



# **WHAT TO DO WITH AN AGEING CHURCH?**

Options and encouragements

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## Introduction: A pressing question

Today there is an absolutely vital question which very few want to address.

It is this: 'What should be done with a church as its members move into old age?' Every church, hopefully, has some elderly members. The unity of the Spirit desires to reach across age gaps to the glory of Christ. But what is the way forward when the majority, or perhaps all of a congregation, have reached retirement and beyond?

Ideally, as some members move (using an analogy from football) into 'extra time' in life, Psalm 90.10, there would be younger ones to take their places in supporting and running the church. But what can be done when that younger generation is missing?

### **No hope?**

It may be, of course, that the church has only itself to blame for being in such a position. The membership has been so concerned with its traditions and to keep things the same that younger Christians simply could not relate to the church or find a place of service there. The church has become in-grown with its first concern to please itself rather than to be sacrificial disciples. But having woken up to the mess into which the church has got itself, is there no way back?

The experience of other churches may be different. Perhaps they have done their best. They have tried to modernize, to reach out and to include others, but with little effect. The younger generation of the church has gone off to college or university and never returned. The bigger city churches attract students and have got those young people accustomed to the large church atmosphere and its ways such that the youngsters have felt they cannot return to the more demanding challenges of an older church which is likely to be diminishing in size. When young people have left student days behind and gone into a career they have relocated to a different town and automatically they look for a big church there. Smaller and older churches are out of fashion and teeter on the brink of closure. Is there no hope for such situations?

Across the country the question of what to do with an ageing congregation keeps numerous pastors awake at night. Maybe the church no longer has a pastor so an elder or deacon tears his hair out with worry as he can see himself in the not-too-distant future locking the building for the last time and a 'For Sale'

board being put up outside – in the eyes of the watching world, yet another proof that Christianity is a failure and that God is dead. Can we ever be happy with that?

## **Rebuilding**

And yet in Scripture we find many encouragements telling us that hopeless situations can be recovered.

The OT books of Ezra and Nehemiah, for example, are about rebuilding from ground zero. Though Jerusalem had been devastated and the people taken into captivity, the Lord was able to reverse the situation. The tables were turned on Babylon. The exiles returned. The prophets Zechariah and Haggai prompted the construction of a new temple. The walls of Jerusalem were remade despite much opposition.

Is there no hope for an elderly congregation? Surely with God there are ways forward. This booklet will suggest five strategies to consider. I doubt if it will solve all the problems. But just as in a game of football goals in extra time can make all the difference, surely it is possible for elderly churches to make a real impact for the Lord Jesus.

## A Biblical reminder

If you Google “productivity in older versus younger workers”, you will find that research shows that there is not much difference. According to a review by C. A. Viviani *et al* cited by the National Library of Medicine, 41% of findings show no difference, 31% show better productivity from younger workers and 28% show better productivity from older workers.

We should not write ourselves off as we get older. A startling example of this is the output of the film score composer John Williams. Born in 1932, some of his best music has been written during his 60s through to his 80s - things like the themes from *Schindler’s List*, *Lincoln*, *War Horse* and, of course, the *Harry Potter* movies.

The whole of Western society is oriented towards youth. The assumption is that after 60 we are pretty washed up and cannot expect to achieve much. But it seems that, although our bodies age, the evidence is that this secular approach is too superficial. Older people often have experience and wisdom that younger people don’t have. God has designed things such that our later years can actually be some of the best years of our lives. It is when it is possible to do our best work.

### **Old Testament saints**

And interestingly, the Bible appears to back that up. It is worth just thinking through the ages of those that we find the LORD using in Scripture.

Though mentioned in Eden, the promise of the gospel really begins to take off with Abraham. He is 75 when God comes to him in blessing and he leaves Haran for the promised land, Genesis 12.4. He is 86 when there is the debacle with Hagar, Genesis 16.16 – yes, old people can get things wrong. But he is 100 years old when the promised son Isaac is born, Genesis 21.5. Now we know that people’s lives were extended a little longer at this stage of Scripture history – but nevertheless Romans 4.19 speaks of Abraham’s body as being ‘as good as dead’ and similarly Sarah’s womb being dead. God used this elderly couple.

Jacob is 130 years old when he moves to Egypt, Genesis 47.9, yet he copes with the new adventure God is taking him on. Having misfired in his attempt to liberate Israel at the age of 40, Acts 7.30, Moses is 80 years old when God uses him to effect the exodus. Aaron, his brother and helper, is 83 years old when the

people escaped and were led to the promised land, Exodus 7.7.

Caleb's ambitions in the promised land begin to be fulfilled when he is 85, Joshua 14.10. Much of the crucial work of the prophet Samuel took place after his retirement speech in 1 Samuel 12. And it is when the new king, Rehoboam, ignores the advice of the older counsellors and takes that of the 'young Turks' who were his cronies, that things go wrong for God's people and the nation is divided.

We can't say that God never uses young people. That is not true. But it is also not true that old people are set aside by God. If we tell ourselves, or allow other people to tell us, that we are 'past it' once we reach 65 or so, then we are gravely mistaken.

### **Older people in the New Testament**

When we come into the NT we find that it begins with a faithful group of elderly saints. Zechariah and Elizabeth were 'well on in years' when the Lord begins to use them – to bring John the Baptist into the world, Luke 1.7,18.

It is another ancient couple of people, Simeon and Anna, who were key to keeping God's promises of his Messiah and his kingdom alive among the people of Jerusalem. Simeon is near death, Luke 2.29, and Anna was at least 84 if not far older, Luke 2.37.

The Lord Jesus was around the age of 30 when he began his ministry and his disciples were younger men too. But, converted later on the Damascus Road, the apostle Paul is probably the most energetic in serving Christ's kingdom, 1 Corinthians 15.10, and at the end of his life when Paul describes himself as 'an old man' Philemon v9, that he is still very active for Christ.

The apostle John was probably in his 80s or even 90s when he wrote the last book of our Bibles, Revelation.

So again, though we must be balanced, the NT is encouraging us not to write ourselves off when we get older.

### **Promises of power**

And what is particularly interesting is that two of the greatest promises concerning the power of God are given in the context of old age.

Abraham is 99 when, having promised him a child, God asks him, 'Is anything too hard for the LORD?' Genesis 18.14. And although it is addressed to the virgin Mary, actually the other great reference to the power of God directly concerns Elizabeth her older relative. Young Mary is told, 'Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God,' Luke 1.36, 37. The promise of God's power is not about age, it is about faith. Jesus said, 'Everything is possible for him who believes,' Mark 9.22.

Of course, the devil will tell us that we are past it. He will say that nothing can be done – especially by older folk. But we begin this booklet by reminding ourselves that God's word says something rather different, Isaiah 40.29-31.

### **Prayer is the key**

In the coming pages we will consider five strategies for a congregation of elderly people to move forward. However, it must be stressed that none of these approaches is a guarantee of success. These are only earthly means which God can use.

Let's be clear, though he is sovereign, the Lord does use means. We think, for example, of the strategy given to Joshua by the commander of the Lord's army for the people to march around Jericho, Joshua 6.2-5. Or again the tactics given to Gideon come to mind which included torches, jars and trumpets, as he put to flight the hosts of Midian, Judges 6.15,16. But, of course, no matter what the means, it is the Lord himself who wins the victories, Judges 7.2. That being the case, prayer and seeking God is crucial. No merely human strategy, certainly none of the five we propose here, can succeed on its own. It is not by might or by power but by the work of the Holy Spirit that victories are won, Zechariah 4.6. So whatever option we try in order to open up the future for the elderly church, we must pray. And pray hard. And God hears.

It is a simple fact of history that the wonderful revival which took place on the Isle of Lewis, off the West coast of Scotland, in the mid-twentieth century started with two women in their 80s who set themselves to pray because the young people of the island were no longer attending church.

## **Option 1: Throw money at it?**

Money does have a certain power. It can be used for good. Sometimes we need to 'throw money' at a problem.

This is what the apostle Paul writes to Timothy, 'Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant or to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age...' 1 Timothy 6.17-19.

Good deeds include building up God's churches. The future of any congregation, no matter of what age profile, can be helped by making funds available. And often older people now have far more money available than younger people.

### **Let's use our money**

Let us think about the 'Baby-boomers'. This is the post-war generation, born between 1946 and 1964 to which many of us in churches belong. We are aged between 58 and 76 at present and we make up 21.3% of the UK population (14.3 million).

Generally speaking, older people are the people with the money. I know that may not be the case for particular old people. Some sadly live in poverty. But on average older people are more well-off. Read these Government figures for example: 'The net household property wealth of those aged 60 to 62 is 17 times greater than those aged 30 to 32, according to analysis by the Office for National Statistics.' This is from April 2018. Seventeen times greater is quite a difference!

The first option to explore in thinking about the future of an ageing church is to look at what money there is and what could be done with it. This will call for sacrifice. It will call for radical discipleship and swimming against the tide of our materialistic world.

Talking about money is always a sensitive issue for people. But with care, leaders must raise this question with the church membership if they are to be serious about trying to secure the future of the congregation and of its witness in the local area. Are we going to let a church die because we were too concerned to hang on to our savings? And often churches themselves have money in the

church bank account. Now may be the time to spend it, rather than saving it for a rainy day. Now *is* the rainy day!

### **Workers and buildings**

If the church hasn't got a pastor, then no wonder it is failing. And, being very practical, if you want a young pastor with a family who will help the church reconnect with the general community then to offer a generous salary and accommodation is not only a wise way but a loving way of attracting such a man.

It may be that the church should support an evangelist as well as the pastor. Such a person could concentrate on making links with people in the local area. A busy pastor may not have time to run *Christianity Explored* courses at convenient times for enquirers. But an evangelist would.

If younger people are missing from a church, then another tack is to begin to address that by financing a full-time youth and families worker to reach out to that particular age range. Some research and some thinking about the church's catchment area and its surrounding population may lead you to appointing a different kind of worker. Wisdom is required. But making finance available can be the key to opening the door to the future. We are, indeed, to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the harvest field, Matthew 10.38, but it would be hypocritical to pray like that without being prepared to put our hands into our pockets.

Another aspect to think about is the church building. Perhaps young families have visited the ageing congregation and not returned simply because the facilities for their children are not very nice or missing. I think of one particular chapel which is just one large room. There is nowhere to take a crying baby if the child pipes up during the sermon, distracting everyone. Parents feel embarrassed. Could your building be improved in such a way that it was more accommodating to young families? It might cost some money – but it would make a difference.

### **A right attitude**

It will be a waste of money without prayer. If we simply 'throw money at it' in a spirit of impatience – just wanting to get the problem quickly fixed and out of our hair – then this approach is unlikely to succeed. We know that the kingdom of God cannot be built with worldly wealth, John 3.6. Rather our money ought to

be offered to God's work with reverence and repentance and with a heart concern for Christ's cause and to see people saved.

It also should be offered with a spirit of thankfulness. If we are of that older 'Baby boomer' generation, we should consider just how 'lucky' we have been compared with people of other periods. We have benefited from the day of our birth from the National Health Service. We have lived through a time of peace and prosperity. We are those who by-and-large have been able to buy and own our own houses. We went to university without having to take out student loans. We bought our houses and now they are worth 20 times what we paid for them. Such blessings which others have not known should not be taken lightly. We might well renew and upgrade our financial support of the church by way of saying 'thank you' to God.

### **Giving and blessing**

As older Christians come towards the end of their lives on earth, there may be a place for a one-off large financial gift to their church – especially if its future is in jeopardy. Many older folk have most of their capital tied up in their house and also they do have a concern to leave a legacy for their children. But that doesn't preclude a large gift to the church. How about basically leaving your children your house, keeping the rest of your savings to a minimum and giving a large gift to God's work? Certainly, many people gave a lot of their wealth for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, Ezra 2.69. And God's word promises blessing to those who give.

The OT promise is, 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse...says the LORD Almighty and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it,' Malachi 3.10.

The NT says simply, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive,' Acts 20.35.

So, the first option as we think about what to do with an elderly church is to get the people to look at their finances.

## **Option 2: Keep going and make changes?**

There is a difference between weather and climate. The weather is what happens each day. But the climate is the average of what happens over many years – usually meteorologists think in terms of 30 years or more.

It may just be that your church is going through a bad patch for whatever reason. Yes, the congregation is ageing, but it is not yet time to panic. It's just the weather, not the overall climate of things that is the trouble. Should we just keep going? Galatians 6.9.

None of us relish change. We like the things with which we are comfortable. So, there will always be a tendency just to keep going with things as they are and hope for the best. But on the other hand, there is an argument that says that things aren't going to get better by keeping doing the things that got us into this mess in the first place.

How are we going to decide if our problems are just the weather or the climate?  
How are we to make a balanced choice concerning the need to change?

### **Spiritual health check**

In assessing where a church is at, we have to start with the spiritual condition of the individuals who make up the core of the congregation. Outward forms may need changing or they may not, but it is the hearts of the people that matters most to God, 1 Samuel 16.7. How can we assess ourselves spiritually? Checking our appetite is usually a helpful place to start when it comes to physical health. Similarly, a good appetite for God and the things of God is a reliable sign of spiritual health. What is that like among the people of your church? Are they keen to hear the word of God? Do they love to sing the praises of God? Do they love to be with the people of God? The psalmist longs for God, even when times are difficult, Psalm 42.1. But if that thirst for God is missing, if there is a weariness with church, something deeper than trying a few new strategies will be needed to set the church to rights. Repentance will be the starting point, Mark 1.3, 15.

A congregation can have forgotten what it is meant to be about. A church can be thought of as having 3 dimensions – inward, outward and upward (IOU). In deciding what to do about the elderly church, we can use IOU as a diagnostic instrument.

I – inwardly: is there love in the church which can accommodate and be attractive to outsiders?

O – outwardly: is the church preaching and practising the love of God to the local area?

U – upwardly: is there heartfelt love for God rather than mere formality in the church services?

These questions must be addressed fairly and objectively. The leaders may need to think and pray long and hard in order to see things clearly. Maybe there is a place to invite a mature minister who is a friend and loves the church to look in from outside to give a balanced assessment of the health of the church and the state of its activities.

### **Breaking the mould**

Sometimes there has to be a recognition of the need for change. The gospel is, of course, unchanging, but there are legitimate and necessary adaptations concerning how it is to be presented and manifested. These are to vary according to circumstances.

We find this even in Acts. For example, when Paul preaches Christ to a majority Jewish audience in Pisidian Antioch, his theme is God's dealings with their nation rooted in the OT history with plenty of quotations of Scripture. But when he preaches the gospel to Gentiles in Lystra he argues from creation and providence. He doesn't directly mention the Bible. He is flexible in order to best serve his hearers. We remember Paul's famous statement of his adaptability that 'by all possible means I might save some,' 1 Corinthians 9.20-23.

Similar innovation is shown by the church in Antioch. Previously the gospel had been shared only with Jews. But scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution following Stephen's death, Christians found themselves in Gentile territory and began to speak to Greeks about the Lord Jesus, Acts 11.20. In a sense they had broken the mould. This was not simply a gimmick, but it was motivated by Christian love for the lost and rooted in the OT which foretold of the gathering in of the Gentiles.

Churches too must be willing to adapt to best serve, not ourselves, but the people we are trying to reach. It may be that the church is good at heart and relatively healthy spiritually, but we have simply got stuck in a rut and, yes, need to keep going but also make changes.

## Change equation

What those changes might need to be will depend on particular situations. The new approach must be thrashed out and prayed through by the pastor and leaders. The crucial issue is to make sure you bring the people with you. You must get the congregation on board.

How is that to be achieved? Here is an equation which you might find helpful as you contemplate making changes in the church.

- $EFFECTING\ CHANGE = f(V + L + D) > COST$

Let explain it. It tells us that effecting change is dependent on (in mathematical terms 'is a function of' hence  $f$ ) three things V, L, D. The letter V stands for vision for the future. The letter L stands for leadership. The letter D stands for discontent with the current situation.

- *First*, the vision for what we are aiming at in making the changes has got to be clearly focused and explained. Think of the exodus. V would be the hope of the Promised Land.
- *Second*, people have got to have confidence in their leaders. So, L is important. When people are asked to embrace change thoughts like the following go through their heads: 'It is all very well having a good idea, but can our leaders deliver this? Are they able and faithful men?' In exodus terms think of Moses and later Joshua.
- *Third*, there has got to be enough discontent, D, with the current state of affairs for people to realize that changes *must* be made. Are we content that churches keep closing and the name of the Lord Jesus loses credibility? If we love him, we feel we must act.

Together, the vision, the leadership and the discontent with the *status quo*, generates momentum for change. The last section of the equation tells us that for change to happen and be embraced, that momentum must be greater than the cost of change. All change costs something. It might be money; it might be simply a loss of what is familiar. But if we are truly concerned, our desire for change will be greater than what it might cost us. That's what a leadership must aim at.

### **Option 3: Concentrate on reaching older people?**

There is a proverbial saying that has a lot of wisdom: 'If life has given you lemons, then make lemonade.'

Lemons have a sharp and bitter taste. You might be bitterly disappointed that your church is in decline and only old people attend. But instead of being discouraged by that, we can decide to make the best of it. We can decide to focus on the challenge of reaching and helping older people.

And God can bring honey from the rock, Deuteronomy 23.13; Psalm 81.16. He can turn the bitter into sweet.

The fixation with young people and young families is understandable. Humanly speaking it is young people who secure the long-term future of a church. But old people are precious too. Each one is an immortal soul loved by God. And our older friends need Christ just as much as any teenager, Romans 3.23.

#### **Homogenous people groups**

A homogeneous people group is a collection of individuals who are similar to each other in a number of significant respects. For example, they might be in the same age range, same ethnic background, same socio-economic background and have similar values and experience.

The missiologist, Donald McGavran (1897-1990), saw this as the key to church growth. In a nutshell he said that to build a church, you need to decide on your target audience and gear everything to suit them to the exclusion of everything else. His theory is now largely and rightly discredited. But all the best heresies have some truth in them – that's why they take off. Where McGavran was right is that people do find it initially attractive to be with people like themselves. Where he was wrong is that not only is God's love for everyone, but that diversity is good, Romans 12.4-6, and without it a congregation becomes in-grown and enslaved to 'group-think'.

This homogeneous people group idea is still sadly used to try to build youth churches from which older people are excluded as their presence might give off the wrong signals to the 'cool' younger niche market the church is targeting. That is ugly and wrong.

But that is rather different from deciding that if we are mostly old people, perhaps we could concentrate on reaching out to older people, because they will feel more easily at home with us. We don't exclude younger people at all – if they join us, we are thrilled – but we are simply trying to capitalize on who we are and what we have got. This is an option for an older church. It may not secure a long-term future of a church, but it is making the best of what God has given us at this moment in time for his kingdom, Matthew 25.14-30.

### **The needs of older people**

The 'Baby Boomer' generation, which we have mentioned previously, are now the generation suffering the most loneliness in the UK, with men suffering slightly more than women. Recent research has shown that half a million older people go at least 5 or 6 days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone. Around 40% of those aged over 75 live alone. And loneliness is not good for people, Genesis 2.18. It is likely to increase someone's risk of death by 26%. It is worse for you than obesity.

To focus on reaching out to older people with the love of God may not be very 'hipster', but it is a work in which Christ rejoices. Jesus takes notice of poor widows, Luke 21.1-4. And when they have 'one foot in the grave', isn't that the very time people desperately need the gospel?

If a church chooses this option, here are some things to think about:

- Lunch club – eating together and having conversation with others, is what many older people miss. And here is an opportunity for a brief gospel talk or testimony.
- Disabled access – older people don't do heavy doors, and steps very well. Can the church make the building easier for them?
- Concentration spans – if older outsiders come to church, apart from aids to hearing, it might be helpful to make the sermons a little shorter and livelier.
- Home visits – with the older person's permission of course, could another person from the church visit them? This especially makes them feel wanted.
- Good listening – these older people have experience of life and to listen to their stories is to listen to the person they are. Listening acknowledges that they are human and special.

- Appropriate help – our Christian witness is not simply to be in words but in good deeds. Older people often appreciate sensitive help.

### **A church that has time**

Taking seriously the idea of reaching out to older people is no small task. It cannot be left to one or two people. It is likely that they would soon be overwhelmed – especially if those taking on the task are getting on in years themselves. This work requires a team and that means the whole church getting involved. Paul encourages the Philippians to contend ‘as one man’ for the gospel, Philippians 1.27. The church will need one another. Perhaps some can arrange transport. Others are good in the kitchen. While others have a friendly face and a patient ear to listen. And if you are a church of mostly retired people the great asset you have is time. You have time to give to a work which younger people may not have.

And pulling together in a work like this can help a church rediscover itself. The fellowship is deepened. Fellowship is no longer simply drinking tea together following a Sunday service. It is working together and depending on each other in the work. Suddenly a church may become ‘the body of Christ’ in a way it hasn’t experienced for years, with all the different members playing a part, 1 Corinthians 12.27.

Here then is a third option for the older church.

#### **Option 4: Seek help from other churches?**

The NT churches were often found helping one another.

They did this even at a distance, scattered as they were around the northern Mediterranean. Their fellowship was fostered by the apostles and was expressed in many ways. These included:

- Greetings shared between the churches, with individuals named, in the apostolic letters, Romans 16.1-16; 1 Corinthians 16.19, 20; Philippians 4.22.
- People circulating around the fellowships – it is clear that early Christians moved among the churches on the Lord's business, Acts 11.27; Romans 16.1,2; 1 Corinthians 16.12.
- Offering hospitality to Christians from other churches who were on their way through, Hebrews 13.2; 3 John v5-8.
- Organizing collections for churches to help other churches who were suffering and in need, Acts 11.29, 30; 1 Corinthians 16.1-4; 2 Corinthians 8.3.
- Churches sometimes sharing Christian workers, Colossians 4.12,13.
- Communicating news of the churches between the different congregations and praying for each other, Ephesians 6.18, 21, 22; 1 Peter 5.9.

When a local church is in need as its congregation ages, it seems that one option therefore would be to look to other gospel churches for help. We are not to be too proud to ask. No church is meant to be a vanity project. A church belongs to the Lord Jesus and exists for his glory. And a vital key to this approach is humility from those who are asking for help.

Partnership with another church or churches can be a very powerful route out of trouble. But we have to be realistic. There are good partners and bad partners and we need to be wise.

## **Bad partnerships**

Having emphasized the need for humility, there is still a need for discernment. Be careful who you ask to help you.

Sadly, many churches who could help, won't help. They are fixated on themselves and have little or no wider vision for Christ's kingdom. But even some of those who would be open to helping you, it may be better to avoid. Here is a list of 'helping' churches of which to beware. You can identify them from the spirit and attitude of their leaders.

*Know-it-all masters*: these will come in, but with an attitude to take over. They do not come with a servant heart or the 'gentle and lowly' spirit of Jesus, Matthew 11.29.

*Limited investors*: these know in their conscience they should help. But they are not up for being sacrificial. Help is limited to visiting preachers? They will just prop you up, not solve anything.

*Empire builders*: these are large groups of churches with their own 'brand'. To sign you up is another feather in their cap. They may expect you to pay them – for professional musicians etc.

*Asset strippers*: they are not interested in maintaining the precious fellowship among your church. They are just interested in your building as another 'campus' for their ministry.

*Publicity seekers*: they set lots of conditions. If you can't meet them, they advise you close. They won't take anything on unless it is more or less guaranteed to be a success they can publicize.

## **Good partners**

A good partnership, by contrast, will have the fragrance of a Christ-like spirit about it on both sides. Christ being Lord will be taken seriously and there will be a sense that this is a holy work.

This will express itself in a profound sense of privilege in being called to serve Christ in this way and respect for all involved.

As already noted there has to be great humility on the side of the inviting church. The whole situation requires the grace of God and 'God opposes the

proud but gives grace to the humble’, 1 Peter 5.5. You cannot expect to invite help but then dictate to those helping what they can and cannot do. The inviting church has got to be prepared for change. On the other hand, those coming in to help should have a servant heart, Philippians 2.3-11, and have a concern to listen sensitively to those they are trying to help. The approach of those coming in to help must be clearly set out so that everyone understands. Going into detail will be necessary so that there are no misunderstandings. Love is required. Compromises will be needed. In other words, it will depend greatly on how spiritually mature people are.

### **Truth and consultation**

There needs to be an agreement about what the church stands for. A church is meant to be the ‘pillar and foundation of the truth,’ 1 Timothy 3.15 – so we had better agree together what that truth is from Scripture. With this in mind, it is probably best to ask help from like-minded churches – not from those who may have a reputation for success and yet sit loose to the Bible.

There needs to be clarity from the beginning about how decisions will be made. How will plans be proposed? Is there a forum where different ideas and concerns can be heard? How will final decisions be implemented? Who will do what?

This cannot be rushed. Plenty of consultation, honesty and praying will be required. As time goes on the ‘them’ and ‘us’ (the originals and the newcomers) attitude needs to disappear. There must be a shared outlook that we are all in this together. We are all ‘us’. And we are all after the same goal – the glory of Christ in the re-establishment of a gospel church.

Often there is one leader who is the key to this whole situation. Pray for God to raise up such a person. He will be someone who is quite prepared to put in the hours and act as an intermediary where necessary and have a great heart for peace.<sup>1</sup>

This is then a fourth option for the future of an ageing congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> A good Bible passage for both helps and those being helped to bear in mind is James 3 – with its emphasis on both the use of the tongue, v1-12, and the qualities of the wisdom that comes from heaven, v13-18.

## **Option 5: Plan to use the resources released by closing?**

It is possible to close a church with a sense of dignity and achievement.

It is not always through lack of faith or disobedience that a church comes to an end – though of course that can be the case, Revelation 2.5. Populations move. What was once a thriving town may have been decimated by unemployment. Areas are redeveloped such that a church building is simply no longer in an appropriate place geographically.

The closure of a church does not have to be all gloom and doom. It is possible for those left to think positively about how best to use or redeploy the resources which might be released by selling off its assets.<sup>2</sup> We must look beyond ourselves. We are not to be parochial, but have a larger vision of the needs of God's kingdom nationally and internationally. Like Samson of old, a church might strike a mighty blow for Christ even in its death, Judges 16.30.

### **Large assets**

When a church closes it will often have assets that represent the faithful giving of present and past generations of church members. These assets can be used when a church closes for the benefit of Christ's cause elsewhere and it is possible for the remaining church members to have a say in what happens to the funds released.

The assets generally fall into three categories.

- *Church building*

A church building is normally held under a trust deed. This will often stipulate who the ultimate beneficiary of the church building is to be. Many independent churches have a holding trustee such as FIEC or the Association of Grace Baptist Churches or the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches etc. Holding trustees will arrange for the assets to be dealt with in accordance with the ultimate beneficiary clause in the trust deed. Often the church building (or the value when sold) goes to the wider association of which the church was a member or another nominated Christian body. However, it is possible for the closing church to indicate how it might like some or all of the assets to be used, although this will not be binding on the holding trustee or the ultimate

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<sup>2</sup> I am much indebted to my friend Adrian Creedy for much of this section.

beneficiary. If there is no ultimate beneficiary clause then the closing church is likely to be able to have a greater say in where the assets might go.

- *The Manse*

Many churches still own a manse – a house for a pastor and his family – even when they come to the point of having to close. This too is a large asset. Again though, normally this will be held under the terms of a trust deed and often with an ultimate beneficiary. But the same applies to this as to the church building itself.

- *Other assets*

Besides the church building and the manse, there are bound to be other assets. These are things like money in the church bank account, and physical things like pews, tables, chairs, PA system, Bibles, hymn books etc. There might be a church trust deed restricting the use such things but if not, they can be gifted to other churches or Christian enterprises.

### **Thinking clearly**

When a church has to close it can be overwhelming emotionally. But though such sadness is very understandable, we should not let it handicap us. We need to think sacrificially and clearly at this juncture. Though no doubt immensely upset by the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, people like Joseph of Arimathea, John 19.38, and the faithful Marys, Mark 16.1, knew that there was work to be done – the body of their master needed to be cared for.

So, with the Lord's help, we have to get a grip on ourselves and positively go about the business of accomplishing what needs to be done.

If the remaining leaders or church members have already cultivated links with other churches or organisations, this can be good. These might show us an avenue for service in closure. However, there may be others – missionary societies or Christian organisations who seek to help the persecuted church for example – that could benefit mightily from being given a substantial gift. This might need to be discussed and prayed through together. Often it is an enormous encouragement to another church or Christian organisation to receive a prayerfully given cash gift with no strings attached for the furtherance of their work.

## **Giving with joy**

A church does not have to close with a whimper. It can make a difference. There may even be an argument for holding a final meeting together celebrating the past and rejoicing in the help the church has been able to offer to others as it closes.

- It is no mean feat to be able to provide perhaps enough funds to keep a missionary family on the field for the next 10 years.
- It is a wonderful thing to team up with a new church in another part of the country where God is blessing and help them buy a building for the work.
- It is great to be able to think that in closing the church has provided for perhaps the future of a number of Christian families elsewhere in the world whose fathers are in prison for their faith.

The possibilities are innumerable. So, approaching shutting down with good stewardship it is possible for a closing church to know that its assets will continue to give benefit to the kingdom of God possibly for many years to come. It is a great achievement. In such a way we can comfort ourselves that the devil does not have the final victory and that Christ will be pleased with what has been done, Matthew 25.21, 23.

## Conclusion

We have explored five options concerning what to do with an ageing congregation. There really are ways forward. Corners can be turned. The problems are not insoluble and can be overcome. We believe in a living God, 1 Samuel 17.26.

However, it has to be said that it is imperative that we do not prevaricate. It is possible to let some options slip away simply because we have not been prepared to grasp the nettle sooner. As we have said before, we do not like change and the thought of the upheaval that this needed change may bring can lead us to keep putting things off. But delay can lead to disaster, 1 Kings 13.16, 17, 21, 24. It was the foolish virgins in Jesus' parable who found that once the bridegroom arrived, they were too late to enter the wedding feast, Matthew 25.10-12. We must be careful not to miss our moment.

The willingness of a church to acknowledge its difficulties and with prayer to address the situation is imperative.