



Closing down a church activity

TN34 Training Notes series: Planning

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Many churches hold to the following principle:

You succeed when you start something new; you fail when you close it down.

Such thinking is not only flawed, it is thoroughly dangerous. It indicates a belief that spiritual health is measured by church programmes. Hence the lie that to cut back on anything must be wrong.

These notes are written to encourage you to have an attitude that is always prepared to close down activities, services, committees and groups once they can no longer be regarded as priorities. De-clutter your church programme, and focus on fewer things so that you can do them well.

To continue something that has fulfilled its purpose, become inappropriate, lost its way or failed in itself is highly damaging. It takes you away from where your energies and resources need to be invested. Change is required – and sometimes the best change will in fact be closure.

Put like that, it all makes sense. But for someone who is the provider or customer of the activity under question, it can look very different. They may lose identity, purpose, comfort, stability. Emotions run high. Christians hate hurting others, so you fudge the issue and hurt even more people in your fear of action.

I rejoice when I see a church stopping something for good reason. I wish more of us would have the courage to do this. To help you, here are some tips: first general principles to apply in your church, secondly practical ideas when it's time for action.

I use the following examples as illustrations:

- the closing down of a Sunday evening service (when numbers are small with most having been in the morning);
- the pause in the life of an outreach committee (which has achieved its aims to date).

Think straight!

Here are eight broad principles to help your church be ready for closures when the need arises.

1 **Know why**

Have a crisp, known and updated purpose for everything you do. Look to the future ("so that we can...") rather than the past ("because we saw this need ..."). Justify your activity list! Ask yourselves: 'if we were starting our church from scratch, why would we run this activity? We certainly want to gather together on Sunday, but why morning *and* evening?'

2 **Check it up**

Review all activities at reasonable intervals to see if they are matching up to their purpose. Churches often start something for a good reason, but then it becomes part of the culture. Perhaps the outreach group has acted as a catalyst for all kinds of good things, but has now slipped back into a talk-shop.

3 **Define the shelf life**

Have a philosophy of limited shelf-life for everything you do. Where possible, cite a self-destruct date or a review time *when the case will have to be proved for continuation, not for closure*. This creates a climate of adaptability, which is quite foreign to most churches. You need to distinguish between what should never change (eg. your core beliefs about mission) and what can change (your means of achieving your mission).

4 **Accept what has changed**

Monitor changes to your environment and be ready to adapt as necessary. Your evening service may have been a focus for your young people's work. But why continue if there has been a shift and there are now few teens in your congregation?

5 **Value people**

Value people above activities. Be aware of people's availability as well as their gifts. Refuse to stretch your people-resources to the point where you make demands on them that affect families, health, and stress levels. Above all, value their work for Christ in the world as much as their work in the church. Minimise time spent in church business meetings!

6 **Beware ownership**

Watch out for when people start to claim one activity as their own territory for they will then fiercely defend it against any hint of closure. If the focus of their faith has moved from Jesus Christ to this one outworking of that faith, they will lose everything if it goes.

7 **Dare to be different**

Accept that God's will for your church is not the same as what he wants for other churches. The fact that every other church in town has an evening service may be an excellent reason for stopping yours. Anyway, who says they are doing the right thing?

8 **Start one, stop one**

Whenever you start something new, make it your aim to try to close something else down so that resources are not overstretched. If you have priorities for today, you also need to have what some describe as 'posteriorities', activities that you positively put at the bottom of the pile.

Act straight!

When it comes to the decision to cut off the life support system from your activity, service, committee or group, some will want to fudge things to avoid hurt and unpopularity. Be resolute! Dare to follow these guidelines, and pain will be minimised and the benefits appreciated.

But before you decide anything:

- Put yourself in the shoes of those most affected by the closure and try to understand it from their perspective.
 - Learn some of the basics of how to manage change successfully (not covered in these notes).
 - Brush up on your skills in helping the bereaved, since any closure is a bereavement for some.
 - Ensure that prayer for wisdom, and for those affected, is at the heart of all you do.
- 1 Make sure the decision is taken (and seen to be taken) by the appropriate leadership group, not an individual leader, and is, if possible, unanimous. Five for, three against, and four abstentions is no licence to proceed.
 - 2 Explain *why* you are closing something down. "We always said the outreach committee would close at this date ..." "We are releasing them to do practical outreach this year, rather than just talk about it."
 - 3 Point to the advantages of the closure: be positive and future-directed. "Stopping the evening service will release hours of time currently spent in preparation. We can then make much more of the morning service."
 - 4 If the activity has failed, be honest and say so (but don't use this as an excuse to point the blame away to others). For some reason, many Christians seem to be unable to admit 'We got it wrong'.
 - 5 Identify who will be hurt by the closure: those who currently run the activity in some way, those who make use of it. Make sure they feel properly consulted. Take time with them, and help them plan their own future without the activity. What are their reasons for hurt: loss of tradition, comfort, identity, or what? What can you do to help them over the next few months?
 - 6 Agree to review the situation after a reasonable time, such as six months or a year. Check out what has been gained, and lost.

- 7 When you have gathered the information and prayed, don't prevaricate. Grasp the nettle. Go for it!

Finally

One bold idea to consider: close *everything* down for three months (every committee, every mid-week group) and see what you have missed.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/training/tn34.pdf. They are based (with permission) on an article the author first wrote for CPAS's Church Leadership magazine. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his working as a consultant regarding your church's activity programme, or of his running an event on change management for you.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN34 under Planning.

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