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A good death? Pastoral reflections on closing a chapel

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This article reflects on an experience of the closure of a chapel, exploring ways to challenge the assumption that closure is a failure. Noting the lack of intentional resources to aid churches considering closure, the author identifies the Passion and resurrection narratives as a biblical model for the stages of church awareness of change. Reflecting on these narratives enables the closure of a chapel to be considered as a fitting conclusion to work accomplished, as 'a good death'.

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> *We sit around the table in the church hall as I reiterate the proposal on which we are about to vote – the decision to cease to meet as a society. In other words, the closure of the chapel. I ask for those in favour to raise their hands. I look around the small group as hands are raised – some more reluctantly than others. One or two look at the table as they do so, perhaps unable to look at each other. It is a unanimous decision. The chapel is to close. I find that tears well in my eyes, and I ask the circuit steward (also a local preacher) to pray for us. His prayer is one of comfort and assurance in God's future.*

In this article I offer some reflections on the process of closure of chapels and the impact these processes may have upon a congregation. I cannot say that I speak from a wealth of experience of having closed chapels. In fact, I've been directly involved with only one. Yet, I have listened to and talked with many other ministers and congregations who have been through the experience. Each circuit that I have known has had chapels close in the recent past. The closure of a chapel resonates beyond the immediate congregation – chapel closure doesn't happen in isolation.

I offer these theological reflections in a pastoral context as I see that change and death are themes in the closure of chapels. Yes, there are practical aspects in these conversations – the logistics of death if you like. But while the closure of a chapel can be dominated by practicalities at the end, it all happens within the context of pastoral care and concern.

The times they are a-changing

When I began my first appointment as a probationer minister I knew I might be responsible for closing chapels; in the last months of that same appointment, this became a reality. A church for which I had pastoral responsibility took the decision to close.

It may seem somewhat ruthless or lacking in hope to anticipate closure of chapels. For me, such a conviction came from a realisation that Methodism, the denomination which has run through my family's history for generations, will look very different by the time I come to 'sit down' from when I was accepted into full connexion.

We don't have to go far to find information about the changes in Western Methodism – statistics on declining membership and participation. I have no

intention to rehearse that story here. The Church is changing because society is changing. Change is inevitable. How churches respond, though, is variable. Some congregations seek to connect with their communities as they change; other congregations are fighting the dying of the light. It's not unusual to find both responses within the same church.

Responding to change

Much is written and said about exploring new approaches to mission, outreach and discipleship that connect with the current age, and I welcome these. Of course we should be responding to and connecting with the communities in which we find ourselves, seeing where God is at work and getting alongside that work. There are so many resources available to churches and individuals for this purpose that we are spoilt for choice. But having now walked with one congregation through the decision to close their chapel, I find that actual resources to support such a journey are less abundant.

Why is this? Perhaps such resources would be seen as portents of doom; after all, what leader would be welcomed to a church if they arrived with a course 'Close Your Chapel in Five Easy Steps' under their arm? Perhaps such resources could be seen as assuming the worst, as lacking in hope or trust. Do we really want to admit openly that a church has reached the end of its life?

The process of closing a chapel thus needs some revision. I believe that the closure of a chapel need not be seen as a failure of hope or trust or discipleship. I believe that it can be an opportunity for discipleship, and resources supporting the process of closing chapels belong with the resources and projects around mission, outreach, discipleship and growth.

Closing time

The fact is, closing chapels isn't easy. If anyone says it is then they're not doing it properly, or at least not in a way which is caring of the people and of the heritage of faith in that place. Pastoral issues aside, it's just complicated – forms, permissions, surveys, agents, solicitors, legal language. They say that the death of a partner or moving house are two of the top five most stressful life events – perhaps we might add the closure of a chapel too.

In my experience, it takes time to close a chapel well. In the chapel for which I had responsibility, we spent at least 18 months having intentional conversations about the future of the fellowship in that town. Sometimes these conversations were held, with food, after worship, sometimes at church council meetings. We looked together at the different options that the congregational members had offered themselves – do nothing, become a class of another church, merge with another church on a new site, change the style of worship.

Even if I considered some of the ideas as unlikely or unviable, I knew I needed to take the ideas seriously, giving them appropriate attention. At each point I took time to summarise the conversations and reiterate the decisions we had taken, making sure that all the members were kept informed even if they were unable to be at each meeting. These intentional meetings, with the corresponding notes and letters, gently encouraged an honest assessment of the current situation for the church; we were not going to leave our heads in the sand. I acknowledged that this was difficult for them, and that to have such conversations required courage and honesty. We gave space to talk about the heritage of the chapel and how it was woven into the lives of those who were members: memories of childhood, families and loved ones.

This process also meant that we took time to talk to others, and to the circuit in particular. There was also care and concern from our ecumenical neighbours in the town. In sharing the conversations with others, there was a sense of assurance that the congregation was not walking this path alone but with others, who would hold them in prayer. As it became clearer that closing the chapel was more likely, I spoke of believing in a 'good ending'. As I wrote to them in one of the pastoral letters:

> I believe in a loving God who can, and does, do new things, who does bring new life. I also believe in seasons – times for beginnings, and times for endings. Sometimes, in order for new life to happen we have to let go of things – places, ways of doing things. These may be things which are precious to us, and I know that that can be difficult. Stepping out in faith sometimes requires courage.

It was this careful journey we took together that led us to the point of making the decision to close the chapel.

Biblical narratives

It is vital that we use biblical narratives to inspire and inform our conversations as fellowships of faith. In the quote from my pastoral letter above, there is the hint of Ecclesiastes ('For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven'[1]).

As I reflect on the journey this one congregation took towards the decision to close, as well as on similar stories from other congregations responding to changes around them, I feel there is resonance with the Holy Week and Easter narratives. Chapels or individuals can be placed at different points in the Passion and resurrection narratives:

- Some are living through Palm Sunday – all is going well, the numbers are high and everyone is involved and excited.
- Some are in the middle of Holy Week – the euphoria of Palm Sunday has gone and the ominous clouds are gathering; they remember the numbers of Palm Sunday and are wondering what's changed. Why are people no longer joining in?
- Some are on Maundy Thursday – there is much that is familiar, the same rituals and services, but there is also a strong sense that something is about to happen, something risky, something important. Choices are to be made.
- Some are at Good Friday – death has occurred. The worst has happened. The chapel has closed. All is finished.
- Some are on Holy Saturday – the day of limbo, of the numbness of mourning; no sight of what is ahead other than nothingness.
- Some are on Easter Sunday – resurrection and new life beyond the grave, fresh and exciting.
- Some are at the Ascension – still new and joyful, but with a growing awareness, 'We've got to do this by ourselves now.'
- Some are at Pentecost – at the birth of the church, a deeper discipleship, a willingness to step out in faith and experience what God has in store.

If we desire Pentecost for our churches, then we have to be prepared to go through Holy Week and all that this journey entails. We first have to pass through death, in the conviction that it is possible to have a good death.

Death is something after all

The key to going through significant changes, including the closure of chapels, is to face up to the actuality of death: the death of 'the way things were', the death of a particular chapter in the life of a chapel, the death of the ways we do things now, the closure of a beloved building. Part of living with death is grief. Grief is what happens as we process the reality of death. Grief is not to be avoided, rather it is to be accepted, worked with, and woven into the tapestry of our lives. Grief is not the failure of faith or absence of hope.

Perhaps there is a temptation to deny or smother grief when congregations face significant changes or the closure of their chapel; maybe we want to put on a brave face and be resolutely cheerful because we must show that we trust in God's future. Showing grief or uncertainty might suggest we don't trust God after all. But denying grief is denying something of the human and divine experience. Jesus wept, even though he knew God's power to restore life. Jesus' grief belonged to the story of hope.[2]

Ours is a faith of hope in the Resurrection and new life; that faith is lessened if we do not admit to the reality of death as well. Ours is not an acknowledgement that 'death is nothing at all',[3] but rather the conviction that 'death has lost its sting';[4] ours is a faith which speaks of a love which is stronger than death.[5] In a society which makes death a taboo, surely we ought to be courageous in speaking about it, because we have something hopeful to say about death. As our funeral liturgy says:

> In the presence of death,
> Christ offers us sure ground
> for hope and confidence and even for joy,
> because he shared our human life and death,
> was raised again triumphant
> and lives for evermore.
> In him his people find eternal life.[6]

Therefore, the death of 'the way things were' or the death of a physical chapel can be something about which we can speak openly, honestly and hopefully. When a loved one dies, do we not mourn like everyone else? So too we may be open and honest about the hurt, the grief, the guilt, the numbness, the anger, and the bewilderment which experiencing the closure of a chapel can bring. But let us also weave the hope of faith into these words and actions.

Not failure

Earlier I pondered that one reason for the apparent resistance to talking openly and positively of the closure of chapels is that closure often represents failure. The closure of a chapel might represent the failure of the congregation, the minister, the circuit; but deep down it might suggest a failure of faith and faithfulness, a failure of trust in God and God's power. We look at churches which are flourishing in numbers and wonder what they are doing differently. I remember when I spoke with some members of a chapel which had closed and found there was a common refrain: 'if only we had …', or, 'if only they had …'.

If there has been a failure, then the next step is to ask 'Whose fault is it?' I have heard the accounts that place the blame at others' feet – 'the circuit abandoned us', 'the minister didn't do enough', 'people left us'. I rather think anger and hurt directed at others could be a way of avoiding deeper feelings of personal guilt. Maybe we don't want to ask 'Was it our fault?' 'Was it my fault?' These are far more uncomfortable questions as they call us to doubt the quality of our discipleship: 'Am I a good enough Christian?' I know I asked myself if there was more I could have done for the chapel which decided to close. It wasn't easy to see the hurt of those congregational members and take responsibility for leading them through this pain.

In the light of this, church closure can create a crisis of faith for the individuals involved and for them collectively. Not only might we question the quality of our own discipleship, but we might question whether it's all been worth it. Have we backed the wrong horse (to use a thoroughly un-Methodist analogy)? If God is all-powerful and the Church is to be triumphant, then why has this happened to us?

I want to say that chapel closure is not synonymous with failure. This has a biblical resonance. When Christ died on the Cross, there were those who thought this was the failure of the Jesus-experiment. The followers who encountered the risen Christ as they returned to Emmaus[7] were full of the sense of bewilderment, confusion and disappointment: 'But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'[8] Before long, they discovered that Jesus' death wasn't failure but triumph, which could only have happened *because* of death, not *in spite* of death. In John's Gospel, Jesus precedes his speaking of his own death by using the analogy of wheat:

> Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.[9]

Why should this not also be the case for chapels? The closure of a chapel building could be the beginning of new life. The building may have new uses for the community; the fellowship may travel and offer new life to other congregations; the release of resources and the release from the cares of tending a chapel building (which we know can be onerous) may be life-giving for the members.

Closure of our chapels may also represent the fulfilment of faithful discipleship in a particular time and place. The history and heritage of many of our chapel buildings often reflect given points in the history of a community: the small chapels on the edge of villages built for the farm workers when agriculture was less mechanised; the large city-centre churches which were a religious rejoinder to the Victorian passion for imperial (or imperious) civic buildings. Society and communities have changed. The population lives and works in different patterns and different places; as such, it may be that the original intention for the building is no longer relevant. Many of our buildings have adapted and are adaptable to the changes, but for some a time may come when it can be said, 'well done, good and faithful servant'.[10] How a chapel closes could reflect the faithful acceptance of Simeon as he beholds the Christ-child for whom he'd waited so long:

> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
> 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
> according to your word;
> for my eyes have seen your salvation,
> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
> a light for revelation to the Gentiles
> and for glory to your people Israel.'[11]

Perhaps, at times, closure can happen with that sense that 'our work here is done'.

A good death

It is in the nature of the itinerary of ordained Methodist ministers that we move on. We cannot always walk the entire path with a congregation. The church council meeting at which my congregation decided to close the chapel was the final meeting I had with them. A couple of months later I moved away from that circuit; the congregation had a new minister to walk with them to the final service at the chapel and to decisions about the future of the chapel building.

However, I had already begun to ponder how I would approach those final months if I were still their minister, and had begun to plan how I might enable them to reach 'a good death'. This was the 'Course for Closing Chapels' that I feel is missing in the array of resources available today, using biblical themes to explore the different emotions and thoughts as we walked together towards the final service. While the practicalities of closure would need to be discussed, the focus would be more upon drawing out ideas of faithfulness, discipleship and hope.[12]

If closing churches continues to be part of the life of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, it is essential that we learn together what makes for 'a good death' for a church. This can only be done by engaging with the biblical narratives about resurrection and death, and with our tradition, which sees the possibility that death is the fulfilment of one portion of life and the opening onto another:

> I'll praise my Maker while I've breath;
> and when my voice is lost in death,
> praise shall employ my nobler powers;
> my days of praise shall ne'er be past,
> while life and thought and being last,
> or immortality endures.[13]

Appendix

A GOOD DEATH: FOUR SESSIONS FOR CHAPELS THAT HAVE DECIDED TO CLOSE

1. Sharing our stories – remembering the heritage of the chapel, of the community and of individuals.

- Exploring the heritage using the following prompts:
  - When and why people started attending the chapel.
  - How they and their families' stories were linked to the chapel, perhaps through key events such as births, marriages and deaths.
  - Key moments in the chapel's history.
  - How the chapel has been part of the community over the years.
- Using photos or mementos to create a display which represents the journey of faith of the chapel and its people, and how the chapel's story and the individuals' stories are woven together.

2. Thinking about the seasons of life – focusing our journey of faith and discipleship.

- Using Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 to explore the seasons of life.
- Looking at the resources of our hymns to speak about our journey with God.

3. Exploring emotions around death and dying, grief, and moving on from a chapel.[14]

- Anger – Psalm 13; Psalm 22; Jonah.
- Wilderness – the Israelites in the desert (Exodus); Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11); Psalm 22.
- Lament and sorrow – for example: Lamentations; Psalm 84; Psalms 42 and 43.
- Relief/fulfilment/acceptance – for example: Simeon's song (Luke 2:28–32); Psalm 131; 'lost parables' (eg Luke 15:1–10).
- Remembering – for example: Psalm 84.

- Reconciliation and forgiveness – for example: Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32); Jesus and Peter (John 21:15–19).
- Death and resurrection – for example: John 12; 1 Corinthians 15.

4. Planning the final service and related events together.

- Reflecting on the funeral service together and considering what might be echoed in the closing service.
- Allowing the people to shape the worship.
- Thinking about who to invite from the church and community to enable the chapel's story to have a good end.

Notes

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1.
2. John 11:17–44.
3. Henry Scott Holland (1847–1918), 'Death is nothing at all'.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:55.
5. Romans 8:38–39.
6. *The Methodist Worship Book*, London: Methodist Publishing House, 1999, p. 449.
7. Luke 24:13–35.
8. Luke 24:21a.
9. John 12:24–25.
10. Matthew 25:21.
11. Luke 2:28–32.
12. An outline of this course is included as an appendix.
13. Issac Watts (1674–1748), *Singing the Faith*, London: Methodist Publishing House, 2011, no 79.
14. The resource *Seasons of My Soul: Conversations in the Second Half of Life*, published by The Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England (London, 2014) could be usefully adapted for this.