



Myth Busters: Church Closings

If our primary purpose as a synod is to be the church better and stronger together than we can be apart, then it's no secret that one of the biggest challenges we face in the NC Synod today is the number of congregations that struggle with their very viability. At last count, we had about 108 congregations out of 203 total in our synod with average worship under 100. Of those 108, 57 of them have average worship of under 50. No, of course it's not all about the numbers. Yes, small congregations are blessed expressions of the church in their own way. Still, the practicality of providing pastoral leadership for worship and pastoral care continues to be a financial challenge for many of these 108.

I am finding over and over a pretty huge misunderstanding of our "polity." That word means "a form or process of governance." Same root word as "politics." I have since Christmas heard from four different congregations great concern that "the bishop is coming to shut us down." One even had the whole motive for the supposed fateful visit: "The synod gets our property if we close. The synod wants your property and all your assets. They get it all if you close, so they want you to close." Such an understanding makes the NC Synod office and staff not allies, but adversaries.

The truth about our polity is that we are almost entirely congregational; that is, congregations get to decide almost everything. Short of a bona fide heresy, a sexual misconduct, or a financial impropriety, there is hardly anything the synod or the bishop can "make" a congregation do. Not same-gender weddings. Not buy the new worship book. Not "force" a pastor on you that you don't want. And we can't close a congregation unless they vote to close.

I found out recently in a visit to one council that their supposition that I was there to close them came from a sheet called "8 Options for Struggling Congregations" produced by the ELCA and widely used by our synod staff. Option #1 is Redevelopment, a competitive application process through which the ELCA grants money. There are various options about being satellites of larger congregations, merging or yoking (sharing a pastor) with another small congregation, etc. Option 8 is "Holy Closure." Somebody had seen #8 and decided that this was the ultimate conclusion of the synod strategy—to close congregations. Not so.

We are, in fact, in conversation with three congregations right now who are discerning possible closing. Each of them approached our synod office and asked our input and guidance in their discernment as to whether or not this is the right thing. We will gladly walk with them and facilitate discussions. We will tell them that only undesignated assets AFTER the vote to close revert to the NC Synod. Even if there are only two people left in the congregation, they get to vote on what will become of the property, buildings, money, furnishings, and other assets—within legal limits. We will suggest to them some possibilities they might want to consider, including a portion of their assets to start new congregations, but ultimately they get to decide. It's how we roll—our polity.

Walking with you,

Bishop Timothy Smith



North Carolina Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.