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Study guide

Church closures yield growth

By Robert C. Blezard

When a person passes on to life eternal, their last will and testament dictates how their earthly wealth and assets will support the people and institutions they loved. The same principle can apply to congregations that close their doors and bequeath their assets to strengthen and expand important ministries.

EXERCISE 1: LIFE SPAN

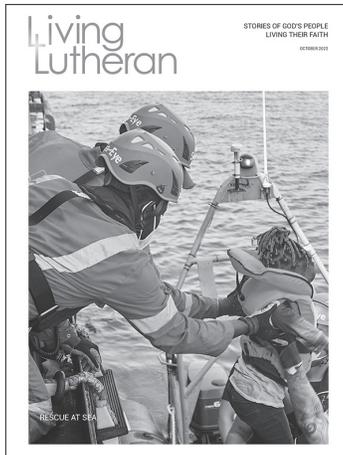
Human lifespan progresses along definite, predictable stages. Birth, childhood, youth, adulthood, middle age, old age and death. Each stage has its own unique characteristics and markers. This pattern can apply to congregations too. Discuss:

- What similarities are there in the lifespan of people and the lifespan of a congregation?
- What characteristics are associated with each stage of human life?
- What characteristics would you ascribe to each life stage of a congregation?
 - Birth
 - Childhood
 - Youth
 - Adulthood
 - Middle age
 - Old age
 - Death
- Review your congregation's history. What events, experiences or data would mark its "stages of life" from founding to present?
- At what stage of life is your congregation now? Why?
- What do you see for the near future? The long term?

EXERCISE 2: CLOSING CONGREGATIONS

Across the country, thousands of congregations shut their doors every year, and experts suggest the pace may be quickening for a variety of factors. Discuss:

- What has your experience been with congregational closures in your area? What have you witnessed?
- How have congregational closures affected your community?
- When a congregation closes, who and what is affected beyond the church membership and families?



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- How have congregational closures in your area affected the mood or outlook of the people in your church?
- What factors have contributed to congregations closing in your area?
- How can your congregation learn from those experiences?

EXERCISE 3: EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Members and families often experience grief when a congregation closes, not unlike the grief experienced when a loved one passes away. Discuss:

- What are the emotional bonds that form between a church member and a congregation?
- Why do these bonds form? What reinforces these bonds?
- Why can these emotional connections be so strong?
- How is grief at the closure of a congregation similar to that felt at the passing of a loved one?
- Explain how and why the following emotions may be experienced when a congregation closes:
 - Sadness
 - Failure
 - Anger
 - Guilt
- What might a grieving process look like for a congregation?
- How might a wise pastor or congregation council help members process their grief?

EXERCISE 4: FACTORS IN CLOSING

In their fight to continue ministry, many congregations are confronting headwinds from inside and outside their walls. What have you seen? Discuss how these factors can contribute to a congregation's long-term stability:

- Dwindling attendance
- Declining offerings
- Inability to adapt to changing community demographics
- Conflict
- Lack of children/youth
- Lack of young families
- Cost of building maintenance
- Decrease in religious commitment
- Low regard for churches

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Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
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- Other factors?
- Which of these are you seeing in your church? How? How is your congregation responding?

EXERCISE 5: LEGACY GIVING

As the article points out, many congregations plan their closing in a way that provides not only an orderly transition but also a distribution of assets to ministries and nonprofit organizations that are important to the membership. It's a way of leaving a "legacy" for a congregation.

- At what point would a congregation see the "writing on the wall" that a closure is coming? What would be the warning signs?
- Along with "denial" and desperation moves, what are unhelpful responses to the awareness that a congregation is probably facing closure?
- What would be examples of healthy and helpful responses to the awareness that a congregation must close?
- As a study group, form a hypothetical "closure plan" for your congregation.
- How might your congregation remember, celebrate and put closure to its years in ministry?
- What assets, including property, does your congregation have?
- What ministries or nonprofit organizations are important to your congregation's membership?
- What might a "last will and testament" look like for your congregation?

EXERCISE 6: LIFE, DEATH, LIFE

God has ordained our path to take us from life to death, and then from death back to life. How can that pattern fit congregations when they leave their assets to provide new life to a ministry?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do congregations last forever? Why or why not?
- What congregations in your community have closed in your memory, and why? What lessons can you learn from them?
- What "ingredients" would you expect to find in a "recipe" for a healthy and thriving congregation? How can a congregation proactively work to stay as healthy and thriving as possible? With these ideas in mind, how is your congregation doing?
- Explain why a congregation that thrived while serving a community 60 years ago might not be thriving today? What has changed that has made it tougher for churches? How has failure to change made it harder for churches to continue?

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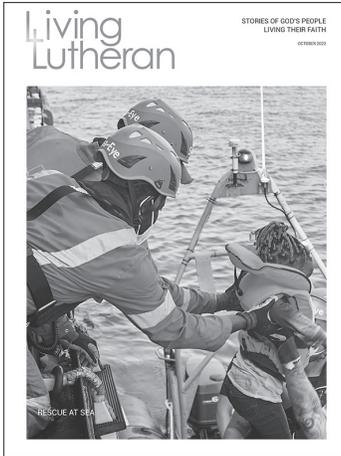
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About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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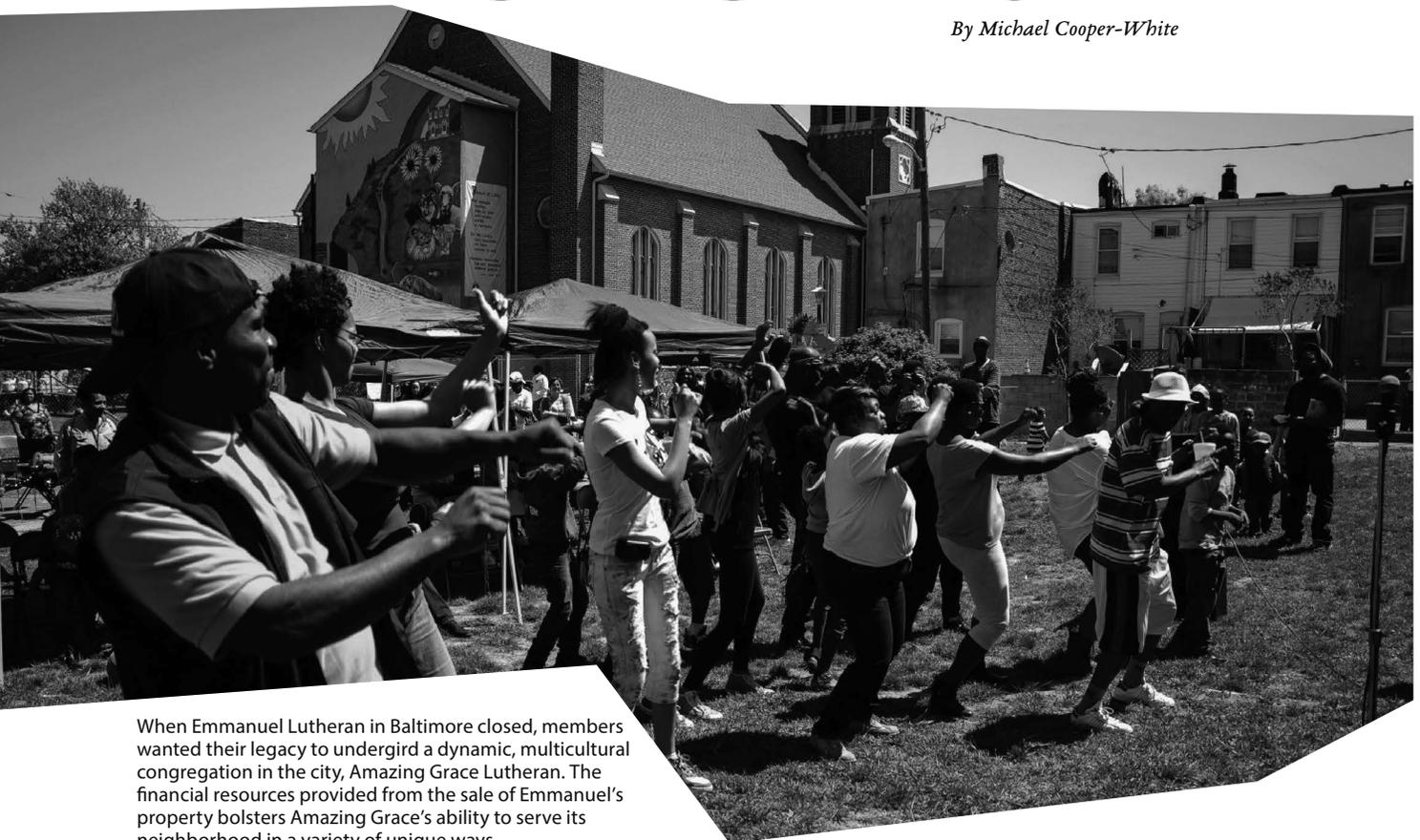
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- Looking at your congregation, is the general outlook for the future more one of optimism or of pessimism? Explain. What challenges or trends is your congregation facing? What sources of hope and life are there?
- What is your congregation known for? What ministries or values has it upheld? If your congregation were to close today, what would be a good use of its assets? What ministries and nonprofit organizations would benefit from your congregation's assets and continue your mission?

Church Closures Yield Growth

By Michael Cooper-White



When Emmanuel Lutheran in Baltimore closed, members wanted their legacy to undergird a dynamic, multicultural congregation in the city, Amazing Grace Lutheran. The financial resources provided from the sale of Emmanuel's property bolsters Amazing Grace's ability to serve its neighborhood in a variety of unique ways.

We recognize the wisdom of Ecclesiastes when it comes to the life cycles of all living beings. As individuals, we know our lives will end someday. But it's often more difficult to accept the reality that all human organizations, including our congregations, have life spans as well.

A 2021 study by the Center for Analytics, Research & Development and Data, affiliated with the United Church of Christ, found that, during the previous decade, between 3,850 and 7,700 U.S. congregations closed each year, or 75 to 150 per week. Some who study church trends

believe the pace will quicken in the wake of the pandemic.

Closure of a ministry inevitably brings sadness and often a sense of failure or a measure of anger or guilt. One often hears: "If only we could attract a few more members, we'd keep going." "If we had a young, dynamic pastor this

wouldn't be happening." "I'm devastated to lose this church where I was married, where my kids were baptized and where I imagined my funeral taking place."

Congregational decline and demise occur for many reasons. In rural communities that are depopulating, churches can lose members to the point where those remaining are unable to carry out the tasks required for vital congregational life. Buildings may deteriorate for lack of attention and maintenance funds. Offerings dwindle to the point where funds aren't available for even a part-time pastor or one shared with another congregation or two.

In other geographic areas where the overall population may be stable or growing, a ministry may decline due to prolonged conflict that drives people away. Outright racism or subtler insensitivity keep some congregations from welcoming new neighbors who differ from the current members.

Today's widespread decrease in commitment to religious communal life is another major contributor to decline. Many who do seek a church are drawn to well-funded congregations that can offer enticing programs.

How will we die?

For everything there is a season ... a time to be born, and a time to die (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2).

"How will we die?" The question is as relevant for a congregation as for each of us as individuals. The conclusion of a ministry can sometimes leave a mess in its wake. Without a plan, a small remaining group of members may squander resources

and even incur unpaid debt. Appropriate disposition of assets may not occur, leaving to others—often the synod—the tending of an unsalable property or deteriorating cemetery. The remaining members may be left without pastoral care rather than assisted in finding a new church home.

By contrast, the ending of a ministry can also be a congregation's final gift and enduring legacy of faithful stewardship. If handled carefully, its death may spread seeds of new life elsewhere. Its assets may support other ministries. Some church buildings are sold and either demolished or converted into residential or commercial spaces, yet other properties continue serving vital needs in a community.

First Lutheran in central Los Angeles was a vibrant congregation for more than a century, but by the late 20th century it had dwindled so badly that it had no future. Working with the Southwest California Synod, its remaining members committed a portion of assets from its valuable property to endow the First Lutheran Chair of Lutheran History and Theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif. This endowment ensures that seminarians will be well-grounded in our Lutheran tradition.

When the few remaining members of Emmanuel Lutheran in Baltimore knew they couldn't go on, they wanted their legacy to undergird a dynamic, multicultural congregation in the city, Amazing Grace Lutheran. This diverse church serves its economically challenged neighborhood



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Photo: Courtesy of Amazing Grace Lutheran Church

through a community garden, a prayer labyrinth, a food ministry, wellness initiatives, a children's summer camp and many other ways.

Jill Schumann, treasurer of Amazing Grace, describes the financial resources provided from the sale of Emmanuel's property as "catalytically transformative." The legacy gift has also leveraged funds from foundations and other benefactors. Emmanuel's gift has freed Amazing Grace to stop worrying so much about money and "focus on our mission of connecting people with the life-changing power of Jesus Christ," she said.

Buildings transformed

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

Across the ELCA, closing congregations' assets are being used to support vibrant, ongoing ministries and new outreach initiatives.

In recent years the Nebraska Synod has creatively repurposed several congregations' properties. The synod sold St. James Lutheran's property in the small town of Edgar, Neb., to facilitate creation of a community center and coffee shop. In Omaha the former American Lutheran now houses Nile Lutheran Chapel, a thriving Sudanese community expected to become a new ELCA congregation.

A similar "mission restart" is afoot in Seattle, where Bethany Lutheran Church closed in 2016. Emmaus Table, an inclusive, intergenerational worshipping community grounded in Lutheran expression, has

been developed by the Northwest Washington Synod. The community meets at Bethany's former building, now called 7400 Woodlawn and repurposed to connect and engage with its Green Lake neighborhood.

A Tigrayan congregation uses the building, along with a preschool and the Emmaus partner Community Loaves, which provides home-baked bread to area food banks.

In Milwaukee, Capitol Drive Lutheran Church gave its building to the Table, which is described as "an innovative synod-authorized ministry." The Table began offering worship services there this year. The building also houses a culinary school, a yoga studio and an art studio.

Similarly, after the merger of two congregations in Midland, Mich., the former building of St. Timothy Lutheran became a community literacy center.

When Grace Lutheran Church in Two Taverns, Pa., concluded its ministry, the funds were distributed to 10 agencies in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. Recipients were chosen carefully to carry forward Grace's historic commitments to serve youth, a local fire company, Scouting and several agencies that assist food-insecure and unhoused people.

Deborah McClellan, a deacon and the last rostered minister to serve at Grace, assisted the congregation in selling the church building to a startup funeral home that promotes green burial practices.

After First Lutheran Church of Glendale, Calif., closed, its property became the Lutheran Center, where the Southwest California Synod office shares

Across the ELCA, closing congregations' assets are being used to support vibrant, ongoing ministries and new outreach initiatives.

space with an Episcopal seminary and continuing education center. And in Houston, the Gulf Coast Synod keeps its offices in a former congregation's building, out of which it hopes to start a worshipping community.

Many arms of the church remind us how important it is to have a will as we position our assets to serve family members and others after we die. Congregations must also contemplate a time when the doors must close and the lights are turned off one final time. Such planning might seem an act of faithlessness or throwing in the towel, but in truth it shows confidence in God's power to bring new life out of death. †

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