Churches</b> .....	88
<b>Was The Pastor’s Experience Representative?</b> .....	90

<b>Best Practices</b> .....	95
<b>Denominational Support</b> .....	99
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	100
 Bibliography .....	 101
 Appendix	
A. Elder Permission Letter.....	106
B. Elder Consent Form .....	107
C. Project Recruitment Letter .....	108
D. Informed Consent Form .....	109
E. Project Survey .....	112
F. Focus Group Questions.....	113
G. Interview Questions .....	114
H. Open House Worship Service Order.....	115
I. Photo Array of Timeline .....	116
J. IRB Approval Letter .....	117

## Tables

3.1	Schedule of Research Activity .....	52
4.1	Evaluation of Survey Results .....	78

## Illustrations

Figure 1	Negative Emotional Word Count .....	75
Figure 2	Positive Comments .....	77



## Abbreviations

BPM	Beats per Minute
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
DMIN	Doctor of Ministry
ESV	English Standard Version
IJPT	<i>International Journal of Practical Theology</i>
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	The New International Version Application Commentary
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary
WCF	WayPointe Christian Fellowship

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

Closing a local church is tremendously difficult work. To close a church while maintaining the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of the people and leaders involved requires supernatural intervention. However, with God, all things are possible (see Phil 4:13). This thesis project attempted to create and implement a plan for glorifying God while accomplishing the closure of a local church and protecting its people, leaders, and pastor. Accomplishing these goals begins with understanding the ministry context of WayPointe Christian Fellowship of Richmond, California. The discussion will then proceed to cover the nature of the problem. A suggested solution will be explored within the purpose statement, which will lead to an examination of the specific vocabulary, the limitations and delimitations of the project, and an expiated thesis statement.

### **Ministry Context**

WayPointe Christian Fellowship has a long and storied history that dates back to 1901. The church has seen three name changes, known twenty-one senior ministers, built three sanctuaries, merged with two other churches, experienced times of incredible growth, and dealt with tremendous tragedy. In recent years the church has watched the slow march of decay eat away at its attendance until it reached the point of no return during the global pandemic known as COVID-19.

The story begins in November of 1901 with a small group of devoted Christians who first met in the home of the founding couple. This group would initially be known as Calvary Baptist Church. Over the next twenty years, they could call their first pastor, build their first building,

and merge with and adopt the name of First Baptist Church of Richmond, California. The pace of growth was remarkable considering the tumultuous times (WWI 1914 – 1918) and the rapid turnover in leadership. The newly planted church had nine senior ministers before 1920. Despite the brevity of the senior minister's average tenure, the church grew throughout its early history and right on through the beginning of the Second World War.

First Baptist Church of Richmond, California, was born into a dynamic city at a tumultuous time. Richmond is home to the Rosie the Riveter National Historical Park, an honor it earned by building 727 ships for the war effort. They were “huge, non-descript vessels that have been given credit for helping to swing the war in favor of the United States. They carried supplies from the U.S. to English, Russian, and African ports.”<sup>1</sup> The record-breaking shipbuilding fueled record-breaking population growth as people, desperate for a job amid The Great Depression, flooded into town from across the country and worldwide.

The diversity of people coming to Richmond during the war boom greatly influenced the diversity of the local churches, including First Baptist Church of Richmond. People's attitudes and expectations certainly changed in the wartime era, and that transformation has continued to this day. An example is the acceptance of the Yiu-Mienh people who immigrated en masse in the 1970s. The Yiu-Mienh are a people without a nation. They hail from Southeast Asia but have often migrated within that region and eventually became wholly displaced. When allowed to immigrate to the United States, hundreds made the trip and settled in the Richmond area. Soon after their arrival First Baptist Church “adopted” many and introduced them to life in western culture. Many within the group were saved and began to gather as a small ethnic church. The Yiu-Mienh church met within First Baptist's building for a season. Eventually, they could

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan D. Cole, *Richmond – Windows to the Past* (Richmond, CA: Wildcat Canyon Books, 1980), 85.

purchase a portion of the property and facilities that the shrinking First Baptist Church no longer needed. The relationship between the two churches continues to this day. It reflects an ethos of the larger community, which accepts multi-ethnic people of many skin tones, hailing from many nations. This ethos continues to be a priority within First Baptist Richmond, now WayPointe Christian Fellowship, which counts among its members' people from Southeast Asia, China, Nepal, Guatemala, Mexico, and multiple U.S. States. In keeping with this trend, the church has also seen many multi-ethnic marriages within its membership.

First Baptist Church of Richmond continued to plod through the decades, experiencing a higher-than-average turnover in its senior leadership until the calling of a charismatic young preacher, the Reverend Stanley E. Franklin, in January of 1970. Pastor Stan, as he was known, provided a clear and compelling vision for the church that produced steady growth for more than twenty years. During that time, the congregation was faithful in giving, which enabled the final building project to be completed and dedicated in November of 1983. The new sanctuary was generously proportioned, allowing for 650 souls to attend weekend services in addition to the 65-member choir. Just a few years after its dedication, the church decided two Sunday morning services were necessary as the average weekly attendance swelled past 600. The church had momentum, but it was not to last.

John Maxwell famously said, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of First Baptist Church, everything began to fall after the retirement of Stanley E. Franklin in July 1995. The pastor who followed had a very different philosophical bent and began moving the church toward more Pentecostal/charismatic teachings, behaviors, and worship habits. The

---

<sup>2</sup> John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the Person Others Will Want to Follow* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), xi.

changes were embraced by some and tolerated by others for his brief tenure, then he left and took a sizable percentage of the church with him. The church struggled in the subsequent six years as it sought a new senior leader. An accusation of sexual misconduct was levied against a youth pastor during the long, challenging transition. The accusation led to a police investigation, after which the prosecuting attorney failed to bring charges; however, the damage was done. First Baptist Church of Richmond was scandalized, and in the months that followed, many individuals and families left.

At this time of crisis, the church hired a no-nonsense former businessman to lead the congregation. The new pastor had a challenging tenure as he tried to recover the church's reputation within the community. Ultimately, the church decided that a name change from First Baptist Richmond to WayPointe Christian Fellowship may provide a fresh perspective internally and externally. Unfortunately, the change did not lead to the type of transformation everyone hoped for. There was little renewal or growth at that time. In the early 2000s, WayPointe supported a staff of four pastors and an administrative assistant, but the church could not push past the crisis. While transformation was not to happen, the pastor was able to sell the former property to the Yiu Mienh church mentioned above, thus securing the financial future of WayPointe.

After more than a decade of ministry, the senior pastor began preparing his associate pastor to take over for him. He then resigned and moved. Unfortunately for everyone, that man was an alcoholic; thus, after just a couple of years, the church voted to remove him from the position. The two men left on the church's pastoral staff wanted the Senior Pastor job, but the church was reluctant to hire either. Shortly after that, they both left as well. For two years, WayPointe had no pastor at all. The American Baptist Churches of the West, WayPointe's

denomination, worked diligently to provide pulpit supply as the elder board worked to stabilize the church from within. Then, after an abundance of interactions, Reverend Chris Sherwood was hired.

In December 2016, WayPointe Christian Fellowship called Chris to be their pastor. There was curiosity and associated attendance in those first weeks, but on average, the church had about forty people attending during the Sunday morning worship service. During that season of ministry, a few faithful volunteers kept the children's ministry going and tried to start a small youth ministry. The struggle continued for many months until two staffing changes were made. The church fired the longtime secretary of the church, and one of the elders recruited a young man to come as a pastoral intern in charge of the musical worship. The arrival of a young talented musician seemed to be the catalyst the church needed. Growth was slow and inconsistent but measurable. By the beginning of 2019, the church regularly had more than fifty and more than sixty-five in attendance on some Sundays. However, that summer, the young man took a paying job at a church down the street, and just nine months later, the whole world shut down as nations, states, and counties tried to quench the fire of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The church that had rebounded in 2019 floundered in 2020. Like many other churches, COVID-19 forced WayPointe Christian Fellowship to close its doors in the spring of 2020. The staff and elder board worked relentlessly to keep the church alive. That season saw a significant financial outlay to purchase cameras, associated hardware, and the software necessary to upload the worship service to the internet. In the first few months, hope burned in the hearts of those brave staff and volunteers who showed up faithfully to “live-stream” the Sunday worship service from the church's sanctuary. The first counts of those attending online were encouraging, but the numbers shrank week after week.

In response to the emergent situation regarding the lack of attendance at WayPointe, the elder board convened a special meeting over the weekend of April 30, 2021. The meeting's only agenda item was to discuss the church's situation. At that meeting, many ideas were introduced and prayerfully contemplated as the leaders worked to save the church. There, in that meeting, the pastor offered to resign. The resignation would have alleviated a significant financial burden from the church, but the elders present immediately dismissed the idea. The pastor, seeking ways to improve, spoke about the aid of conferences and consultants. However, these options were unavailable during the spring of 2021. At that point, the idea of sending the pastor back to school was discussed and approved. It was also there that the agenda for the first emergency congregation meeting was planned.

The first in a series of congregational meetings (and letters) was held on May 23, 2021. At that meeting, the church engaged in a frank conversation about the situation. The discussion included a statistical evaluation of the attendance over the previous two years and a report on the state of the church's bank account. A desperate plea was issued for church members to show up, volunteer, give, encourage others, invite people, and pray. A plan for reinstating the Children's Ministry and fellowship time (monthly potlucks) was proposed, and a commitment to continue to worship the LORD collectively without fail until, at the minimum, January of 2022.

In the wake of the first emergency congregational meeting, the leaders looked but found no discernable changes in attendance or participation of church members. Statistically, fewer people watched, commented, or participated in online worship services. Eventually, the church leaders decided to stop "live-streaming" the worship service with the hope that the people would return to the building. Plans aligned with CDC guidelines. Anti-bacterial hand sanitizer was purchased and installed throughout the building, digital thermometers were deployed, a

children's ministry curriculum was purchased, and preparations were made to thoroughly clean the children's space for a return to Sunday morning corporate worship. The church sent invitation mailers to its neighbors, letting them know about all the preparations we were making, but they did not come. In October 2021, a congregational letter was mailed to members, updating them on the state of the church. On November 14th, the church's leadership called for another meeting where they acknowledged the truth: nothing had changed in the six months since the previous meeting. The church did not have enough new volunteers to open the Children's Ministry, nor were there any changes in the Sunday morning worship service attendance.

By the January 2022 elder meeting, the discussion had changed. The leaders had been wondering whether the church should close, but this meeting led to questions about creating an appropriate closure timeline. The church had its third crisis meeting on February 6, at which no one had a miraculous vision to save the church. Two weeks later, at the fourth crisis meeting, the pastor shared the recommendation of the church elder board to close the church permanently in the autumn of 2022. After that meeting, the pastor drafted and sent a third letter to the membership outlining the recommendation of the elder board.

It is said that hindsight is 20/20; the past is more straightforward to comprehend than the present. A patient observer could look through WayPointe's history and observe many issues which appeared throughout the years. The dysfunction of the church began in the late 1990s. The transition after Pastor Stan's tenure was troublesome and may have led to an unusual shortage of volunteers that has existed since that time. Similarly, multiple mission trips had been envisioned, planned, and canceled for lack of participation. In weighing all this information, one could conclude it was miraculous that the church has survived as long as it has.



On March 19, 2022, the elders of WayPointe Christian Fellowship voted to recommend to the members the closure of the church on September 25, 2022. The reasons for this decision were as follows. Too few people attended the Sunday morning service. There were not enough volunteers, members, or leaders to continue to operate as a local church. The results of low attendance and volunteers are apparent: no children's ministry or nursery, no greeting ministry, and no external ministries. The church's band consisted of five members, but three musicians were professional musicians who were not members of the church. The financial situation was not emergent or viable for the long term. WayPointe had fewer than fifty people attending the Sunday morning service at least once monthly. Congregational demographics included seven children under twelve years of age but no one between 12 – 29. More than twenty-five of WayPointe's people are of retirement age, and one in five are more than eighty years of age. In the world of church administration, there is the phrase "critical mass." The phrase refers to the minimum number of people a church needs to begin to thrive. WayPointe Christian Fellowship does not have a "critical mass." The church elders have spent many hours conversing, thinking, and praying over this decision. These leaders have worked diligently to discover God's will and obey Him. When considering all the information and sensing the leading of the Holy Spirit, the decision the elders made was straightforward, but implementing it was not easy.

### **Problem Presented**

This thesis project addresses the problem that WayPointe Christian Fellowship is in crisis. The crisis has precipitated a need to close the church. Therefore, a system must be devised that will enable the church's leaders to finalize the decision regarding closure and facilitate the end of the local congregation. Without such a system, the people of WayPointe Christian Fellowship will suffer unnecessarily. Without such a system, the congregation will find the

closure of their church to be overly confusing, depressing, and frustrating. These negative emotions may lead to negative behavior directed at the pastor and other church leaders or cause church members to discontinue their habit of active membership. The long-term effects could include the cessation of local church attendance and may lead some to leave the faith altogether. Furthermore, hundreds of churches face similar crises across the country. While church closure has been happening for centuries, there are very few books written on the topic. Similarly, few research projects have been commissioned to study the best practices of churches in the process of closing, the impact closing a church has on its members, or how church closure affects elders and pastors.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to create and implement a system to enable the dignified closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship. If done well, this system will build the bond between God and the people of this congregation, enable the members to continue worshipping the Lord, provide an opportunity for the church to grieve appropriately, and minimize the pain and suffering these church members will experience. God is glorified when his people pass through trials with humility, dignity, and grace. Furthermore, this system may contribute to the greater conversation about closing a local church. As the events of this local church's closure were studied, helpful practices were elevated, and mistakes could be corrected, enabling the system to be used by the leaders of other churches in crisis.

### **Basic Assumptions**

This project assumes that closing a local church can be done well. The researcher recognizes that every task can be done with a varying degree of competence. Here, however, the

efforts are aimed at glorifying God and blessing His people through a process often referred to as “the death of a church.” The assumption is that even in death, or perhaps especially in death, God is glorified. The second assumption is that utilizing best practices from practical theology, pastoral ministry, and psychology will produce positive spiritual and psychological changes in the closing church’s members.

### **Definitions**

This project concerns itself with the closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship. Throughout this project, certain words refer to processes, people groups, and the church. While the terms may be familiar to the reader, they may not be used in the precise way the reader anticipates. Thus, a clear definition is provided here.

*Church Closure or Church Death.* Simply put, death is the cessation of life. For a church to close, it must process all the individual state (and federal) requirements of a not-for-profit organization (if established that way) to dissolve. In so doing, the church ceases all activity of its councils and regular meetings.<sup>3</sup>

*Dignified Closure.* When a local church reaches the end of its existence in such a way that its people are cared for<sup>4</sup>, its pastors and leaders are healthy, and its resources are reallocated into the kingdom of God. Furthermore, the church can accomplish this without overwhelming conflict, loss of zeal, or disconnection from Jesus' bride (see Eph 5:31-32).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Christian Reformed Church, “Crossroads Discernment Process: Logistics of Closing a Church,” accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.crcna.org/crossroads/stages/next-steps/logistics-closing-church>.

<sup>4</sup> Gail Cafferata, *The Last Pastor: Faithfully Steering a Closing Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 29.

<sup>5</sup> L. Gail Irwin, *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 104-05.

*Critical Mass.* Having a “critical mass” means that a church has sufficient attendees to have stable financial support and enough volunteers to support the ministries of the church.<sup>6</sup> The numbers can vary in different situations, but a general rule of thumb is a congregation of at least fifty.

*Leadership or Church Leaders.* The leadership of a church includes those who are appointed as elders (Titus 1:5). The elder group includes those who work hard at preaching and teaching (1 Tim 5:17). In many churches, these people have the title of senior (or solo) pastor. The church appoints these leaders to operate as a council of equals.<sup>7</sup>

*Unity.* The definition of the unity of the Church comes directly from the prayer of Jesus: “I am... praying...on behalf of those who believe in me through their [the Apostles] testimony, that they will all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. The glory you gave to me I have given to them, that they may be one just as we are one—I in them and you in me—that they may be completely one, so that the world will know that you sent me, and you have loved them just as you have loved me” (John 17:20-23, NET). The prayer of Jesus demonstrates the desire of God for His people to be unified. The unity of WayPointe is seen in voting and private and public conversations.

### **Limitations**

At this time, WayPointe Christian Fellowship currently has about fifty people that attend regularly. Thirty-three of those people are members. This DMIN study will have access to these

---

<sup>6</sup> Keith Spencer, “Assessing Congregational Viability,” *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 39.

people, but no more. Another limitation is time. The closing of a church is a unique experience that will have a definitive end date. Thus, a clear but possibly small window will be available for the researcher to accomplish this project. The window in question exists between obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board and the final worship service of the church, which took place on September 25, 2022.

### **Delimitations**

The focus of this action research project is the closing of a local church. As such, the research was restricted to topics associated with that process and limited to the people directly involved. Since the pastor-researcher knows the people of the congregation well, there is reason to believe the relationship will influence the responses of some members. Efforts were enacted to mitigate this reality.

### **Thesis Statement**

If a thoughtful closure plan is developed and implemented at WayPointe Christian Fellowship, then God will be glorified, and the greater church will be blessed as this local church closes. The glory of God is the chief end of man; thus, it should be pursued in all Christian endeavors, including the closure of local churches. As churches reach the end of their life cycles, their people may fall into the enemy's trap by sinning with gossip, slander, selfishness, fits of anger, and jealousy. The church needs a well-designed closure plan to enable them to resist sin, prepare to transition into a new congregation, draw near to God, and bring Him glory in all they say and do.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

American Christian churches of every category have been in decline for decades.<sup>8</sup> Since spring 2020, the worldwide pandemic known as COVID-19 has accelerated this process, and we are now experiencing a rash of church closures in the United States. Within this chapter, the reader will find a close review of the salient literature, an articulated theological position detailing the Bible's direct and indirect stance on church closure, and an examination of the theoretical aspects of church closure.

### Literature Review

Very little literature exists with the primary purpose of discussing church closure. This paucity of extant resources demonstrates the extreme need for more significant research and writing on the topic. Thus, this literature review is primarily based on four books. The best of these books is *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregation*,<sup>9</sup> edited by Beth Ann Gaede and features essays written by fifteen authors, each with experience in pastoring a closing church or consulting with pastors who have closed churches. *The Last Pastor: Faithfully Steering a Closing Church*<sup>10</sup> by Gail Cafferata tells a personal story of a pastor who closed a church but is also intermixed with interviews and survey responses of 130 pastors who personally closed churches. L. Gail Irwin's book *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection*<sup>11</sup> has a similar layout to Cafferata's in telling her own story while interacting

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen Morseth, *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Gail Cafferata, *The Last Pastor: Faithfully Steering a Closing Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> L. Gail Irwin, *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

with the more than thirty interviews done with lay leaders, pastors, and regional leaders who had also endured the process of church closure. The final book to be highlighted is *Finishing with Grace: A Guide to Selling, Merging, or Closing Your Church*.<sup>12</sup>, written by Linda M. Hilliard and Reverend Gretchen J. Switzer. This self-published work is a workbook style, with questions after each chapter. The reader knows the major authors and primary works and can understand how few resources are available. This reality echoed throughout the literature, including the preface of Gaede's work, highlighting the precious little research done in this area and the great need for more. Here, lay leaders, pastors, and denominational leaders who must close churches can find some focused thought on the subject. On the other hand, if one wishes to avoid closure, resurrect their church, grow their church, or otherwise make it better, there are myriad choices.

The available literature does promote a theory regarding its own scarcity: denial. One writer from Gaede's volume notes how individual church members, pastors, and denominational leaders are reluctant to deal with church closure.<sup>13</sup> Hilliard and Switzer concur, writing about how denominations practice institutional denial, the chief symptom of which is the failure to record how many churches are closing.<sup>14</sup> Denial is triggered by any number of situations and is typically born out of fear. For leaders in our churches, closure is the source of many fears. For pastors, congregations, and denominational leaders, the fear of failure looms large and leads to avoidance behaviors.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Linda Hilliard and Gretchen Switzer, *Finishing with Grace: A Guide to Selling, Merging, or Closing Your Church* (U.S.: Booklocker.com, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Keith Spencer, "Assessing Congregational Viability," in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Irwin, *Toward the Better Country*, 58.

Church closure triggers strong emotions which build upon one another. Fear leads directly to avoidance which causes limitations to research and literature, resulting in ignorance and failure. Cafferata argues that the failure is tragic and preventable, noting how the clergy she surveyed longed to share their experience with other pastors, denominational leaders, and seminary professors.<sup>16</sup> Four categories have emerged for examination in reviewing this (and other) literature. The first is a historical evaluation of the path that has led the American church to this place of decline. Next will be a thorough inquiry into the intricacies of decision-making as found within churches in crisis. The third is the art and science of pastoral care for these congregations. The fourth and final category will be a review of the literature's advice designed to improve the overall health of these pastors.

#### How Did We Get Here?

The literature reaches a clear consensus: the American Church is in trouble. According to Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, only 20% of Protestant churches in the United States are growing.<sup>17</sup> It seems Hilliard and Switzer would concur with this estimate. They note how mainline churches (of which they list eight)<sup>18</sup> have been in continual decline since the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the 1990s saw a time when mainline churches were declining while evangelical churches were growing, but it was not to last. In the early 2000s, evangelical churches began declining as

---

<sup>16</sup> Cafferata, *The Last Pastor*, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Jim Tomberlin, Warren Bird, and Craig Groseschel, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), xvi.

<sup>18</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 1.



well.<sup>20</sup> Statistics confirm what careful observers have seen for years: the American church is in trouble.

The story of how the American church began contracting is quite complex. Irwin begins the discussion by reminding her readers of the history of the Christian church. She speaks of how “Church growth and decline in the United States has had its own ebb and flow over history. If we are tempted to think that church closure is a new phenomenon, the record refutes this.”<sup>21</sup> She argues that it is not just the American Church hemorrhaging members but all organized religions in America.<sup>22</sup> This titanic shift is nothing less than a transformation of the religious<sup>23</sup> and cultural<sup>24</sup> the landscape of The United States. A consequence of this shift is the end of the era where there was support for a church in every urban corner and every rural community.

There was a second historical reality from the post-World War II boom when churches were planted across the country. In rural America, there was a notion that towns should be 14 miles apart so that any farmer could do the morning chores, get to town and do their business, and get home in time for evening chores. This logic was then applied to churches.<sup>25</sup> When considering these two different church planting strategies, one can understand how the country may have planted more churches than it could support. Furthermore, significant evidence is available to argue that churches have lifespans similar to humans. Irwin leans into this argument often, writing that average congregations last 70 to 100 years and that “history has shown that no

---

<sup>20</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Hendrik Pieter de Roest, “‘Losing a Common Space to Connect’: An Inquiry into Inside Perspectives on Church Closure Using Visual Methods,” *IJPT* 17, no. 2 (November 2013), 296.

<sup>24</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Len Eberhart, “Closing Rural Congregations,” *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 23.

local church is meant to live forever...[but] like people, churches are born, live and breathe, fulfill their missions, and pass away.”<sup>26</sup> While the theory of lifespans can get quite complex, with varying opinions about the arrangement of different stages and triggers and what constitutes a point of no return,<sup>27</sup> the big idea here is that all local churches, as with all humans, die. The question is when not if.

Theologians argue that the whole of the book of Job can be boiled down to a simple statement: God is sovereign. This statement is offensive to some and an oversimplification to others, but in chapters 38—41, God speaks very clearly about His supreme authority over all His creation. Christians have held to this truth for centuries yet still struggle to apply it universally. In the case of church closure, three authors argue that God's providence leads some churches to close. Gaede recites her hope for congregations through a series of questions intended to direct readers to the possibility “that God calls some churches to close.”<sup>28</sup> Irwin arrives at providence by remembering that the church belongs to God, and Christians are not always even able to see how it will end.<sup>29</sup> Cafferata agrees, writing about pastors who are called, by God, to close their churches and specifically quoting one who had both faith and doubt throughout the process.<sup>30</sup>

Some church closures result from outside influences, and others come through internal failures. Countless stories have been written, spoken,<sup>31</sup> and filmed about pastoral indiscretions.

---

<sup>26</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> For a thorough conversation on Church Lifespan, see Janet Thomas, “The Final Benediction: Transitioning A Dying Church from Indecision to Closure” (D.Min. Thesis, Palmer Theological Seminary, 2013), 28-40.

<sup>28</sup> Gaede, *Ending with Hope*, vii.

<sup>29</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 12, 84.

<sup>31</sup> An example is Mike Cospers, “*The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*” (Podcast), June 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>

Within the literature are accounts of pastors who abandon their churches, build abrasive<sup>32</sup> or abusive<sup>33</sup> relationships with members, fail to keep their word,<sup>34</sup> micromanage to the point of destroying church governance,<sup>35</sup> or fall into sin and fail to repent. While pastors may directly influence their churches, they are not alone in causing problems. Institutional failures also cause churches to be closed from inaccurate or inadequate theology; poor systems of accountability; or unclear mission, vision, and values. Often these failures become cemented into the foundation of their denomination, stifling any attempt at change or adaptation.<sup>36</sup> Inflexibility causes things to break and brings churches to their end.

When churches close, people naturally want to know whom to blame. The reality is that often no one is to blame. Sometimes, it is fair to blame the pastor, denominational leaders, or systems. Other times it is the congregation itself.<sup>37</sup> Cafferata devotes an entire chapter<sup>38</sup> to church conflict noting many specific complaints the pastors she interviewed voiced. She concludes that some churches cannot overcome their internal conflict regardless of the skill or efforts of their pastor. These sentiments appeared in other literature; only they were addressed in vague, unhelpful language.

When a church closes, it is rarely one thing that causes the crisis. At the confluence of facts and emotions is denial. When a church crisis occurs, it is ordinary for the congregation to overlook it, for the pastor to downplay it, and for the denominational leadership to ignore it.

---

<sup>32</sup> Spencer, "Assessing Congregational Viability," 17.

<sup>33</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 108.

<sup>35</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Bush, *In Dying We Are Born: The Challenge and the Hope for Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 58.

<sup>38</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 73-85.

According to research, most churches stay open,<sup>39</sup> not because they have a new vision or are undergoing some variation of church resurrection. Most churches remain open because they will not accept that they are in crisis and thus do not make any decisions regarding closure or merger. However, “not making a decision is a decision.”<sup>40</sup>

### The Decision-Making Process

Each church has its own identity. Recent leadership materials have produced countless mission, vision, and values statements that churches have adopted. However, even if a local church has none of these, it still has an identity and a reason for existing. The first aspect of any decision-making process is evaluating what already exists and comparing it to the ideal. Cafferata suggests, at a minimum, that every local church ought to be serving something and someone beyond themselves.<sup>41</sup> The alternative is to become a congregation that has lost its will or ability to serve its community, region, and the world. That church has (or quickly will) become a social “club.”<sup>42</sup> The unfortunate reality is that many Christians and some researchers struggle to define a local church in their minds and thus focus on the wrong elements of church life. These congregations become inward-focused and can deify the building in which they worship. Hilliard and Switzer come near to this, arguing that people's love for their building is based on their experiences of worship within it; thus, the building itself is a part of the church.<sup>43</sup> While it is easy to understand people's sentimental attachment to a building based on pleasant

---

<sup>39</sup> David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of Over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 85.

<sup>40</sup> Robert E. Gunther, *The Truth About Better Decision-Making (Collection)* (London, UK: Pearson Education, 2008), Part VI, Truth, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> “Club” is used in a derogatory manner by Cafferata, Irwin, and the pastors they interviewed. One pastor says, “if it's not a church, then really there's no purpose in calling it a church.”

<sup>43</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 19.

memories, this does not deify the building.<sup>44</sup> Christians do not worship created things but the creator alone.

When church leaders begin evaluating their churches, they will find resistance. That resistance is very often born in fear. For the leaders, it is the fear of making a mistake, of closing the church prematurely, of failing God and his church, and of the future. Pastors interviewed shared a common fear of making the decision.<sup>45</sup> They described agonizing times of prayer and thought as they reached inescapable conclusions; they were fraught with immense consequences.<sup>46</sup> One of those consequences is overcoming the idea that “closure is failure.” So prevalent is this thought that Gaede, Cafferata, and Irwin each devote significant portions of their books to discussing and dismissing the notion. When congregants, pastors, and denominational staff members get this idea stuck in their heads, the decision-making process becomes about avoidance of failure rather than seeking God's will. Another aspect of fear-based decision-making comes when there is mistrust in the relationships between the congregation, pastor, and denominational staff. Both Gaede and Cafferata told of congregations worried about the motives of their denominations, suggesting the desire for closure “is just so they can get all the money”<sup>47</sup> and ultimately support their own causes.

If church leaders can navigate the initial resistance, they are left with the monumental task of determining how to decide to close. Decisions such as these bring an onslaught of emotion that will change the course of people's thinking and lead to even more pain. Pain like this is why Irwin urges her readers to gather ample information dispassionately before attempting

---

<sup>44</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 165.

to evaluate any of it.<sup>48</sup> This recommendation fits well with the advice the Heath brothers give in chapter 11 of their book *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*, to set tripwires. A tripwire is a predetermined evaluative event that forces a decision to be made.<sup>49</sup> An example of a tripwire set for a church closing scenario is calculating the average Sunday morning worship service attendance. The alarm rings if it dips below 50 people for four consecutive weeks. Leadership teams looking to set up tripwires could use information gathered from congregational surveys, signs of church crisis,<sup>50</sup> financial health,<sup>51</sup> or the inability to reach goals outlined in the church's mission, vision, and values statements.<sup>52</sup> Once these tripwires are in place, the leadership team can set dates to reevaluate the data and make decisions based on facts. If these metrics verify a "failure to thrive,"<sup>53</sup> church leaders then have the compelling evidence needed to begin the painful conversation with the congregation. For some church leaders, this is an excellent time to perform a church survey based on the results of the trip wire data. Regardless of how the leadership does it, Cafferata rightly argues for the importance of attaining the consensus of the membership regarding the church crisis. This effort enables congregational participation and puts accountability<sup>54</sup> for the decisions upon each member, not just the leadership.

As the information is collected and church leaders begin to understand the inevitability of closure or merger, those leaders should also consider seeking outside help. It is always wise to

---

<sup>48</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* (New York, NY: Crown Business, 2013), 222.

<sup>50</sup> Spencer, "Assessing Congregational Viability," 23.

<sup>51</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 44.

<sup>52</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 66.

seek advice from “someone who’s solved your problem.”<sup>55</sup> The reviews of help given by denominational leaders are mixed. Cafferata and Irwin describe ideal situations where leaders can “play a crucial role by offering compassion and respect to their pastors.”<sup>56</sup> Spencer agrees, in theory, that denominational resources and staff can be helpful but also warns about power-hungry leaders who may mandate their participation in the “process-if not outright control of it.”<sup>57</sup> Another way to obtain outside help is to hire a church consultant.<sup>58</sup> While these people can be accommodating, finding someone with the requisite skills for this unique process can be difficult, and it may be expensive for churches that are typically short on funds.

Once a leadership team agrees that the church is in crisis, the next task is to determine what to do about it. Each author makes their own suggestions regarding a church’s options, but for clarity, this thesis project will explore only three: continue the ministry as it is, arrange for a merger of some kind, and “fold the tent.”<sup>59</sup> Specific evidence shows that most churches stay open and remain as they are, but this delays the inevitable. An alternative option is to merge with another ministry. Hilliard and Switzer speak about mergers as though it were a simple matter of finding another like-minded ministry willing to merge and then merging. They write that “when two churches are failing, the advantage of merging is obvious.”<sup>60</sup> The reality is, “when either the only or the primary motivation for merger is survival, most of the time the merger only results in postponing the death of the churches that merged.”<sup>61</sup> Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, authors of

---

<sup>55</sup> Heath and Heath, *Decisive*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Spencer, “Assessing Congregational Viability,” 25.

<sup>58</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 52.

<sup>59</sup> Spencer, “Assessing Congregational Viability,” 27-28.

<sup>60</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 37.

<sup>61</sup> Terry E. Foland, “Merger as a New Beginning,” in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 65.

the definitive work *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, expiate the challenges of church closure. First published in 2012 and updated in 2020, the book outlines four models for healthy mergers: rebirth, adoption, marriage, and intensive care.<sup>62</sup> To continue investigating church mergers is beyond the scope of this thesis project.

When all other options have been considered and rejected, the permanent closure of the church remains. While this option will be contentious for some throughout the process, many reach a place of relief. Some will eventually confess, “we should have done this years ago,” and after joining a new church, admit, “it is such a joy to come to church and do ministry instead of having to figure out how we can keep the doors open and lights on for another week.”<sup>63</sup> The relief in this woman’s voice is echoed systematically in the statistical reality that shows, “There is an inverse relationship between the closure rate and the growth of a denomination. The lower the church closure rate, the more likely the denomination is in decline. The higher the closure rate, the more likely the denomination is growing.”<sup>64</sup> It would be exceedingly helpful if these truths were found within the minds of every church leader who had to contemplate closing their church.

### Shepherding the Flock Through Church Closure

The care a pastor provides for their congregation is always crucial. It is never more important than during a season of crisis that leads to church closure.<sup>65</sup> One of the truths revealed

---

<sup>62</sup> Jim Tomberlin, Warren Bird, and Craig Groeschel, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 21.

<sup>63</sup> N. Nelson Granade, Jr, “The Pastor’s Experience,” in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 63.

<sup>64</sup> David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 88.

<sup>65</sup> Janet B. Thomas, “The Final Benediction: Transitioning a Dying Church from Indecision to Closure” (D.Min. Thesis, Eastern University), 80, ProQuest Ebrary.



in Irwin's research is the correlation between "healthy closure...[and] the availability of a competent pastor."<sup>66</sup> Despite this, many churches fail to receive the care they need most.<sup>67</sup>

The need for pastoral care is illuminated by the analogy of church closure as "the death of a sacred community."<sup>68</sup> This analogy is found within the literature on countless occasions, so much so that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's work *On Death and Dying* is directly quoted or referred to more than twenty times in the four primary texts and many times beyond that in the secondary literature. Thus, it is worth delineating the five stages of emotion people pass through as they process their own pending death: "denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance."<sup>69</sup>

Denial is both powerful and common. It occurs to every category of people within closing churches: pastors, elders, deacons, members, and regular attendees. When church leaders are affected by denial, the consequences can be severe, as discussed in the introduction to this section. Denial among church members may cause less damage overall, but it is still problematic since it prevents people from rightly processing reality, the closure of their church.<sup>70</sup> Pastors who care for their flocks work hard to break through denial through frequent and various forms of communication with the church by soliciting their opinions and forcing their involvement in decision-making along the way.

---

<sup>66</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 80

<sup>67</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 69.

<sup>68</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 86.

<sup>69</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, & Their Own Families* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1969), ix.

<sup>70</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 71.

Anger is another common emotion found in people losing their church. Anger comes out in a variety of ways. For some, the anger is directed at God.<sup>71</sup> One woman confessed her disappointment saying, “It kind of felt like God left us,”<sup>72</sup> but God is not the only recipient of congregational anger. The church can quickly become embittered toward previous pastors, current pastors, elders, and one another.<sup>73</sup> Hilliard and Switzer write extensively about negative behaviors congregants exhibit due to their anger and their disorientation. “More than once, we have sat in helpless horror as one church member has attacked another with unwarranted and unexpected hostility, rudeness and rage during a congregational meeting and stormed out, leaving everyone in the room shell-shocked, emotionally ravaged, and speechless.”<sup>74</sup> Using her experience and the information she garnered in her interviews, Cafferata writes about conflict management by identifying “key tools for reconciliation.”<sup>75</sup> She concedes that “some congregations, especially those in theological conflict, may collapse in irreconcilable chaos, pastoral leadership can provide order, protection, and guidance”<sup>76</sup> which can and should enable church closure to happen with dignity and peace.

Once a congregation believes they are in crisis, bargaining begins in earnest.<sup>77</sup> The bargaining is evidenced by the number of parishioners who seek out the pastor or an elder, grab their shoulder and begin a sentence in one of the following ways: “have you considered...,” “perhaps we could...,” or “I know what we need to do.” The bargaining is often focused on

---

<sup>71</sup> Tanya Stormo Rasmussen, “The Members’ Experience,” in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 51.

<sup>72</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 37.

<sup>73</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 41.

<sup>74</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 12.

<sup>75</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 76.

<sup>76</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 77.

<sup>77</sup> Rasmussen, “The Member’s Experience,” *Ending with Hope*, 50.

whatever aspect of the church crisis the member is most familiar with and is likely to neglect other significant issues. Again, the best remedy is consistent and varied communication that honestly speaks to every problem with which the church deals.

In *On Death and Dying*, Kubler-Ross titles her fourth stage “Depression,” but this may be myopic. Undoubtedly, depression is a universal emotion<sup>78</sup> in those dealing with death, but literature also includes another helpful word, “grieving.” Taking the similarities for granted, the author will now report on the overlapping ideas found in the literature. Cafferata uses the word “grief” over 80 times in her volume, describing the condition of the pastor, elders, other church leaders, members, and congregation. In her well-articulated position, she contends that pastors who shepherd their people well must honor the grieving process found within the congregation.<sup>79</sup> Irwin also expiates the process devoting her third chapter to “Expressions of Grief in the Faith Community.”<sup>80</sup> Without quoting Kubler-Ross, she speaks to denial, anger, bargaining, and grief through the lens of many interviews highlighting the pain people feel amid the church closure process. Fortunately, suffering has meaning; it teaches us about the “importance of time” and pushes us to “make the most of every relationship.”<sup>81</sup>

Healthy people who pass through the worst life has to offer will eventually reach a place of acceptance. Acceptance is revealed differently from one person to the next. Some can articulate what has happened and what they hope will come.<sup>82</sup> Others demonstrate their acceptance through a slow change in their attitude. One pastor argued that her congregation

---

<sup>78</sup> Rasmussen, “The Member’s Experience,” 52.

<sup>79</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 86.

<sup>80</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 23.

<sup>81</sup> Linda E. Philabaun, “Dying with Dignity: Palliative Care for the Dying Church” (D.Min., University of Dubuque Theological Seminary), 75, ProQuest Ebrary.

<sup>82</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 87.

demonstrated acceptance as they became “involved in new church homes.”<sup>83</sup> Finding a new church home may not be the first indication of acceptance. Acceptance is essential, and healthy pastors, who are closing their churches, hope their congregants find it.

Shepherding a flock through the closure process is a complex process for which the literature advises good listening, honest dialog, and over communication. Cafferata strongly urges pastors to have a full course of listening to their people and the Holy Spirit.<sup>84</sup> This advice may be drawn from Steven Covey’s famous fifth habit as found in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Cafferata’s suggestions include open, closed, small group, and individual meetings. In each scenario, she calls the pastor (and all church leaders) to be honest. Likewise, Irwin compels her readers to listen well and find the right time to “be the bearer of bad news,” noting how pastors should rightly use their “authority to tell the truth.”<sup>85</sup> Both authors tell stories of congregations stuck in the denial and bargaining phases of their processing to illustrate the essential nature of telling the truth in these situations, especially when it is painful.

Communication is at a particular premium during a church closure. The literature suggests communicating honestly and as early as possible since “like any leader, a pastor is often emotionally three to six months ahead of his or her people.”<sup>86</sup> Another reason for overcommunication is the limitation of rumors. Crises invite rumors. Scripture warns believers against such things (Prov 20:19; Eph 4:29; 1 Tim 5:13), yet rumors and gossip persist within

---

<sup>83</sup> Rasmussen, “The Member’s Experience,” 53.

<sup>84</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 66.

<sup>85</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 81.

<sup>86</sup> Granade, Jr., “The Pastor’s Experience,” 63.

most congregations. Continually telling the truth is the best defense against such problems.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, an ongoing honest, respectful dialog is an excellent deterrent to interpersonal conflict.<sup>88</sup>

### Maintaining Pastoral Health

Both logic and literature agree; closing a church is hard. The process is arduous for the congregation, membership, elders, and pastor.<sup>89</sup> For pastors, church closure leads to health issues, including higher-than-average rates of depression, obesity, and marital problems.<sup>90</sup> In examining the data, one can understand why pastors struggle physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually since they experience various responses from the people with whom they interact. These conversations can reveal different kinds of accusations, condemnation, anger, and confusion, most of which stem from the same wrong understanding that closure is a failure. Closure as failure is the most impactful lie that people believe. When the congregation sees closing as failing, they conclude that the pastor (along with everyone else) has failed. Pastors whom close churches must work diligently to maintain their health. Becoming healthy and maintaining that health is the source material for an unending torrent of material and is not the primary goal of this thesis project. However, the literature makes a few specific suggestions for the pastors undertaking this work. This advice begins with finding a healthy balance in relationships with the church membership. One writer stresses how challenging it is for pastors of dying churches “to be present in the midst of anxiety and grief without being overcome by

---

<sup>87</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 24; Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 80.

<sup>88</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 81.

<sup>89</sup> This reality is self-evident but explicitly mentioned in Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 106, 133 and Irwin, *Better Country*, 36, 54, and regularly implied by every writer on the subject.

<sup>90</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 112, 114, 128.

anxiety.”<sup>91</sup> This notion conjures the idea of somehow transcending the situation. The pastor must be part of the congregation and stand outside of it. Cafferata describes this as “emotional differentiation,” which enables the pastor to “stand apart as ‘I’” while also leading “among the ‘we.’”<sup>92</sup> Her research revealed that pastors who could find a copesetic equilibrium were better able to shepherd their people and maintain their mental health.

Furthermore, she encourages the pastors to lean into healthy relationships with helpful people like their spouses, children, other pastors, or counselors. Of course, each of the authors would agree that having a healthy relationship with God is more important than anything else. Finally, there is advice suggesting that the pastor have an “outside outlet” that helps them remove their mind from the challenge of closure and focus on something else regularly. The author stumbled into this activity when he and his spouse began creating a detailed plan for a vacation they would take together after the church was closed.

Pastoring a church through closure is like being the spouse of someone dying. The spouse feels intense grief and pain because of the pending loss, yet this is also when many well-meaning people make their life more difficult. These relations desire to help, but they often ask foolish questions about the medical care that was or was not provided and make unwanted suggestions about alternative treatments, medicines, doctors, and supplements. Some of these people will suggest it is a matter of faith, and if the spouse only believed more, the sick would become well. Others come and unknowingly ask the spouse to provide them comfort instead of it being the other way around. These experiences are commonly hoisted upon pastors of closing churches, as Hilliard and Switzer describe from their encounters with church members and people from the

---

<sup>91</sup> Granade, Jr., “The Pastor’s Experience,” 56.

<sup>92</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 49.

community.<sup>93</sup> Cafferata expands the idea to include pastors from other churches and denominational leaders.<sup>94</sup> When both the congregation and denominational leadership fails to provide support, that, for Cafferata, is a double-jeopardy pastor.<sup>95</sup>

The final aspect of pastoral health considered within the literature is managing future expectations. Cafferata's interviews revealed that pastors closing churches experience spiritual and emotional exhaustion. Some of these pastors also described a "stigma" they felt had been applied to them to the point of name-calling: "congregation-killer church closer."<sup>96</sup> She describes a "vocational wake" that occurs for some pastors who close churches. This "wake" is the turbulent water in which pastors must decide what to do next. Many, about two-thirds of Cafferata's survey respondents, apply for another pastoral job, some retire, and some choose to leave the ministry.

### Conclusion

There is precious little research and literature that directly speaks to the process of church closure. Nearly all the available research and literature originated in mainline churches. While these resources can be of great value to any pastor or church leadership team charged with closing a local church, there is a great need for more evangelical research and writing on this topic. The need is particularly true now because of how the pandemic known as COVID-19 has changed the world in general and the landscape of American Christian churches in particular.

---

<sup>93</sup> Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, 24

<sup>94</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 110, 167.

<sup>95</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 143.

<sup>96</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 137.

The pandemic, along with other forces, will cause many churches to close, thus increasing the immediacy of the need for this critical work.

When researchers and writers begin focusing on churches facing closure, it will behoove them to speak directly and practically about how their members can successfully find, evaluate, select, and integrate into their next church. The extant literature on church closure provides just one piece of advice, suggesting that current members look for a church of the same denomination near their home. This advice is too little guidance for a decision of this magnitude.

### **Theological Foundations**

The Bible does not give specific directives regarding the closure of a local church; however, biblical truths can be employed to develop a theology of church closure. These truths must be prayerfully appropriated and carefully applied. The theological section that follows will include a brief overview of church theology, a more thorough investigation of Jesus' warnings to the churches in Revelation and his parable regarding the unfruitful fig tree, a look at Paul's teachings regarding church leadership, and an examination of Biblical shepherding during a crisis.

#### **Church: A Brief Biblical Definition**

The biblical definition of the church includes two entities: the universal church and the local church. As instituted by Jesus, the universal church is the community of all true confessing believers in God throughout time.<sup>97</sup> In Paul's treatment of the marital relationship, many truths regarding Jesus' relationship with the church are revealed. In the passage, the Apostle relents,

---

<sup>97</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 853. P. Adam McClendon and Jared E. Lockhart, *Timeless Church: Five Lessons from Acts* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), Chapter 1.



“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32)<sup>98</sup> Of what mystery is Paul speaking? The mystery of Jesus's headship over the church (Eph 5:23) and the more excellent mystery of His undeniable love for her. The love Jesus has for His church is demonstrated by His sacrifice (Eph 5:25) and the sanctification He provided (Eph 5:26) that made possible His presentation of the church (presumably to the Father) as holy and without blemish. Finally, Paul teaches the tenderness of Christ in how He nourishes (Eph 5:29) and cherishes (Eph 5:29) His church.

The local church is the body of Christ gathered in space and time for the people of God to fellowship, worship, study, give, evangelize, baptize, and love one another for God's glory and their good. These groups are often called an assembly, fellowships, or congregations. The Bible is replete with examples of local churches “in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 11:22), in Asia Minor (Acts 16:5), in Rome (Rom 16:5), in Corinth (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), in Galatia (Gal 1:2), in Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:1), and in the home of Philemon (Phlm 2).”<sup>99</sup>

Opinions regarding the nature, essence, and requirements of the local church vary widely depending on one's denominational background, theological training, and personal experience; however, nearly all Christian churches agree on a few key elements every Christian church must demonstrate. Rick Warren helpfully codified the five essential elements of a local church he found irrefutable in his seminal work *The Purpose Driven Church*: evangelism, ministry, fellowship, discipleship, and worship.<sup>100</sup> Many church leaders and scholars have taken issue with Warren and his ministry. Still, these five elements have lingered for nearly thirty years and

---

<sup>98</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this thesis project will be from the English Standard Version of the Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

<sup>99</sup> Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 348.

<sup>100</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growing Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 103-106.

provide an excellent platform for demonstrating how churches in crisis often fail to meet the minimum required of any group calling itself a church.

The first point at which churches often fail is evangelism. The work Christians call evangelism<sup>101</sup> ought to be happening both locally and globally. Local work should be a regular part of the ministry done by the saints within the church. Global ministry should be done through training, sending, and supporting missionaries who experience the call to ministry in a foreign locale. Biblical examples of evangelism abound. The most obvious two are Jesus and Paul. Jesus, the Son of God, came from heaven (1 Thess 1:10) to earth to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). The Savior demonstrated many things, including missionary activity. The Apostle Paul also went into foreign lands to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ (See Acts 16-20 and his letters).

The second point at which many churches fail is in ministry. Ministry is a vague term, but it certainly includes benevolence. Churches in crisis often fail here. James, the brother of Jesus, tells us that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (Jas 1:27).

The third of Warren's purposes is fellowship. From his perspective, baptism is an example of fellowship. Whether the reader agrees with this assessment is inconsequential, for all can see the biblical mandate to baptize believers “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19, NIV). It is common for dying churches to go for years without having any baptisms in their midst.

Finally, churches rarely practice church discipline at the end of their life cycles. Matthew quotes Jesus' teaching regarding handling those who are caught in sin. The

---

<sup>101</sup> Millard J Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, ed. L. Arnold Hustad, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 347.

LORD instructs the people, 'If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, *tell it to the church*; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector' (Matt 18:15-17, emphasis added).

There are biblical imperatives to which every church must adhere. It can be argued that churches that do not or cannot obey the Lord should no longer be called Christian churches and should permanently close.

### A Theology of Church Closure from Jesus and Paul

There is only one time the Scripture speaks of closing a church, and the words belong to none other than Jesus Christ, Himself: "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Rev 2:4-5). To make sense of this warning, a review is warranted. In the first chapter of Revelation, the Lord reveals to John some of the mysterious symbols He is using, "the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Rev 1:20). Thus, when He warns about abandoning the love they (the church at Ephesus) had, the consequence Jesus has in mind (the removal of their lampstand from its place) is the end of the Ephesian church.

The warning is simple enough: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first." To what works does Jesus refer? Love. It appears the Ephesian church had abandoned the love they had. Love is a vague term; thus, "some interpreters have understood 'forsaken your first love' to refer to a diminished love for God (cf. 12:11); more

commentators today understand the phrase as love for one another (as likely in 2:19; cf. Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4; 2 Thess 1:3). Both objects of love are possible (cf. Heb. 6:10), but surely the latter is included...”<sup>102</sup> This two-pronged understanding aligns perfectly with Jesus' other thoughts on the matter, as seen in Mark 12:30. In the passage, Jesus quotes from the Shema, reinforcing its command to love God and connecting it with the command to love one's neighbor.<sup>103</sup> It is a wildly unfair conclusion to suggest that churches that die are those in which the people have lost their love of God and people, but if the latter becomes real within a church, the former is not far off. Loveless churches should close.

Jesus uses the fruit of the tree analogy to describe the works of a person multiple times (Matt 7:18, 12:33; Luke 6:43). In Luke 13, the Lord tells a parable about a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard that did not produce fruit, but rather than destroying it immediately, the caretaker convinced the man to give the tree extra care for one year to see if it would eventually produce. In this story, Jesus uses the familiar analogy of the tree and fruit; only here, the tree refers to the nation of Israel rather than an individual.<sup>104</sup> The story reveals the limited patience God displays toward His chosen people. This parable is very relatable to troubled churches. It is the nature of God to be patient and caring. However, His patience for individuals, churches, and nations not bearing fruit is limited.

Leadership is crucial to the success of nearly all human endeavors. While visionary church leadership does not guarantee that a church will succeed, many failures are attributable to the failure of church leadership. A skillful researcher would have no trouble finding examples of

---

<sup>102</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 106.

<sup>103</sup> Douglas S. Huffman and Jamie N. Hausherr, “Shema, the,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry, David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>104</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 970.

churches forced to close directly after the revelation of a key leader's sin. The Apostle Paul anticipated this and provided Timothy with a list (1 Tim 3:2-7) of issues that elders must have mastery over. Paul begins with the man, whose speech and conduct must be decorous. He expiates this idea by noting that the man must be a one-woman man who is the master of his mind, reputation, behaviors, and family. Furthermore, he must be a seasoned Christian.<sup>105</sup> When leaders fail to conform to these standards, they leave their churches vulnerable, and churches that tolerate such behavior, or worse yet, those that hire pastors or elect elders with unrepentant hearts, have good reason to fear the judgment of the Lord. He may bring a swift and righteous end to their church.

### Shepherding God's People Through Closure

The Bible is replete with examples of shepherding as an analogy for godly leaders taking care of God's people. The word "'Shepherd' came to designate not only persons who herded sheep but also kings (2 Sam. 5:2) and God Himself (Ps. 23; Isa. 40:11). Later prophets referred to Israel's leaders as shepherds (Jer. 23; Ezek. 34)."<sup>106</sup> When Jesus walked the earth, He called Himself "the good shepherd" (John 10:11), and when people are experiencing unrest, confusion, and anxiety, their need for a strong and tender shepherd is at its greatest. Therefore, a study of biblical examples of shepherding follows. This study will focus on the duties of a shepherd, including protecting the sheep, leading the sheep, and teaching God's truth to the sheep.

### **Shepherds Protect the Sheep**

---

<sup>105</sup> Linda Belleville, "Commentary on 1 Timothy," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews*, vol. 17 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 64.

<sup>106</sup> Elmer Gray, "Shepherd," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, et al. (Nashville: Holman Bible, 2003), 1484-85.

Any biblical theology of shepherding must begin with Jesus. In the tenth chapter of John's Gospel, he firmly teaches about the importance of protecting the sheep. This protection begins and ends with a relationship. Jesus speaks first of the sheepfold, a walled-in pen where the sheep are held behind a door. At first, He talks about the door being protective since only the shepherd enters that way (John 10:1), but later, He states He is the door. The point at which the sheep enter the dangers and blessings of the pasture is Jesus. Similarly, pastors must minister where their people enter into their worlds. This entry happens via relationship. As the literature shows, a member's ability to navigate the closure of their church is directly related to their willingness to engage in "honest and loving relationships with the church's ordained leader."<sup>107</sup> That relationship must begin with love, the kind of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13. In this season, the pastor's relationship with the church enables the ministry to happen; without it, the sermons, counseling, and advice given within the church all fall on deaf ears. Consequently, if a pastor wants to protect their flock as Jesus taught and modeled, that pastor must first have the love and respect of their people.

Another of Jesus' teachings regarding the protection of the flock is the calling of its under-shepherd. After Jesus' famous declaration of being "the good shepherd" comes His indictment upon the "hired hand." Here, the Lord reminds those who would do as He did that "The hired hand, who is not a shepherd and does not own sheep, sees the wolf coming and abandons the sheep and runs away" (John 10:12). Pastors who are not called to their church in powerful ways often flee when their church comes into desperate times. While measuring a pastor's sense of call is an impossible task, both Scriptures and the literature<sup>108</sup> agree that being

---

<sup>107</sup> Cafferata, *Last Pastor*, 29.

<sup>108</sup> Both Cafferata and Irwin speak of this phenomenon at length, noting the correlation between a pastor's call and the relative health of the church closure process.

called by God is valuable. Jesus' words indicate that pastors who are not called will abandon the sheep, exposing them to the world's wolves and thieves. Conversely, when a pastor is called to a church and follows Jesus' model and teaching, he will lay "down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

From his youth, King David understood how shepherding required courage and faith. In his appeal to King Saul for the honor of killing the Philistine Goliath, the young man David tells a story of his days as a shepherd. He proclaims that lions and bears would sometimes attack the flock, but he would rescue the sheep from them. (1 Sam 17:34b-35). Using this story, he argues that the God who "delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Sam 17:37). David understood God's desire to use shepherds he called to protect his flock which was something "they had all, including the king, forgotten that however untenable the military position might appear to be, they were the armies of the living God. The plural may indicate that David assumed that unseen spiritual forces were also involved in the battle."<sup>109</sup>

The story is a wonderful reminder of the single most important aspect of protecting the sheep: the power of God. With the power of God, the shepherds can "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil" (Eph 6:10-11). Jesus' teachings are instructive for all who are called to this shepherding, but it is worth remembering that Jesus is the greatest source of protection. Consequently, pastors who desire to protect their flocks must pray for them and consistently lead them to Jesus. Jesus alone is "the good shepherd." He alone is capable of

---

<sup>109</sup> Mary J. Evans, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 83.

literally laying down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). For pastors of local congregations in the midst of closing, the best way to protect the flock is to continue leading them into the presence of the Living God, as all pastors should do.

### **Shepherds Lead the Sheep**

Jesus' teaching has a clear leadership element as well. In the fourth verse, the Lord speaks of leading the sheep out of the sheep gate, and his sheep follow him. Carson argues, "that such a shepherd goes ahead of his sheep and draws them constitutes an admirable picture of the master/disciple relationship."<sup>110</sup> Jesus is the leader, the chief shepherd, and pastors called by the Lord into pastoral ministry are to beckon the sheep: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). This could include a multitude of things particular to each situation, but it certainly includes leading the people into ongoing worship, continued discipleship, and helpful discipline. Leading a closing requires detailed planning to allow the membership to engage with the Lord in ways that enable the processing of the emotion that comes naturally to this process. Leading well includes teaching the people what to expect as individuals and as a congregation. When shepherding is done right, it also leads to unity rather than strife because healthy leaders discipline those who fail to treat everyone with the love of Christ.

Much of the shepherd's leadership burden is expressed in preaching and teaching. Good preaching encourages, disciplines, teaches, reminds, draws people in, and sends them out. In making his case for preaching, Haddon Robinson argues that "a power comes through the preached word that even the written word cannot replace." Furthermore, preaching does "not consist of someone discussing religion. Instead, God Himself speaks through the personality and

---

<sup>110</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 383.



message of a preacher to confront men and women and bring them to Himself.”<sup>111</sup> Pastors who rely upon the Holy Spirit will also find his guidance in sermon preparation. These pastors will be drawn to preach about God first and practical matters next. Some themes will be critical to cover during this time. As the Spirit of God brings wisdom, particular elements will reveal themselves. Still, pastors should consider preaching about the aspects of a healthy church to prepare their people to choose their next church.

### **Shepherds Teach the Sheep Truth**

Jesus demonstrated how an aspect of shepherding is teaching the sheep. His under-shepherds will also create teaching opportunities that enable the flock to deal with the hardships of church closure. In his magnum opus *Discipleship Counseling*, Neil Anderson states, “there are two critical beliefs that are essential for our mental health. The first is based in the true nature of God...The second critical belief is based on a true knowledge of who we are as children of God and the nature of our relationship with Him.”<sup>112</sup> It is, therefore, incumbent upon the shepherd leaders to teach their flocks more about the God we worship (an ordinary act of pastoral ministry) and more about who they, as children of God, are. Again, specific topics are myriad but should include helpful prayers in times of crisis,<sup>113</sup> the interdependency within the church<sup>114</sup> (see 1 Cor 12:12-26), some basics concerning self-care, and practical advice regarding the care of other people in crisis. Many pastors are well-trained to pray and teach others how to pray.

---

<sup>111</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 19-20.

<sup>112</sup> Neil T. Anderson, *Discipleship Counseling: The Complete Guide to Helping Others Walk in Freedom and Grow in Christ* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2003), 56.

<sup>113</sup> Judson J. Swihart and Gerald C. Richardson, "Counseling in Times of Crisis," *Resources for Christian Counseling* vol 17, (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1987), 34.

<sup>114</sup> Swihart and Richardson, "Counseling in Crisis" 7, 36.

Similarly, most pastors have education and experience regarding the importance and facilitation of interdependency in fellowship, so these ideas will not be explored further.

Many words have typified different movements within mental health care, but none is more important than “truth.” As stated earlier, there is no more significant threat to mental health than when a person misunderstands who God is or misunderstands who they are as a child of God. These misunderstandings are sometimes the result of ignorance, but more often, they are born in lies. In John 8, the apostle tells of a confrontation Jesus had with a group of Pharisees. During this interaction, the Lord taught His people about their position under God, noting that “everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34-36). This is truth. As children of God, we must not practice sin but instead be freed from sin by the Son. The Pharisees do not understand Jesus' words; furthermore, they intentionally deceive and distract the people by insulting Jesus because of their misperception concerning his parents. They then go on to claim God as their father. Jesus' response is harsh and instructive: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me” (John 8:44-45). First, He refutes their claim of righteous spiritual parentage, then He reveals they are offspring of the devil. Their parentage does not come from flesh, but rather “this kind of sonship is predicated on kinship of behavior and values, [thus] it is not surprising that Jesus’ opponents want to carry out their father’s desires.”<sup>115</sup> Next, He convicts the devil of the most serious crime, murder, and connects it with lying, thus condemning the practice of lying

---

<sup>115</sup> Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 353.

and the devil. Finally, the Lord speaks of truth. Jesus is “the way, and *the truth*, and the life” (John 14:6, emphasis mine). Thus, we see the weight of truth conceptually. Jesus is truth, and the devil is a liar.

In all sorts of mental health crises, including church closure, truth is good medicine. One reason Jesus confronted the Pharisees as he did was to teach this lesson to those present and all who would come after. The thief wants to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10), but Jesus, the truth, came to redeem life. Redemption comes as people discard lies and begin to believe the truth. Redemption happens on grand scales as lost sinners repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord and savior. Redemption also happens as seasoned saints begin to believe Jesus can work in and through the pain and loss of their church closing. While it was not the aim of this project to study confirmation bias,<sup>116</sup> it is worth remembering how damaging it can be to believe a lie since they tend to linger in one's mind despite all evidence to the contrary.

As shepherds work to reveal lies and speak the truth, a variety of issues will come to the surface. The pastors and members will be rewarded well if they can process the issues as they arise. The most common of these issues is fear. God knew that fear would be omnipresent in humans; thus, the Scripture is peppered with commands to be courageous and not fear. There are many variations of the lie: “the future will be terrible,” but the truth is “that for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). Another common issue is unresolved conflict between church members. Despite Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness (Matt 6:12, 18:21-22), humans are still reluctant to ask for forgiveness and to forgive others. Good leaders will demonstrate forgiveness, teach forgiveness, and encourage their people to practice forgiveness.

---

<sup>116</sup> In a recent study, subjects were twice as likely to favor data that confirmed their opinions over disconfirming data. See Heath and Heath, *Decisive*, 95.

The Bible speaks clearly about what shepherds ought to be doing and what God expects them not to do. In the thirty-fourth chapter of Ezekiel, God speaks through the prophet to the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves.

Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness, you have ruled them (Ezek 34:2-4).

There is power in the simplicity of this passage. God tells the shepherds, do not feed yourselves without feeding the sheep. Do not observe the weakness of the sheep without strengthening them. God warns them not to claim the identity of shepherd without caring for the flock by healing the sick, bandaging the injured, seeking the lost, and bringing them back to the fold. God is saying that if a shepherd does these things, they are guilty of “cruelty, and hence of poor stewardship.”<sup>117</sup> Another way to say it is that they are bad shepherds.

The Scriptures declare the glory of God. The creation reveals His glory. He is glorified in every aspect of life. Nevertheless, His people do well when they intentionally labor at magnifying His glory (2 Cor 4:15). When a church is in crisis, the people tend to look inward. However, a church led well can continue glorifying God regardless of what comes (1 Cor 10:31). When a church grows, it glorifies God, and when it closes well, it glorifies God. In the end, let the church say, “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim 1:17).

## **Theoretical Foundations**

---

<sup>117</sup> Steven Tuell, *Ezekiel*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 237.

The work of ministry is always about loving God and loving people. As church leaders grapple with the church closure process, it is imperative that they remember the purpose of ministry, loving God, and loving people. These two loves guide the process and compel church leaders to learn all they can about church closure, lead with humility, always strive toward collaboration, and act decisively, making layers of decisions.

People are change-resistant. Church leaders and congregations resist change, and closing a local church constitutes an overwhelming change, an emotionally draining, mentally challenging change for all involved. If a pastor is to lead a church through this process lovingly, that pastor must intentionally learn as much as possible because closing a church will be unlike anything they have done before. While some pastors have experience assessing the health of a church, the process will be complicated by the myriad of issues. Some of these issues will be known ahead of time, but many will be unpredictable. Church leaders may find the process too daunting and choose to hire a church consultant. Such a consultant ought to enable the process of evaluating the congregation and help to educate the pastor. However, the best practice is for the pastor to lead the assessment process.<sup>118</sup> Whether a consultant is used or not, the onus is still on the pastor to learn about the church. Wise church leaders will seek tools designed for evaluating their church.<sup>119</sup> As the pastor's knowledge and understanding of the church grows, they will begin, in earnest, the process of wrestling with the decision regarding the closure. Communication with other church leaders and the church's membership is critical whenever a church is in crisis. Some pastors will be tempted to share too much too soon and may cause

---

<sup>118</sup> Peter Bush, *In Dying We Are Born: The Challenge and the Hope for Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), 66.

<sup>119</sup> Keith Spencer "Assessing Congregational Viability," in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 22-28.

irreparable harm to the membership. Others may wait too long, leaving the people guessing and gossiping.

Pastors and churches without a pastor tend to conclude that their church should remain open. Some will argue that by “just being open,” the church is a witness within its community. Rarely is this true; however, dying churches often demonstrate the atrophy of American Christianity. The research shows that denominations with higher church closure rates are more likely to grow, while the denominations with the lowest closure rates are in the fastest decline.<sup>120</sup> This counterintuitive truth should encourage denominational leaders, pastors, and congregations to contemplate the benefits of closing.

Contemplating the closure of a local church requires layers of decision-making. The further into that process a leader gets, the more complex the decisions become. The first and most important determination is finding God's will for the future of the church. Seeking the Holy Spirit is an individual experience, and communicating that personal, holy conviction requires tremendous wisdom and uncommon faith.<sup>121</sup> Leaders must decide whom to involve in the next phase, when to involve the congregation, how to interact with denominational leaders, and how each communication should go. Those leaders must decide between church closure and merger if the church is no longer viable. If a church merger is an option, it is essential to define the type of merger the church is willing to accept.<sup>122</sup> It is critical to note the rarity of success when a merger is executed in emergencies to avoid closure. If one of the merging churches is in crisis and chooses to merge, the non-crisis church nearly always absorbs the dying church. The non-crisis

---

<sup>120</sup> David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of Over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 88.

<sup>121</sup> Cafferata, *The Last Pastor*, 62.

<sup>122</sup> Tomberlin and Bird, *Better Together*, 21.

church typically retains all staff, systems, and culture. The troubled church, however, does not retain its systems or culture, and the staff must negotiate their new role within the new church.

Churches do not belong to individuals; they belong to God. Therefore, healthy church leaders must be collaborative in the closure process. Not only does collaboration express a value rightly given to the congregation, but it also limits unhealthy resistance in later stages.<sup>123</sup>

Understanding the benefits of leading collaboratively is vital because this leadership style requires more of the leader. Examples of how collaborative leadership adds to leadership strain include the requirement to listen actively, listen humbly, and implement helpful suggestions. Listening like this requires multifaceted communication. The pastor will need to host a series of congregational meetings in which the people can freely express their opinions, suggestions, and emotions. Furthermore, church leaders should connect with each individual within the congregation to ensure every voice is heard. Not every opinion counts equally, but every person is essential. It is impossible to predict where the best ideas will come from; consequently, the pastor must walk humbly and listen well.

Christian history tells us that churches, like humans, have life cycles. History leans toward grand stories of revival, renewal, and expansion but tends to ignore the inevitable: what is born eventually dies. When humans encounter the death of their loved ones, there is grief expressed in myriad ways, but there is no preventing it.<sup>124</sup> Humanity has worked hard to enhance life, extend life, and enjoy life, but everyone knows death is inevitable. People tend not to think of churches this way, but they should. When people understand how something works, it reduces fear, promotes interaction, and enables greater enjoyment. Healthy churches teach what the Bible

---

<sup>123</sup> Gail Cafferata, "Respect, Challenges, and Stress among Protestant Pastors Closing a Church: Structural and Identity Theory Perspectives," *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no. 3 (June 2017), 314.

<sup>124</sup> Irwin, *Better Country*, 24.

says about how churches should worship, minister, lead, evangelize, and fellowship. These are excellent topics for churches to teach, but church leaders must also begin to share honestly about ordinary church lifecycles. It is normal for churches to be planted, find a measure of success, realize the summit of their influence, and begin to decline.<sup>125</sup> Churches around the world close every day. However, a misunderstanding exists regarding church life cycles, leading to what may be described as “zombie churches,” which are alive on the outside but dead inside. These churches are terrible wasters of resources and a poor reflection of our glorious God.

### **Conclusion**

As the closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship draws near, the leadership increasingly senses the need for a Christlike system to enable the process. Such a system is under development, and its creation and implementation will enable WayPointe Christian Fellowship to close with dignity. As the church leaders continue with this work until its completion, the glory of God will increasingly be revealed.

The review of the literature regarding the closure of local churches reminds us that the work of closing a church so that God is glorified and His people are blessed requires courageous leaders. If the work is to be done well, those courageous leaders must face the reality of their church’s decline early before it becomes a crisis. Apprehending the seriousness of the situation takes persistent prayer, deep thought, and thorough communication. There is a desire among the congregation and the leaders for renewal in every declining church, but renewal is not always possible; renewal is not always God’s will. The research, and the ordinary experiences of

---

<sup>125</sup> Tony Morgan, *The Unstuck Church: Equipping Leaders to Experience Sustained Health* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 1.



American Christians, point directly to a continuing decline in church attendance across the country. The obvious conclusion from this data is that more churches will need to close.

Students of the Scriptures are consistently reminded that Jesus is Lord. He is the Lord of heaven and earth and every church. Local churches do not belong to individuals. Local churches belong to Jesus and His people. When church leaders, including senior pastors, forget this reality, problems arise. For churches in crisis, churches are preparing to close, and pastors should feel compelled to lead collaboratively. Furthermore, churches that rightly understand their purpose recognize they must bear fruit, as a church should bear fruit. Fruitless churches exist, and they should be closed.

As church leaders contemplate closure or a merger, pastors must expand their knowledge on the subjects. The time leading to closure or merger is a season of decision-making that requires great wisdom and knowledge. If pastors possess the knowledge needed, communication is fluid, and congregations experience peace and joy. In these ways, churches can close with grace while glorifying God in the process.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

The design of this DMIN project is to serve as an intentional plan for closing a local church. The intervention is to facilitate each aspect of church closure to the glory of God and the blessing of church members. The project was designed for a real church with real people who need care and attention. The health of the people, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, is the primary focus of the preparation and implementation of this project. Secondly, these people's opinions, feelings, and votes are the subject of study, analysis, and report. Administrative tasks will also be necessary to accomplish the closure of this local church.

### **Intervention Design**

Christians, above all other things, are to glorify and serve God alone. Faithful Christians know this because they have read how Jesus rebuked Satan by reminding him what Deuteronomy 6:13 says, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Matt 4:10). Glorifying God is accomplished through worshipping and serving God and loving Christians. This truth comes from John's first epistle: “everyone who loves the father loves whoever has been born of him. By this, we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:1-3).

Throughout the process of closing WayPointe, the church will continue to worship. Each Sunday, the church will gather (as has been done for generations) to sing, pray, hear the Word of God read and preached, take communion, and fellowship with one another through the Holy Spirit. Each Tuesday evening, the men will gather to study God's Word and encourage one another. Every Wednesday, many church members will continue to join the online gathering for

corporate prayer, a time of individual sharing, and a group Bible study. The weekly rhythms established within the church will continue until the church closes permanently.

This research project begins amidst the worship of God’s people, having been approved by the Institutional Review Board, the professorial mentor, and the elder board of WayPointe Christian Fellowship (see Appendix A). The research will continue until the third week of October 2022 and will be open to every adult congregant, approximately thirty people. Each member will be sent an email (see Appendix B) at the outset describing the study, outlining the individual's choice of whether to join the study or not, and an initial survey (see Appendix C). At the subsequent mid-week meetings, the researcher will describe the project in detail and recruit members for focus groups (for specific questions, see Appendix D). Since the church groups are composed of different individuals, the focus groups will each provide unique data. The kind of interaction achieved in an in-person session with only men has its own feel versus that of the mixed group of people meeting online.

Additionally, the Elder Board creates a third, separate focus group. From there, the researcher will identify key leaders for individual interviews (for specific questions, see Appendix E). The focus groups and interviews will be conducted throughout the research window. The surveys will be given at the beginning and again after the research period. Having three separate data sources ensures the reliability of the information. The schedule for this period of the research project is in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Schedule of Research Activity

<b>WEEK</b>	<b>RESEARCH TASK</b>	<b>CHURCH CLOSURE TASK</b>
1-2	Obtain Permission from WCF Elders Send Email with Survey to Participants	Administrative Duties as Needed
3	Initial meeting Focus Groups A & B Review Survey Data	Administrative Duties as Needed
4	Review Focus Group Data	Fellowship Event: Church in the Park
5	Initial Meeting Focus Group E	Administrative Duties as Needed
6	Review Focus Group Data	Administrative Duties as Needed
7	Second Meeting Focus Groups A & B	Guest Preacher 1
8	Review Focus Group Data	Guest Preacher 2
9	Second Meeting Focus Group E	Open House Worship Service
10	Third Meeting Focus Groups A & B	Processing Grief Sermon #1
11	Distribute Survey	Processing Grief Sermon #2
12	Process Data	Final “Family Worship” Service and Meal
13-17	Synthesize Data	Administrative Duties as Needed

The intervention design's basis is to glorify God by loving the people of God well, especially through meaningful communication. The communications process began before the project, continued throughout the intervening months, and truly escalated after the elders recommended church closure to the membership in person on February 20, 2022, and three days later via the U.S. Postal Service. At that membership meeting, the pastor and elders began dialoguing with the church regarding the decision to close. The leaders clearly explained the reasoning for their recommendation and the necessity of the member's united support. One result

of the communications that had gone before is that most people understood the leadership's reasoning behind the decision to close. There were contentious moments with high emotions and heated words in the meeting. The animus did not end there; a malicious email sent to much of the church's membership expanded the hostility. The elders worked through a disciplinary process based on Jesus' prescription in Matthew 18:15-20. Despite the challenge of a few members, the vast majority agreed with the leadership and voted to permanently close WayPointe in the Autumn of 2022.

Obtaining the will of the membership is a critical outcome of good communication. For WayPointe, the members voted to: close the church, accept final payment on a loan serviced by the church, list the property with a real estate agent, and consent to an elder proposed plan for distributing whatever financial resources remain after all church business. After extensive membership meetings and numerous email exchanges, a vote was called for each item. The pastor and elders made every effort to obtain a consensus among the people before calling for any vote. This practice paid significant dividends in the unity displayed in each voting session. The percentage of agreement on the ballots never fell below 85%. While the church passed through a poignant season, its people did not lose their capacity to engage honestly, listen patiently, and compromise fruitfully.

Healthy communication produces a peaceful community and minimizes rumors. A theme found in the literature (reviewed in chapter two) is how much the pastor affects the emotional state of the church members. Pastors who regularly provided information enabled their people to feel more confident in the closure plan. Sharing pertinent aspects of the process and soliciting people's opinions are essential in limiting people's fears and empowering their emotional movement from denial to acceptance. Furthermore, a regular exchange of information limits the

rumors and gossip, which are both predictable and destructive to the church's emotional state. In pursuit of these outcomes, the researcher utilized two online midweek Bible studies which were already a part of the rhythm of the church's life. These weekly group meetings facilitated pastoral care, particularly listening. Members often shared their hopes, concerns, and curiosities in these meetings. Unfortunately, the process does not partially eliminate rumors because the gossip originates outside the fellowship and spreads rapidly via social media. Rumors and fiction may be inevitable, but they can be severely squelched.

Coinciding with the research were interventions designed to help the congregation grieve their church's loss. Part of grieving is remembering together. One way the church accomplished this was through monthly potluck lunches. Another method incorporated into the intervention was the well-decorated memory box within the lobby of the church building. The congregation received note cards upon which they were asked to write meaningful memories and subsequently place those cards within the “memory box.” After three weeks, the pictorial timeline, which spans approximately twenty feet, was mounted on the back wall of the sanctuary (see Appendix I). Those cards were placed appropriately upon the decorative timeline in full view of all who worshipped at WayPointe. This display was continuously updated throughout the final months of the church's existence.

Celebrating also helps with grieving; thus, the church planned for two significant celebrations over its final months. WayPointe hosted its fourth annual “Church in the Park” event, providing the congregation with a wonderful time of fun, the collective eating of delicious food, and the sharing of collective memories as the congregation worshipped outdoors at a local park. This event allowed the membership to celebrate and invite family, friends, and acquaintances to join in the special time of worship and fellowship. Next, the church will invite

every former member or friend of the fellowship to an open house. This celebratory worship service was held Sunday, September 4, 2022. For this special event, the church invited several influential people from the history of WayPointe to come and use their gifts to bless the congregation one last time. Those invited to be a part of this time of worship are special to present and former members. The invitation went out to the former: organist, worship leader (and several members of his band), associate pastor, and elder board moderator. Other dignitaries included the senior pastor of the Yiu-Mienh Baptist Church and the Executive Director of Recruitment and Development of WayPointe's denomination. The event's theme will be "Unity" (for an outline of the service, see Appendix F). Because of the church's long history (founded in 1901), the church is planning to host many former church members. There may be more than three hundred such people who reside in the Bay Area and more who live a great distance, but there is an expectation that many will come together for a final morning of worship, fellowship, and remembrance. To maximize opportunities for interaction, fellowship, restoration, and renewal, the church hosted a catered luncheon on-site, allowing the congregation to spend more time together.

For the sake of the membership, the pastor arranged the final three Sundays of the church's existence to be intimate. There will be no guest speakers or invitations to outside people during those Sundays. Instead, the pastor, who borrowed from C.S. Lewis's work *A Grief Observed*, will craft a pair of messages acknowledging the reality of people's grief while reminding them of God's promised joy. The final sermon is entitled "The Family of God." The last church activity under the name "WayPointe Christian Fellowship" is scheduled for September 25, 2022. The theme for the final Sunday is "family," and after the worship service, the congregation will share its final family meal.

The research design supports the people of WCF. This support comes through the ongoing availability of the pastor and other church leaders. Among the research questions is, "how can the leaders of WayPointe best support you in this time of need?" This question was paired with another question about the participants' desire to receive a call from the pastor or an elder. Furthermore, questions inquire about participants' perceived need for personal counseling. The pastor's availability for counseling will also be communicated during regularly scheduled informational meetings.

In the months before all the grieving and celebrating, the church's leadership team worked diligently to assist the congregation in preparations for transitioning into a new church fellowship. The pastor preached a series of nine sermons under the title "Blueprints of a Healthy Church." These messages borrowed from Mark Dever's book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* and covered the topics of preaching, the gospel, discipleship and growth, membership and discipline, leadership, prayer, mission, and how to choose a new fellowship. Furthermore, WCF hosted a pair of guest preachers. Based on the advice of the Elder Board and a few key church members, the pastor arranged for two local pastors to preach at WCF. Hosting these preachers will expose the congregation to voices from other churches they may choose to join.

Closing a local church is an emotional process for all people involved. Perhaps one overlooked aspect of this reality is the mental health of the church's elders. Nevertheless, if their mental health suffers significantly, the other elements of the research and the closure process can be compromised. Thus, the closure plan must include aspects aimed at physically, mentally, and emotionally maintaining these leaders' health. The first element of the plan is for the church leaders to work hard at staying in healthy, trusting relationships with each other. One method of facilitating such relationships is regular meetings in which the pastor asks others to give an



account of their own health, followed by the pastor giving the same account to the others present. The mental health of the church leaders is also supported by resources available within the community. A third avenue of contact is the research itself. The survey, focus groups, and personal interview questions each ask about the effects closing the church has on the respondent's health.

The literature explored in the second chapter reveals how the pastor's health requires even greater care. Therefore, a specific part of the intervention design is a plan created to aid the pastor in maintaining health. Having already established a long history of distance running, the pastor maintained a rigorous running schedule. Running has proven to be an excellent exercise and a terrific stress management mechanism. Distance runners also know the value of proper rest; thus, the schedule included rest periods. Regular daily rest, including adequate sleep, is advantageous. Similarly, the pastor will schedule at least one time of vacation in which the pastoral couple will leave the church closure process geographically and mentally.

Spiritual health is essential for every pastor but maintaining that health while living through a crisis requires special planning. Therefore, the pastor will continue to embrace the ordinary spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, and meditation. Additionally, the pastor kept a prayer journal. This journal was updated multiple times each week with thoughts, concerns, and prayers related to the journey of closing the church. Keeping the journal proved wise since it helped organize prayers, emotional processing, and the bracketing out of biases. Furthermore, the pastor has chosen to maintain healthy relationships within an accountability group run by pastors for pastors. No one is immune to the flesh, and the Bible commands us: “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (Jas 5:16).

The planning for health also includes intentional care for thought and emotional life. In keeping with Paul's directive to the church of Philippi, the pastor intentionally focused on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8). Another aspect of mental health maintenance was the ongoing task the husband and wife of the pastoral team have undertaken, which was planning an extended vacation for after the church was closed. Having something to look forward to (in this case, a vacation) was medicinal in situations where mental health is being taxed. This element of the plan has the added benefit of drawing the pastoral couple together. Intelligent people would presume the church closure process is difficult for marriages, and the previously examined literature supports this deduction. Thus, wisdom dictates making every effort to support the marriage. The final aspect of the pastor's plan is the assurances from the regional denominational staff that mental health services, including professional counseling, will be available should the need arise.

The plan for WayPointe Christian Fellowship also includes administrative tasks, which are critical to the dignified closure of the church. The membership has already voted to list the building and property with a real estate agent. Selling the building and property is a significant undertaking that requires consistent interaction with the real estate agent and the membership. The agent selected by WCF was chosen based on a recommendation from denominational staff, a separate recommendation from another local pastor, and an interview with the pastor of WCF. The Yiu-Mienh Baptist Church owes WayPointe more than \$600,000. The elders will need to build three proposals to present to the membership to enable discussion, which will lead to a vote regarding the best way to dispose of the loan.

Separately, the church elders have proposed a committee form to create a list of appropriate ministries and missionaries the church will support financially with the proceeds of the sale. The elders determined that once the list was complete, each recipient would be assigned a certain percentage. To facilitate the planning of what the church calls “departure donations,” the pastor arranged for four local ministry leaders to come and share their organization's vision with the church.

According to the Attorney General of California, every penny the church has must be redistributed before the non-profit organization can be dissolved. Many challenges exist in this statement. A plan must be created which accommodates the giving of an unknown sum of money. The plan must reflect the will of the members of the church. Ascertaining the membership's will for a complex giving plan, which includes nearly thirty ministries and missionaries, is proving difficult, but it is essential. The first step in creating the plan came from a church member who suggested empowering each member to direct a sum of the church's resources to a non-profit charity of their choice. This idea developed into a plan where members can choose to direct \$5,000 to any non-profit organization or direct \$10,000 to any Christian ministry. Facilitating the departure donations plan will be the church accountant, who was asked to continue working until every asset was disposed of completely. The church will also hire an attorney to finalize the organization's dissolution, WayPointe Christian Fellowship.

The design of this intervention plan is singular in purpose: to assist the members of WayPointe Christian Fellowship in a dignified closure of their local church. The researcher observed the church's behavior, opinions, and feelings through surveys, focus groups, and personnel interviews. If this intervention plan is successful, a high percentage of the people of WayPointe will successfully transition into new churches with minimal pain and maximum

unity. Furthermore, the resources of WayPointe will all be appropriately distributed, and the church will be dissolved promptly.

### **Implementation of the Intervention Design**

The nature of this DMIN project required that the researcher create a unique plan to support the permanent closure of the local church, WayPointe Christian Fellowship. The original plan needed to be specific enough to accomplish its mission and satisfy the Institutional Review Board while being flexible enough to adapt to unforeseen challenges. The plan also needed to cover various topics, including organizational decision-making, ongoing corporate worship, continual relationship development, excellent celebratory events, maintenance of mental health in leaders, and the collection of data through it all. During the implementation, the researcher and other church leaders found the process helpful for anticipating future requirements and the day-to-day activities required while closing the church.

As the church's leaders came to understand the complexity of the process, finding a workable corporate decision-making strategy became critical. While a process for corporate decision-making existed within the church's by-laws, it was cumbersome and slow. Therefore, the elders instituted a new pattern consistent with the corporate documents but not hindered by them. This process consisted of processing requirements of closure through the elders first. This body, which consists of five members, meets at least once per month to assess the needs of the closing church. Once an idea had unanimous support, the elders would bring it before the congregation in a semi-formal business meeting for consideration. After some discussion, most of these ideas were met with general support from the congregation, and a vote was scheduled for two weeks after that meeting. Sometimes, however, the congregation was split, and the elders would have to reconsider the idea. Since the membership was limited to fewer than twenty five

active individuals, the pastor would email the board and blind copy the membership to solicit individual feedback. This process was helpful in that the elders were imbued with new information regarding the membership's will and could alter the proposal to better meet the people's needs.

As the corporate decision-making process trundled, another facet of the public communications procedure became polemical. The sensitive issue was how much freedom to permit any individual within the public meeting. Wise moderators understand how important it is for people to express themselves, thus gaining affirmation of their opinions and feelings. Practiced moderators also know how easily a meeting can deteriorate into unadulterated complaining or mean-spirited accusations and name-calling. Fortunately, the membership nearly always displayed grace and mercy in their public remarks, and the moderator, the pastor and researcher, was only compelled to emergency actions a few times. Within the meetings, a few individuals spoke untruths that required immediate correction. There was also an instance where a member began having an uncontrolled emotional outburst that necessitated a strong response, bringing the meeting to an awkward silence and eventually hastening the end of sharing for the day. In the researcher's opinion, it is better for a moderator to appear overly controlling than to allow meetings to become combative. Reviewing these examples of meeting behavior has reinforced this opinion.

Of the many decisions the membership made after the elders brought a proposal, the most difficult was deciding how to donate the remaining funds at the end of the closure process. The church began using the phrase “departure donations” to describe the plan for giving away these funds. At the plan's genesis, the pastor created a list of ministries and missionaries and organized them by how the church had related to them in its recent history. That list was then separated into

categories, and a simple mathematical algorithm was created to assign each organization funds based on an unknown ending balance. Then the plan was scrutinized and changed in a repeated cycle for several weeks. The elders struggled to find unity because of the infinite variability inherent in such a task. Questions continued to surface: How many organizations should be supported? How should we prioritize the organizations? What sort of algorithm should be employed to distribute the funds? Should the members be enlisted to help with the process? If so, which members? Why those and not others? The discussion continued until the elders finally landed on an outcome upon which they could agree. The elders then presented their solution to the membership, who promptly began asking many of the same questions the elders had been asking a few weeks earlier.

Unlike the amicable discussions the membership had on church closure, and the proposed sale of the building and property, the discussion about dividing the final sum of money was complex, bordering on contentiousness. One of the members suggested to the church that a new proposal should be generated. Four new proposals were generated within ten minutes of the idea entering the conversation. At this time, the moderator reminded the members of a truth uttered at the outset: designing a plan to dispose of the final sum is very complicated. That complexity was then illustrated by the four new proposals which had come so quickly. Thus, the moderator returned to a simple, informal vote, using thumbs up or down, on whether to accept the elder's proposal. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of accepting the elder's proposal, and the meeting was adjourned.

With the understanding that nothing and no one can aid people in need more than God, the church has continued gathering for worship, fellowship, and study. The primary gathering is the Sunday morning worship service, which imparts joy and sadness. As the church gathers, she

remembers the promises of Scripture, that God “will not leave you or forsake you” (Deut 31:6b), and how He is “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:3-4). Thus, the congregation gathers to worship God and is confronted with how few worshippers appear. The mood of these gatherings is a sweet melancholy.

This mixture of joy and sadness now persists in both of the mid-week Bible studies as well. Each Tuesday evening, men from the church have come together for more than five years to fellowship and study God's Word. As the church entered the final summer of existence, one of these men suggested studying the world's religions. The leader agreed with the idea and suggested that each man choose one religion and prepare themselves to teach. Some group members prepared and taught for the first time, and a new layer of discipleship was added. As the weeks passed, the researcher could observe words and body language directly through the online video chat, which was utilized to facilitate these meetings. This group was also amenable to hosting two focus group meetings over the final six weeks of its existence.

Wednesday's group is different in composition and purpose. However, the same in that it provided an opportunity for direct observation and the willingness of participants to share within a focus group setting. The Wednesday group comprises men and women and begins each meeting with thirty minutes of corporate prayer. The prayer time is followed by individual sharing and finishes with a Bible study founded on the sermon from the previous Sunday. Most people who attend this meeting have shared openly regarding their personal opinions and emotional responses to the closing of their church.

In addition to these weekly meetings, the church also gathers for monthly potlucks and hosts an annual outdoor worship service titled “Church in the Park.” The monthly potlucks were excellent for communicating with people who were not attendees of either mid-week group. The potlucks are also helpful to the researcher attempting to make observations and the pastor continually pursuing church morale. Church in the park also helped with both of these objectives. It offered people who have a tangential relationship with the congregation an occasion to celebrate how WayPointe had blessed them.

The intervention design included comforting elements based on historical activities and celebratory elements designed to facilitate remembrance and positive grieving. Creating a timeline and memorial wall has aided a healthy expression of memories that trigger gratitude. These memories were generated by current and former members and have initiated the grieving process in some who had resisted that necessary and emotionally taxing work. The researcher was surprised by the high percentage of current members (approximately 70%) who participated by including at least one church memory. Furthermore, dozens of people who attended another celebratory element, The WayPointe Christian Fellowship Open House, enjoyed the pictorial timeline.

An open house worship service was coordinated early in the development of the closure plan. This worship service was designed to unify the past and the present. To accomplish this goal, four former staff members and the pastor of WayPointe's sister church, Yiu-Mienh Baptist Church, were invited to participate. Furthermore, the former director of musical worship gathered five musicians and singers from previous worship teams to come and lead the congregation in singing. To this group was added the current pastor of the church and a current denominational leader along with the current church members. Designing and implementing this



unique worship experience was a significant challenge for the pastor, his worship producer, and the membership.

The open house had ordinary pieces and extraordinary elements. It is an ordinary modern protestant worship service that contains the singing of worship songs, public prayer, and the preaching of God's Word. The open house had these elements. It is ordinary for WayPointe to enjoy a monthly potluck, and the open house had food. This service began and ended at the ordinary time WayPointe worships each Sunday. However, the church ordinarily has approximately twenty-five congregants, not 150 or more. The regular worship service has one speaker, not five. Regular potlucks require each family to bring food, but the open house was catered. Admittedly, recent ordinary worship services have had high emotion among the people, but the open house had church members feeling anxious weeks in advance because of the unknown nature of people. The current members expressed apprehension concerning who might attend, who might approach whom and say what, and which people from the last traumatic event might materialize. The open house was extraordinary because God showed up, and miracles happened. Not least among them was the true celebratory nature of the gathering.

The church invited guests to the summer worship services as part of the intervention plan. After much investigation and solicitation, the pastor found two local church pastors willing to preach at a WayPointe worship service. This process aimed to connect congregants with local pastors in hopes that simple relationships might form and the church might be inspired to visit that pastor's church after WayPointe's closure. Early indications suggest that it did cause multiple members to contemplate which church they might attend in the months ahead. The other guests invited into the WayPointe worship services were local missionaries and leaders of para-church organizations. One such guest was the Reverend Dr. Garry Zeek, the Executive Director of

Global Training at S.O.S. International, a retired senior pastor with more than thirty years of full-time ministry practice, and a dear friend of the researcher. Because of these experiences, Zeek is uniquely qualified to provide observations of the closure process and the departure donation plan. After visiting WayPointe, Zeek sent along the following note:

The members of WayPointe have a unified determination to bless other ministries with the proceeds of the sale of their building and other assets. They have passionately purposed to invest their resources to meet the needs of people, body, soul, and spirit. Their desire is to help spread the gospel of Jesus Christ locally and around the world. To do that, the church has invited ministries to come during a Sunday service and share their vision and mission. S.O.S. International, a ministry that I am involved with as Executive Director of Global Training was given such a chance to share about our work training church leaders in the developing world. It was a wonderful and fruitful experience. The people were clearly taking the opportunity to financially bless ministries, locally and around the world, prayerfully and seriously. They were kind, gracious and upbeat. The church leadership was wise to include everyone in the process. Each member can submit, for financial support, a ministry of their choosing. What a wonderful way to unify the church and help them own this blessing. The wise and timely blessing of these resources will impact the cause of Christ for years to come. The church leadership is helping this beloved church to end well with a sense of purpose and dignity. I believe much of what they are doing will be model for other to follow. The end will be painful, the grief real but they are leaving a legacy of generous faith, hope and love.<sup>126</sup>

After the members voted to sell the building and grounds, the leaders recognized the need to create a plan for donating those dollars. The first part of the plan empowered members to direct money to any non-profit organization, and educating the people about worthy ministries in the region was deemed necessary. This process also had the added benefit of educating the pastor and elders, which became crucial as they were tasked with appropriately giving away whatever sum remained after all other debts were paid.

---

<sup>126</sup> Garry Zeek, email message to author, September 4, 2022.

Implementing the church closure plan has generated intense experiences for each elder team member. The church closure plan included elements of intentional fellowship intended to aid each church leader in processing the emotions associated with the work. As the implementation process progresses, there is increasing evidence of too little emotional support. Some elders consistently express how the closure process is causing traumatic emotional responses, but others have admitted to suppressing their feelings until the procedure is finalized. Despite the variability within the elder group, the pastor continues to ask each elder about their experience in hopes that they feel encouraged and supported.

The pastor researcher also diligently implements the plan, hoping for greater personal peace and supernatural joy. Some aspects of the plan were particularly advantageous, including the continual practice of spiritual disciplines and the vacation the pastoral couple took four months before the end. Other elements have been more challenging than anticipated, including finding regular times of rest and negotiating the pastor's severance package. Overall, the process has been a relentless grind.

The final aspect of the intervention is the processing of the data collected. To accomplish this, the researcher will consult multiple sources, including recommended books, a statistician, and a retired pastor and missionary. Statistical analysis will be performed on the data retrieved from the surveys. This data will reveal general changes in the thoughts and opinions of the membership throughout the process. Furthermore, the focus group and personal interview transcripts will be mined to uncover common themes, unforeseen complications, irregular trauma, misunderstandings, and the general efficacy of the intervention.

Closing WayPointe Christian Fellowship will require a comprehensive plan capable of predicting necessary actions to facilitate a merciful process while remaining flexible enough to

process unforeseeable requirements. Implementing the plan with love and grace is exacting a high price on every leader within the church. The process and the data collected throughout will prove to be invaluable.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The final worship service for WayPointe Christian Fellowship was on September 25, 2022. Forty-four people attended the service. After the service, the members gathered around a very long table, held hands, sang The Doxology,<sup>127</sup> and ate together. The church is now officially closed. God was glorified throughout this process. The evidence of this abounds and will be expiated throughout the chapter, but it can all be summed up in one word: unity. When the pastor first identified the crisis and described it for the elder board, there was unity among the elders. When the crisis was brought to the members for consideration, unity was also found in them. When the elders recognized that the crisis had reached a tipping point and the church would have to be closed, there was unity within the group. Though the passage was never named, Ephesians 4:3-4 was undoubtedly the attitude the pastor and elders worked for daily. The elders took great pains to lead “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3-4), which was the only way for the church to close and glorify God and bless the membership.

The reader might rightly imagine how maintaining a spirit of unity in such difficult circumstances would be both critical and challenging. With any significant undertaking, there is resistance. Along with the predictable emotional responses of regular people within the process came one member whose response was incendiary and public. Nevertheless, the membership was able to overcome and maintain unity. Similarly, when one from outside the fellowship began attending, the Holy Spirit revealed the outsider's intent to the pastor, who quickly confronted the man before a Sunday worship service began. One might assume this man was sent by the enemy

---

<sup>127</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace – 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 342.

considering the reaction. Once this person was removed from the worship service, the man began picketing the church claiming that closure was against God's will and that the pastor was a servant of the devil. Once again, the church endured, and unity prevailed. One senior church member cried through tears, "I see the unity, and I'm proud of our church and people."

In creating and implementing a biblically sound closure plan, the researcher saw significant changes in the church member's words, behaviors, and attitudes during the research window. This chapter details some quantitative and ample qualitative data showing how the membership of WayPointe Christian Fellowship was blessed through ongoing worship and clear and perpetual communication, which led to authentic participation and intentional preparation, facilitating the choice of their next church. Throughout the process, care was taken to support the elders. This care produced mixed results. Similarly, the plan included elements designed to maintain the pastor's mental health and some of these outcomes were favorable, while others were dismal. The final section of the chapter provides details from the administrative aspects of the plan, including voting outcomes for elders and members, moderator notes from membership meetings, and results of the building sale process and attempt to close the business and wind up the nonprofit corporation.

### **The Plan Brought Blessings**

A healthy relationship with God Almighty is the greatest blessing for an individual or a church. For the entirety of the church closure process, WayPointe continued to worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The people worshipped God corporately each Sunday by singing and reading God's Word. Church members also worshipped God regularly through times of communion and fellowship. During the closure season, the church also had

special services that included a Sunday for worship and fellowship in a local park, an open house, and a unique members-only final Sunday worship celebration.

One way to increase joy during a difficult season is to focus on the things that can be done rather than those that cannot. WayPointe had hosted a worship service in a local park for three consecutive years, and the people had demonstrated a great affinity for the special service. It was done again on the last day of July 2022 and received a jubilant response from the membership. One result was the attendance, which had been averaging about 25 persons per week, but nearly doubled when the church met at the park. The event allowed the members to celebrate amid the trauma they were feeling. The event also started the countdown to closure in the minds and hearts of many congregants.

The leadership decided to host an open house to honor current members, inviting previous attendees to return for celebration and remembrance. The result was a fascinating worship service and luncheon. The attendance for the worship service was counted at 150 persons, with eleven guest musicians and speakers. The theme for the day was unity; one guest speaker, a former pastor, spoke about the requirement of forgiveness to maintain unity. He then apologized for his part in the church's downfall and publicly asked for forgiveness. His message set the stage for the message of WayPointe's pastor, who implored the group to seek and grant forgiveness within the worship service. The response from the visitors was overwhelmingly positive, but the current membership described mixed feelings.

In a focus group, one member spoke about how she had been pricked by anger when thinking about the event. She related a story in which she had gone to a local store, seen a former member, and had an internal argument about why the former member had left. Anger with former church members became a common theme among the members as they grappled with the

closing of their church. The sentiment involved was how the church would survive if those who had left would return. Furthermore, several members told stories of previous attendees asking about the health of WayPointe and why it was closing. “Why do you care? You’re not a part of us anymore!” blurted out one of the members. This emotional response was greeted with affirmations from others in the meeting. When the researcher asked that member how she felt about the open house, her response was insightful: “I’m going to be OK, but I’m dreading it.” One of the beautiful elements of the closure process was seeing some of the pastor’s people find a way to forgive those previous members for leaving (and other offenses). The researcher did hear different stories from the open house of old wounds being healed and relationships being restored. Not everyone felt this way, however. The researcher heard of some members who continued to be angry with former members for wounds inflicted many years ago.

Healing requires more than time. Healing requires rest, hard work, information, and application. The pastor put the open house in the plan because it was a way to honor those who served God well throughout the church's history, but God used the event to test the current members. The test churned up emotions that had laid dormant in many people that needed to be processed for their emotional healing. In hindsight, people saw how the emotion from the open house was related to the emotion that came at the final closure. Because they could find some healing in their relationships with former members, they could better process their emotions connected with closure. If the emotions of both events had arrived at the same time, the pain would have been excruciating. Thus, it was good that God forced people to begin processing these things a month before the final amen.

The original plan called for the final three worship services to be intimate; only members were invited to attend. What was unforeseen was the emotional fallout from the open house. In



the pastor's sermon preparation, during the week after the open house, God led him to alter the message slightly to talk about the biblical relationship between grief and glory. What was unknown to the pastor was how impactful that relationship would be for the people processing the pain of closing and the pain of explaining what was happening to friends, family members, and former church members.

While each of the final three worship services assisted the members in processing their emotions and connecting with one another, the last service was exceptionally fruitful. This service was attended by all but two of the members. Many congregants willingly expressed their gratitude and hope for the future during open sharing. During and after the service, people gave each other gifts, relayed stories, described their plans, and expressed thankfulness in intimate moments of conversation. The gathering included a catered luncheon, with everyone eating at one long table spanning the entire atrium. The pastoral couple was thanked multiple times for planning an excellent end for such a beautiful church.

### **The Plan Brought Results**

The conversations regarding church closure began in 2014, but the membership chose to stay open at that time. Approximately two years later, the pastor was hired. The church experienced a fluctuation in attendance over the following years, but in the fall of 2019, the congregation seemed to be rebounding. The world then changed as a result of the pandemic known as COVID-19. WayPointe was never able to recover from the season of shutdown and the associated fears, controversies, and reformation of people's habits. It was June of 2020 when the elders first discussed permanently closing the church. At that time, the decision was made by the elders to wait and see how people reacted to the gradual reestablishment of normal life activities. By the end of that calendar year, the pastor believed church closure was inevitable.

In the spring of 2021, the elders met to discuss the current church crisis and decide how to proceed. The pastor offered to resign, noting a belief that if the church were to survive, it would need a new visionary leader to come and reinvigorate the membership. The elders rejected that plan and opted to keep their pastor regardless of what came next. This decision inaugurated the season of communication and participation for the membership.

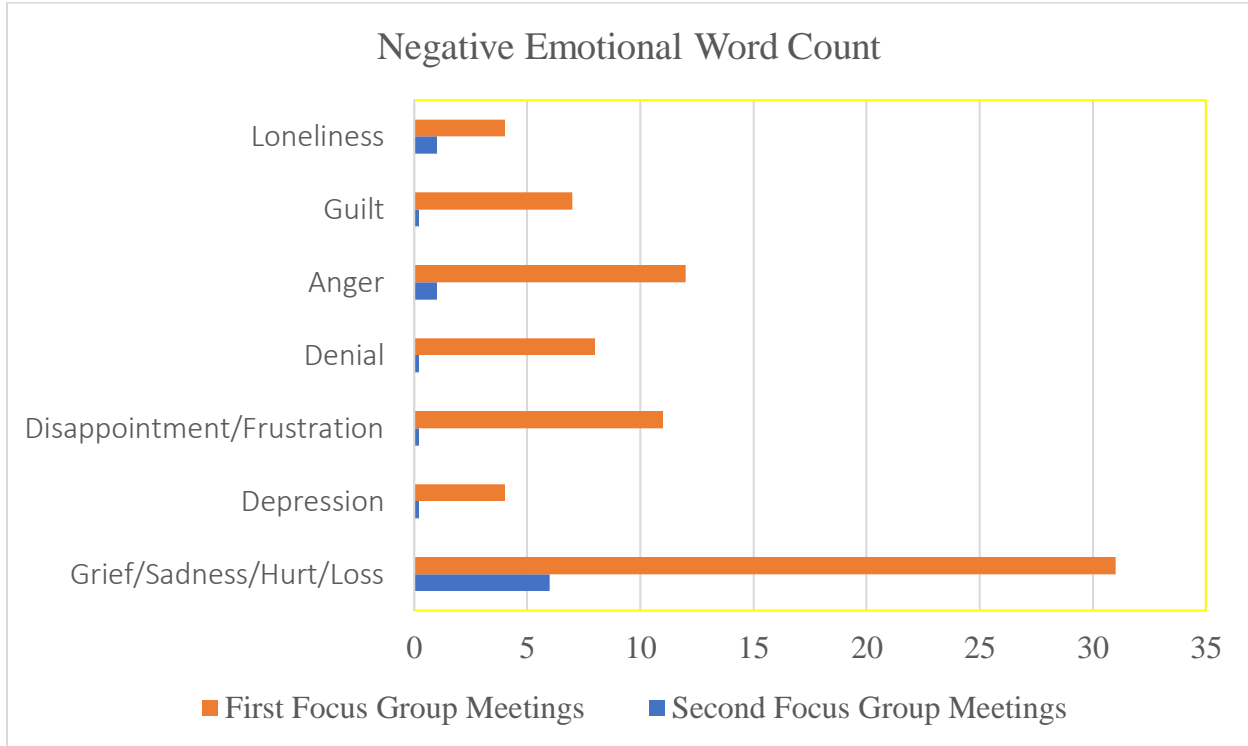
Over the following ten months, the pastor called four crisis meetings for the membership, wrote and mailed three crisis letters to the membership, and led more than a dozen elder meetings, all designed to answer one question: Should WayPointe close? It was the overwhelming opinion of the membership following the unanimous will of the elder board that, yes, WayPointe Christian Fellowship should permanently close on September 25, 2022.

The result of the plan, the communication and participation of the members, has been undeniably positive. In a meeting held within a month of closing, the topic of processing emotional trauma was discussed. One elder board member spoke from his heart, reminding everyone how “we've been processing this all along the way. We've had time, and I'm grateful to the pastor who took us through it and helped us understand. We're not shocked because we've had time to work through our emotions.” The evidence does demonstrate a significant reduction in the use of negative emotional words from the first series of focus groups to the second series, as reflected in the Figure 1 below.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> The researcher recorded multiple online focus group meetings, transcribed the conversations, and counted the specified words to display the corresponding changes in attitude and emotion numerically.

Figure 1: Negative Emotional Word Count

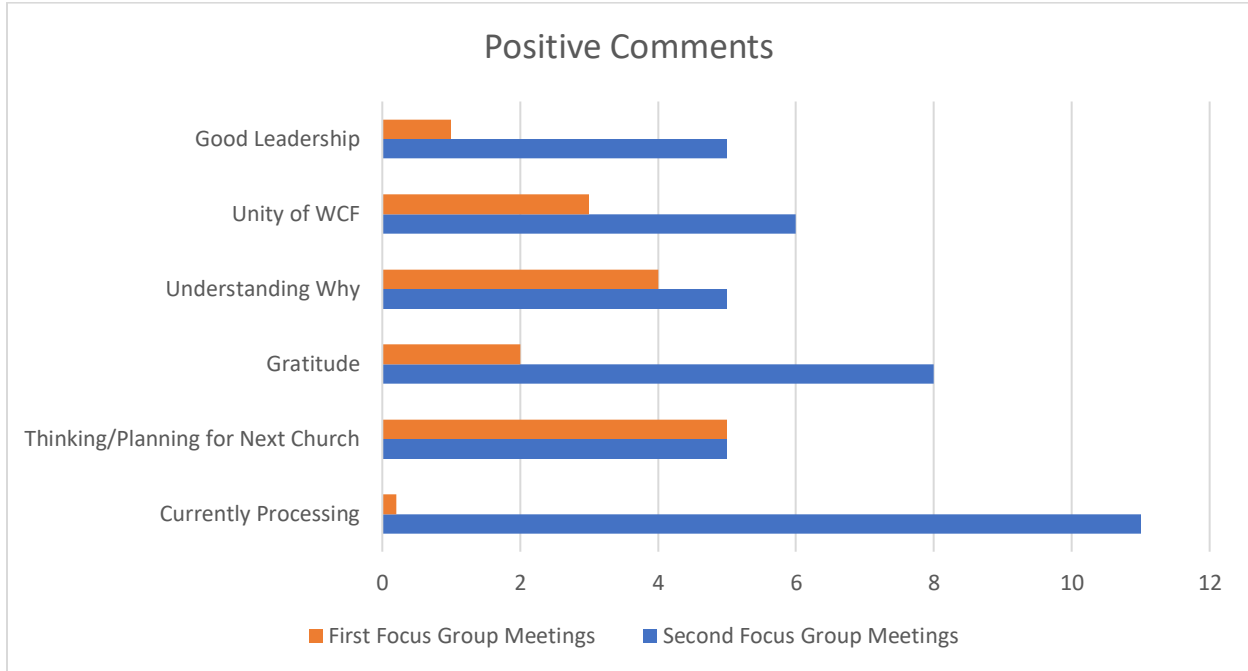


When taken as a sum, the first focus group’s usage of negative emotional words was seventy one compared with only twelve negative emotional words used by roughly the same groups of people found in the second round of focus groups. The researcher found this to be surprising and confirming. It shows that the intervention plan did have a significant effect on the people of the church. In particular, the consistent and varied communications between the pastor, the elder board, and the membership proved very helpful for the people as they worked at processing the trauma of church closure. The meetings pushed the conversations forward for some people, but for one key lay leader, “it was getting the letter in November that started my processing.” She admitted that she had become depressed when she read it, but it forced her to acknowledge the reality of the church crisis, which led to the closure. Another key couple remembered, “the pastor came to our house to talk to us about church closure. It helped us to

process as we asked our questions,” which helped them to gain clarity about the process and understand why the church had to close.

In comparing the two focus groups, the use of emotional language declined, and the use of affirming language increased. The first sessions included moments where people expressed gratitude, hope, and pride, but the expression of these sentiments rarely happened. Numerically, the expression of such positive comments more than doubled in the second group of sessions. One such expression came just before a focus group began. That time was a weekly prayer session during which one young woman had been attending for months but had not prayed aloud until this session. Her willingness to be vulnerable in that moment spoke volumes to the pastor and the others present. Once the session officially began, the people started talking about the mixture of pain and hope as they contemplated the churches they were planning to visit. When taken together, the number of positive comments increased from fifteen to more than forty, as seen in the Figure 2. These changes in attitude, language, and behavior noted in the focus groups were also shown in personal interviews, field notes, and survey responses.

Figure 2: Positive Comments



Loretta (not her real name) has been a part of the church for nearly seventy years. In that time, she has been a faithful attendee with one exception. She took some time off 60 years ago to help a church plant with their children’s ministry. For the final three months, she could be seen each Sunday in her usual chair, prepared to worship God through her tears and grief. When the leadership team began to hang the timeline in the back of the sanctuary, the pastor spoke with Loretta about it. “Have you seen the timeline? Isn’t it wonderful?” he asked. “Oh, no. I cannot go by and look at it. That would be too painful,” she replied. Her reluctance surprised the pastor a bit. Loretta was faithful but was not involved in the mid-week Bible study, the leadership team, or the worship team. Thus, the pastor did not have any regular contact with Loretta aside from the few moments each Sunday morning as they greeted one another. As the weeks went by, the pastor became concerned that Loretta would not process her grief and may not find a new church to attend. Wednesday, September 23, the pastor called and interviewed Loretta. She spoke of her

grief and pain but also of her plans. She had friends at WayPointe. A couple she had known since before their marriage more than 50 years ago, and they had invited her to join them in attending another local church. She accepted the invitation to the same church she had helped all those years ago.

Loretta is not the only one thinking about their next church. The results of a survey given on August 23, 2022, and again on September 19 show that the people of WayPointe are considering where they will attend next. Many factors contribute to this data, but one factor was the two local guest preachers the pastor invited to come and speak at WayPointe in July. Meeting and listening to these men preach helped some members connect and caused others to think critically about where they would be attending when choosing a new congregation. Table 4.1 shows a series of five questions put to the membership to determine how the people were thinking. For each question, 100% represents the respondent's belief that the statement is accurate, and 0% means it is false.

Table 4.1: Evaluation of Survey Results

<b>Survey Question</b>	<b>Aug 23</b>	<b>Sept 19</b>	<b>Change</b>
I have thought about attending another church	78%	86%	+ 8%
I have discussed which church I will move to with friends	59%	63%	+ 4%
The idea of changing churches is frightening	50%	57%	+ 7%
I am familiar with two or more local pastors	65%	69%	+ 4%
I know which church I will be attending after WCF	48%	51%	+ 3%

The reader will note that these indicators of preparedness for church change increased.

Some may argue that increasing fear about changing churches is a bad sign. However, it is the opinion of the researcher that the rise in anxiety related to changing churches is a positive sign because it demonstrates that the respondent is taking the reality of imminent change seriously.

Examining the membership rolls along with voting participation and active attendance reveals that WayPointe had twenty-eight members during the church closure season. There was almost perfect unity throughout the multitude of member meetings, emails, proposal reviews, and decisive votes. None of the votes had a lower than 80% approval rate. The membership consistently reaffirmed the plan and how the elders executed it. Evidence supporting the member's approval comes from the voting record noted above, comments uttered in the focus groups, and responses to the survey question: Are the leaders doing a good job? The reader will recall that 100% is affirmative while 0% would be false. The result from the August 23 survey was 96%, and on September 19, it was 92%.

On August 28, 2022, the researcher interviewed Ron (not his real name). This interview was combined with Ron's comments in both rounds of focus groups, and his email response to the survey questions comprised the researcher's understanding of Ron's position. Ron was a longstanding church member and consistently attended the men's Bible study for several years. The overall impression Ron had of the closure plan was quite positive. He acknowledged it was not done perfectly, but "I'd say it's been handled very well." He appreciated the ongoing communication between the church leaders and the congregation, the open house worship service, and how the meetings were focused and productive. His only negative comment concerned the high level of control the moderator asserted in an early crisis meeting, but he recognized the importance of keeping the members focused. He went on to say, "it's just it's not in any way criticism about what has happened because what I have seen happen is we, and I'm

really saying pastor and the four elder board, have responded to needs and issues that have arisen through, you know, throughout this thing because there's no textbook to say well let's see we're on step thirty seven of this.” In the end he was “happy we have the opportunity to talk about it all, the good and less good.”

### **The Plan’s Impact on WayPointe’s Leaders**

The elder team comprised five men: the pastor; Grover, the elder board president; Jeremiah, the treasurer; Gene, the secretary; and Tanner, the at-large member (not their real names). Closing the church has been an arduous and painful process for each one. Grover, Jeremiah, and Gene had each called WayPointe their church home for over two decades, and Tanner was raised in the church, walked away from God as a young adult, and returned to faith in Christ there.

In interviews, meetings, and focus groups, the men of the elder board spoke time and again of the pain church closure was causing them. In the first round of focus groups, Tanner was quite honest:

I feel really sad about it [church closure]. I think [I feel] borderline depressed knowing it’s [the church] not going to be there anymore. It’s been part of my life ever since I was three years old, or five years old, somewhere around there, and it’s just really sad. I understand why it’s closing and everything, but still, it’s disheartening. For me, it’s just, last week, when you [the researcher] brought this [focus group] up, that you would be asking questions, I gave it thought, and I really could not identify my feelings, I couldn’t put them in words, but then I went online and to do some research about other church closures and [I realized] this is sadness.

He was not alone. Grover lamented his conversation with himself: “I said wow [I was] sitting in the sanctuary saying, we're not going to have holidays here anymore. No celebrating holidays [at WayPointe], and that makes me sad. Even now, having to think about this, the Bible study this evening, these Bible studies are coming to an end, and that’s sad. Then if I allow myself to think



about it, it's depressing." The pastor also relayed how he is processing some emotion, but not all of it. He cited how easily he became angry as evidence of an emotional overload. When Gene spoke, he also told of his emotional trauma, noting how "anger is a way of processing and what you [the pastor] just said, it's anger [you are expressing]. It comes out because we're unhappy, and we don't know what to do with our emotions. So, we get upset, we get angry, yeah, I thought about it too, and I think, I don't know that I'm processing it at all. Sometimes people ask, 'well, where are you gonna go to church' then I say, 'I don't know, I haven't thought that far,' because I don't want to think about it. Yeah, it's in the future."

One of the surprises was the intensity of the pain and how quickly it came on for the elders. The researcher believes the pain caused the elders to employ coping mechanisms early in the process. One coping mechanism was avoidance. In one of the many elder meetings, Grover admitted, "I'd never thought I'd be an elder in a closing church." The statement is representative of how the elders felt much of the time. The team would alternate between making concrete plans for church closure and ignoring the issues altogether. In one session, Gene put it this way: "I don't want to think about it. I'll deal with it when I have to. I'm tired. It makes me tired." Jeremiah also struggled with avoidance, but it manifested differently for him than for the others. He was invited to attend six different focus groups, but he only came to two. During those sessions, Jeremiah shared how other people were feeling, how important it was to keep moving forward, and how he was trying to do what God wanted. In one elder meeting, he was asked how he was doing and responded, "I'm not worrying about why the church has to close. I'm just telling myself to do what has to be done, to get on with it."

These statements now lead the pastor to believe the avoidance can be traced back to the January 2020 elder meeting. The pastor scheduled an elder retreat at this meeting, and each of

the elders agreed to attend. One week before the retreat, the pastor began to arrange some carpooling one of the members canceled. Then, two days before the event, another elder communicated his intention to miss the retreat. These absences may have been caused by a desire to avoid the topics of the church's crisis and the need to decide if closing the church would be unavoidable.

The burden of leadership was heavy upon the men of the elder board, but most demonstrated real progress in processing their emotions. Tanner shared how understanding church life cycles helped him to reframe his thinking about closure. This new understanding led to a more accurate assessment of the causes of the closure, which enabled Tanner to release his guilt regarding the process and embrace God's will for him and the church. Gene has also processed feelings about the process. Throughout the closure season, the secretary of the elder board spoke of a desire to ignore personal emotional reactions and procrastinate in selecting a new church. The researcher saw changes in Gene over the last few weeks as he spoke of his pride in the work the elder board had accomplished. In his prayer before the final focus group, he asked God to "bless the church and those struggling. Give wisdom to each of them and help them to not do nothing [referencing church members still avoiding the decision of which church they will attend next]." Gene also thanked God for his time at WayPointe and asked him to "be with us now as we have emptiness in our hearts." Grover also demonstrated a greater acceptance when he spoke in a second session focus group. The president of the elder board described his ongoing thought process saying, "since I'm involved in the mechanism of the closing, I know what's happening and, in a sense, I've accepted it. So maybe that's being comfortable about it? I'll just say, OK, it's happening... it's real to me." The final member of the elder team did not

join in any of the last focus group sessions and thus provided too little data for the researcher to conclude anything regarding his emotional processing.

There is no way to estimate the personal cost the pastor paid for closing WayPointe Christian Fellowship. Utilizing journal entries, personal notes, and recollections shared between the pastor and his wife, the researcher will describe the results of the plan and the impact it had on him. This description will begin by looking at measurable changes. The pastor's weight is one of those changes. In the decade leading up to church closure, the weight of the pastor varied between 215 and 220 pounds. Specifically, in the six-month average from August 5, 2018 – February 2, 2019, the pastor's average weight was 219.2 pounds. The six-month average leading up to church closure was 232.4 pounds and a high weight of 236.5 pounds. That is an average increase of 13.2 pounds carried over six months. Specifying the correlation between weight and stress is beyond the scope of this DMIN thesis project. A second measurable outcome is a reduction in the average miles the pastor ran. From 2018–2021 the pastor ran 889, 942, 872, and 927 miles, respectively. When taken collectively, that is an average of about seventy five miles per month. In the months leading up to the closure, that number dropped to forty four miles per month. The pastor believes time was the primary cause for the reduction in mileage, but the effects were myriad.

Other physical changes the pastor noticed include an increased resting heart rate measured in beats per minute (bpm). In previous seasons that number would be approximately 55-60 bpm, but now it is 60-65 bpm. In the final month, the pastor also noticed that his sleep suffered in quantity and quality. The sleeping problems include a new difficulty in falling asleep combined with many more occasions of waking up during the sleep cycle. The lack of rest also significantly reduces the average days off per week. The pastor and his wife could take two

vacations with a total of twenty days off. However, beginning on January 10, 2022, the combination of work and the DMIN program only allowed ten non-vacation rest days.

The impact of the plan on the pastor's mental health was significant. While measuring mental health is difficult, there were several changes in behavior that the pastor and his wife acknowledged. These behavioral abnormalities demonstrate how the plan caused an erosion of the pastor's mental health. Particularly, the pastor cited a noteworthy increase in stress markers leading up to the open house and again leading up to the church's closure. These stress markers included a substantial increase in emotional instability leading to deficiencies in thought and an inability to filter emotion-driven behavior. The intellectual instabilities manifested in diminished mental acuity, loss of focus, and decreased ability to prioritize. The pastor's wife described an inappropriate "tunnel vision, where he would focus on trivial things." The emotional failures included increased irritability, loss of patience, bursts of anger, and uncontrollable weeping. A specific example is the changing level of aggression in his driving as the stress increased. While the plan included elements specifically designed to help the pastor manage stress and process emotion, the result was still significant mental health trauma reported by the pastor.

The result of the plan on the pastor's spiritual health was mixed. The pastor's faith is intact, and his trust in God is unwavering. In planning the concluding series of sermons, the pastor reported a clear sense that the Holy Spirit had brought particular wisdom and vision for the church closure season. Overall, the pastor positively affected his spiritual life; however, he acknowledges that his ordinary spiritual disciplines were regularly set aside because of the season's business. There is a belief that the pastor could have been more self-controlled in maintaining his spiritual discipline routines, thereby strengthening his relationship with God and minimizing some of the emotional pains he experienced.

## **Administrative Outcomes**

The administrative details required for closing a once-thriving local church are numerous, widely varied, and incredibly complex. In the final nine months leading to WayPointe Christian Fellowship's closing, the administrator scheduled and moderated six member meetings for disseminating information and listening to the people, six meetings to facilitate voting, and twelve elder meetings. Furthermore, the administrator was tasked with finding and hiring a real estate agent and an attorney with experience in aiding nonprofits in closing, or what is legally referred to as "wind up and dissolution." Additionally, WayPointe was the owner of a loan from a previous sale that needed to be discharged so that the building in question could become the legal property of the purchaser. Discharging the load included negotiations within the elder board, further negotiations with the purchasing church, additional negotiations with the membership of WayPointe, creating a proposal to satisfy all parties, and a church vote. Once this was completed and the purchasing church made the final payment, the administrator proceeded to procure the required documentation, which included a substitution of trustee and full reconveyance. These documents were then transported to the county Clerk-Recorder to be legally recorded.

The professional relationships with the realtor and attorney added to the administrative responsibilities. The realtor required vast information regarding the building and property the church had voted to sell. Facilitating the sale also necessitated several meetings with potential buyers and multiple property tours. Similarly, the attorney asked for a copious number of documents, including those outlining the church's relationship with local and national government agencies, the minutes from key elder meetings, the proposals and outcomes of elder votes, the minutes from key member meetings, the proposals and outcomes of membership votes,

those specifying the financial standings, and those detailing the plan for distributing all remaining assets. All the proposals, at the elder and church member levels, had to be created and edited by the administrator in consultation with elders and key leaders.

The researcher was surprised at the overall unity of the church throughout the closure process. The sense of unity was a significant point of emphasis during each of the membership meetings. In each of these meetings, the moderator began with prayer and an opening statement. This pattern set the stage for the congregational conversation. Each meeting had a slightly different feel which oft related to the topic of discussion. The most contentious meetings had the most contentious topics: closure and money. The meeting at which the member's discussed closure was made difficult by only one member. This member made her position plain; she was against closure. When it became clear she was alone, she became quite agitated and caused quite a scene. The moderator allowed her to speak her peace but quickly retook control of the meeting and proceeded with the agenda. The second tense meeting discussed the elder's written plan to distribute the remaining funds to membership-chosen ministries and missionaries. At this meeting, the same member who had caused tension before was again being contrary, which made moderating an otherwise civil, if tense, conversation more difficult. Ultimately, the members unified and voted to affirm the elder written plan, with twenty-one voting “yes” and one voting “no.” The researcher was surprised by this unity because of the many stories about division, contention, and animosity in closing churches.<sup>129</sup>

The administrative task requiring the utmost tact, patience, and trust was negotiating the pastor's severance package. The topic was first placed on the elder meeting agenda on May 9, 2022. Since the topic related to the pastor's salary, he recused himself from the discussion but did

---

<sup>129</sup> See Hilliard and Switzer, *Finishing with Grace*, for examples.

remind the other elders to create a proposal in May, June, and July. On August 5, the elders brought their first proposal. That proposal was based on their research and included an “industry standard” offer. The pastor suggested the elders seek counsel from denominational leaders familiar with churches dealing with this kind of scenario. The denominational advice was for the severance package to be substantially increased. The board then asked the pastor for his proposal, which was provided. Twelve days later, the board came up with another proposal that was agreeable to all concerned. The process was a source of great turmoil for all the people involved. While the researcher is not privy to the closed-door deliberations of the elders regarding the severance package, he has come to understand that those conversations were highly challenging for the men involved. The pastor and his wife agreed that negotiating an agreeable severance package was among the top five most demanding aspects of leading the church through the closure process.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this DMIN intervention plan are positive. God is glorified. God’s people have been blessed. The church has closed, the people have grieved, the church leaders have endured, and most of the membership was worshipping God in community Sunday, October 2, 2022, the week after WayPointe ended.

Where there was unpredictability, it was quite positive for most people. For the pastor, the best aspect of the closure was seeing the people caring for one another deeply in unexpected ways. When the unpredictability was negative, it only affected the church leadership, not the congregation.

Most of the results were predictable. The church members were saddened throughout the closure process, but most were able to process their grief constructively. Hundreds of

interactions happened along the way, and the people were kind to one another. The amount of gossip was modicum; the spread of rumors was particularly scarce. Church members maintained abundant trust in their leaders. The church was led well, suffered little, and will leave a bounteous legacy for two dozen ministries and missionaries to carry on the work of the Lord.



## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

An ever-increasing number of churches throughout the United States will soon close their doors for the last time. Recent research demonstrates a deterioration of American Christianity, a rise of the religiously unaffiliated, and a corresponding decline in church attendance. There is no reason to believe these decades-long trends will reverse anytime soon. The result is a clear need for research followed by teaching and training for denominational leaders and pastors who are likely to be affected. Furthermore, all church leaders should be educated about the topic. With proper education, pastors will be better equipped to support their peers who will be facing this challenge in increasing numbers.

Choosing to close a church requires mental fortitude and a strong will. The first obstacle the church leader(s) will face is the internal debate regarding the nature of the process. Can it be God's will to close *a* church? Is it God's will to close *this* church? Is closing a church ever good? Is closing the church abandoning the faith? Should church leaders not be optimistic? Obviously, not every church should close; not every church in crisis should close. Some believe closing churches is always wrong; others think every church with fewer than 50 people attending should close. Deciding to close is never easy, but the researcher has learned some questions that can help the leader(s) to make a wise decision that will glorify God and bless his people.

### **Comparing WayPointe's Experience with Other Churches**

The downward trend for WayPointe, and many other churches, began decades before the church's closure. As is common for churches in crisis, many attempts were made to correct the problems. WayPointe's direction departed from others when the pastor, with the advice and consent of the elders, publicly stated the metrics he would utilize in making the closure decision.

The pastor honestly shared with the members about the significant trouble the church was having early in the process. The researcher found this assertive communication to be rare within troubled churches. Elders within the church have cited this direct communication as crucial for enabling the members to process the decisions that followed and accept the outcomes.

One common theme among many distressed churches is denial. The literature reviewed in the second chapter contained many examples of denominational leaders, pastors, church elders, and congregations ignoring data revealing insurmountable local churches' problems. The elders of WayPointe overcame their instincts and confronted the realities of their dying church. The bravery shown by these men is uncommon. One of the common misconceptions they were able to name, process, and defeat is the insidious thought that church closure is akin to failure. When leaders believe their path leads to ruin, they change paths. The author does not believe closing a church is failing; instead, the author believes church leaders must spend time in prayer, weigh the evidence, and do their best to obey the will of God. Closing a local church may be the will of God, but it is the work of local leaders to discern God's will for themselves. The elders of WayPointe spent time praying and working to determine God's will. It is the opinion of the author that the elders of WayPointe followed God's leading which empowered them, enabling decisive actions regarding church closure.

Working with an aging congregation is another theme among churches contemplating closure. WayPointe's elder team consisted of three men whose age was over 80, one just past 60, and the pastor, who was close to 50 at the time. The blessing of such a group is the existence of great experience, wisdom, and patience. However, there are some drawbacks as well. Aging men often struggle with health issues, energy levels, creativity, and curiosity. These men served God

well but could have benefitted from the enthusiasm and novel thinking of someone significantly younger.

The reviewed literature shows how interactions with denominational leaders produce mixed results. Some pastors recount how helpful their denominations were in supporting the church's leaders and guiding them through the process. In contrast, others relayed terrible tales of denominational control asserted without regard for the local congregation. The results from WayPointe's closure did not approach either extreme. Two leaders from the American Baptist Churches of the West, locally known as "Growing Healthy Churches," were kind and generous in their dealings with the pastor. They provided references for a local real estate agent and an attorney, who proved quite helpful. One of the leaders attended and spoke at the Open House event sharing his insightful perspective on the church's history and current closure process. The other denominational leader was encouraging and offered to listen and provide counsel. What was unavailable was specific direction regarding the church closure process. Neither of the denominational leaders had received any training, read any books, or had any first-hand experience with closure. The author has since come to know that very few evangelical denominational leaders have had any training, read any books, or personally experienced church closure.

### **Was The Pastor's Experience Representative?**

In anticipation of a reader contemplating church closure, preparing for it, or having already begun closing a church, the author offers some personal data. Such a reader may wonder if what is ahead for them will resemble what the author experienced. The following section was written for such readers. Here, the author will attempt to describe closure elements that appear to

be common and those unique to his experience. This section must recognize that each person is created with strengths and weaknesses that impact the journey.

Furthermore, each individual is somewhere in their life story; some of the circumstances make the process easier, and others make it more difficult. The author had the advantages of a healthy marriage; adult children living independently; gifting, training, and experience in counseling and teaching; two active weekly Bible studies; and a natural ability to love people while also being professionally detached. The challenges he had to overcome included multiple traumatic family events, exhaustion lasting more than two years, poor administrative skills, a complex sister-church relationship, and a multitude of opinionated former church members.

Church closure is a grueling process. In nearly every account the researcher read about, a common theme was longsuffering. For the author, the closure process took approximately eighteen months, but the crisis began long before. WayPointe had been struggling for years when COVID-19 burst into the worldwide consciousness in the spring of 2020. The government of Northern California was quick to close churches, and like many other religious organizations, WayPointe never recovered. Thus, the pastor's time of trial lasted from the summer of 2020 until the late fall of 2022. It is unlikely that many other pastors who struggle through the closing of a church will be called to endure for this length of time.

During the governmental stay-at-home order, the church's leaders worked intentionally at maintaining congregational relationships. One of the efforts led to an evening Bible study every Wednesday hosted by the pastor via the Zoom digital platform. Early on, this time became segmented into three parts. For those desiring a corporate time of prayer, the start time was 6:30 PM. After this, the group transitioned to a time of fellowship where each member could talk and listen to everyone else share. Finally, the pastor would teach from the Scripture. In the autumn of

2020, the pastor began to teach about mental health. Each of the topics included practical help and biblical wisdom. The group covered ways to maintain a healthy mind, how to help a friend in need, when to ask for help, tips intended to aid as people attempt to detect suicidal thoughts within friends and family member and ways to help such people, and some specific information about various mental illnesses. This group continued meeting throughout the entire season of closure and became an excellent resource for the pastor. Opportunities to communicate informally with church members are rare, and this group was used to share details about the process and get valuable feedback from congregants.

Another resource the pastor utilized to significant effect was the men's Bible study. This group started shortly after the pastor was hired. Attendees typically included all five elder board members, five or more church members, and a visitor or two. The Wednesday group provided meaningful interaction, so the men's study did as well. The group's dialog provided invaluable insights through informative conversations among attendees. The discussions were informative for the pastor, who learned about the thoughts and opinions of the men and allowed them to be informed about the progress in the closure procedure. Closing the church would have been multiplicatively more difficult without the mid-week groups.

The size, variety, and number of challenges each pastor faces closing a church cannot be readily estimated. What can be assumed is that each pastor will face many complex problems. Some of these can be anticipated, but others will be unpredictable. For example, the pastor was tasked with finalizing the sale of a property the church had sold long before he was hired. This task was well-known and thus predictable; however, the level of complexity took the pastor by surprise. This task alone consumed more than fifteen hours. The time spent speaks to the complexity of the re-conveyance process and the relative complexity of closing this church

compared to other church closing examples of which the researcher is aware. The second example of WayPointe's complicated closing procedure is the money. In reviewing the finances after the church was closed, the researcher found \$340,967 in the church's bank account. Having such a balance caused tension for one member who believed the church should have remained open until the money ran out.

Another example was selling the building and property the church used until its final worship service. At present, this task is not complete, the building is not sold, but the process has consumed at least twenty-five hours. These tasks taught the author how the church closure process consumes the pastor's time and reveals their every weakness. While not every church closure will be this complex, the researcher would still argue for pastors closing churches to obtain as much help as possible.

When the pastor sought help, his wife provided more aid than he could have imagined. Years earlier, the elders had hired her to be the church's secretary. It is rare for a husband and wife to get along at home and work, but the arrangement leveraged the health of the marriage to yield the benefits of their collective strengths. These strengths were well displayed on the final Sunday. During the church's last worship service, the pastor utilized his gifts in connecting with people through preaching and moderating an open microphone time. The wife showed her care by organizing a final "family meal." The final worship service was a beautiful expression of love, and the church could say goodbye with gratitude and joy.

The pastoral couple blessed the church in many ways and benefitted from sharing the experience. There is a definite advantage when one's spouse already knows the cause of the stress the other feels. A high level of trust existed within the pastoral marriage, empowering openness. Both spouses found comfort in sharing their innermost feelings sometimes and sitting

in silent togetherness with others. Ultimately, they experienced the trauma of church closure differently, but the burden was lessened for both because it was done together.

While the pastoral couple found strength in one another, perhaps the most traumatic event during the closure season came from a catastrophe within their family. The event details are private, but a new searing pain was introduced two weeks before the closing Sunday. The resulting emotional fallout pushed the husband and wife to the limit of their emotional tolerance. Following this incident, the pastor struggled to process his emotions properly and began employing a coping mechanism: compartmentalization. Together the husband and wife decided he should intentionally stop processing thoughts and feelings related to the family crisis until a later date. This decision resulted from several conversations and the wife's fear of her husband having a heart attack.

When a person passes through a tremendous trial, that difficulty is sometimes extended when they are forced to explain the pain. Multiple church members reported this kind of experience. Sometimes the congregants were asked by family, but other times it was former members investigating the demise of a church they no longer attended. Observation and experience have led the researcher to an opinion regarding the nature of internal pain compounded by external pain added by well-meaning friends and family. Processing church closure also fuels the double pain felt by one whose spouse is dying. There is grief from the anticipation of the loss. There is also an emotional tax to be paid each time the spouse tells the story about how they arrived at this place. Retelling the story about the injury, the diagnosis, or the failure of the treatments sometimes does something like reopening a scabbed wound, and the emotional blood begins to flow once more. The author recognizes the existence of an emotional spectrum each person fits into; individuals experience the emotion of an event differently. For

many, including the pastor, the pain of retelling the story caused another coping behavior: avoidance.

Avoidance is common in humans. Having been the pastor of WayPointe for nearly six years, the researcher had a standing invitation to a monthly meeting of local church leaders. Unfortunately, the group had experienced some inconsistency in its meeting schedule; during that time, some had left, and new people had joined. Not wanting to retell the story of WayPointe's closure to new people, the researcher avoided attending this meeting for the final four months of the church's existence. The members of the church also practiced avoidance. One member told a story of seeing a former member in a grocery store and avoiding that person. Other members avoided the Open House because they feared being asked why the church was closing if the leaders had tried everything to keep it open and what they planned to do next. For many people, the pastor included, defending the decision to close the church is painful, frustrating, and infuriating. These emotions are multiplied when the person asking demonstrates a false knowledge about the inner workings of churches. Unfortunately, many arrogantly portray a self-satisfied heir of knowledge that communicates pity and a sense that the church would have been saved if they had been a part of the process. The researcher believes the pastor reached a breaking point and avoided people who may have communicated anything resembling that sentiment for fear of losing control of his emotions and replying in anger.

### **Best Practices**

In evaluating the literature, the researcher noted a distinct lack of good advice for those burdened with closing a local church. In partial remedy of this issue, the following section highlights disciplines and tools the author found most helpful.



Maintaining relationships that add strength, joy, and wisdom may be the most critical task a church-closing pastor can do. Of course, all relationships flow from a strong relationship with God. Closing a church will demand much of the church leaders, and those not continually pursuing worship, prayer, Scripture, confession, and other disciplines they have found helpful will suffer. The author intentionally included confession because stress over time reduces inhibitions and may increase sinful thoughts and behaviors. Humility and confession will be essential attributes for those desiring to glorify God, bless His people, and minimize their trauma.

Healthy human relationships must also be fought for. Wise people know that when stress exists, people often express their negative emotions in ways that cause pain to the people they love most. Church leaders must intentionally communicate feelings, express gratitude, and, as necessary, ask forgiveness from those closest to them. Earlier in this chapter, the author addressed the possible need to avoid certain people. While avoiding people may sometimes be necessary, let the reader embrace the need to draw important people close to themselves. Underestimating the value added by the loving people in one's life would be a grave mistake.

While church closure requires leaders to perform dozens of administrative details, the superior work is caring for the people. Normal leadership development may teach people to understand their strengths and weaknesses, so they can perform optimally and delegate tasks as necessary. A closing church may not have the human resources necessary to delegate elements of the process that fall outside the leader's strengths, and there will be essential tasks. The researcher found obtaining help challenging because the church was shrinking, but not impossible. One of the regrets the pastor has is not asking for more help from the available capable people. Not asking for help often enough led to consequences. Being perpetually

exhausted and too often distracted from shepherding duties were two of them. However, this reality cannot dissuade the shepherd from focusing on the sheep. Perhaps the reader can learn from the pastor's mistakes and find willing people, even outside the church, and humbly ask for help. If a person tasked with church closure can recruit multiple helpers, perhaps that church leader will be able to work at a sustainable pace and finish the job well.

Each church has its interpersonal dynamics, the result of myriad church leaders, strong individual personalities, denominational values, and the practice of church discipline or failure thereof. The pastor spent more than four years building a culture within WayPointe that led to open communications within the member meetings. Unity is a tremendous asset in the church closure process, but stories from other closing churches often describe congregations locked in argument and division. Those who must close a local church should make the utmost effort to build unity and prevent factious behaviors. One helpful suggestion is for each meeting to begin with prayer; perhaps prayer specifically for God to bring supernatural union among his people. Moderating such meetings can be very stressful. Reading a passage from John 17 may mitigate that stress as the moderator reminds the congregation that unity is not just a good idea but God's idea. The church's leader must then decide how to balance the meeting between allowing people to speak and letting people say destructive things. When moderating such meetings, the researcher chose to err on the side of keeping control of the meeting. The members were free to voice their feelings and opinions about the closure process at every opportunity. As the moderator, the pastor would only interrupt if a member said something untrue and damaging, personally confrontational, or wildly outside the agenda of the meeting. Wisdom and courage are required when moderating such meetings since the need may arise for the moderator to interrupt

someone forcefully. These gatherings, however, cannot have lies, gossip, personal attack, or other foolishness. Shepherds protect their sheep, even from one another.

Another critical aspect of shepherding is preparing the sheep for their next shepherd. The pastor wrote and preached sermons designed to train the people to select, join, and integrate into their next church for the five months leading up to the closure. The first series was called “The Church” and had sermons about preaching, the gospel, discipleship, church discipline, biblical leadership, prayer, mission, and how to select a new fellowship. The second series, titled “Last Words,” contained messages about core beliefs. The final three sermons were on grief and glory and the comfort of God.

Being gifted, trained, and experienced in counseling was only marginally helpful to the pastor of WayPointe. The survey sent by the researcher asked the respondents if they needed help processing their emotions regarding church closure. Of forty-two responses, only one marked yes, indicating either the people were unaware of their need or were aware but chose not to ask for help. Similarly, in the months leading up to the closure, no one communicated the desire for a meeting with the pastor to discuss their emotions about closing the church. However, multiple people spoke openly about their feelings in both mid-week Bible studies. Several people confided in the pastor during luncheons and in the atrium of the building after the worship service had ended. The researcher thus concludes that counseling is an essential skill for those closing a church, but this burden does not need to be carried by the pastor alone.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of human support for a pastor walking through a church closure process. For this pastor, encouragement did not come through a denominational cluster of regional pastors, although a similar group could benefit others. In place of this group was an online-based accountability group of pastors. In the summer of 2020, the pastor joined

this group and built healthy relationships with the other men because of shared positions and issues. The researcher has concluded that finding a group where there is accountability, a group in which a person can know everyone and be known by all, is as invaluable as biblical (Jas 5:16, 1 John 1:8-10).

### **Denominational Support**

Protestant evangelical denominations are ill-equipped for the onslaught of impending church closures and mergers. Conversations with seven regional administrators from western districts (typically northern California, western Nevada, and southern Oregon) of The American Baptists, The Evangelical Free Churches, The Assemblies of God, and The California Southern Baptist Convention revealed a startling lack of preparation. These leaders support local pastors should they ever need to merge or close.

It would behoove denominations to invest in training and resources for those leaders who will directly support local pastors through these times of crisis. Preparations ought to include philosophical discussions regarding the nature of merger and closure. There is value in each denominational leader reaching an informed opinion about different kinds of mergers before advising local leaders looking to merge. Similarly, denominational leaders should consider the advantages and pains of closing a church. These leaders ought to have good answers to common questions posed by those contemplating closure, including: Can it be God's will for a church to close? What is an appropriate process by which local leaders can decide whether church closure is the right decision? Is closing a local church failing as a pastor? As a group of elders? As a membership? As a denomination? Why or why not? Is staying open not a worthy objective for a local church?

Willing denominational leaders should be trained to aid the pastors in preparing for closure or merger. Training should include information designed to help local church leaders with decision-making, design an appropriate timeline to support their choices, maintain quality mental health, create a communications strategy specific to their crisis, negotiate internally (e.g., expectations for paid staff, length of employment, severance packages) and externally (e.g., selling the building and other assets, working with attorneys), and the creation of a giving plan for whatever resources remain.

### **Conclusion**

Church closure devastates nearly everyone involved, but it is not evil. Closing local churches is a natural consequence of their God-given life cycles. While Christ's universal church is comprised of local churches, closing them is not the death of his bride (Rev 19:7). It is more like removing an unfruitful tree from the orchard (Matt 7:19). Church closure can also have beautiful aftereffects. Members of the dying church are often better served and enabled to serve in their new churches. Resources from dying churches can provide much-needed support for other ministries, thereby glorifying God and blessing his people.

## Bibliography

- Alexander, T. Desmond, and Brian S. Rosner, eds. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Anderson, Neil T. *Discipleship Counseling: The Complete Guide to Helping Others Walk in Freedom and Grow in Christ*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003.
- Belleville, Linda. *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews* Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 17. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2009, LOGOS.
- Bible Studies Press. *The NET Bible First Edition*. Nashville: Biblical Studies Press, 2005.
- Bush, Peter. *In Dying We Are Born: The Challenge and the Hope for Congregations*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
- Cafferata, Gail. "Respect, Challenges, and Stress among Protestant Pastors Closing a Church: Structural and Identity Theory Perspectives." *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no. 3 (June 2017): 311-333.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Last Pastor: Faithfully Steering a Closing Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020.
- Carson, D. A. *The Gospel according to John*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Christian Reformed Church. "Logistics of Closing a Church." Crossroads Discernment Process. Accessed 24 March 2022. <https://www.crcna.org/crossroads/stages/next-steps/logistics-closing-church>
- Cuss, Steve. *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs*. Nashville: Nelson, 2019.
- Dever, Mark. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013.
- Devine, Mark and Darrin Patrick. *Replant: How a Dying Church Can Grow Again*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2014.
- Enns, Paul P. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago: Moody, 1989, LOGOS.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Edited by L. Arnold Hustad. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Etienne-Gibson, Rose. "Promoting Spiritual Growth Through Small Group Devotion in the Aftermath of Church Disintegration." D.Min. Thesis, South University, 2018.

- Evans, Mary J. *1 & 2 Samuel*. Understanding the Bible Commentary Series. Ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012.
- Fahnestock, Della M. "Living Wills for Congregations: A New Approach to Church Life Transitions." D.Min. Thesis, Lancaster Theological Seminary, 2008.
- Getz, Gene A., *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church*. Chicago: Moody, 2003.
- Granade, N. Nelson. "The Pastor's Experience." Pages 55-63 in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*. Edited by Beth Ann Gaede. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Gray, Elmer. "Shepherd." In *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. by Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, Steve Bond, E. Ray Clendenen, and Trent C. Butler. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003, LOGOS.
- Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004, LOGOS.
- Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*. New York: Crown Business, 2013.
- Hesterman, Lowell L. "Ending with Strength." Pages 121-32 in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*. Edited by Beth Ann Gaede. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Hilliard, Linda M, and Gretchen J. Switzer. *Finishing with Grace: A Guide to Selling, Merging, or Closing Your Church*. Booklocker.com, 2010.
- Holdbrook-Smith, Samuel. "Strategy for Merging Unhealthy Churches and Leading the Merged Congregation to a Healthy Christ-Centered New Testament Church." D.Min. Thesis, Liberty University, 2012.
- Huffman, Douglas S., and Jamie N. Hausherr. "Shema, the," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry, David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, et al. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016, LOGOS.
- Hull, Bill and Robert E. Colman. *The Disciple-Making Pastor: The Key to Building Healthy Christians in Today's Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.
- Irwin, L. Gail. *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014.
- Jenkins, Michael. *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=430975>.

- Kauflin, Bob and Paul Baloche. *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Keener, Craig S. *Revelation*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999, LOGOS.
- Kinnaman, David and Gabe Lyons. *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why it Matters*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007.
- Landis, John W. "Hanging on for Dear Life: Easing the Inevitable." D.Min. Thesis, Drew University, 2013.
- Lewis, C. S. "A Grief Observed" in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.
- Liefeld, Walter L. "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, LOGOS.
- Lyons, Gabe. *The Next Christians: Seven Ways You Can Live the Gospel and Restore the World*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2010.
- Manzo, Lynne C., "Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23, no. 1 (March 2003): 47-61. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272494402000749>
- McClendon, P. Adam, and Jared E. Lockhart, *Timeless Church: Five Lessons from Acts*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2020, LOGOS.
- Morgan, Tony. *The Unstuck Church: Equipping Churches to Experience Sustained Health*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017.
- Olson, David T. *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of Over 200,000 Churches*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.
- Patrick, Darrin and Mark Devine. *Replant: How a Dying Church Can Grow Again*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2014.
- Philabaun, Linda E. "Dying with Dignity: Palliative Care for the Dying Church." D.Min. Thesis, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, 2007.
- Piper, John. *Brothers, We are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002.
- Rainer, Thom S. *I Am A Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes the Difference*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013.



- Rasmussen, Tanya Stormo. "The Member's Experience." Pages 43-54 in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*. Edited by Beth Ann Gaede. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.
- de Roest, Hendrik Pieter. "'Losing a Common Space to Connect': An Inquiry into Inside Perspectives on Church Closure Using Visual Methods." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17, no. 2 (November 2013): 292–313.
- Sanders, Michael P. "The Case for Closing the Contagiously Conflicted Church: Three Reasons Why it is Necessary." D.Min. Thesis, Liberty University, 2014.
- Serjak, Cynthia, Beth Yoest. "Leaving Sacred Space: Closing a Church." *Pastoral Music* 33, no. 6 (Aug 2009): 31-33. <https://npm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PMVol33-6.pdf>.
- Shelton, Lewis R. "Managing the Lifecycle of a Christian Ministry: Distinguishing Between the Need for Intervention and the Necessity of Internment." D.Min. Thesis, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2013.
- Spencer, Keith. "Assessing Congregational Viability." Pages 16-29 in *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*. Edited by Beth Ann Gaede. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Strauch, Alexander. *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995.
- Swihart, Judson J., and Gerald C. Richardson. "Counseling in Times of Crisis." *Resources for Christian Counseling*, gen. ed Gary R. Collins. Dallas: Word, 1987.
- The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.
- The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016.
- Thomas, Janet B. "The Final Benediction: Transitioning A Dying Church from Indecision to Closure." D.Min. Thesis, Palmer Theological Seminary, 2013.
- Tomberlin, Jim, Warren Bird, and Craig Groeschel. *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
- Tuell, Steven. *Ezekiel*. Understanding the Bible Commentary Series. Edited by W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012.

Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

Wiens, Greg, and Dan Turner. *Dying to Restart: Churches Choosing a Strategic Death for a Multiplying Life*. Exponential Books, 2018.

Yancey, Phillip. *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

## APPENDIX A

### ELDER PERMISSION LETTER

The following is a letter asking permission from the WayPointe Elders to begin research at WayPointe Christian Fellowship.

18 April 2022

Elder Board

WayPointe Christian Fellowship

770 Sonoma Ave

Richmond, CA, 94590

Dear Elder Board of WayPointe Christian Fellowship,

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The title of my research project is The Final Amen: Designing and Implementing a Christlike System for the Closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship and the purpose of my research is to create and implement a Christlike system to enable the dignified closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at WayPointe Christian Fellowship and utilize your membership list to recruit participants for my research.

All participants will be asked to complete the attached survey. Some will also be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Chris Sherwood

Pastor WayPointe Christian Fellowship

APPENDIX B

ELDER CONSENT FORM

The following is a permission letter document to accompany the consent form

June 2022

Rev. Chris Sherwood  
Senior Pastor  
WayPointe Christian Fellowship  
770 Sonoma St.  
Richmond, CA 994805

Dear Chris:

After a careful review of your research proposal entitled The Final Amen: Designing and Implementing a Christlike System for the Closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship, we have decided to grant you permission to access our membership list and contact anyone from WayPointe and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

We will provide our membership list to Chris Sherwood, and Chris Sherwood may use the list to contact our members and regular attendees to invite them to participate in his research study.

We will not provide potential participant information to Chris Sherwood, but we agree to provide his study information to the congregants of WayPointe Christian Fellowship on his behalf.

Sincerely,

Forrest Drummond  
Elder Board Moderator  
WayPointe Christian Fellowship

## APPENDIX C

### PROJECT RECRUITMENT LETTER

The following is the initial recruitment email.

August 2022

Member  
WayPointe Christian Fellowship  
770 Sonoma Ave  
Richmond, CA, 94590

Dear Church Member:

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting a project as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The purpose of my project is to create and implement a Christlike system to enable the dignified closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and call WayPointe Christian Fellowship their home church. Participants, if willing, will be asked to fill out a survey, possibly sit for an interview, and/or participate in a focus group. The time commitment varies from 5 minutes to 90 depending on which aspect the participant is willing to engage in. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please complete the attached survey and return it by handing it to Suzanne or me or placing it in the blue box located at the rear of the church sanctuary. For more information, please call or text me at [REDACTED] or email me at [REDACTED].

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, determine for yourself if you would like to proceed with the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part.

Sincerely,

Chris Sherwood  
Pastor WayPointe Christian Fellowship

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

## APPENDIX D

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The following is the form required for informed consent.

#### Consent

**Title of the Project:** The Final Amen: Designing and Implementing a Christlike System for the Closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship

**Principal Investigator:** Reverend Chris Sherwood, Senior Pastor WayPointe Christian Fellowship, Doctor of Ministry Candidate at Liberty University

#### Invitation to be part of a Project Study

You are invited to participate in a project study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age and a regular attendee of WayPointe Christian Fellowship. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to create and implement a Christlike system to enable the dignified closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship. It is ordinary for churches to close, and this causes tremendous trauma to the people in such churches. This study makes an attempt to close a church in a way that causes minimal trauma to the people of the church while glorifying God in all things.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete the survey provided. This task should take approximately 5-10 minutes.
2. Participate in a focus group. One focus group will happen live and require approximately one hour. The second focus group will happen via zoom and will be recorded. It will take approximately ninety minutes.
3. Some participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. The interview will take 30-90 minutes, and the conversation will be recorded.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefit participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study is the opportunity to discuss the closing of the church. This discussion is likely, but not guaranteed to, provide mental and emotional support for those who participate.

Benefits to society include providing future pastors and other church leaders with valuable information regarding the closure of churches in ways that glorify God, support church members, and alleviate some pastoral anxiety throughout this painful process.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Project records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

### **Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**

The researcher serves as a pastor at WayPointe Christian Fellowship. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or WayPointe Christian Fellowship. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Chris Sherwood. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Benjamin Laird, at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to **audio-record or video-record** me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date



## APPENDIX E

### PROJECT SURVEY

The following is the initial survey. It will be included in the recruitment email and used again at the end of the research window.

Losing a church is difficult. This assessment is designed to help the church leaders understand where you, the congregation, needs support. Thank You for participating.

Questions	TRUE	Mostly True	Somewhat True	Not True
1 Closing WCF will be emotional painful	4	3	2	1
2 I have thought about attending another church	4	3	2	1
3 I need help processing my emotions regarding church closure	4	3	2	1
4 Additional fellowship events would be helpful to me	4	3	2	1
5 There are things I'd like to say to the pastor	4	3	2	1
6 The idea of changing churches is frightening	4	3	2	1
7 Many people from WCF are sad about closing	4	3	2	1
8 We need more opportunities to share our opinions about closing WCF	4	3	2	1
9 I would like an elder to call to discuss closing the church	4	3	2	1
10 I have discussed which church I will move to with friends	4	3	2	1
11 I understand why the church has to close	4	3	2	1
12 WCF should have a potluck after every Sunday service	4	3	2	1
13 If I was in charge, WCF would stay open	4	3	2	1
14 No one knows how I truly feel about the church closing	4	3	2	1
15 I am familiar with two or more local pastors	4	3	2	1
16 I believe it is God's will for WCF to close this fall	4	3	2	1
17 The people of WCF are like family to me	4	3	2	1
18 I would like more social time at church	4	3	2	1
19 The leaders of the church are doing a good job	4	3	2	1
20 I know which church I will be attending after WCF	4	3	2	1

## APPENDIX F

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The following is a list of questions to be used in the various focus groups.

1. Would anyone volunteer to describe how they feel about the closure of the church?
2. How are you processing your emotions regarding church closure?
3. Do you believe closing the church is necessary? Why or why not?
4. Who are you talking to about negative feelings regarding church closure?
5. What is the hardest part of closing the church for you?
6. Are church leaders doing a good job leading? Why or why not?
7. If you were in charge of WayPointe, what would you do differently?
8. Have you thought about the church you will attend after WayPointe? Why or why not?
9. What will be important in your next church?
10. Who is willing to share thoughts about the next church they will visit?
11. Are you having conversations with other members of WCF about a different church? If not, why? If so, how are those conversations going?
12. What would help you to choose your next church?

## APPENDIX G

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following is a list of interview questions.

1. How are you doing?
2. How are you processing the emotion related to the closing of WCF?
3. Are you in agreement with the decision to close? Why or why not?
4. Are you sharing your thoughts and emotions with anyone? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe it is God's will that the church close? Why or why not?
6. If you were leading the church, what would you do differently?
7. How would you assess the leaders of WCF?
8. What does a good church leader look like?
9. Do you know of any good church leaders outside of WCF?
10. Are you ready to begin "church shopping?" Why or why not?
11. Describe the "perfect church."
12. Do you know how to begin the process?
13. What conversations have you had about church shopping?
14. How can we help you with the process of church shopping?

## APPENDIX H

### OPEN HOUSE WORSHIP SERVICE ORDER

WayPointe Christian Fellowship's worship service begins at 10:30 AM PST. Below is the service order for the special service titled "Open House."

Time	What	Who
10:30	Song 1 "I Surrender All"	WCF Worship Band
10:35	Welcome, Introduction of Guests	Pastor Chris Sherwood
10:40	Song 2 "God of Wonders"	WCF Worship Band
10:45	Song 3 "O' For 1,000 Tongues to Sing"	WCF Worship Band
10:55	Introduction of guest speakers	Pastor Chris Sherwood
10:58	Opening Prayer	Pastor Andrew Lai
11:00	Guest 1 Dr. Tim Brown + Rev. Gilbert Foster	Growing Healthy Churches
11:08	Guest 2 Fauq Jiem Leiz	Pastor of YMBC
11:16	Guest 3 Patrick Waller	Former Pastor WCF
11:24	Guest 4 Charley Stone	Former Pastor WCF
11:32	Closing Remarks and Prayer	Pastor Chris Sherwood
11:40	Conclude Service	
11:45	Begin Luncheon	

APPENDIX I

PHOTO ARRAY OF TIMELINE

WayPointe - First Baptist Church Richmond Timeline for the Open House September 4, 2022



## APPENDIX J

### IRB APPROVAL LETTER

June 9, 2022

Chris Sherwood  
Benjamin Laird

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY21-22-1158 The Final Amen: Designing and Implementing a Christlike System for the Closure of WayPointe Christian Fellowship

Dear Chris Sherwood and Benjamin Laird,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data-safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason:

Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not “designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge,” according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.**

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**