

Church Closure Process

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 There are times when, for one reason or another, a local church will be concerned about its future. It is much better for these concerns to be voiced, rather than ignored. By raising these concerns, you are not admitting defeat or failure. You are fulfilling your obligations as church members by placing your situation before God in prayer, giving thanks for the devotion, service, and faith of those followers of Christ that went before you, and being open to where the Spirit may lead you next.

1.2 At such a time the church / elders' meeting should share their concerns with the Synod Pastoral Committee who will support the church with prayer, advice and guidance as needed.

1.3 In the case of an LEP the principles included here will be of help, but the church will also need to include the Synod and/or County Denominational Ecumenical Officer and their equivalent in any partner denominations, in the conversations.

1.4 Even though this is called the 'Church Closure Process' taking the first step does not mean closing is inevitable. Raising the issue, having the conversations, and exploring possibilities may lead to starting on a new path rather than closure.

2. HAVING THE DISCUSSION

2.1 When these concerns first appear in some form on the elders' meeting agenda:

- Hold before God in prayer the situation, fellowship and surrounding community.
- Consider where the church might be in five years' time.
- Distinguish between a church ceasing to meet as a worshipping community, the body of people, and closing a building. One can happen without the other.
- The church (body of people) may they wish to dispose of the premises, but meet elsewhere, such as in a community space, or a building of another denomination.
- The church may consider uniting with another URC, either to make 'one church on two sites' or to unite on one site. Would the church benefit from uniting with another local church of another denomination?
- If it is the management of a building that is the issue, it is worth considering whether the church could continue without such a millstone. Is it a lack of people to serve as officers, to deal with policies/compliance, and might that burden be eased by uniting?
- Look at mission, ministry, finance, buildings, and membership.
- Request support from the Synod Pastoral Committee.

2.2 As the Synod Pastoral Committee comes alongside and the conversations continue:

- Hold before God in prayer the situation, fellowship and surrounding community.
- Consider setting up a steering group with Minister / Interim Moderator, two or three Elders, and members of the Synod Pastoral Committee.
- Maybe send a questionnaire to members and wider church family about the situation and possible ways forward.
- Take time to consider all possibilities - explore every alternative and listen for the Spirit's guidance.
- Circulate a list of all possibilities, including closure.
- Keep all members and the wider church family fully informed about what is happening or being explored, especially those who do not attend Church Meetings. Use every possible means to do this e.g. hand-outs, Sunday notices, magazines etc. so that no one can justifiably say, "We did not know".
- Accept that this process will take time and that people might change their minds.

3. MAKING THE DECISION

3.1 By embarking on this discussion your concerns about closure may have been transformed into a creative, effective and transformed way of being church together. If so, the Synod gives thanks and blesses you on your new path.

3.2 If this new path involves the retention of your building and uniting with another URC or a local church of another denomination, your engagement with this closure process is at an end. The Synod Pastoral Committee will of course support you as you follow this path.

3.3 If this new path involves closure or disposing of your building through uniting with another URC or a church of another denomination:

- Discuss the wording of a draft resolution with the Synod Pastoral Committee and the Property Officer for agreement prior to sharing with the membership. (see Draft). There will be a number of legal and technical issues involved, and it is best to clarify those first.
- The elders should reach a unanimous, or agreed, decision to go as a recommendation to the Church Meeting.
- Have a meeting with members and wider church family to discuss the possibility of union or closure but where no decision will be taken.
- Hold the decisive Church Meeting where the vote is taken immediately after a service so that it is in the context of worship. It is important that all members and adherents are given formal notice of this meeting. (See draft Notice of Special Church Meeting)

DRAFT NOTICE OF SPECIAL CHURCH MEETING

NOTICE OF SPECIAL CHURCH MEETING

Formal notice is hereby given to all members and adherents of United Reformed Church, and to other interested parties, of a special church meeting to be held on (Date, Time) at (Venue).

The purpose of the special church meeting is to formalise matters arising from the previous church meeting held on (Date) and the decision to move towards closure as a worshipping congregation and the necessary steps in connection with the proposed disposal of the church premises.

The special church meeting will consider the attached draft Resolution. (Attach draft Resolution as agreed with Synod.)

- Ensure that the Synod Pastoral Committee is aware of the meeting and, if possible, a committee member is present.
- The Church Meeting could vote to have a secret ballot.
- Provide pastoral care for those upset about the decision.
- Complaints may come from previous members who have not attended for years.
- Be prepared for a reaction by families with distant links to the church, or from those whose relations'/friends' ashes have been scattered or buried in the grounds - deal with

these sympathetically. Agree a press statement with Synod should the issue be raised in the local press.

- The power to dissolve a congregation is a function of Synod. The local church should ask Synod for its approval to close and with that approval so resolve. If the members have already done this and dispersed, such a vote is a formality. If a church has dispersed without any Church Meeting resolution, the Synod needs to declare the congregation formally dissolved from an appropriate date.
- For the closure of a building the usual practice has been to request that the Church meeting passes a resolution under paragraph 2 of the schedule to the URC Act. This is perfectly in order but is not required. If a building is redundant and there is no longer a Church Meeting, it can be disposed of under paragraph 5.

4. IMPLEMENTING THE DECISION

4.1 Making the decision to close or dispose of a building through uniting with another URC or a church of another denomination is not the final act of a church meeting or the respective elders meeting.

4.2 The membership and wider church family may be grieving, moving on from a building in which their lives have revolved around for many years.

4.3 Other considerations:

Pastoral Concerns

- Decide whether the fellowship is going to move on as a group or go their separate ways.
- Give people time and space.
- Acknowledge the need to grieve.
- Recognise the need to find a new spiritual home – encourage people to try several churches.
- Continue to provide pastoral care until people are settled in a new church.
- The Church Secretary should arrange for certificates of transfer for those members who wish to join other churches.
- Be aware of the extra needs of people ill or bereaved at the time of closure.
- Ensure the housebound continue to receive pastoral care/home communion etc.
- Realise that there will be a loss of network to pass round news e.g., of deaths.
- Hold at least two Elders' Meetings after closure.

Disposal of Contents

- Any document connected with trusts, charity endowments or ownership of property must be deposited in consultation with the Synod Property Officer. (In the case of LEPs, the denomination responsible for depositing material would normally be the one which owns the building in trust.)

- Contact should be made with the nearest County Record Office / Archives Centre to discuss depositing items (in consultation, and an inventory shared, with the Synod Property Officer) with them such as: registers, minute books, accounts and financial records, membership lists, church magazines, orders of service for special occasions, photographs, records of stained glass, furnishings, banners, interior/exterior of building, memorial tablets, special artefacts, church silver, plate, china, mugs etc, war memorial(s), church histories, memorabilia, memoirs, list of tombs in graveyards, or material from a Time Capsule.
- Elders are authorized to dispose of, by way of gift or sale, the furnishings and other articles in the church buildings as they think fit. The disposal of the communion plate or other valuables, the pews, organ and fixtures and fitting, must be agreed with the Synod Trust via the Property Officer. Any proceeds should be paid into general funds.
- The locally held assets are held for the charitable purposes of the URC. Until the moment of 'closure' they could legally be given for anything supporting the charitable purposes of the URC e.g. to another congregation of the URC. It would not be lawful to give away assets beyond the limits of the charitable purposes of the URC e.g. making financial donations to a dogs' home. Any assets remaining after the point of closure not committed via the closing resolution become the property of the Synod.
- Make sure one person, and one person only, is in charge of the complete list of contents. (Probably the Church Secretary in consultation with the elders' meeting.)
- Nothing should be given, promised, or taken without this person being consulted.
- Keep a detailed register of all gifts, donations and recipients of the objects/contents.
- Be sensitive when disposing of any items. Consult donors or their relatives and consider offering things back to them.
- Let the congregation take souvenirs - hymn books, Bibles, plates, cups etc.
- Offer things to local churches - especially those with links including ecumenical ones.
- Consider offering items of interest to a local museum.

Administration

- The Registrar of Births Marriages and Deaths needs to be informed. The church building may no longer be a place of public worship and the church will no longer conduct marriages. The Registrar will give instructions.
- General advice on archives and record keeping can be found here: <https://urc.org.uk/your-church/guidance-support-for-churches-synods/archive-record-keeping-guidance/>
- Keep the insurance company fully informed of changing situations.
- Give organisations using buildings warning/notice of closure.
- Website, Facebook and email accounts in the "name" of the church should be closed.
- The final Elders Meeting may be three months after closure.
- Be aware of your obligations under GDPR regarding deletion / retention of personal data and to obtain consent before sharing with any third party.

Finance

- Transfer any money in High Interest Accounts to the current account as closure approaches.
- Make a full list of all Direct Debits & Standing Orders.
- Notify regular payees that the account is to be closed.
- Assess the funds required to wind up the church's affairs.
- All monies owing to the church to be gathered in.
- Plan to leave at least £100 in the current account. When ALL transactions have cleared, make donations as agreed by the final Church Meeting.
- If thought appropriate, the Elders can make small donations from the church's unrestricted funds.
- Ascertain from bank the correct closing procedure.
- Check for any restrictions on disposal of bequests held in restricted or endowment funds.
- The remaining balances to be paid to the Synod as soon as possible after disposal of the premises.
- All investments to be transferred to the Synod.
- All bank accounts to be closed and final accounts to be prepared not later than three months after the disposal of the premises.
- Final Church Meeting should agree that Elders can accept final statement of accounts.
- The final/closing accounts must be independently examined and then sent to the Synod Finance Officer as soon as possible after the official closure.
- All Church accounts from the previous three years should be scanned and sent electronically to the Synod Finance Officer.
- Following the closure of the church the Synod Trust will take on responsibility for any repairs or expenses relating to maintaining the building / enabling its sale.

Building

- The premises and other assets to remain insured until they are taken over by Synod.
- All necessary action to be taken to comply with health and safety and public liability requirements.
- Any items stored for any other organisation to be returned / collected by the relevant / authorised personnel before the date of the final service.
- Church clearance day to be held to dispose of any remaining items (skip to be hired if necessary).
- External church noticeboards should be removed, or at least have the church name and any contact details taken off.
- All keys to be collected in and handed to the Synod Property Officer.

5. CLOSING SERVICE

- This is the final communal act of the worshipping community.
- If you are uniting (and not retaining your building), this may change the tone of the service but not its necessity.
- Liaise with the Synod Moderator to set the date.
- Plan this as a group.
- Think carefully about who should be asked to preach.
- Involve as many people as possible, including children and young people.
- Consider including reflections on different aspects of the church's history and life.
- Do not assume that the minister (if you have one) will want to do too much in this service.
- Make a list of who should be invited e.g. past ministers, regular lay preachers, ecumenical neighbours, civic representatives and the wider community.
- Have something for people to take away from the service. Take these to people who missed the service through illness, etc. and to the housebound.

6. DRAFT RESOLUTION – to be agreed with the Synod Pastoral Committee and the Property Officer (on behalf of the Trust) prior to sharing with the membership.

At a meeting of the:		United Reformed Church ("the Church")
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Held at:		Date:		Time:	
Chaired by:					

It was proposed and agreed that the Church, being the body of people who assemble here for worship, witness and mission, asks the Eastern Synod, for permission to dissolve itself in accordance with the provisions of (4)A(iii) of the Structure of the United Reformed Church.

1. That the following people:

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- are appointed to wind up the affairs and assets of the Church. The responsibilities include discharging all debts and liabilities and those responsibilities and duties set out in the Eastern Synod Church Closure Process.
- are to be indemnified in respect of all acts and omissions except in the case of malice, recklessness or dishonesty.

2. The church be dissolved from:
3. That the buildings associated with the church (church, halls, manse etc.) be sold.
4. That the following donations (under £1000) be made from the church's unrestricted funds to the following registered charities or United Reformed Churches:

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5. The benefit of any legacies to the church that arise in the future should pass to (name of church) / Eastern Synod. (In the event that the named church has closed then the legacy should pass to Eastern Synod.)
6. The Church asks Eastern Synod, for approval to apply the net assets and sale proceeds entitled to them in the following manner (after payment of debts and liabilities as aforesaid and all other expenses):

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- the remainder shall be entrusted to Eastern Synod for the purposes of the United Reformed Church.

Signed, for the Church Meeting:

Chair		Print	
Secretary		Print	
Treasurer		Print	
		Date:	

7. VACATING A CHURCH BUILDING CHECKLIST

Please complete for every building associated with your church i.e. hall/manse/other residential.

CHURCH NAME			
ADDRESS:			
Date of Closure			
ELECTRICITY			
Name of supplier			
Account Number			
Meter reading at date of closure			
Location of meter			
Have you notified the supplier of closure / that you are moving?	YES / NO	Date	
GAS			
Name of supplier			
Account Number			
Meter reading at date of closure			
Location of meter			
Have you notified the supplier of closure / that you are moving?	YES / NO	Date	
LOCAL AUTHORITY			
Local Authority			
Have you notified the LA of closure / that you are moving?	YES / NO	Date	
WATER			
Name of Supplier			
Account Number			
Meter reading at date of closure			
Location of meter/stopcock			
Have you notified the supplier of closure?	YES / NO	Date	

SECURITY SYSTEM (if applicable)			
Supplier			
Account Number			
Alarm code			
Have you notified the supplier of closure?	YES / NO	Date	
TELEPHONE			
Supplier			
Account Number			
Have you notified the supplier of closure?	YES / NO	Date	
TELEVISION / BROADBAND			
Supplier			
Account Number			
Supplier notified of closure?	YES / NO	Date	
DOCUMENTS	(tick or circle)		
Please provide copies of:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Last EICR (5-year electrical test) certificate. If unsatisfactory proof that the remedials have been completed	
	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A	latest Gas Safe certificate, if applicable.	
	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A	Asbestos Survey and Management Plan, if applicable	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fire Risk Assessment	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Property Maintenance log	
Any known disputes boundary/neighbours/others?			
Does the site include a burial ground? YES / NO If it does, is it closed or please provide details of any known reserved plots			

Are there any burials below the church floor?		YES / NO
Provide details of who will hold the keys. (Please label the keys as to which doors they open.)		
To the best of your knowledge please provide details of any issues, problems, idiosyncrasies and details of any other service contracts on these premises.		
Signed:		Print:
Date		
Please return this form to: resources@urceastern.org.uk or by post to: URC Eastern Synod FAO The Property Officer 36 Duxford Road, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire CB22 4ND		