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LIVING WILLS FOR CONGREGATIONS:  
A NEW APPROACH TO CHURCH  
LIFE TRANSITIONS

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BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Market Street Church experienced several decades of declining membership and structural decay to the church facility prior to adopting a simple Living Will, written by lay leaders, which guided its journey to closure. The intent of this study is to document Market Street Church's experience with the congregational Living Will as a means of presenting an intentional approach to significant church life transitions such as closure.

This study examines the current literature regarding compassionate care for the dying and those sources that regard the ebb and flow of congregational lifecycles. It finds that there is a lack of material that offers a helpful link between those two bodies of writing, thus addressing compassionate care for dying congregations. The documented journey of Market Street Church is offered as such a link.

The distinctive context of Interim Ministry is also examined and found to be significant for the introduction of a congregational Living Will. This single-case history is offered to the ecclesiastical community as a reference tool for congregations approaching significant life transitions in all stages of organizational life but particularly for those facing similar situations of decline and closure.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Thesis Statement:**

This study is written as a single-case history about the particular journey toward church closure undertaken by a century-old congregation by means of documenting my memories (as pastor) and the gathered memories of congregants. This study specifically presents an Intentional Interim Ministry period during which a Living Will approach to congregational closure was utilized, and also proposes that a congregational Living Will might become a helpful instrument in facing significant church life transitions other than those that deal with chronic decline and closure. The intent is that by documenting the journey of one congregation that benefited from this Living Will approach it might inform other congregations' approach to decision-making and considerations about their futures.

### **Methodological Approach:**

This study will dialogue with the current literature that deals with (a) church decline and closure as events to be avoided or threats to be overcome, and (b) engaged, pastoral care for the dying as strictly an individual, biological and spiritual journey. In both of these cases the existing resources fail to explore the possibility of a bridge between the experience of congregational decline and closure and the individual, biological and spiritual journey into dying and death. This study will demonstrate that the spiritual journey of facing death/closure with intentionality and planning can be embraced as a natural, productive part of a congregation's lifecycle and can similarly be guided by a Living Will document, thus creating a bridge between two existing bodies of work.

As a participant observer in the life of the Market Street congregation, I will document my own memories and insights, applying descriptive analysis as fairly as I can. My decision to lead a declining congregation through an intentional process toward church closure and the experience of pastoring those who shared that journey will be told primarily from my own perspective. The many and varied impacts upon the congregation that came with writing, living with, and eventually closing/dying by the terms of the Living Will shall be recounted as I experienced and observed them.

To expand and deepen my own narrative, personal interviews with five congregants who were actively involved in church leadership during the Living Will period have been documented independently by means of personal interviews. These interviews probed not only the recollections of the congregants, but also invited their assessment of the Living Will process itself and its validity for other congregations facing similar questions about church closure. Those collected judgments and insights will be integrated into a separate chapter and will provide valuable hindsight analysis from those lay leaders' perspectives.

“Overall, the single-case design is eminently justifiable under certain conditions—when the case represents (a) a critical test of existing theory, (b) a rare or unique circumstance, or (c) a representative or typical case, or when the case serves a (d) revelatory or (e) longitudinal purpose” (Yin 45-46).

As a single-case history, the study of Market Street Church's experience with the Living Will is an example of what Yin calls a "rare or unique circumstance." To the extent that this author is able, that case history will be documented descriptively with the benefit of hindsight and will not impart excessive bias. The majority of the study, however, can only be told in the first person. I will not attempt to universalize what was a personal and distinctive journey for me. Credibility and verification of the overall Market Street experience as presented through my recollections and those of the interviewees is supported by the general agreement with reference to commonly sited events. Variances within the particulars of perspective and memory are documented as they were presented and provide considerably more breadth and richness to the study than contradiction. The public documents of the Market Street Church's various committees and Council were also consulted to verify the chronology of events and provide independent documentation.

#### Defining the Terms:

A confluence of terms will surround the Living Will process most of which were used descriptively, but not definitively, while the journey was taking place. Throughout the years leading up to Market Street Church's experience with the Living Will and during its journey toward closure the terminology of death and dying was commonly and freely employed to refer to church closure. It was from that perspective that the concept of a Living Will emerged. Indeed the use of a guiding document which was from its inception identified as a "Living Will" (an instrument most popularly understood in relation to individual, biological death) reinforced the metaphor of the congregation as a

single, mortal organism with measurable “life signs” that we chose to call “markers.” We did not at that time evaluate our language and the applicability of our metaphors. There was a general understanding of what those terms meant that went unchallenged and an acceptance of the metaphor that went without scrutiny.

As a result of this study and the hindsight reflections that have been given to the potential applicability of the Living Will approach to church closure, the journey of Market Street Church has been examined more closely. What are the consequences of utilizing the language of death and dying for a congregation? This study provided the opportunity to view our experience through several different theological lenses for the purpose of finding clear and purposeful language to communicate our journey. The theological framework that prevailed most dominantly upon this study was constructed around the use of the terms death and (possible) resurrection. It seemed almost too obvious. Market Street Church closed (death) and a remnant portion of its members moved on to form a new church start (resurrection). Even those who did not join the new church start but did move on to active participation in another congregation might be seen as experiencing a personal resurrection in their faith journeys. But the death and resurrection framework is problematic.

Questions remain as to what exactly “died” when Market Street Church closed. In truth no human life was lost at all in the biological sense to which the term death is most commonly applied. Did the organizational structure die? Well, perhaps, but even there a nuance must be applied because the congregation was not legally terminated. The new

church start that emerged with thoroughly distinctive characteristics, but it retained the Market Street incorporated status and legal identifiers, including its name. Did the history of Market Street Church die? Did the community of faith die? The answers to all these questions seemed to require very particular nuance and qualification in order to be applied. Therein is the difficulty. Since when is death, “somewhat”? Why was it so difficult to find the one clear and absolute aspect of the congregation that completely ceased to exist? While the word “death” was a highly functional term to those of us who used it at the time, it just does not stand up to scrutiny outside of its highly abstract and metaphorical application.

The term resurrection was perhaps even more problematic. Biblical references to resurrection combined with popular notions of “being reunited with loved ones in the sky” did not support the wholesale transformation and re-invention of identity that the Market Street remnant intentionally and consciously undertook when creating their new church start. Nor was it experienced by those who disbursed to join other communities of faith. What kind of resurrection was it? The term has many differing popular renderings and scholarly assessments. Even the biblical text does not offer a clear, definitive measure of the term against which we can qualify the new church start experience. If it was a resurrection of sorts, what exactly was resurrected? Was it the individual congregants or the sense of community or the legal entity? And what happened to the approximately one half of the congregation that chose to find their church homes elsewhere or nowhere? Are they “un-resurrected” simply by virtue of where and how they pursued their faith journeys? Did they experience a degree of individualized



resurrection, or some other form of new life that would fit the description, or shall we just count them out?

In the end the death/resurrection metaphor and theological interpretive framework simply failed to support the experience being recounted in this study. Despite the frequency and popularity of *death language* within the Market Street congregation during the Living Will period, this study will demonstrate that the guiding metaphor was not death, per se, but rather a journey through the Valley of the Shadow. The emphasis here shifts from event to process.

Perhaps it is only with hindsight that we can see how powerfully liberating the Living Will document was in the Market Street Church experience. The congregation was still in an unremitting period of decline that the individual congregants were fearful and saddened to endure, but there was never any sense that the members themselves would not survive the church's closure. The members of Market Street Church would wake on the morning after the church's closure and carry with them the relationships, the memories and traditions of that congregation. In fact it would require a few weeks of financial transactions and legal document-signing before even the church property could be said to have "died." The faith and spiritual journey of the Market Street congregation, both individually and collectively, moved into the darkness of the Valley of the Shadow and also emerged from it. Not everything that entered the Valley of the Shadow emerged intact, and certainly not unaltered, but the journey through the Valley was at the heart of the experience.

Therefore the concluding analysis of Market Street Church's experience brought forth by this study will accentuate the themes of journey that were present throughout but not always consciously and overtly claimed by those who lived it. The theological/spiritual framework therefore is that of journey and process, and the theoretical framework is that of systems and relationships. This study will not, however, remove the death language from the telling of Market Street Church's story. It was the language we spoke at the time, and it will endure within this document as it surely does in the minds and memories of those who lived through it.

#### Professional Significance:

This study provides an uncommon resource for pastors, congregational lay leaders, and Conference/District judicatory leaders who wish learn about one option for intentional, positive, journey-oriented church closure. It conveys the experience of one congregation's ability to assess which of its needs and goals would determine its sustainability, and the ensuing journey it took through the Valley of the Shadow: closing the church building, selling the property, disbursing the community of faith, and walking freely into whatever lie ahead.

This study will be most directly helpful to churches that operate within a structure of congregational polity, and may be generally informative to churches with other polities as well. Irrespective of the particulars of decision-making and procedures relative to membership status, ownership of property, and congregational rites of closure, this study

offers more than a single example of one church's movement toward closure. It invites conversation about how congregations die/close and what we in leadership might do to make better fruit of that experience. It encourages other congregations in states of chronic decline to deal creatively and positively with the journey that lies ahead without denial. Perhaps it will also invite congregations to consider their needs and goals relative to sustainability before dire conditions set in.

Contrary to the ample supply of resources that seek to "turn dying churches around," this study explores a means of leading a congregation through the dark days of decline and closure in a pastorally sensitive, intentional and ultimately future-facing way. It also documents some of the positive congregational changes that occurred as the journey toward closure became clearly identified, embraced and communally undertaken.

Additionally, this study intentionally raises the possibility of a Living Will approach that is both journey-oriented and systemically-focused being helpful in other periods of significant church transitions. This point is certainly secondary to the documented application given in the Market Street case study, but is nonetheless a significant offering of the Living Will concept.

## **PART 1 – LIVING WILLS AND LIFECYCLES**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Entering the Valley of the Shadow: Hospice Care and Advanced Directives**

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil,  
for you are with me... (New American Standard, Psalm 23:4)*

Religions can help us find answers to our questions about life, death, and the mystery of whatever lies beyond. Most human beings arrive at the conviction that a single physical life on planet earth is not the full sum of our species' existence. For many this certainty in "something else" provides the safety and secure footing upon which to construct attitudes about personal mortality. One's chosen religion offers the sought-for comfort. It validates the rites and rituals, and defines the realities that will follow death's arrival.

For most monotheists, with a personalized and relational understanding of God, those religious rites and rituals often convey the communal aspects of faith. Christian congregants expect a degree of direct and individualized pastoral care when death becomes immanent. The families of the dying turn to religious representatives to confirm long-held beliefs and to give voice and presence to the traditions that offer comfort during times of loss and grief. The role of the clergy person, whether pastor or chaplain, is very often central to the wellbeing of family members whose suffering is as much a pastoral concern as is the spiritual nature of the dying person's journey. Perhaps more

than anything else, the clergy person's gift to the family is that of bringing a spiritual *presence* that none other could or would choose to offer. Mysteries tend to make us nervous.

Medical experts on the other hand provide different insight and offer different kinds of comfort. "Medicine focuses on life, on saving life and on prolonging life.... Hospice focuses on the path that leads to death, and eases the person into that transition" (Anderson 16). As medicine has evolved to offer more and various means of extending life, the complexity of end-of-life issues has risen dramatically. There is a diminishing level of clarity regarding what constitutes a "terminal" illness and to what lengths technology should be applied to sustain life, and at what point hospice or palliative care is proper. The impulse to "leave it all in God's hands" is simply not as simple as it once seemed to be.

For many individuals and families a degree of comfort and clarity is achieved through the presence of a living will, or advance directive document. Increasingly this document becomes part of people's lives in their middle age rather than being introduced as part of the dying process itself. Families may even sit together and discuss the document along with its implications for limiting the scope of potential outcomes. It is helpful for pastors to also be informed about congregants' end-of-life wishes and whether or not those desires have been made explicit through a living will document.

With the increasing commonality of these medical advance directives the conversation about death and associated end-of-life issues has been given a platform in many families and congregational settings. Financial considerations can be discussed along with which medical options to be avoided or implemented. Pastors might also be welcomed into the conversation at some point as the family considers various funeral and memorial service elements are desired. Often there are standardized forms that clergy can introduce to families at such times to gather information about preferred scripture readings, favorite hymns, etc.

All of this has helped to ease the shrouded reality of death out of its closet and into the light of honest conversation. By sharing the burden of preparing for death in advance of its immanent arrival, people can ease the sometimes guilt-ridden struggle that loved ones face when left with these decisions uninformed of the dying person's wishes. Thus the living will has found its place in legal and medical circles, in families and congregations, and in the lives of individuals as a reasonable instrument of preparation for the certain outcome that faces all beings that inhabit this earth. The power of death is somewhat diminished in that its name has been spoken. Its arrival has been considered with forethought. And the sting of grief will be decreased at least as far as knowing that the deceased person's preferences and intents have been respected during the dying process.

In 2005 the all too public and politicized case of Terri Schiavo, a young Florida woman existing in a chronic vegetative state, has helped many Americans and people

around the world re-examine their own end-of-life intentions and the legal documents that should provide for those intentions being carried out.

While some politicians foolishly sought to capitalize on the situation by publicly denying Ms. Schiavo's expressed wishes and the will of her husband, it was the empathy and common sense of public opinion that eventually held sway. What the politicians did not expect was that even many of the more conservative, religious and "pro-life" constituents valued an individual's right to choose the terms under which they will die. In the end it was a testimony to the respect we all wish to be given in our final days. None of us ever want to become like Terri Schiavo.

General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ issued the following statement about the importance of the Schiavo case and the lesson it held for pastors, congregants and families:

"The lesson we may want to take from this is the need for our pastors and congregations to encourage open discussion about end of life issues, and urge members—regardless of age—to make their wishes known, not merely in private conversation, but in living wills and durable powers of attorney that are shared forthrightly with all of one's closest relatives" (online article).

Later in the statement, Thomas told of his own family's experience with a family member who entered an irreversible vegetative state. He said, "My brother, sister, mother and I did not have to debate his care among ourselves. My parents had been very clear about

their end of life care decisions, and had shared them in legally binding ways with their doctor.”

Thomas’ counsel to all those within his denomination and beyond was that, “While politicians, judges and clergy are arguing the legal and moral nuances of the case, it’s important for the rest of us to get our own affairs in order.”

The sad case of Terri Schiavo may well have done more to bring the populace together on the issue of limiting the extent to which medical technology should be applied to sustain life than any formal policy statement by a church or state. When we saw the images of Ms. Schiavo on the television the one thing that most people knew was that they did not want to end up that way. Lingering to the last degree of sustainability had been given a face. Intuitively most people knew that it just was not the best way to die.

The growing acceptance and prevalence of both specialized hospice care and living wills among medical and religious practitioners reveals a level of acceptance with an individual’s right to contribute to end-of-life decision-making even when those decisions rule out possible life extending measures. The same is not quite so with regard to organizations such as the church.



## Chapter 2

### **Saving congregations from closure: Organizational Lifecycles**

*There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)*

How do we assess the lifespan of a church? What terms do we choose to measure a congregation? Is your church growing? Is it healthy, or dying? Is your church friendly or vibrant? While other organizations tend to use more financial and business-related terms to describe themselves, the language most churchgoers choose to describe their congregation tends to be more personal and even biological in nature.

We refer to churches and congregational communities as being a “body” that might be aging, or thriving. From the apostle Paul to twenty-first century Christians around the globe, the metaphor of body has had great significance in the way we understand our communities of faith and our relationship to the one we call, Christ. We talk about the “health” of our congregation. We say that churches are “born” and admit that sometimes some of them “die.” But even while we thoroughly personify that organizational entity we call church, we tend to treat its dying as an aberration.

A plethora of church resource material has been produced to address the topic of revitalization and church renewal. There are books that accentuate revival through

dynamic new leadership, others that promote the general marketing of niche ministry efforts and others that find miracle ministry cures through everything from small groups to mass revival meetings. The common theme is that if your congregation is not thriving at the moment there are definite steps that can be taken to rectify the situation.

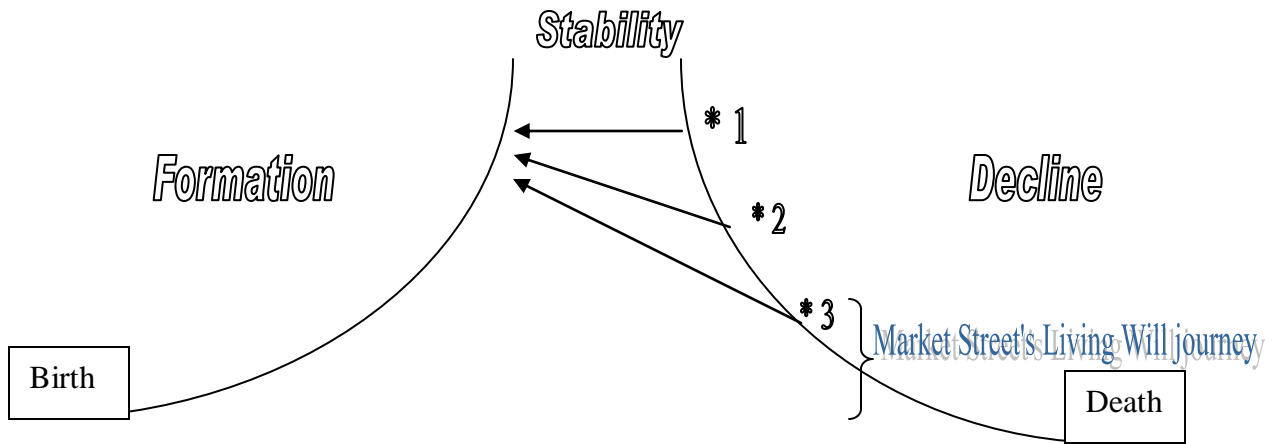
In I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!, Reverend Paul Nixon opens his manual on congregational transformation by claiming, “Thousands of future pastors currently training in university divinity schools will soon graduate full of zest for ministry, only to find themselves deployed to do deathbed vigil somewhere—tending to a rapidly aging congregation that has little energy to do what’s necessary to thrive” (9). Despite this ominous prognosis Nixon devotes his efforts not to penning helpful approaches to pastoral care that those thousands of ministers might employ in their dying congregations’ final months and years, but rather to insisting that all the necessary steps for church revitalization are right there for the taking. Throughout Nixon’s many examples of congregational struggle, the consistent approach he takes is to apply willpower. His optimistic message about the power of desire and commitment to lead to church growth is encouraging, but even Nixon admits that for many congregations it simply will not happen.

The theme of overcoming congregational decline and staving off closure might be inspirational and certainly the resources for how pastors and church leaders can find the appropriate antidotes for any congregation’s struggle are abundant, but what about those congregations that will indeed close? Have they simply failed? Did they merely lack the

willpower or creativity to serve their communities and restore their ministry's vitality? And even if their closures are due to personal weaknesses in the pastors and parishioners who attend them, are there no creative ways to minister to those churches in which the last significant period of congregational transition will lead them to permanently locking the doors?

In her excellent book, Can Our Church Live?, Alice Mann presents a diagram of the congregational lifecycle that has been adapted and reproduced by many other church-renewal authors (Mann 9). In her diagram a basic bell-shaped curve indicates the life of a congregation with birth on the left baseline and death on the right. The incline of the curve indicates formation, the top arch of the curve represents stability and the descending line opposite formation is called decline.

At even intervals along the declining slope of the graph Mann indicates opportunities for congregational renewal, revitalization and redevelopment which draw the church back over to the formation side of the curve. The farther down the decline slope the more difficult it is to restore a congregation to its formative up-slope.



*(Adapted representation of the Mann congregational lifecycle graph)*

Mann’s work is an excellent resource for maintaining growth oriented congregations and has been instrumental in the arguments of countless others authors. The area of the bell-shaped curve (and hence, of a congregation’s lifecycle in general) that is given minimal attention and even less detailed input is the area farthest down on the declining slope, between redevelopment and death.

While Mann and others do acknowledge that some congregations do “die.” There is very little creative energy given to the discussion of pastoral approaches that might yield a fruitful and meaningful end-of-life experience for those congregations. For many authors congregational “death” is not a reference to church closure at all but rather a comprehensive and daring course correction. It describes a complete ministerial transition from the habits and patterns developed in the past to new acts of ministry which, in effect, yields yet another form of renewal or revitalization.

For Mike Regele, in Death of the Church, “The call of the Gospel is a call to die in order to beat death.” But for the institutional church that he views as being in crisis, he states, “[W]e can die because of our hidebound resistance to change, or we can die in order to live” (19). Regele is convinced that something called “death” is certain to occur in (or *to*) the church. His research is full of persuasive statistics and charts that demonstrate a generalized decline of many factors within the Church at large and his purpose is to challenge churches to overcome them. He does not ask, however, what pastors might do to minister to those congregations whose declining factors will not or cannot be turned around.

So while the notion of facing what Mann calls “a holy death” (8) that carries the intentionality and forethought of an advance directive might be commonplace in our lives as individuals, we still prefer to think that our congregations should go on and on in a loop of growth, stability and decline that always looks to be renewed and restored to growth again. To Mann’s credit she does pose the following consideration for those congregations who are not able to escape chronic decline and closure. “The hospice movement has helped many individuals to make their last months both dignified and emotionally rich, but this cannot happen if the person keeps waiting for a cure. When a congregation faces its impending death sooner, while there are still enough members around for a wonderful “funeral” event, the concluding days of that faith community can be spiritually powerful” (8). Part 2 of this study offers the detailed story of one congregation that lived the journey to which Mann points.

## Chapter 3

### Utilizing the Living Will approach in congregational settings

Although it is not common to actively seek out death as an individual or closure as a congregation, it might be helpful to have a plan in place when one knows that such events are likely. For individual humans the knowledge of personal mortality and the tenuous nature of life have opened the door for many of us to prepare medical advance directives while we still seem relatively young and healthy. For a congregation, however, the possibility of revival and renewed lifecycle can lull congregants into a blindness that cannot envision the possibilities of closure even when they loom large on the horizon.

“It’s one thing to avoid talking about living wills, death or funerals while we are playing bridge or bowling, but it’s quite another to continue to avoid such subjects when an ill relative or close friend is growing visibly weaker with each visit” (Byock, 2004, 15).

There are two points to be made here. First, when congregations are in a state of chronic decline, it is reasonable that a Living Will instrument can yield some clarity about the trajectory and timeline of the congregation’s future. The second point, however, is that a Living Will can serve congregations as an instrument of purpose and intent without signaling immanent closure just as they do in the lives of individual people who draft their Living Wills while in the prime of their lives.

One plausible scenario that would apply to this second point will be introduced at the end of the Market Street case study. It seems reasonable that if a congregational Living Will can guide and clarify the journey through the period of church transition that has been brought about by chronic decline, it might also be useful in clarifying a congregation's steps when experiencing a major transition brought about by growth.

In Discerning Your Congregation's Future, Roy Oswald and Robert Friedrich discuss the characteristics of four size-based categories of churches (28-30). Each category has its own distinctive structure and mode of operation that enable it to thrive and potentially grow into the next category. Some congregations, of course, will also experience these categories in decreasing order. In a section entitled "Congregations that are changing in size" Oswald and Friedrich state, "One of the most devastating or invigorating things that happens in any size congregation is movement from one size to another" (30). They go on to offer some advice. "If your congregation is in transition between sizes of congregations, two things increase: [a] the need for strategic planning to manage the changes occurring [and b] the need to be aware during the planning process of the heavy role change is playing in your congregation's life" (31). Perhaps a congregational Living Will is a just the model that could effectively be applied to these transitional church life scenarios. Future case studies might prove or disprove this point.

The emphasis of this study, however, will be upon the applicability of the Living Will instrument in the lives of congregations experiencing chronic decline. In the case history which follows (see Part 2), the Living Will was adopted by the congregation

nearly five years before their eventual closure. Their state of chronic decline, however, was the key, undisputed factor in its implementation. Therefore it is the condition of chronic decline more than that of perceived imminent closure that calls for the consideration of a congregational Living Will.

In his book, The Four Things, Ira Byock discusses the profound value of dealing honestly with one's condition in life. He invites people to come forthrightly to terms with their past and present relationships in order to move freely into their best possible future. "Whenever we are able to open up and become vulnerable and honest with ourselves, we allow the opportunity for profound transformation" (Byock 2004, 26).

In congregational life there is an important period of time when the opportunity for honest self-assessment meets preparation for the future. For many congregations we call this time, Interim Ministry. Since 1975 the specific ministerial function of an Intentional Interim Minister has evolved into a reasonably uniform vocational path across several denominational lines.

The foundational understandings of the role of an Interim Minister were forged during a conference held in 1975, led largely by Loren B. Mead and the Alban Institute, and participated in by representatives from at least a half dozen denominations (Mead 1976). Since then the Interim Ministry Network has emerged as the leading coalescing body for Interim Ministry training, information and networking. Along the way the role of Interim Minister has grown from that of "place holding" while a congregation is



between permanent pastors, to that of specialized ministry gifted in the dynamics of transitional leadership.

Over the years the Five Developmental Tasks of Interim Ministry have been recognized and implemented widely. They are (1) addressing congregational history and habits, (2) identifying core congregational identity and vision, (3) empowering lay participation and leadership in the life of the congregation's ministry, (4) strengthening the ties to the wider church bodies, both regional and denominational, and (5) preparing the congregation to embrace newness and change. Various denominations and local judicatories phrase these Five Developmental Tasks differently, but the basic five principles have remained a part of an Interim Minister's role for over three decades.

Certainly not every church that is between permanent pastors is also in need of significant transitional changes of mission and ministry, or is dealing with painful, broken relationships that call for the specialized care of an Intentional Interim Minister. But for many churches whose histories are troubled or whose futures are uncertain, the transitional time of Interim Ministry could be their best opportunity for significant growth and healing.

By its very nature Interim Ministry is involved with the work of congregational grief. Interim Pastors arrive when a permanent pastor has departed. Regardless of the circumstances under which that departure has occurred, the congregation will have to deal with the loss of their pastor. Interim Ministers encounter all the classic stages of

grief in their work with congregants, all the while preparing the congregation for their own departure. From the very beginning, an Interim Minister's relationship with the congregation must be explicitly temporary. The Interim's goal is to prepare the congregation to receive its next permanent pastor. Thus the grief work that an Interim Minister does not only helps the congregation deal with a pastoral leader who has left, but also prepares them to accept the necessary departure of the Interim him/herself.

Along with "regular" ministerial responsibilities, the transitional nature of Interim Ministry presents specific "change-oriented" responsibilities as well. Alan G. Gripe characterizes these two aspects of Interim Ministry as "maintenance and change" (Gripe, p.62). He considers worship, pastoral care and church administration to be part of the ministry of maintenance. The ministry of change consists of grief resolution, conflict management and mission development. Each congregation will require differing levels of maintenance-based ministry and change-based ministry. Thus the Interim Minister will have to quickly assess the congregation's needs and attempt to apply the right balance.

For congregations that have struggled with turmoil for a long period of time, or that have become stagnant and complacent, the Interim period will often provide a jolt of change-based ministry. In Revitalizing Congregations: Refocusing and Healing through Transitions, William Avery writes of churches in various stages of brokenness.

"Some congregations are almost habitually in crisis, perpetually driving away their ministers and maintaining a balance of power between factions within the parish by

continued fighting. Just as some marriages survive because the glue of the relationship seems to be in the continual arguments, fights, and bickerings between the spouses, so too are these churches glued together by constant fighting that maintains the fractious status quo” (Avery, p.2). In other cases he states, “Sometimes a congregation’s focus on its ‘glory days’ can keep it in the valley of despair and in desperate need of revitalization” (Avery, p.139).

Throughout all his examples of conflicted congregations, Avery refers to the work of Intentional Interim Ministers as bringing a ministry of “therapeutic intervention” that sets the stage for growth and renewal. It is the intent of Avery’s book, like so many other congregational lifecycle material, to help churches find their way to renewal and revitalization. That is certainly a worthy cause. But some congregations will die and church doors will be closed for the final time. In some cases there will be no renaissance. In those cases and for those congregants the Church as a whole needs the vision and foresight to deal pastorally and professionally.

The necessary tool to achieve such a responsible approach to the dying church might well be a Living Will. Such an instrument could help congregations clarify their boundaries and quantify the aspects of their organizational life that can be subjected to that kind of measure. A congregational Living Will could allow churches to address the hidden questions about chronic decline and possible closure in open and public forums with all members. It could help congregational leaders assess the lengths to which they

are willing to go (i.e. the time, resources, and energy that they are willing and able to invest) in order to sustain the congregation in its given location.

A Living Will would always need to be a dynamic and adaptable document. It should be reviewed annually by the entire congregation and freely amended as circumstances warrant. Just as any individual might reconsider the terms of her/his medical living will in the light of a new technological advancement, so too should a congregation be able to reassess the terms and conditions of its Living Will document.

The introduction and implementation of a congregational Living Will must be sensitive to the dynamics of the systemic whole. While it seems that a period of Interim Ministry transition would lend itself well to the introduction of a Living Will to churches in chronic decline, the same might not be true to congregations that implement a Living Will to guide them through other significant periods of transition. The question of timing for introduction, like so many other questions that surround the congregational Living Will concept, is at this point more conjecture than proof. In the Market Street Church case, the Interim Ministry period was an important and helpful factor. In any case of congregational uncertainty and/or transition a pastor with sensitivity to the church as a systemic whole will be a great benefit. Whether permanent pastor or Interim, a grasp of the larger issues and implications plus the ability to offer creative, compassionate leadership are likely to be crucial elements in maximizing the potential of the Living Will journey.

## **PART 2 – CASE STUDY**

### **Chapter 4**

#### **One Congregation's Living Will Story, 1999-2004**

##### **INTRODUCTION**

I had served as an Intentional Interim Minister in two United Church of Christ congregations for a combined length of five years when I learned that Market Street Church (not its real name) was in immediate need of an Interim Minister. In my denomination the Interim Minister's assignment is a very specific one of leading a congregation through a series of transition points that culminate in the call of a new permanent pastor. The five Developmental Tasks of the interim period are explicitly stated in an un-copyrighted resource made available through our Conference. In this handbook the five Developmental Tasks are listed as:

1. Coming to terms with history: The congregation may need to be released from the restricting power of the past in order to openly and fully prepare for—and accept—the new pastor.
2. Accepting shifts in lay leadership: The interim period can help provide the environment in which change can occur positively, creatively, helpfully.
3. Discovering a new identity and defining a new purpose: The interim period provides both the time and the opportunity for a process through which congregations can take a look at themselves, find out who they truly are, and articulate their basic mission/purpose and goals.

4. Reaffirming denominational ties: The interim period thus is a prime time for the local church to remember and reinforce its covenant with the wider church.
5. Committing to new leadership: As [the congregation] seeks to understand its history, identity, needs and goals, it needs also to affirm the possibility of fulfilling those purposes in the context of the arrival and ministry of the new pastor.

Intentional Interim Ministry was a vocational choice that I had made prior to coming to the United Church of Christ during my first pastoral assignment in another denomination. By the time I learned of Market Street Church, I was comfortable in the Interim Minister's role and committed to serving congregations in difficult and/or complex periods of pastoral transitional. When my Area Minister contacted me about Market Street Church and gave me their file I remember thinking, "These people need a hug!" I read through pages of reports and documents that told of the congregation's history with successive pastorates that survived mostly-conflicted time periods and eventually concluded with painful (sometimes *forced*) departures. They seemed to choose pastoral leaders that brought difficulty and conflict with them. With such an embattled history, I expected to find that Market Street Church had its share of members with "power issues" and I wondered if those antagonists would have the final say in this congregation's factious life. It was clear to me that a positive and encouraging approach was being called for, but I was not at all clear that it would be sufficient to inaugurate a vitality surge. Even if this congregation did prove capable of moving productively

through the Interim period and calling a new pastor their dream of becoming a revitalized congregation was still very much in doubt.

When I arrived, the congregation as a whole seemed to be functioning with a great deal of indecision and perhaps even aimlessness. Their most recent called pastor had left over two years before, and they seemed to have moved in no particular direction since that time. After a period of drifting in a holding pattern with a retired minister who provided weekly pulpit supply, they covenanted with an Interim Minister who would serve half-time and help the members determine if they had any congregational life left in them.

Market Street's heyday had been in the 1950's and 60's when the Sunday School rooms rang out with the sounds of eager children and adults alike. In the decades since then, this all-white congregation of city-dwellers had morphed into an all-white congregation of suburbanites who were steadily growing in median age and rapidly shrinking in total numbers. By almost any model of congregational vitality, they were a dying church and based upon my conversations with them at the time most of the members were at least semi-consciously aware of that fact.

In the year and a half prior to my arrival, their part-time Interim Minister was aware of all of these factors and, as I could discern from the reports and memos he left behind, was driving the congregation toward some admission of defeat that would lead them to call it quits. His position was that they needed to die, and do it quickly.

The reports that I read from this Interim Minister were scolding and accusatory in tone. In writing he called them “biblical illiterates” and “obstinate.” What he called them verbally (I would later learn) was much more harsh. I wondered if he was trying to embarrass them into the grave. Were they really that hopeless, or were they again entangled in the recurring pattern of aggressive pastor, combative parishioners, and conflicted leadership? And if their Interim Minister was so certain that closure was the best (if not, only) answer, why hadn’t he been able to lead them in that direction?

So this was the place where my Area Minister wanted to send me and I was definitely curious. I met the church Council in December for a rather casual interview, and was offered the position of Interim Minister. Market Street decided to take one last determined risk toward achieving stability and renewal. They offered me a full time package which they hoped would establish a new pattern of commitment to optimism that would lead to calling a full time permanent pastor.

These people had courage and I recognized it. I had the curious desire to see if we could achieve their optimistic goals by making the best of our time together, and they were responsive to that kind of leadership. The journey ahead was one that none of us anticipated.



## INTERIM MINISTRY

The congregation that I came to know and care for was an interesting blend of people as varied as any mono-racial, mono-cultural congregation can be. My general sense about their demeanor was that they were friendly people, but with a strident conviction toward defensiveness.

This defensiveness may well have been the result of the recent years' struggles and abuses, or perhaps it ran more deeply, more historically and more systemically than that. I never confirmed its genesis, only its prevalence. I recall that the lay leaders as well as the general active membership seemed to me to be emotionally *flat*. They were defensive, cautious and willing to be stubborn if it seemed that they might be getting pushed around again by someone in authority.

At one point I told the Worship Committee that preaching at Market Street Church was like speaking to distant passers-by. They did not appear to be listening to the sermon. They did not make comments when they left the service. They were polite and civil, but clearly not willing to open themselves up to any heartfelt experience—joyful or sad.

When I told the committee this, my purpose was to explore *why* this was the case. I wondered if I was doing, or not doing, something to which they were responding with this empty distance. Strikingly, the committee's response was to apologize to me. They promised to try to "do better" and hope that the rest of the congregation would catch on.

And sure enough for weeks to come I could tell that they really were trying to be more attentive. One dear member of that committee began making weekly comments to me on her way out of the narthex. It was the same comment every week, “Thank you so much. That was very good.” But she looked me in the eye and smiled sincerely when she said it.

I had been called to guide them through a pastoral search process in which they would make an assessment of the primary characteristics of the church and community, identify the style of pastoral leadership they were seeking, and determine the compensation package they could offer. A congregational profile was to be developed in which they would disclose the general characteristics of the church facility, the demographics of the membership and congregation’s specific needs in its pastoral leader.

The first step was to complete a congregational profile, which would be the primary communication tool used by pastors who were seeking placement to determine whether or not to make themselves available as a candidate for the Market Street position. After the profile was completed, then a Search Committee would be formed whose task it would be to interview candidates and eventually make a recommendation to the congregation.

Throughout the development of the congregational profile the issue of church decline and possible closure was a constant theme. We held small group meetings to gather the various strands of information needed for the church profile, but the members just wanted to talk about their fear of closing. In congregational meetings the question,

“How long can we make it?” became recurrent. The Council and I attempted to look hopefully toward the future and the arrival of a new pastor, but the doubts and insecurities of the congregation were pervasive.

I was their Interim Minister, and my covenantal duty to them was to prepare them to call a new permanent pastor but I was failing. They were stuck. They did not want their church to close and, with an average attendance of about fifty persons each Sunday, they did not appear to be hopelessly lost but their prognosis certainly did seem bleak. The old, massive church building had more aches and ailments than the dwindling congregation could afford to treat. The wiring and heating systems were antiquated. Lighting was inadequate, air-conditioning was non-existent and water leaks were commonplace. This little congregation was being crushed by its own beloved dinosaur of a building. The beauty of stained glass and flawless wood, the peal of the pipe organ and the memories of a century of worship could not pay the bills. They were sinking slowly but surely in financial quicksand, and still hoping for a lifeline whereby they could pull themselves out.

At this point in my relationship with Market Street Church, I was not asking, “What are they trying to preserve?” I was just trying to guide them through a process in which they could sustain whatever it was they wanted so dearly to sustain. That’s when the idea of writing a congregational Living Will came to mind. It was one of those ideas that just morphed and molded itself in my brain as I discussed my work at Market Street with others inside and outside the congregation, and as I pondered their future while

sitting alone in my office. I remember talking with a colleague about Market Street's situation and trying to imagine how such a congregation could possibly attract a pastoral candidate. As I described the relationship that they were seeking to build with a new pastor I said something about it not being fully honest for the church to enter into a new pastoral relationship while truly believing that they were in a terminal condition of decline. If the members secretly believed that they were headed for closure they needed to not only disclose their fears, they needed also to construct a blame-free process of arriving at the final diagnosis. I felt that they could not lay the burden of "miracle worker" upon their new pastor when in fact they did not believe that such a recovery was possible. They had to be able to tell their new pastor when it would be OK to pull the plug. They needed to determine for themselves what the end would look like and how it would come about and not rely upon a new pastor to be the judge or executioner.

Some kind of congregational Living Will just seemed to make sense. I had no resources for this and I had not heard of anyone else utilizing this common medical document for a congregation, but it just seemed to fit. Besides that, it was a model that the members could understand on a personal level. Many of them had a medical Living Will (or, advance directive) of their own, as did I. We understood what it was for, what it would do and not do and why it was important for us to make certain decisions about our last days ahead of time. None of us would want a loved one to anguish over our personal end-of-life decisions if we could save them that pain. The question was, "Could this model be adapted to suit the needs of a congregation?" I decided to let the congregation decide.

I began as always by sharing the idea with the church Council. My challenge to them seemed almost simple. It was not particularly theological, or deep in methodology. We knew that we, as a congregation, were dying financially and numerically, and that, barring something unforeseen, the new pastor we were seeking would be Market Street's last. So asking them to enter into this new (and probably, final) pastoral covenant with an honest and self-directed end-of-life plan seemed reasonable. I thought they would *get it*. They did.

#### MAKING THE DECISION...ACCEPTING THE PLAN

As a precursor to writing the Living Will we needed to identify the general willingness of the congregation to pursue end-of-life options. We drafted a simple questionnaire that asked members to choose one of three possible options:

1. Remain in this location as long as possible, continue to budget the financial resources we have, prepare for eventual closure and disband the congregation when the property is sold.
2. Remain in this location and actively seek another congregation or organization interested in renting/sharing our space.
3. Proceed with the sale of this building and move, as a single congregational unit, to a new location.

In one of the most profound moments of self-disclosure the members voted to for option number one. Number two was chosen as a close second, but option number three

finished in a distant third. While their votes for option number two indicated an enduring hopefulness toward being rescued, the strong preference for option number one over number three revealed the centrality of role their building played in their identity as a congregation. Market Street members were willing to surrender their congregational bonds of relationship for the sake of their facility.

The Council did try to locate any interested group that might save the congregation from the financial downward spiral they were in, but of course there were no saviors to be found. With that reality we proceeded to construct the Living Will of the congregation to reflect their determination to remain in their troublesome facility until their final day.

In a specially called congregational meeting the Council and I introduced the challenge of adopting a Living Will to the whole congregation as a precursor to calling a new pastor. One of the benefits to introducing a novel idea is that there is no known track record to be held against the approach. No one can say, “We tried that before and it didn’t work.” (Obviously there is no track record to *support* the approach, either. So it’s not without its risks.) Nonetheless I explained that if a pastor were to come to Market Street Church she or he deserved to know where the congregation perceived itself to be in its lifecycle in a forthright and written manner. Separating fact from fiction was needed. Rumors had circulated throughout the local Association for nearly a decade that Market Street was closing, dying, or soon to close. The congregation itself did not know if it had

one year of life remaining or five or twenty. They were asking a pastor to come to them and commit to them, but they did not honestly know what they had to offer in return.

If they were indeed experiencing an irreversible decline, was it strictly due to membership loss? If it was as simple as a numbers game, would not an evangelism campaign turn things around? If they were dying because of the financial drag of the large facility, would not a special effort to rent out portions of the huge old building ease the strain on the budget? If they were dying because they were too conservative or too liberal for current community interest, would not a new dynamic pastor with just the right spin heal their woes?

The truth was that for decades the congregation had wrestled with those questions. Everyone had an answer. No one had a plan. Opinions were plentiful but commitment ran low. In absolutely classic form, the membership wanted two things: (1) more members, more vitality, and more programs, and (2) for nothing to change and nothing significant to be required of them. They were not bad people. In truth I was finding them to be surprisingly wonderful and interesting people. But they were utterly typical. They did not understand that the notion of *lifecycle* (with the implicit, end of cycle—or death) could be applied to congregations as well as to individuals. Many of them believed that their church was *meant* to go on forever, that God somehow “personally wanted” Market Street Church to exist and that God would magically sustain them if they were faithful enough. They had never considered the natural providence that

might be inherent in the lifecycle of a faithful body of believers: a lifecycle that might include a journey through the dark valley of decline and closure.

There was at Market Street that which exists in most if not every congregation: a sense of entitlement. While the individual members were—and still are—remarkably faithful and kind hearted people for whom I have developed honest affection, they found it easier to expect things from their church and pastor than to see themselves in partnership with their pastor in being the church. They possessed an unchallenged view of themselves as individuals functioning independently within the organization/congregation. They had never been presented with an understanding of the church as a systemic whole wherein their behaviors and the behaviors of others were inextricably linked.

Their historic pattern of combative power struggles and financial inadequacies continued to pervade their relationships in unacknowledged ways. The pursuit of recapturing the good-old-days when they had lots of members, a dominant pastoral presence, and relative financial stability was their constant modus operandi. The stories that they recounted to me at the time, however, indicated that they were committed primarily to waiting for such a salvific revival to take place. Their wait had been long already, and even though they were weary they were not planning to take any radical steps that might alter their course. They would just wait, and take what came.



For me the matter came down to this: if the congregation was to call a new pastor, that person had the right to understand that she or he was entering a relationship with a partner that believed itself to be in a terminal condition. The church was dying and was seeking a new relationship to carry it through its last days (years?). As I began to explain to the congregation that they were entering into just such a relationship, their compassion and reason rose to overtake their sense of entitlement and their glimmering hopes for a miraculous rebound. In natural, real life terms it came to make sense. And that's when we drafted our Living Will.

The Council asked that I draft the basic framework and bring it to them as a working document. I did not want to “give them all the answers” nor impose my assessment of their condition too firmly so I wrote only a single page—more of an outline than anything else. The Council reviewed it and concluded that it needed only minor adaptations in order to be sufficient. In the end the document at which we arrived was far simpler than any of us might have imagined beforehand. It was very brief and charted only (a) what were the markers for closure, and (b) what were the essential steps to be taken when any of those markers were reached. There was no need for a lengthy document. The congregation understood the rationale behind the Living Will and needed only a clear finish line. This is the document that we approved:

**Market Street Church**

*The Living Will of the Congregation*

We, the members of Market Street Church, wishing to be faithful to our purpose and calling as a community of faith set forth the following conditions as definitive markers for our termination as a congregation meeting at Market Street Church, York, PA

We set these markers as indicators that our members' faithful gathering as a Body of Christ for worship and service to others at Market Street Church, York, PA is complete.

We set these markers in covenant with all those who are now and ever have been members of Market Street Church, asserting our conviction that God is calling us on to new times and places for worship and service.

Upon the realization of any of the following markers, we, the members of Market Street Church, shall call a congregational meeting – allowing for the constitutionally required two weeks notice – and shall hold a vote of closure. A simple majority shall carry the vote.

1. When nine members of the congregation can not be found to serve on the Council. That is, whenever the Council convenes for business without nine members having been elected/appointed.
2. When the total membership reaches seventy-five.
3. When the total cash assets of the congregation reaches \$25,000.
4. If by June 30, 2001, we have not called a permanent Pastor.
5. If at any point we have been without a called or designated pastor for a period of two years.

Upon such a vote of closure, the congregation shall hold only one additional service - for the purpose of farewell - after which it shall cease to gather for worship at Market Street Church, York, PA henceforth, and members shall be encouraged to apply their talents and gifts to the faith community of their choosing.

Membership of home-bound members shall be retained by the congregation unless otherwise directed.

The property of Market Street Church shall be sold and any portion of the assets to be distributed shall be allocated in accordance to the will of the voting members of the congregation present at the time of the vote of closure.

*Adopted by the congregation, February 6, 2000; Amended, 2002.*

**MEANWHILE...**

Throughout this first year of ministry with Market Street, while sorting out who we were as a dying congregation and coming to terms with our issues of congregational mortality, I had significant administrative and organizational tasks to undertake. The chief operating principle was that even though we were prepared for our death and closure, we were going to live each day and week in the meanwhile as a ministering,

learning community of faith. So whether or not closure was immanent, we had a life to live.

I suspect that the clarity of this vision and the centrality of its purpose were much more clear to me than they were to the majority of parishioners at the time. In hindsight I can also see that my natural task-oriented nature plus the absence of a long-term emotional relationship to the history of the congregation prepared me to address the transitional issues that Market Street Church was facing in ways that other members were not. What I anticipated from the members was the grief and sadness of closure, which indeed came. I addressed it with the best pastoral care I could muster. What I did not anticipate but most certainly also came was the angry backlash from a few people who were losing personal power as a result of the church's closure.

For most of Market Street's members the interim period was not particularly eventful. They had experienced pastoral transition before and were neither highly involved in nor motivated by such changes. Even the process of coming to terms with our chronic decline and writing the Living Will did not provoke a high degree of overt struggle for most members. Indeed many of them told me that they found the whole process a relief. For the small minority, however, the interim period offered an opportunity to control events and assert power. When events unfolded in ways contrary to their plans various expressions of anger and grandstanding occurred. There were three examples of this that bear noting.

It is not uncommon for an Interim Minister to deal with church staffing issues. Generally most pastors would rather not undertake the unpleasant task of firing a member of their staff even when that is just the thing that is most needed. And so when the Interim arrives long overdue staffing issues are some of the first things we address. Other times an Interim will find church staff members who are so enmeshed in the life of the congregation and its members that during a time of pastoral transition they lose their effectiveness as a new “boss” comes on the scene. This latter scenario was my experience with Market Street’s secretary, and it was the first of those *angry backlash* events.

At the beginning of 1999 the congregation was much like a raft drifting along on generally calm waters. Many members had learned to ride along without much input or effort. The classic “20/80” formula was in play (20% of the people were doing 80% of the work). The problem for Market Street was that a key member of the twenty percent was the church secretary. She was not a member of the congregation, and should not have been permitted by the previous pastor to assume such an involved and enmeshed role that exceeded her staff position.

She had become a force to be reckoned with during the tenure of the previous Interim Minister. She was part-time paid staff whose weekly hours were nearly twice that which a congregation with Market Street’s size and complexity needed and could afford. She had inserted herself into church Council meetings as the Executive Secretary—taking minutes for the Council and offering clear input and guidance. This was a position that should have been held only by an elected church member (as required in the church

constitution), not an appointed staff person. While I'm sure that the Council members were aware of the irregularity of a staff person's presence on the governing board, the willingness to have someone else do the work was their guiding paradigm.

In addition to her role on Council, she had independently begun writing and editing the church newsletter and managing the church calendar. I suspect that this was done with the knowledge and permission of the previous pastor, who did not leave a legacy of effective administration in any facet of the church's life. This was not how I choose to lead a church and its staff. In many regards the secretary had become the church's chief administrator, which is a position of leadership that I believe no pastor should abdicate.

But the most outrageous and bizarre insertion of this secretary was her self-appointment to develop the Sunday service—including the order of worship, choosing the hymns and writing/selecting prayers. When I arrived in the office on my first day of work in January, 1999, I found that she had actually chosen my scripture texts for my first month of sermons! When I thanked her for her efforts but said that I would be selecting my own texts (despite what had been published in the newsletter) she was visibly insulted.

Clear and strong leadership is needed throughout any Interim Ministry period, and the place for that to begin at Market Street Church was in the church office. So I met with the church secretary immediately to introduce the significant changes that would be

occurring. I explained to her the central role that communication would play during the course of my ministry at Market Street, and that I needed to be responsible for the content of all communications that came from the church office. Therefore she would have to clear everything that she wrote for general dissemination with me before it went out. More to the point I told her that I would be the one writing and/or selecting the content of the church bulletins and newsletters.

This new arrangement did not work out very well for her. She responded to the shift of power, reduction of her autonomy and potential loss of her job by triangulating the situation. In a play for power, she began complaining to church members that some of the new and different things that I was introducing into worship were “not biblical.” She had developed strong friendships with members of the congregation over the past two years and was calling upon those friends to support her efforts to maintain the status quo, especially the administrative balance of power. It didn’t work.

When the Council supported my request to remove her from the position of Executive Secretary of the Council she shifted the angle of attack. She was a conservative Baptist who “*did not believe in*” women in ministry. I still do not know quite what that phrase is supposed to mean, exactly, and I doubt that she could fully articulate it if pressed to do so. Nonetheless it was clearly time for me to invite her to find other employment. And when I did she became furious and vengeful. As she spent the next couple of months calling church members and threatening to sue the church for unlawful dismissal (for which she had no legal grounds), the extent to which she had become

personally committed and emotionally invested in Market Street's future became apparent. She had fully expected to be the key transitional person to offer cohesion and stability when the Interim period was over and the new pastor was called. Perhaps more than any member of the congregation, this staff person had intended to be integral to the vision and continuation of the Market Street congregation. It did not turn out that way.

Changes were indeed made to the order of worship and its style. These were not drastic changes but noticeable ones nonetheless. I believe that the Interim Minister must create enough diversity and introduce enough change so as to make room for the style of the eventual permanent pastor. Especially when the Interim period follows a successful, long-term pastorate, the changes made by the Interim Minister will be both crucial and painful. The congregation in pastoral transition needs to experience these changes in order to have a broader frame of reference than simply: Is it like or unlike how our last minister did it?

I had experienced the wrath of congregations who hated being nudged away from the familiar. It was not so with most of the members at Market Street. I think that they had experienced so many things that had failed, or had been bizarre, or had simply not lasted very long that they were not terribly unnerved by my changes. (A key to any of these changes is always the support and input of the respective church committees. I was fortunate to be working with a kind and open minded worship committee.) But nothing is perfect and not everyone was as emotionally stable or personally mature as my worship committee members happened to be.

Of the three significant *angry backlashes* that I will recount here, this second incident was the least expected. In 2001 a lifelong member of the congregation came to me on the Sunday after Christmas with that granite facial expression that is sometimes used to stoically mask a raging anger beneath and said that she would be leaving the church. “You may have heard this, but I want to tell you myself; I’m out of here!” she said. “You’ve ruined my whole Christmas; the whole sacred thing!”

I stared at her in confusion waiting for some kind of rationale to follow. And when it came, and she left my office, I continued to sit there staring at the door and slowly sorting through the echoing sound and fury.

True to her word she and her husband left the congregation that week and never returned. And what had I done to ruin her Christmas? (Remember, the devil is always in the details.) During the Christmas Eve service, I had forgotten to turn off the ceiling lights during the singing of Silent Night and therefore the affect of that candlelit hymn at the close of the service was strikingly anti-climactic. Everyone in attendance noticed and I’m sure that most wondered why the ceiling lights remained lit, but no one else considered their entire holiday *ruined* by the over-illumination. Actually I too had been singing the hymn wondering why the ceiling lights were still on, but just figured that the person responsible for turning them off had forgotten, or missed the cue. Only after the service, during the fellowship gathering, was I reminded that that forgetful person had been *me*.



When this parishioner left the service visibly unhappy, and then later came in to tell me that she was leaving the church for good, I was not the only one who knew that the story did not add up. I suspect that, being a generally rational person under most circumstances, the deeper truth of it was that she had tolerated as many small changes over the past two years as she could. When the lights did not come down on Christmas Eve, it was the convenient reason for a big and dramatic exit.

She had been uncomfortable with the course of the congregation for a long time. Many years before this incident she had directed the large children's choir. Now there were no longer any children in the congregation. She and her husband had been very good friends with the previous pastors and their families. Now her husband rarely attended worship services at all—another person who *did not believe in* women in ministry. Of course I do not believe that the Christmas lights were the true reason for their departure. The times had just changed too much for them: too many losses and too many things to grieve.

And so thus far the commonality of these *backlash* stories lies in the anger derived from a loss of personal power. This was, after all, the *modus operandi* under which the congregation had functioned for decades: struggle for power, hostility, combativeness and intimidation. I can see now how the cycle of conflict ran its course. I can also see how my approach to strong leadership coupled with open communication, enhanced by the very fact that I was “just” an Interim and that they had finally come to

terms with their limited life expectancy intersected to provide really quite minimal opportunities for this cycle of conflict to work its destruction.

But by far the worst incident of *angry backlash* during my Interim time with Market Street Church was much more vicious than the others. After the Congregational Profile had been completed and the Living Will was put into place, it was time for the congregation to actively search for a new pastor. Having a Search Committee that could accomplish this task well is a central and necessary element in any Interim Minister's work. The selection of suitable Search Committee members is an important step.

I had carefully watched all of our lay leaders interact with each other throughout the entire first year of my work with the congregation before approaching the individual whom I thought could best lead the process. She accepted. From there the Chairperson and I worked in tandem to bring the rest of the committee into being and knit them together as a collaborative unit. I believe now, as I did then, that this method of forming the Search Committee is a sound process. I would not change the process itself or the collection of nine individuals who eventually comprised Market Street's committee. This selection process, however, did provide the context for the most incendiary incident of my ministry at Market Street Church.

Any member who wanted to be considered for the Search Committee was encouraged to submit her or his name to the Committee Chairperson within a three-week period. This opportunity was publicized widely through letters, announcements and the

church newsletter, and the response was good. In the end we received eleven names. This was two more than the number of positions on the committee. One of those named was to a man whom both the Chairperson and I knew as a destructive and divisive person. He was the congregation's bully; a role he had played through the past three pastorates. He was the antagonist of whom I had heard horrific stories from various parishioners, but who had thus far been on his best behavior during my tenure.

The congregation's history of internal conflict was filled with examples in which this man and the pastor conducted themselves in the worst, most violent and ugly of manners. And of course he also happened to be widely known throughout the congregation as one of the wealthiest members. Few people also knew that he was also one of its stingiest weekly contributors. His power over the congregation was a financial myth.

When the Search Committee was introduced to the congregation and commissioned to their task during a regular worship service on January 23, 2000, our antagonist's fury was unleashed. He was not on the committee. He had been given no power over the process of calling the next pastor, and his temper became red hot. Although he had been notified by letter prior to the service of commissioning (as had all of the committee applicants) it was not until the announcement was publicly made that he lost control of his reason and emotions.

The following Monday morning he came into the church office (by this time we were working on our third church secretary who put in only four hours a day, three days a week) and demanded to be part of the Search Committee. “I’ve hired the last three ministers and I’ll hire the next one, too.” He shouted in my face. I reiterated the information he had been given previously, that the committee was now fixed and that the two individuals who volunteered but were not selected remained as alternates, should we need them.

This did nothing to soothe his ego. He was in an indignant rage as he began recounting all the good deeds he had done for Market Street Church over the past few decades. He looked around the office and spotted a desk chair that he claimed to have once donated and demanded that we give it back to him. His tirade went on for several minutes and concluded with some insults about my incompetence and an assurance that I would regret my mistake.

When he left the office I called the Church & Ministry Committee chairperson whose committee was responsible for any pastor-parishioner conflicts. I relayed the incident and told him that I would give a written summary of events to the entire committee. The chairperson assured me that the congregation had dealt with this antagonist in the past and that, while he was nasty and threatening at times, no one believed him to be a real danger. A voice in my head (or maybe it was the knot in my gut) told me otherwise.

The antagonist took his complaint to the church Council who had already been briefed on the situation by the Church & Ministry committee and the Search Committee. Despite the fact that his volume was high and his tone was angry, the Council members engaged him politely and allowed him to verbalize accusations, claims and threats that were inappropriate at best and occasionally outrageous. When he had finished, however, the Council members ignored the whole incident as though it had not occurred and continued with the business of the meeting.

Finally things erupted violently one Sunday morning when we held a fellowship hour immediately after worship. Our antagonist (I'm using that term as an act of great generosity at this point.) came after me shouting curses and threats. When he crossed the room and had gotten close enough to me he reached out and grabbed my shoulder, spinning me around. The only thing I remember thinking was, "What's he going to do—hit me?" Strangely, I wasn't really afraid of a punch, being too stunned by his inappropriateness, and made no move to defend myself.

Just then the Council President intervened decisively by stepping between us and shoving me into the church office and closing the door behind me. The man continued his tantrum while the Council President stood guard outside the office door until several members escorted him out of the building. The Council then finally grasped the severity of the situation. They gathered and called an immediate special meeting to draft a resolution banning him from church property for the duration of my ministry. They sent it out to every member of the congregation (most of them had witnessed the incident and

needed no further explanation) and offered to discuss their decision with any member who requested it. No one did. The Council then went as a group to deliver the resolution to our antagonist. I was told that he greeted them coolly but generally acted as though they were making a big mistake and had been duped into “taking her side” in all of this. Fortunately he never violated the resolution and I’ve never encountered him since.

The Council and lay leaders’ determination to finally deal with the antagonist was a critically important step. All the years of conflict and abuse that this congregation had tolerated seemed to have at last ruptured like an ugly cyst. This man had displayed his worst behavior in such a public way that there was no debate over *what really happened*, or *should anything be done* this time. The congregation’s leadership banded together finally as people who were willing to put violent, destructive, antagonism away once and for all.

Somewhere in the midst of dealing with this nasty and threatening incident plus learning to live with a Living Will some members of the congregation began to take a turn. I think that for some of them, their future and their past took on a more honest cast. The illusion of being a church that did not need to deal with internal conflict was shattered. The illusion of being a church that did not need to take its own state of chronic decline seriously was also gone. For some people these changes were too much to deal with and they left the church—most of them peacefully. For others I believe that the steady optimism that I had been modeling to them over the past two years had begun to take

hold and they were willing to walk into Market Street's future, as well as their own, with a sense of expanding spiritual maturity.

They were beginning to understand their own faith and spiritual journey independently of Market Street Church. Of course the congregation's history was their history and they all played a role in the congregation's relational dynamics. But there was an emerging awareness that their futures would not be shared in the same way as their past had been. Some members began undertaking the hard task of self-examination and self-awareness. They embraced this time as an opportunity to prepare individually for the choices that the future would bring.

The overwhelming majority of members had received the Living Will as a sign of relief. Indeed I encountered virtually no opposition to the Living Will (its proposal, its adoption, or its eventual implementation) at all. For the most part, the Living Will allowed most members of Market Street to relax and give up the old habits of struggling for power. Once the clear path to closure had been mapped, with only a very few exceptions, the internal conflicts disappeared. They could choose individually whether or not they wanted to journey through this dark valley leading to closure with the rest of their church mates. And most of them did. But there was little reason to pitch battles anymore. And nearly all of them chose not to.

The Search Committee's experience however would challenge even those bravest of steadfast members. Even though we had made good and positive changes within the

life and psychology of the congregation, the reputation of Market Street's conflicted habits preceded them wherever they went.

There's a saying that I learned as a child that goes something like this, "Wherever you go, you take yourself with you." In the case of Market Street Church that was not going to be good news. We had a lousy track record. While I have no first-hand knowledge of the deliberations that occurred within the Search Committee meetings, I do have reason to believe that Market Street's reputation as a difficult and embattled congregation was widely-enough known that it kept candidates from even considering Market Street Church for pastoral placement.

The Search Committee should always conduct its work independently of the Interim Minister. Market Street's committee worked exceptionally well, and followed all denominational rules of protocol. I was given no information about how many candidates submitted their profiles to Market Street Church for consideration, and I certainly no idea of those individuals' identities. What I did know was that month after month would pass and the Search Committee would come to the Council meeting with "nothing new to report." Naturally I would do the math in my head: number of months to find a candidate, plus weeks to set up a neutral-pulpit trial sermon, plus weeks to introduce the candidate and hold that person's test sermon at Market Street, plus the number of months needed to relocate the candidate to our town and begin permanent ministry with the congregation, all added up to too much time. As the months slipped by that sum of time needed to



complete the pastoral search was becoming nearly as large as the anticipated remaining lifespan of the congregation. Things were not going very well.

By the end of the year 2000, I was approached by the Search Committee and presented with an option of remaining in service at Market Street Church. The Area Conference staff had been watching as Market Street's pastoral search sat idle throughout the year and they knew that there were no serious prospects on the horizon. They made a rare proposal to the committee that should the church be interested, I could be offered the uncommon position of *Designated* Pastor. The Search Committee jumped at the opportunity.

In our denomination an Interim Minister is not permitted to submit her or his profile to the Search Committee for consideration for permanent placement and so I was never in the running for the Called position. Nor had I wanted to be. The effectiveness of Interim Ministry is linked, I believe, to the absolute knowledge that the Interim is not available for permanent placement. And I loved that part of being an Interim Minister.

The category of Designated Minister carries the effect of permanency while acknowledging that the formal Call process had not been followed. It is not often permitted by the Conference as a viable option during the Search process, but we all knew that Market Street Church was stuck in the mire of few possibilities.

I had spent two years with this dying, embattled congregation and (quite to my genuine surprise) I had learned to like them—well, most of them. There was a small group of members with keen and curious minds; some with gentle and sincere hearts; some with devoted and indefatigable willingness to serve the church. After two years I found myself honestly wanting to stick by them through their demise, and to be the one to conduct their service of closure. I knew them. I wanted to walk with them through their final months and send them off into whatever and wherever they would come next.

On January 8, 2001, I signed on to a two-year Covenant of Ministry—which the congregation unanimously approved. I was designated as their pastor for a period of time that we all expected would be “long enough” to accomplish all that remained. At that moment both my relationship with this little congregation and my own sense of pastoral ministry was born anew. I was no longer a passer-by: the Interim who comes and works for a year or two and then leaves abruptly, disconnecting entirely from the congregation. Quite suddenly I was “for real.” I would be their last pastor; the final name on a century-old list of clergy leaders. What I did not know at the time was that my life had shifted. My vocational journey had just taken its most adventurous up-turn.

#### ONE DAY AT A TIME

In Interim Ministry I had danced to the music of a pre-existing score. Not only does Interim Ministry come with exact guidelines and tasks, but more fundamentally it also requires that the Interim present a contrast to the previous pastor. My ministry had been lived in contrast to something else. It had been my mission to clean up messes and

stir up change, but never to really make the ministry of the congregation I was serving *my own*. My mantra as an Interim Minister had been, “These are not my people.” I was the middle-inning relief pitcher whose job was to take what the previous person had started, do my own thing with it, and then hand it off to the next person. There was never any chance that I would “go the distance.” Being designated to permanent ministry instantly changed that. Suddenly I needed to know what my own core message was because now I was free to minister to this congregation independent of the prescribed Interim Ministry agenda.

Now I had committed myself to walking through the Valley of the Shadow with them and I was determined to take that journey in the most positive and growth-full way we could. To do this, we needed to enter a season of *carpe diem*. It was a season of expanding and learning and encountering new ideas. I applied it to biblical study and hymnody, to denominational polity and local ministry, to social justice efforts and to spirituality. It was time for the congregation to learn everything I could teach them, ingest it, and then assimilate whatever they found palatable in to their own growing faith.

This theme became expressed in a phrase that the Council, and eventually the whole congregation grabbed onto: “Seek personal, spiritual maturity.” It became the personal challenge of each individual, and it opened up dialogue on many fascinating new levels. As a dying congregation with no more illusions of immortality and a pastor who was unwilling to play the power-struggle games of the past, we found that it was time to *get real* with ourselves. I became very honest, even blunt about my own

theological perspective—not as *the* way of believing, but as my way. I promised the people that I would tell them everything that I could in our remaining time together, and that they had the challenge of integrating it to whatever extent they believed was faithful to them. In all of this I gradually discovered for the first time in my decade of pastoral ministry an opportunity to lead from my heart.

It was clear to just about everyone who was doing the math at Market Street that the marker on the Living Will that would come into play first was the financial marker. As one year rolled into the next we all kept an eye on the remaining balance of total cash assets. With no endowment or tucked-away stash of reserve funds, it was an easy course to chart. Just watch the checkbook.

We projected that there were about two years of funds remaining. The Council had become a true partner with me as we openly addressed not only the status of our life expectancy, but also frankly determined the strategy for making the most of our limited situation. Their job was to hold the grim numerical picture of our dwindling future in front of the membership and my job was to suffuse the journey with life. In my estimation I had the more rewarding and perhaps even the easier task.

Seeking personal, spiritual maturity was the heartbeat of our journey. The way we discussed it at the time was in terms of (a) walking together into our dark valley of death and closure, and then (b) facing the freedom to choose from the limitless paths and options that would confront us after this shared journey was finished. From my

perspective the pastoral task that would yield the longest reaching benefits in the lives of my parishioners was the challenge of teaching them to examine their own values. The courage to identify one's own values, put theological language to them, and then open mindedly explore what faith traditions best affirm those values was a gift I wanted to give to every member.

For me it was a time of coming into my own. I openly and intentionally laid claim to the liberal theological ground that was and is my denomination's hallmark and said, "This is who I am and who your denomination is. So what do you think about it?" I refused to play blame games or tiptoe around the issues. Within our denomination there are lots of local congregations who blame regional or national church leaders for everything they don't like and invest considerable energy in defiant oppositionalism.

The great opportunity of knowing that our congregation was sure to close in the near future was that we all knew we would have to find something new to satisfy our spiritual needs. What kind of community would that be? How similar or different would it be to the various teachings that Market Street Church had brought to our town over the past century?

At Market Street I modeled what I believe to be the strength of our denomination: that we do not need to agree on all things to share space at the table. I showed my members that together we could look the issues squarely in the face, discuss them openly and thoroughly and each walk away with the same challenge: Learn something, and

grow. To be sure not everyone responded with the eagerness and enthusiasm that I did, but no one tried openly to derail the process. Some wanted to learn and grow and change, while others did not. Some were putting in their time at Market Street Church because they were not willing to leave until the final death bell tolled. I was OK with that. But along the way there were eyes that began to twinkle and minds that began to whirl. We were growing up as individuals and as a community, and I was having a ball. The Living Will had lain to rest the unanswered questions and fears about a possible church closure that somehow sneak up on members. It also liberated them to live life fully until their chosen end line was reached. The transformation was wonderful to witness.

#### TIME TO CELEBRATE

Along the way we took time to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the congregation. A special committee was formed to oversee the yearlong schedule of special events leading up to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert and dinner party. A theme was chosen and commemorative mementos were ordered.

It was a hectic and indulgent time for all of us. Looking back on it now I'm so very glad that we did not hold back. Even though the funds continued to dwindle away with every passing month, we threw parties and reunion gatherings. We gathered stories from members both current and past, and printed them in enough booklets to supply all our members and friends.

In typical Market Street fashion the recollections of members that we gathered throughout the year reflected only a vague admission of the turmoil that had existed over the decade. Most people strictly recalled the good times, the fellowship and the festivities in unblemished radiance. Everyone knew that time was running out and they were determined to put the best face on their history that they could possibly find. Perhaps bygones really were bygones, or perhaps it was just not worth dredging up, but I took my cues from the congregation on this one. Throughout the year I made a special effort to accentuate the positive and focus on the blessings of the past, present and even the future. Enough with the lesson learning, it was time to make way for revelry.

I hope that all those members who left the congregation during the last year or so before our closure recall this anniversary year as I do. I hope it was for all of them a chance to walk away with something good and wholesome in their hearts—no matter how historically accurate it may have been. When the parties were over and all the pictures had been snapped, there was little left for us to do but to anticipate the not-too-distant end.

## CLOSURE

It takes a long time to die. The date of Market Street's closure was Sunday, October 17, 2004—our 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary.

As 2004 began the congregation's financial forecast was becoming clear in a precisely calculable way. We were about ten thousand dollars above our Living Will's

financial marker and we were running a bare-bones operating budget that necessitated withdrawing on average a thousand dollars from savings each month. With those facts in mind, the Council took decisive action and at the winter congregational meeting in February a bold decision was made. We set the date of our death. The projections indicated that our finances would last only until early fall even if nothing unexpected came along to deplete our funds and so in an act of faith and optimism, the congregation chose the third Sunday in October, our 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary, for our death.

For many of the lay leaders remaining in the congregation at that time the decision was a relief. Finally they knew just what they were dealing with and what timeframe lay ahead wherein their major decisions would have to occur. With the date of our closure set it was time to get creative, get busy, and get all the loose ends tied together. The “To Do” list was lengthy:

- Consult the Constitution and By-Laws, again and again
- Locate the property deed and consult our attorney
- Consult with our insurance agent – What were the implications to our policy if we were unable to sell the property quickly, but were no longer using it? In insurance-lingo what’s the difference between buildings that are “not in use” and those that are “vacant.”
- Send lots of email to our Conference leaders. Were there any Conference guidelines that we needed to know about with regard to property rights?
- Explore the benefits of public auction versus real estate listing.
- Interview real estate agents and auctioneers.



- Church contents

An opportunity for sharing mementoes – We utilized a Claim Form method of allowing every active member to indicate up to three items that they would like to have as a memento of the building. We established the standard of “a suitable donation” as the cost for every item and allowed the discretion of the recipient to guide the compensatory exchange.

Sell with property or separately – Time to discover what loose items could be sold at auction, and what might need to stay with the property.

Throwing away the junk – After several decades, there’s a lot of junk stashed in the corners and cupboards. We needed to make arrangements for appropriate waste disposal and recycling.

Preserving the historical – Sentimentality generally runs deeper than actual historical value. We knew that there were a few items that the York Historical Society might be interested in, so we designated a member to handle those donations.

- Publicize the procedure – Tell and retell the membership about what is happening.

Consistory would need to be diligent about communicating their decisions, and providing opportunities for the membership at large to give input. We decided to hold periodic “Church Chats” throughout the process. These Church Chats would provide important fellowship opportunities and convey key information.

Maintaining our unity and ability to collaborate would need to be done intentionally.

- We discussed the need to anticipate second-guessing from the congregation, while committing ourselves to remaining united and focused as a governing board. As

time for closure neared, anxiety levels would rise within the congregation and God knows that our species is not at its best when we feel insecure or anxious.

We were going to try to be prepared for the worst while hoping for the best.

- Pastoral care for the shut-in and homebound needed a long-range plan. Who would be their pastor once we closed?
- Distribution of final resources was a significant concern. Final decisions were to be made by the congregation as a whole, but the Council needed to give leadership to the process. What percentage of assets would be given to local agencies and to denominational funds?
- Providing for member transfers long after closure was a concern. Along with a long-range plan for providing for the needs of homebound members, a means of providing membership transfer needed to be put into place. When the church was closed, whom should members call to initiate a membership transfer?
- Farewell to church staff. In the midst of decline and death a congregation's survival instinct might inhibit its sense of generosity. We decided to say farewell to your church staff with as generous a parting gift as we could manage.
- Focus on member's spiritual journey moving forward

I thought it would be essential to provide our members with information about other local churches so they could develop some ideas about their future church home. We invited our sister churches in the city proper to come and present themselves to us through worship. Each of these churches in our immediate locale was given a Sunday service to do with as they pleased. All the churches within a larger radius were listed (phone,

address, size, worship times, etc.) on an information sheet that was provided to our membership. The emphasis was upon the sending out of disciples into communities of faith wherein they will be most comfortable and productive.

I also began to introduce new information in worship regarding various denominational choices and differences.

- We also incorporated a committee-approach to planning our service of closure, allowing the worship committee and others the opportunity to contribute to the development of our final service.

The time and money we spent caring for the details was beyond value. We grieved together and in public. We gave opportunities for people to tell us as leaders how they needed to grieve and what they wanted to carry with them. The opportunity to claim mementos was sacred for many, unnecessary for others. The opportunity to write stories was cathartic for some, painfully impossible for others. I took extra time to talk with committee members and Council leaders when planning every special event and service so that we had an ample level of ritual and formality (aspects of organized gatherings that I tend to minimize in my naturally more casual and conversational style).

Along the way we never hid or downplayed the timetable for closure. At nearly every special event or service I heard people saying, “This might be our last....” And yet it never became too laborious, never too morose or daunting. To be sure we had our sad,

solemn, and sobering moments but the members had learned to talk to each other, and to me, and we bore each other up.

Other things we learned along the way:

- Look out for the vultures – other churches (even the kind, well-meaning ones) began to see our death as their opportunity. We received letters and phone calls from other churches explaining why we should all move our membership to their congregation. For the most part I did not pass these items on to the Council. They had made their decisions with amazing diligence and for some uninvolved outsiders to think they could step in and save the day for us was insulting.
- Look out for the other vultures – inactive members and relatives and former members began to emerge to reclaim items previously given to the church but to which they now felt entitled. Again we found ourselves in a situation where people who knew nothing about our decisions had assumed that they knew what we should be doing. We chose to refer all these requests for church items (often stated in such a way that wrongfully presumed rightful ownership) to the public auction. We did not allow gifts to be “ungifted.”

In hindsight I can say that we worked with amazing precision and collaboration. The list of details needing to be attended to did not exist until we began writing it down ourselves. We sought assistance from our Conference leaders but found that none of them had any experience with dying churches that applied to our situation. So we invented the

rules as we went along and covered the bases as best we could. As it turned out I can hardly believe how well we did and how smoothly everything went.

In mid-summer as plans were moving along and details for our closure were being finalized a major development occurred that permanently altered the course the journey for about half of us. I had been silently and deeply mourning the loss of the first congregation in which I had truly been myself. I was thinking that perhaps this would be my final pastorate and that I might explore other aspects of ministry entirely. I had loved the last two years of teaching and challenging the congregation and doubted that another such opportunity awaited me anywhere in the Pennsylvania Conference. I had grown and changed along with everyone else, and maybe now it was time to take my leave of pastoral ministry.

While I was contemplating a career shift, some of my parishioners were struggling to imagine themselves in any of the local congregations of our area. In less than three years of my designated ministry, Market Street Church had gradually become the frontrunner among York County congregations in expressing a strong denominational identity. We were more theologically progressive than any other. We were the only congregation that exclusively used inclusive-language hymnody and liturgy. We had come to feel quite proud of our denomination in ways that some other churches in our Conference would never dream of. And for some of my members who dearly wanted more growth and more progression in their faith there was a concern that only the

Unitarian Universalist congregation could approximate that experience. There did not seem to be any other Christian alternatives.

That is when they came to me and asked why we couldn't just continue doing what we were doing somewhere else. They wanted to form a new church start and needed know if I'd give it a try. I found their vision irresistible. What none of us knew was, "How?"

Once again the Council gave strong and unified leadership. They wrote a letter offering the opportunity to join in a new church start to every member—even though not every member of the Council itself was planning to join it. We were interested to see how much support this idea was carrying. All along we had been challenging people to seek out the congregation that truly fit their theological perspective. Now we wanted to know how many of them were best suited to the perspective and leadership that had evolved at Market Street Church over the past couple of years. When all the replies were in, one half of the congregation chose to join, at least initially, the new church start.

I was and still am convinced that those who chose to move into the new church start did so out of an honest process spiritual self-assessment. This makes me very proud. I had preached personal spiritual maturity and theological self-awareness for so long that I believe they really tried to base their decisions on those factors rather than convenience, familiarity or what their friends were doing.

So we had about eighteen active members who wanted more of what I had been giving them. Now what? Once again I was back at the Conference office seeking direction.

The Conference Minister gave his full blessing to the idea of a new-church-start emerging out of the journey of closure and self-awareness that our congregation was going through, but directed me to get the approval of the local Association's Ministry Committee. That's where we met our most strident opponent.

The Association had just enlisted the services of a consultant to help them develop a new vision of growing the Association and getting the congregations to be more supportive of one another. They knew that Market Street Church was dying the entire duration of my ministry there, and had never even phoned to ask if there was anything they could do to assist or comfort us. But now as I met with them and shared my enthusiasm about leading a new church start comprised initially of members from Market Street, they told me to wait until the consultant had finished his work and the Association could develop a plan for church growth and networking.

I was stunned. In another year when the consultant finished his work this opportunity would have passed. We would all have moved on to new places and new communities of faith. I could hardly believe that they would refuse a new church start on the basis of a study that was trying to find ways for the Association to expand and be more internally supportive! But that was their answer. No new churches.

I was more than disappointed. I was angry. The rationale made no sense to me and when I called the Conference Minister he too could not believe the decision they had reached. But as we discussed and commiserated about the turn of events, it came to me that what had been rejected was a *new* church. If Market Street simply reinvented itself without dissolving the legal corporation, the Association would have no jurisdiction over our decisions. The Conference Minister cautioned me that this might not be a popular decision among my colleagues, but that he thought it was a legitimate response to the stance of the Ministry Committee. So that's what we did.

We went back to the congregation for a major decision, "If the corporation itself is not terminated, what shall we do with the financial assets from the sale of the property? I was open to hearing lots of suggestions about disbursement ratios and discussion about who should keep how much, but none of that happened. The congregation quickly and unanimously decided that all assets should remain with the remnant group that was forming the new church start. There was no animosity; no haggling. We would form a new church start out of what was actually a century-old corporation, and it would begin its new journey with a small nest egg from the sale of the old building and the closure of the former congregation. What a dramatic change of course.

This was truly no longer the congregation with a well-deserved reputation for power struggle and animosity. The members of Market Street Church were acting with



grace and generosity. They had learned to seek out spiritual paths that were free from the wranglings of the past.

At that point we also decided to hold a public auction of the internal contents of the building, and to place the property on the open market for sale. We waited until July to list the property with a local agent and by September we had a solid offer. While we did not receive the asking price and only one member of Council voiced disappointment at that, I was completely relieved to have a deal in hand prior to our closure date. I think we got a fair price, but more importantly I know that being free of the property enabled many more details to fall into place and for the service of closure on our 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary to be a true act of finality. In my book it was a godsend.

During one of our innumerable Council meetings earlier that summer it had been suggested that we allow every member to keep something by which to remember the church. It was a great suggestion and was indicative of the thoughtful way we were trying to conduct our business. So each active member was offered the opportunity to take any three items from the church that would serve as a memento to them. Nearly everyone took a hymnal. I decided to take the two wooden chairs from my office. They were not anything terribly special, but I know where they came from and that's the point. No one abused this opportunity to claim items and I think it was a significant chance for people to assess the actual value of the material things of the church. I believe that by offering them the chance to take anything they wanted, they realized that it really wasn't the

*things* that were most important to them at all. *Value* was defined by sentiment, not dollars and cents.

That was the kind of attitude and demeanor that guided us through our final days. And then we closed. October 17, 2004 was a beautiful, sunny Sunday morning. The closing worship service was really very simple and laced gently with the rituals of departure. We wanted to include everything that we ought to, but not so many things that it became heavy with sadness or ceremony (see Appendix C). The closing, recessional hymn was participated in by everyone in attendance. We all recessed all the way out the door and onto the sidewalk. Lay leaders carried out special symbols that represented Market Street's character and history. Then while we stood outside in the sunshine we sang our benediction, and I turned around and locked the doors for all to see. It was over.

I had prepared myself to expect the tears and emotions of the members. But they were very subdued. The service was lovely and the participants were solemn, but not overcome. Even during the rather dramatic and powerful conclusion of the service outside the church building, the tears glistened many eyes and cheeks, but no sobs were heard. Perhaps we were all a bit stunned by the finality of it all. But perhaps we also had prepared ourselves quite well over the past four years of living with our Living Will. We had witnessed exactly what we had all agreed in writing would happen.

After that day, the whole congregation would never gather again for any formal event. Small group gatherings and reunions would be planned and shared, but the

congregation as a whole was no more. Unfortunately, there was one small matter of business that remained to be settled. We had to sell off our stuff.

Even though the dearest memories were about people, relationships and special moments, the public auction of the church contents did prove to be a painful day for the several members who attended. It was held on the Monday immediately following our closure and emotions were understandably raw. The local newspaper sent a reporter and photographer to do a feature article about us. The auctioneer zipped through everything from filing cabinets to candelabras. And various members stood along the sides of the room watching simple items that represented special events being sold for cheap. Here the tears of sadness became mingled with the frustration of material reality.

As I've mentioned, I can be overly task oriented. While I had spent months trying to give members ample opportunity to talk, remember, share gifts and claim mementos, by the time late October rolled around and we were selling the contents of the building I thought the tears were over. I was consumed with the work of closure and forgot to attend to the pain of loss. It wasn't until I saw members crying and overheard their conversations of anguish that I came back to my pastoral senses. This was their final, final farewell. It really was finished and the things that weren't walking out the door for a dollar here, a few cents there, were headed for the town dump.

## THE NEXT CHAPTER

Our transition into being a new church start followed immediately on the heels of all the signed documents and bolted doors associated with our closure and disbursal. The story is a good one and has only begun to blossom into the saga we hope it will become. But that is a different chapter in my life and an unfinished epilogue to this account.

One thing that I did manage to do in the first months after we closed was to email every former member of Market Street Church and ask the members for their opinions about the whole Living Will process. Only a few of them hit the reply button, but I would like to give them the final word here, nonetheless:

### First-hand Reflections:

† *In regard to the Living Will, I think at first I didn't like the idea much, probably because I didn't want to think about what was going to happen to us. But it retrospect I feel that it kind of kept us on course. The process of writing it—bringing it before the congregation, etc.—made sure that everyone had an opportunity to be involved in what we had to go through to get where we are today. Everyone was informed and while it was an emotional experience, it was structured and planned well enough that I know I didn't feel any confusion or left at loose ends. I think the Living Will helped make it that way.*

M---

† *The Living Will was a good tool for any congregation who is dying/declining. Who ever wrote the will, did a wonderful job. Living with the will was simply facing reality.*

N---

† *From my perspective of being on the church council the Living Will was almost a God send. As a council member ministers kept telling us that we are dying but no one could answer my question of how do we know when it is over. To clarify this a little I knew the bills were being paid, I knew there was money in the bank, I knew there was a love of God, and I also knew the people were becoming fewer.*

*The process of drafting and creating the Living Will was a little tough at first, but the conversations that grew from the process really helped us to understand that there may*

*be some issues if we don't create some guidelines. For instance if we didn't create the Living Will we probably would not have started to do anything about closing the church property until we had little or no money. Our process conversations taught us that if you wait that long you take the risk of not only having no money, but if the property does not sell, you could potentially start owing people money with no money in the bank.*

*So from a council and personal perspective the Living Will made it clear what to look for to know that the end is near. It gave us a way to monitor the dying process and in the end it gave us a chance to be proactive about how and when we would die giving us a feeling of control rather than panic at the last hour. It is interesting that for your personal life the feeling now days is that you should talk about your dying, your funeral, your burial; but for church life most people don't want to talk about it because it is too painful. I feel because we were open to exploring this process together it gave us the opportunity to live, remember, and experience our death with as positive an attitude as possible.*

CA---

† *The living will gave the church a yardstick to see how close the church was getting to actually having to close and it gave the time necessary to emotionally prepare for that. The living will established a financial basis to be sure there was enough money remaining to maintain the building until it was sold.*

R---

† *I think the living will was a very good thing to have in place, this way cause less tension to deal with and stops some of the rumors.*

MJ---

† *It was difficult for me to accept at first because voting the will into existence was admitting there was going to be an end. Establishing the bench marks was an excellent opportunity for discussion within the membership and that was good because I always had a sense that everyone felt ownership to the will. It was not just a consistory designed/created document. The bench marks were concise and very understandable so there could not be any argument over interpretation. The bench marks recognized that membership, finances, and leadership are all a important in maintaining a church. I liked that we just didn't evaluate the health of our church on finances alone. I also liked the fact that it still required a final congregational vote. It helped the consistory to organize our plan of attack in preparing for the end and it gave us the time to think the process through very thoroughly. Even though it was emotional and sad for me, again, I think the will helped us to work as a team. There were never arguments and we really listened to each other. I don't know for certain if the living will totally caused that or not, but I do know I will always be grateful that we were able to close with dignity and with no hard feelings toward each other. If there had been a lot of disagreements, they would have made the closing even harder. The Living Will kept us accountable. It truly is an excellent management tool for a congregation that may be thinking that closure is in the future.*

S---

## **Chapter 5**

### **Congregant Interviews: Reflections on their Living Will journey**

Market Street Church closed in October, 2004. Nearly half of the closing members chose to move forward together and form a new church start, and the other half chose to move in other directions with their faith journeys. In the spring of 2007, five of those members active in Market Street's final years participated in individual interviews for the purpose of reflecting on the Living Will process, and offering their analysis of that journey.

The five participants who were interviewed were chosen for their awareness of the Living Will process and their ability to articulate memories, impressions, and perspectives. Each one was an active participant in the life of Market Street Church throughout the Living Will period (1999-2004). One interviewee has since moved on to active participation in another congregation. One has become generally inactive from participation in any faith community. Three have become actively involved in the new church start that was begun in the months following Market Street Church's closure.

The interviews were conducted casually in the homes of the interviewees and were voice recorded for the purpose of accurately transcribing their contributions to this study. The interviewees shall be identified herein as Paul, Elizabeth, Ann, Mark and Sue (not their real names).

## FROM CONFLICTED PAST TO CONFIDENT FUTURE

Market Street Church's history as a conflicted congregation was well known throughout the local Conference. They had struggled with successive pastorates for decades prior my arrival in 1999. My assessment of the time I spent at Market Street, however, is that it was generally peaceful. With only a few glaring exceptions, the congregation and I shared a productive and copasetic time together. Certainly a component to that relationship was our healthy blend of personalities and leadership styles. But arguably the presence of the Living Will, with the clarity that it brought to the question of closure, was the principle factor in Market Street's transition from a conflicted past to a confident journey in to the future.

Paul recalls a congregation that had, "lots of conflict and struggle, always related to money issues or people just wanting to get their own way. Maybe every church has some of this but at Market Street it was pretty constant." The basis of this conflict could be found in the style and quality of Market Street's pastoral leadership, according to Sue. She remembers, "We had one bad break after another. Our whole history was just repeated shooting ourselves in the foot. It all goes back to having that one strong pastor for forty years who did not develop good leadership skills among the members around him."

The struggle within the congregation was rooted both in its financial situation and in what Sue calls, "C-level" pastors. She says, "We always struggled over money and the

ones who got short-changed were the pastors. We just never had enough money to offer a strong enough pastoral package to attract the top ministers. We got pastors with definite skills lacking and we didn't know how to help them do better. We could afford C-level pastors, not A-level."

When asked how a congregation which, in the 1950's, had several hundred active members could not afford a full pastoral package, interviewees spoke about the general character of the congregation. Mary thinks that as long as the church was growing the people were preoccupied with struggling for more power and influence, and that when the membership began to decline the members turned on one another. "I remember my mother telling me that way back in the 60's when the church was filled with hundreds of people we still thought of ourselves as a dying church. We knew something was always going to go wrong—like that whole thing when the treasurer stole money from the church" she said. "There was always someone to blame for the problems. Sometimes it was the pastor, and other times it was someone else in the church."

Sue believes that the conflicts were always somehow rooted in finances and that those financial struggles might have been related to the skill level of the pastors. "Even when we had hundreds of active members," she said, "we were not a very giving church. Not all the members were poor or lower class, so the giving could have been better. Maybe the problem goes back to ministers who were timid about preaching stewardship and giving. I'm not sure, but I do know that it caused a lot of tension within the congregation when the minister would have to go without pay."



“The worst time of conflict, though,” Sue continues, “was when we had to ask one minister to leave. It was awful. I would sit in that sanctuary on a Sunday morning and just know that we could have cut the tension with a knife. He [the minister] was having so many problems and we had tried to work with him, but this was just bringing everyone down. So I was the one who finally had to make something happen. When he resigned there were members who stopped talking to me for years!”

Ann remembers Market Street’s internal conflict growing throughout the 1980’s and 90’s, and considers it to be linked to the way church leaders were dodging the question of Market Street’s persistent decline. In the end, she recalls, “The real nasty and trouble-making people were either leaving the church because it was dying, or they were getting older and just not fighting as much anymore. Maybe that’s why it got better at the end. There just wasn’t that much to fight over.”

#### ONE FINAL SEARCH FOR A PERMANENT PASTOR

The last permanent, called minister to serve Market Street left in 1996 and the congregation decided to follow the standard judicatory procedure of moving directly into an open Search and Call process for a full time replacement. The first step was to enlist the leadership of an Intentional Interim who would guide the Self-study and Search period. This minister was serving two small churches in transition simultaneously and, despite being touted by the Conference as the finest minister in his field, proved to be yet another source of pastoral controversy and conflict.

Ann recalls asking this minister to help the congregation identify its nearness to closure. She said, “I kept asking, ‘when will we know that the end is here?’ but no one answered me. Maybe no one knew. But I think the minister had his own agenda and didn’t want to get the people involved in finding the answers. He wanted us to merge with the other church he was serving. We did not want to merge, but he wanted it that way.”

Elizabeth remembers this period as a difficult time. Of the Interim minister she said, “He was really rough on us. He was falling apart as our leader and we already had our own problems at that time, so he wasn’t really helping.”

“I think the Conference and our minister just wanted us to close so they could stop dealing with us” said Sue. “And then this minister had his own problems and left, and we were on our own again.”

In January, 1999, after only a month’s gap from the previous Interim’s departure, the congregation extended to me the offer of coming to Market Street as an Intentional Interim with what I understood to be the standard job assignment of bringing the church through a period of self-analysis and then the search for and calling of a new pastor. Ann remembers my arrival as being a “last chance” offering from the Conference. She said, “When you came we were told that you were our last chance and that the Conference had

no more options for us. So when you started talking about leading us through a search for a permanent pastor I was confused.”

While Ann was hoping that I held some new information and hope for the future of which the congregation was unaware, I continued to serve Market Street without any knowledge that they had hired me as a last ditch effort. Elizabeth said, “We were just really lucky that you were willing to come to us even though we were having so many problems.”

#### NAMING OUR CONDITION AND INTRODUCING THE LIVING WILL

I introduced the concept of a congregational Living Will in the summer of 1999. It was a new way of understanding the congregation’s situation that proved palatable to most members. In many ways the familiar and non-threatening terms such as “hospice care” and “living will” provided the spoonful of sugar that helped the sour medicine of church closure go down more easily.

Paul felt some relief with the introduction of the Living Will. He recounts it in this way, “I kept wondering, what’s the point of this? Why don’t we just disband and go our separate ways? But I guess I never said anything because I didn’t want to be the bad guy who caused the church to close and make everyone leave their friends. Even when we wrote the Living Will I was thinking, why don’t we just close now? But at least this way the Will would be the bad guy.”

Ann also found some essential answers that she had been seeking. “I had been asking about how we would know that the end was here, and finally we had the answer to that question. The Will forced us to think about it and put some answers in writing.”

Mary recalls, “It was a very difficult time. Even though we had had these ideas about our church dying it wasn’t until you brought the idea of a Living Will that we knew how to address it. I mean, we had been talking about our church going downhill for years but finally we had a plan for dealing with it.”

All five interview participants indicated that the church was filled with people who were feeling over worked and burned out. Sue said, “It was a period of denial. We were all wearing so many hats just to keep things going, but no one wanted to address the reality of our condition. The Living Will made the intangible, tangible.”

Paul puts it this way, “Each one of us was so constantly needed that we felt that we couldn’t even miss a single Sunday. It was kind of a desperate feeling—being needed just to hold things together and keep things going. Going to church had become a kind of job, and before the Will was in place there was no end in sight.”

I had held small group meetings throughout the second half of 1999 and it was during those meetings that I introduced the need for a Living Will as part of an honest and forthright search for a new pastor. The ease with which the congregation accepted the

Living Will surprised me. Perhaps it stemmed from the general fatigue being experienced by the congregation's leaders.

Sue remembers being surprised by the congregation's response to the Living Will. "The congregation really responded openly to it. Maybe it was because the Council was so thoroughly involved in it and stood behind it, but mostly I think they were just relieved. You were able to bring us to the answers without making anyone feel like you were shoving anything down our throats."

Ann comments, "The congregation embraced it. None of us really liked it—the dying, that is—but the Will gave us something we could deal with. As a Council we welcomed everyone into the process and took each of their suggestions into consideration. It was a group effort. You gave us the challenge and said that we had to find the answers, but you didn't demand that we answer it immediately. You helped us all come to terms with it."

## THE LIVING WILL PROCESS

The Will was adopted by the congregation in February, 2000, and was the guiding instrument for the church's remaining four and a half years of life. In the interviews with these five participants, each had the opportunity to offer some assessment of the process more than three years after the journey ended.

Ann remembers, “We could have changed the document at any time. Nothing was etched in stone. Life changes and we didn’t know what was coming down the road, so the Will had to be open to changes or improvements as we went along. I think it worked really well.”

Regarding the particular markers that the congregation chose as triggering a vote of closure, Mary said, “Yeah, I really think they were the right ones: Keeping a full Council is important. If you can’t find even nine leaders then it’s time to close. And the one about membership goes with the financial marker. And the ones about having a pastor in place, well, we were just lucky that you decided to stay with us or the Will would have gone into effect much sooner.”

As the timeframe for closure began drawing obviously near we needed to deal as sensitively and as directly as possible with people’s feelings of loss and separation. I suggested to the Council that we develop a system whereby every active member could claim a few items from the church as a kind of “parting gift” on the day of closure. Four of the five interviewees independently mentioned the process of claiming any three items as a memento as a meaningful part of the journey.

Elizabeth said, “Having those three items was and still is very comforting. It really helped us. Even though they are just *things*, they still have emotions attached to them and they remind us of the people that we no longer see.” “Those mementos were very important,” said Sue, “they reassured us that we would not be leaving everything

behind. Even the people who weren't very involved in making the decisions at that point knew that they weren't being left out."

Another reality of church closure that Market Street experienced was that the more the news of our congregation's imminent closure became known throughout the wider community, the more "friendly offers" were made from other churches or ministers who were trying to solve our crisis for us. Some made recommendations about which churches in the area we could merge with. Some told us about pastors they had heard of who could turn dying churches around. Many came to us with the suggestion that we all just move en masse to join their own church.

These unwanted interjections were especially frustrating to the Market Street church leaders who were working with a well documented plan and were quite diligently committed to following the Living Will toward its natural end. No "rescue" was desired. Nonetheless, when other churches learned of Market Street's approaching death we were presented with all manner of offers from opportunists of one variety or another.

Elizabeth remembers these incidences with frustration. "What amazed, or maybe disturbed, or shocked me most was all the people who came out of the woodwork trying to just get us to give them things they wanted for their own churches. Some were asking for things that some relative of theirs had donated to the church ages ago. That's just wrong. They actually thought they were somehow entitled to get back a gift that someone else had made."

Sue recalls, “The other churches could have approached us more above-board. We even invited our sister churches in the city to come and tell us about themselves so that the process would be clear and shared by everyone. But instead, they seemed a little too eager to have our members pack up and join them on the spot without letting us work through our process.”

These obstacles and frustrations along the way did not seem to be the key concern for the members who were interviewed, however. The Living Will process itself received strong support from all interviewees. When asked if the Living Will process is a good way to handle church closure in general, Paul said, “The Living Will is a good process. It’s what kept us from just trying to struggle on and on. We agreed to it and then we just had to stick it out. I’d hate to go through another church closure again, but if I had to I’d want to use a Living Will for clarity.”

Mary said, “I would absolutely recommend the process. The Living Will allowed us to understand Market Street’s closure as a death rather than a failure. If we had just dwindled to nothing, it would have felt like a failure. This way it feels like we allowed something to die.”

Ann also endorses the process, saying, “I’d absolutely recommend this process as a clear way to plan things the whole way through. But without open-minded leaders who can work well together and are willing to adapt, I don’t know if it would work in every



circumstance. The leaders and pastor have to be able to work together and make adjustments along the way.”

Elizabeth states, “There’s no better way to handle it if you want an orderly manner. It’s the way to handle things if you value giving everyone a chance to know what was happening and to participate in the saying goodbye. Maybe there will always be people—outsiders, I mean—trying to take advantage of the situation for their own gain, but that’s not the Living Will’s fault. If you have to go through this kind of thing, this is the way to do it.”

## CLOSURE

As the final months approached and the financial marker clearly remained the leading indicator in our Will, the Council became proactive about the exact date of our closure. Acting six months preemptively, they chose the 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the congregation for our final worship service and the congregation approved the date. Because this proactive step was taken, the lay leaders were able to begin making final arrangements with regard to the sale and disbursal of property.

Ann was Council President at the time and remembers it this way. “We were proactive at the end and that was a huge factor. We saw that the financial marker was coming and we got busy. It was a lot of work and we decided to be prepared for the closure when it hit rather than waiting until it came and then getting busy. In fact, I think I would make that as a suggestion. The church Council needs to start working actively to

prepare for the final closure at least six months before it actually hits. There's just too much work to be done for it to wait until after the vote of closure is taken."

The building itself was a major player in the process of letting go. For Ann it was, "a real problem. We were just lucky to have unloaded it as quickly as we did. The key to finally closing a church is getting rid of the property." For Mary and Sue the building was a source of deep emotional attachment. Sue said, "I loved the building and I still hate to drive by it in its current state, but I do realize that it is only a structure. We put so much energy over the years, not to mention money, into keeping that place going. It was sad to finally let it go."

When asked, "What actually died for you on that final Sunday?" She responded, "What died was the history of Market Street Church as a group. That's what came to an end. Since then we've splintered and have lost unity. Some of us are still very close, but *that* congregation as a whole is gone now. The Living Will was the doorway. Some passed through the doorway early when they knew we were fading fast. Some walked through the doorway on the final Sunday when we locked the doors. And others of us have walked through the doorway together into a new church start and we're building something exciting."

As for the final service held on the 101<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of the congregation, I have noted that there were strangely very few tears. When I asked about this, Ann responded, "We were just tired and ready to face the truth. I think it would have been harder on me

to watch you lock those doors if I hadn't known that I still had things to take care of in the week to come. With the auction, I mean. I knew that I would get to walk through there again. But even for those who weren't going back in I think we had them so well prepared that they just faced up to it."

Elizabeth remembers feeling as though the death was slow and gradual. "I knew that it was over, but we had all planned to eat lunch together that day so when we sang the final hymn on the front steps we knew that we still had more time together. After lunch we just went home and it seemed, OK."

Sue remembers facing the future with hopefulness. "I just remember thinking that it really wasn't over. At least for some of us who were going to go ahead and form a new church start, there was a future to plan. By the time we actually held the funeral service I had resolved everything within myself and was ready to move on."

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion: Summary Findings and Lingering Questions**

The claim of this study is that by documenting the journey of one congregation that benefited from the Living Will approach to significant church life transitions, other congregations' approach to decision-making and considerations about their futures might also be informed. To that end the following summary findings and lingering questions are offered both to point out the insights to be gained from the Market Street experience (what worked and what did not work), and also to raise questions that might be considered in future settings and applications of the Living Will approach. The future of the congregational Living Will approach to church life transitions is in the hands of those who will test it and adapt it to their own needs.

#### **SUMMARY FINDINGS**

##### **A Strategy of Informed Intuition**

The guiding strategy that was present throughout the Market Street journey was two-fold. First there was a fully engaged, open-minded and intentional pursuit of information between pastor and congregational leaders. This journey was not by any stretch headed by a single leader with fixed goals. It was an informed collaboration.

The Living Will journey requires that both pastors and lay leaders ask questions and engage in active listening. The core group of leaders at Market Street that emerged during the first year consisted of those who wanted to participate in the life of the congregation. Many members had become apathetic. They were kept well informed and offered moments of active engagement, but they were not placed in the core role of

“collaborator.” Likewise there were those in the congregation who sought opportunities to command the group, seeking both to ask the questions and give the answers. These people were not embraced as key leaders nor were their single-minded positions placated.

The Living Will journey is no place for apathy or external fiat. This is a rule as necessarily applied to pastor as to parishioner. Information-sharing among church leaders must be intentional and un-triangulated. Pastoral guidance and role modeling in this area is essential, but the second part of this strategy must also be “turned on” throughout the process: intuition.

Pastoral intuition is indispensable, and probably also un-definable. It is that internal compass that alerts one when to press harder or to pull back. It tells the pastor when the leadership can handle yet more work and when they need space to do their own soul-searching and self-care. Pastoral intuition is a necessary guide throughout the Living Will process because the journey will require both time for interpersonal tenderness and tenacity toward task-oriented details. The intuitive balance modeled by pastor, and carried forth by lay leaders, is the central piece of the Living Will journey that will remain nebulous and free-flowing. Its importance however can hardly be overstated. Informed intuition must undergird the journey and can provide the “slack in the rope” necessary to adapt to the many needs, known and unforeseen, that will challenge the process of church life transition.

## **Embrace the Journey**

“The purpose of the journey *is* the journey.” This statement became an important mantra for the congregation of Market Street church. Along with honoring the past and preparing (almost exhaustively) for the future, we were absolutely committed to being present in “the now.” The journey itself was the point, the purpose and the goal.

The Living Will approach to significant church life transitions blesses a congregation with intentionality that it might not otherwise have. It also calls the congregation into the present in a way that can be thoroughly invigorating. The Living Will document that the Market Street congregation adopted took care of the procedural issues and the lay leaders devoted themselves to addressing all the legal, financial, and physical details of the journey. This allowed room for a spiritual emphasis upon self-awareness and personal maturity to come to the fore in the worship life of the congregation.

The Living Will journey through the Valley of the Shadow is nothing if not a *journey*. The Valley of the Shadow is a place where things change. Some things emerge changed, improved, maybe even cleansed. Other things might not emerge at all. The Valley is uncharted and filled with unknown mysteries. But without question the Valley of the Shadow is a place through which one can learn to journey with a concentration on the “now” and an admission of the uncertainties of “tomorrow.” The Valley of the Shadow has a way of simplifying and centering the experience.

For Market Street church the journey through the Valley yielded an emphasis upon the spiritual development of each member who took the journey. We did not know where we would be “next year at this time” so we opened ourselves to the truths and discoveries that were before us in the present. The Living Will journey at least implied that most of us would go our separate ways in the near future. This opened us up to a sense of self-awareness and self-discovery that was independent of the congregation as a whole. The members of Market Street church would eventually need to make new choices about their spiritual identities and congregational affiliations. The journey through the Valley of the Shadow offered each sojourner an opportunity to shed any pretense of inherited identity and to claim a level of spiritual authenticity that might frame future choices.

Such acts of self-discovery can be frightening and the last thing that a grieving, dying congregation needs is more anxiety. Here too pastoral intuition becomes the canon. The educational and informational surge that many Market Street members sought had to be tempered with the related denominational and scholarly support that assured them that they were not venturing into uncharted territory. A congregation that is hungry to learn and discover will also need time to process and assimilate that new information. The most proper—and most effective—approach to this process must be fundamentally pastoral. Like the psalmist’s sense of the “thou” that comforts the journey through the Valley, so too is the pastoral role during a significant church life transition. This is the time for a strong and steady pastoral presence to be offered to all those who sojourn. It is a time for pastor and lay leaders to be committed to open dialogue and active listening.

And it is the time for church leaders to trust their instincts about maintaining balance and building collaboration.

In the end what the Market Street journey most profoundly teaches is that a congregational Living Will is much more than an instrument of church closure. Quite significantly it is a supporting guide through a significant transition. The congregational Living Will is an instrument that clarifies the future in a way that frees congregants to live more fully in the present.

### **Find Markers that Fit**

A simple examination of the markers chosen by Market Street Church to trigger their vote of closure will offer little help or guidance for other congregations. They were markers that spoke specifically to the Market Street congregation and most surely will not apply well to another congregation in another context.

The Market Street congregation did not choose markers that spoke to their theological perspective of “God’s will” or the “need” for a Christian witness to be present on their particular block in the city. They did not choose any markers that addressed their desire to share community with each other or their appreciation for the habits and rituals that they shared. What they chose were measurable markers that spoke to the “externals” of church life because those were the markers that were right for them.



The markers must speak to the people who adopt them. They must also remain items which are chosen, rather than fixed directives that govern. The Market Street congregation met twice each year for congregational meetings. At every one of those congregational meetings from the time the Living Will was adopted until the church closed, the Living Will markers were an agenda item. They were reviewed, discussed and either affirmed or amended. The congregation's awareness of the markers and their ownership of them were repeatedly and publicly acknowledged. Keeping the markers relevant and applicable to the given context was a key aspect of the congregation's ownership of the Living Will process as a whole.

### **An Acceptance of Job Insecurity**

The pastoral role of an Interim Minister is by definition temporary. For any pastor to fully engage in the Living Will journey there needs to be a high degree of comfort with the unknown—especially when it comes to one's employment. There are valid reasons why the Living Will might predominantly become a tool of Interim Ministry, but perhaps none as practical as the willingness to engage in a process which will likely culminate in the termination of one's pastoral service. Even if the Living Will approach is employed as an instrument for dealing with church life transitions related to growth, the pastor will experience at least a re-defining of her or his role.

In church growth situations, the pastor might be facing a decentralization of authority as ancillary small groups assume greater influence, or the expansion of the pastoral staff as multiple services and programs call for specialization of tasks, or even

the intentional division of the congregation to accommodate a new church plant with its own pastoral leadership. All of these scenarios can be approached with the guidance of a congregational Living Will, and all of them will present a degree of job insecurity for the pastor.

Perhaps the most common expression of the Living Will journey, however, will be to prepare for church closure. In this case, of course, the pastor will be working herself/himself right out of a job entirely. A high level of uncertainty will be present throughout the process. The Market Street journey lasted for four years. A pastor will need the capacity to lead the congregation positively and pastorally without getting sidetracked by concerns about an unknown financial future. Measures of self-care and planning must certainly be undertaken in concert with the congregation's journey, but should not become a preoccupation that undermines one's ability to pastor the congregation through its transition.

It seems reasonable that a pastor would want to be fully committed to the Living Will journey for its duration before entering into it. The implications for the congregation, were a pastor to leave during the Living Will period, are unknown but seem likely to bring about a short-circuiting of the process.

### **Accommodate a Variety of Departures and Early Exits**

Some people do not respond well to change. Others (probably fewer in number) thrive under the challenge of bringing about something new. When a congregational

Living Will is implemented to address a significant church life transition the responses of the members are likely to run the full spectrum from angry resistance to happy embrace. This was true of the Market Street experience.

For a significant number of members at Market Street the adoption of the Living Will brought about a sigh of relief. Questions about church closure that had loomed like a dark cloud for many years finally had answers. The Living Will charted a clear and agreed-upon course that took away the guessing and wondering and relieved some of the anxiety that members had been carrying for a long time. Quite contrary to the angry resistance that only a few members demonstrated, the majority of Market Street members responded to the Living Will with a willingness to face the sadness and grief of closing their church as an act of respectful gratitude.

A key to the united atmosphere that pervaded Market Street church during its final few years was the timely departure of those who did not want to embrace church closure as the “holy death” to which Alice Mann refers. It is important to allow people to leave. Those who are angry or fearful might leave while slinging verbal stones. Those who are tired of the struggle to maintain a declining congregation might just slip away.

This can be a difficult thing for a congregation to put into practice. Congregations are constantly talking about church growth and seeking new members. When people leave the church pastors are almost always asked, “What happened? What went wrong? How can we get them back?” The church that is approaching a significant life transition,

however, needs to allow some of its members to depart before the final bell is rung. For pastors who are well versed on church-growth strategies this process could be a harsh blow to one's ego, but the journey through the Valley of the Shadow is a time to concentrate on being pastoral to those who remain and setting free those who choose to go. By communicating the acceptability of early departure pastors can help parishioners make the best choice for themselves. This will also help those members who remain throughout the journey to not feel unjustly abandoned by their peers.

Again this is an area where informed intuition must be applied. Allow those who do not have the energy or interest to participate throughout the transition period to move on. Encourage those with grievances to make a fresh start elsewhere. Talk to the lay leadership about those who have departed and help them to overcome any lingering blame or frustration they might have. But in the end this is a pastoral journey with those who will walk through the long Valley together. How *they* emerge from the journey is the core issue.

### **Anticipate External Interference or Opposition**

No matter how many times a thing has been said, there will be those who have no idea what is going on. Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. But do not expect that everyone was listening.

During the Living Will journey at Market Street church there were multiple measures taken to inform and include the wider church Association and Conference in

the transition process. Nonetheless there were leaders throughout those wider church bodies whose opposition to and/or interference with the Market Street experience was based upon ignorance. As tiresome as it might become, the church that is undergoing a significant life transition must continuously be able to give a consistent articulation of its journey to others.

An example of this occurred when, as part of the preparation for closure, the Market Street congregation invited all of the neighboring churches within the denomination to choose any Sunday morning to come to Market Street and make a presentation about their respective congregations. They were asked to share whatever information about their church ministries that might be informative to Market Street members who would soon need to find new churches to attend. This was a resounding failure. Of the nine churches that were invited, only two agreed to make presentations. Of those two that scheduled visits, only one actually came.

It had seemed to the Market Street leaders that by forthrightly offering the local sister churches an opportunity to present themselves to the Market Street membership, some of the peripheral solicitations for our members might be avoided. We were told later by a pastor of one of the churches that did not respond to our invitation that he was uncomfortable “competing” for members.

Perhaps a single opportunity in which all the local churches could be invited to a more social gathering would be less threatening to them. The idea of giving members an

opportunity to learn about neighboring congregations (especially those within one's own denomination) still seems to be a good one. The means of communicating that invitation to sister churches, and the method whereby they give their presentations will have to be addressed with creativity and conducted in as non-threatening way as possible.

This lack of interest that our sister churches demonstrated in the choices that Market Street members would make about their future church homes was not entirely honest. Although local churches declined to present themselves and their programs to the Market Street congregation publicly, several local pastors did lobby Market Street members intentionally and directly. Approaches were made to individual members seeking their membership, and also to individual members seeking their influence in gaining a more wholesale transfer of the Market Street congregation. To their credit the Market Street members steadfastly reiterated the Living Will process to all the pastors, neighbors, and other interested parties whose interventions were contrary to the plan.

Church leaders from local congregations were not the only ones who did not respect the boundaries of the Living Will process. Our Conference and Association leaders also intervened in un-requested ways and for reasons based in lack of understanding. Despite all the email messages, letters and public announcements that were made by Market Street leaders to the appropriate judicatory officials, it proved insufficient in keeping them adequately informed.

After closure some Association and Conference leaders were angry about the way Market Street “circumvented appropriate protocols” even though we followed every measure of which we were made aware. Others were confused about where Market Street’s members went, and whether or not the Association could have been more involved in finding them new church homes. All of these matters and countless more had been addressed by Market Street leaders over and over again, but the message had not gotten through.

The lesson here is that no one will understand the process as well as those who are engaged in it. As long as the Living Will approach is new and unfamiliar to church leaders in general, the ongoing need to interpret it to those “outside” the experience will be laborious. Anticipate the need to issue repeated articulations of the process and perhaps the frustration of dealing with unwitting opponents can be minimized. Most importantly, however, is the need to work assiduously at keeping all the appropriate wider church representatives as well informed of the process as possible.

### **Create Celebrations and Rituals of Remembrance**

The Living Will is an instrument that guides change and no change can occur without loss. In the case of Market Street church the Living Will guided a congregation to its closure and for the members of that congregation the most significant loss was that of their history and heritage.

An absolutely crucial element of the Living Will journey is the process of saying goodbye to what has been. Because the congregational Living Will document is such an intentional tool for embracing change it affords church leaders the opportunity to plan events of celebration and remembrance in advance. No amount of time, effort or money that is spent on these rituals and celebrations will be regretted. This is not the time or area in which to be stingy.

Once again informed intuition will ground this aspect of the journey. It is essential to listen to the members' stories of the past and value the path that they have trod. At Market Street there were certain aspects of their history that were adored and revered in the members' stories. They spoke fondly of a pastor that guided the congregation for four decades over a generation ago. To publicly acknowledge those fond memories we highlighted him and all the other clergy who ministered to the congregation in a special service in which portraits were hung in a central location and the gift of leadership was celebrated in both lay and ordained leaders.

Market Street members also had great pride in their musical ministry. In response to that pride we threw a party in which all former choir directors and organists were invited back on a Sunday afternoon for a recital. The music was fantastic and the stories that flowed during the ensuing fellowship time were priceless.

Our congregation's anniversary became a central feature of our celebrations as well. The one hundredth anniversary of the congregation occurred during the Living Will



period and we did not hold back on the expense of the celebration. Like any other congregation with a significant milestone to recognize, we offered our thanks and collected our stories. We spent an entire year giving members opportunities to share reflections and plan celebratory events. And then finally it was the congregation's anniversary (its 101<sup>st</sup>) that was intentionally chosen for the date of its closure. The Living Will period had a special way of making the past more precious and the present more alive.

The Market Street congregation also shared in the material aspects of the church. By instituting a process of claiming mementos each parishioner was able to physically hold onto a meaningful part of the church. The intuitive process of balancing the relentless march toward the future with the ability to pause and appreciate the past is a blessing that both enhances and enlivens the Living Will journey.

### **After the Decision is Made, Let it Go**

The volume of details to be addressed and decisions to be made will be more than any pastor or church council can fully anticipate. Along the way, however, the open collaborative process among church leaders will help reveal new ideas and insights about “what to do next.”

A significant reflection offered by the Market Street Council president was that the governing body needs to begin planning for the transition point's arrival as early as possible. At Market Street the date for closure was chosen intentionally a few months

before the terms of the Living Will were actually met. The date was chosen because of its significance (the anniversary of the congregation) and its approximation to the projected time of Living Will conditions being met. This decision turned out to be of vast benefit. It allowed the church Council to begin taking decisive steps toward closure within the Living Will framework and thus with the assent of the congregation.

Details such as contacting a realtor and an auctioneer were addressed in advance of meeting the Living Will marker because the date of closure was fixed ahead of schedule. It is important to note that the closure date which was chosen was absolutely realistic, and probably fell within a week or two of when the Living Will marker would have been met. Nonetheless, the key learning was that the Council would have had a much more difficult time making “final arrangements” if they had waited for the marker to be met before acting.

Along with planning ahead there is an essential need to “let it go.” When a decision is made, do not allow for second-guessing. There are simply too many choices and decisions for church leaders to make for any pattern of second-guessing to be tolerated. There will be times when the right decision for the congregation is the one that is most expedient. As an example of this, the Market Street building was sold for less than its asking price. The Council agonized over the decision to sell the building quickly for a reasonable but less than optimal price, or to risk holding it for a better offer. In the end they chose to negotiate diligently with the early bidder, and then sell it early rather than hold it for a hoped-for better price.

Whether that decision was “right” or not is not in question here. The lesson is that it was the Council’s decision to make and once they made it they needed to let go of any lingering doubts. Once again the church leadership sets the standard here. If the congregation can see that the leadership is satisfied with its decision-making, they too will be likely to accept the results. Every act of making a decision and then letting it go is practice for the final transition point of the journey. The Living Will experience is designed to culminate in a significant point of transition. Practicing the art of collaborative decision-making followed by letting go will prepare for that transition in a way that builds confidence and averts the “what ifs” that might ensue, thus reducing the need for second-guessing.

## LINGERING QUESTIONS

The community of faith that was Market Street Church did not survive the Valley of the Shadow unaltered. In many ways it emerged in an unrecognizable form that lingers primarily in the memories or adapted relationships of the members. While there are identifiable strengths to be found in what emerged from the Valley, we must acknowledge that the original community of faith as a habitually gathering whole was lost in the process.

There are many aspects of the Living Will journey that remain untested. With only this one case study to reference, we are left with unanswered questions about every possible scenario outside the Market Street experience. A significant area to be explored

is whether the Living Will instrument is only helpful to churches in chronic states of decline. Could the Living Will approach be adapted to address significant points of transition in congregations that are growing? If so what adaptations would have to be made?

The particulars of how the congregational leaders address the closing of financial accounts, sale of property, preservation of historic items, and provisions for homebound members are certainly not definitively established by this one study. Also untested are the options for maintaining ongoing relationships among congregation members.

Many Market Street members have chosen to gather twice a year for lunch at a local restaurant. This practice has continued for three years since the closure of the church and the number of attendees has begun to dwindle, but the need for ongoing community has been generally met for those who have participated. Other members of Market Street have maintained more personal and social relationships. Some of those who had close friendships prior to closure have continued to interact socially even though they have chosen to join different church communities.

Another untested question about the Living Will process is whether or not a permanent pastor can effectively implement a Living Will process. The Market Street story reveals some of the strengths of introducing the Living Will during an Interim period. Would the congregation have responded differently if their previous, permanent pastor had introduced the concept? Could the Living Will have been effectively

introduced by the permanent pastor that they had hoped to call when our Interim period was finished?

The Living Will document that Market Street adopted met their needs. It addressed the issues that they needed to have addressed. It did not address or even raise the question of many internal, spiritual aspects of congregational life. What if it had? As our journey so happened we addressed the spiritual, ritual, habitual and pastoral care issues outside of the document. Others might choose to include those elements of the journey in the Will itself. Doing so might well provide an additional element of comfort to the process.

#### CLOSING THOUGHTS

Chapters four and five of this study chronicle the Living Will approach to church closure as Market Street Church experienced it. By capturing the reflections and experiences of some of the members who lived through that journey, the Living Will process is placed in context and its impact is personalized.

The conflicted and often combative history of Market Street Church provides an important canvas upon which the story of their final years' journey is drawn. In light of that history the Living Will period was a significantly more peaceful and collaborative time. When they were introduced to the concept of a congregational Living Will they were a listless and beaten congregation in many ways. They had fought internally and feuded amongst themselves for generations. They had also struggled for decades with

pastoral leadership that failed to resolve their issues and against which they chafed. When all this grappling for power had brought them to a place where there was very little left to struggle for, they finally showed the maturity of character needed to name their core issue and honestly address how they wanted to face it.

The members of Market Street Church who went on to form a new church start have begun to test the unknown potential of this approach to congregational transitions. They adopted a Living Will in their third year just as membership was beginning to trend upward. In that case, the Living Will provided markers not only for potential closure due to financial and membership attrition but also for potential division due to dramatic growth. This new congregation has identified their relative smallness as an essential characteristic and strength of their ministry and has used the Living Will as an instrument to provide for the opportunity to give birth to another new church start. That would be a very different kind of death-like transition, but an intentionally chosen path nonetheless.

The language we choose along the way is always important. I believe that Market Street's four-year journey through the Valley of the Shadow was made less fearful and more manageable by our focus on the opportunity for spiritual growth that the valley provided. We knew that passing through the Valley of the Shadow would bring about the closure of the church. We also knew that we as individuals would emerge to seek new faith experiences elsewhere. What kind of disciples would we be when we joined our next community of faith? What old habits would be left behind?

This is the richness of the Living Will approach to church closure. It allows the church's leaders to deal realistically and specifically with the massive work of closing a church, while creating the context within which the members can undertake the faith examination and self-awareness process that will lead them into new pastures. If the Living Will is adopted prior to the "eleventh hour" there will be time for creative acts of pastoral care and celebrations of farewell.

This case study is offered with the hope that other congregations will find in it the seeds of possibility, the provocations for conversation and further inquiry, and the invitation to consider congregational life in previously unimagined ways.

APPENDIX A

**Guiding Questions for Congregant Interviews**

*The following questions were used as guides during the course of the congregant interview, each of which lasted for a minimum of ninety minutes. Not every interviewee responded directly to each question, and the questions were not addressed in the listed order in all interviews.*

Describe the life and ministry of Market Street Church in early 1999.

Describe the Living Will process a you experienced it.

Do you know what “died” for you and when that death occurred?

For whom do you think this process was most difficult or negative? What could be done differently?

For whom do you think this process was most productive or positive?

Do you know anyone (any congregation) presently to whom you would recommend this process?

Do you know anyone (any congregation) presently to whom you would *not* recommend this process?

If you were to find yourself involved in another dying church, would you be willing to go through this Living Will process again?

How would you alter the process to improve it of make it more meaningful/positive?



APPENDIX B

**MARKET STREET CHURCH LIVING WILL**

Process: In the Living Will process the congregation establishes its own church life transition markers in accordance with denominational and regional judicatory regulations.

Product: The Living Will document can be quite simple. Here is the actual covenant utilized by Market Street Church:

<p><b>Market Street Church</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Living Will of the Congregation</i></p> <p>We, the members of Market Street Church, wishing to be faithful to our purpose and calling as a community of faith set forth the following conditions as definitive markers for our termination as a congregation meeting at Market Street Church, York, PA</p> <p>We set these markers as indicators that our members' faithful gathering as a Body of Christ for worship and service to others at Market Street Church, York, PA is complete.</p> <p>We set these markers in covenant with all those who are now and ever have been members of Market Street, asserting our conviction that God is calling us on to new times and places for worship and service.</p> <p>Upon the realization of any of the following markers, we, the members of Market Street Church, shall call a congregational meeting – allowing for the constitutionally required two weeks notice – and shall hold a vote of closure. A simple majority shall carry the vote.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. When nine members of the congregation can not be found to serve on the Council. That is, whenever the Council convenes for business without nine members having been elected/appointed.</li><li>2. When the total membership reaches seventy-five.</li><li>3. When the total cash assets of the congregation reaches \$25,000.</li><li>4. If by June 30, 2001, we have not called a permanent Pastor.</li><li>5. If at any point we have been without a called or designated pastor for a period of two years.</li></ol> <p>Upon such a vote of closure, the congregation shall hold only one additional service - for the purpose of farewell - after which it shall cease to gather for worship at Market Street Church, York, PA henceforth, and members shall be encouraged to apply their talents and gifts to the faith community of their choosing.</p> <p>Membership of home-bound members shall be retained by the congregation unless otherwise directed.</p> <p>The property of Market Street Church shall be sold and any portion of the assets to be distributed shall be allocated in accordance to the will of the voting members of the congregation present at the time of the vote of closure.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Adopted by the congregation, February 6, 2000; Amended, 2002.</i></p>
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APPENDIX C

MARKET STREET CHURCH SERVICE OF CLOSURE

THE CHIME HERALD

THE LIGHTING OF THE ALTAR CANDLES

THE INVOCATION

THE PROCESSIONAL HYMN OF GATHERING AND PRAISE

THE WELCOMING OF THE PEOPLE

THE CALL TO CONFESSION AND INTROSPECTION

One: If we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

**All: If we confess our sins, God's mercy restores us and calls us to a higher path.**

THE PRAYER OF CONFESSION

One: For the sins we have committed and the wrongs we have brought to pass,

**All: Forgive us, O God.**

One: For the love we have withheld and the beauty we have callously passed by,

**All: Forgive us, O God.**

One: For the cruel words that we have spoken and the kind praise that has not escaped our lips,

**All: Forgive us, O God.**

One: For the days ahead and the miles of discipleship we have yet to travel,

**All: Prepare us, heal us and restore us, O God. Amen.**

THE ASSURANCE OF GOD'S LOVE

One: God's love receives us, restores us, and requires that we show love to others in return.

**All: Thanks be to God. Amen.**

THE HYMN

THE PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

**Open our eyes, O God, that we might see the potential before us. Open our mouths, dear Lord, that we might become voices of courage. Open our hearts, O Wisdom, that we might know how to live in peace with your creatures, everywhere. Amen.**

THE READINGS

Micah 6:1-8, Romans 12:1-18, and Matthew 5:1-16.

THE MEDITATION

THE SERVICE OF COMMUNION

Invitation to the Table:

Come, all who wish to participate in this act of remembrance. Come, you who seek to unite yourselves with justice. Come, as a community of faith, to the table of the Christ who commanded that we love ourselves, our neighbors, and even our enemies as an act of obedience to the Eternal.

Communion Prayer:

One: We give you thanks, Eternal God, for your grace over all creation.

**All: We praise you for the beauty and bounty of the earth, and for the vision of the day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none.**

One: We rejoice in your faithfulness and confess humbly our need for healing and forgiveness.

**All: We pray for your restoring presence to be upon each of us, and upon all your created realm. May this meal of sharing and remembrance renew in us a sense of commitment to our calling to be your stewards of the earth and your servants to all who are in need.**

One: We thank you for the life and example of Jesus our Christ, and we celebrate the gift of good news we know through him. We ask that through the symbols of the bread and the wine, we might find the courage to live as he lived, and to know you as he knew you.

**All: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but**

deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

**Amen.**

Sharing of the Elements at the Altar Rail

*(Note: We chose to utilize small groups sharing communion together  
at the altar rail as an especially meaningful act of community.)*

\* Prayer of Thanksgiving:

**Bountiful God, we give you thanks that you have refreshed us at your table by  
granting us the presence of Christ. Strengthen our faith, increase our love for one  
another, and send us forth into the world with courage and peace, rejoicing in the  
power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

THE LITANY OF CLOSURE

One: We remember the hearts, the hands, the lives that have transformed this building of glass  
and wood into a church of faith and witness. We remember the Deacons and Elders and  
Pastors who have served us and led us and challenged us throughout the years.

**All: We give you thanks, O God.**

One: We remember the decades of struggle and the decisions that were difficult; the  
perspectives that changed, the learning we did, the growing we experienced. We  
remember the children who were baptized, the youth who were confirmed, and the adults  
of all ages who were married in this place.

**All: We give you thanks, O God.**

One: We remember the funerals and all the members who have grown old here. We remember  
the personal struggles and triumphs we have shared together. We remember the  
confessions that were made and the forgiveness that was granted.

**All: We give you thanks, O God.**

One: We remember the good we did and the good we failed to do; the community events and the ministries of caring. We remember the fun, the games, the meals and the meetings we shared.

**All: We give you thanks, O God.**

One: We remember all these things and pledge to carry the memories in our hearts as we move from this place into new times and new places. We are sisters and brothers, together, united in faith and in journey.

**All: Amen.**

#### THE ANTHEM

#### THE REMOVAL OF THE ARTICLES OF WORSHIP

*(Note: We chose to lead our recessional hymn with the following symbols:*

*Pulpit Bible, altar cross, hymnal, communion chalice, offering plate, and church banner.)*

#### \* THE RECESSIONAL HYMN

Let the people follow the articles of worship as they leave the sanctuary. Please recess through the narthex and gather on the sidewalk. Please carry all personal belongings with you as you will not be returning. The doors will be locked behind us.

#### \* THE PRAYER OF PARTING

#### \* THE CHORAL BENEDICTION AND DEPARTURE

*(Note: We chose to sing an old familiar hymn, "God Be With You Till We Meet Again" as our benediction. The congregation stood in a circle with the articles of worship in the center as they sang.)*

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**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

Records from Market Street Church Council, committee minutes, church archives, and other administrative documents.