



Empty Houses: A Pastoral Approach To Congregational Closures
By Mike Jones

Booksurge, Charleston, 2004, \$20.

For many, *church closure* conjures up a mundane picture of financial setbacks leading to shutting the doors of a church building or rented worship facility. But Jones will have none of this. To live in the reality of church closure, is to see not facilities, but rather an empty house i.e. a large family broken up forever. Immediately the book takes on an excitement and vibrancy because it is really about hurting humanity facing a wilderness of change and uncertainty and needing an alternative route that leads to a viable future.

Jones flashes before us an image of a death, an open coffin, and of all that follows: grief, loss, bewilderment, anger and denial. He fully recognizes that with every church closure, there are individual members and participants whose lives, energies, emotions are deeply fused. Therefore the sense of loss is only too palpable and often very intense. Not only is the worshipper strongly tied to the people, but also to the history of that church family and all the symbols, memories, keepsakes, and fixtures that were part of it.

Jones work maps a way through to the day of closure and beyond. It takes us through the stages of diagnosis, decision, planning for closure, and planning for conflict. Amidst this mapped out journey is ever the need for a pastoral heart, and a form of care not greatly removed from the palliative care administered to those moving to the day of death. The deeply committed member of a church about to close may experience in events before the closure a kind of approaching death, but after closure a grief not greatly different from those who grieve the loss of loved ones. By way of such comparisons Jones transports the reader out of the realm of misconception. Church closure can no longer be seen as a routine affair akin to the closing of a retail outlet.

The map Jones gives us is at present a rare one. Irving Hexham calls it a *pioneering effort* *Books on church growth are ten a penny. This is the only book I know on church closures. As such it is a pioneering effort to address a much neglected subject that has become a taboo among clergy and laity alike.*

Jones makes us keenly aware that church closure should involve a large measure of

transparency and embrace all concerned. Nor does Jones make the error of assuming that the embrace should not exceed those immediately concerned. On the contrary he has much to say about the need for support and assistance from the congregations and leaders of the denomination at large.

Jones has not given us a map to abstract for practical use. Quite the contrary, it is filled with administrative insights and an ever present awareness that church closures require difficult decisions that will not please all concerned.

The balanced integration of compassion and realism that accompanies every page is in itself high commendation for this pioneering work. Though Jones is here focusing on church closure, much of the insight and approach to human beings individually and collectively could be utilized to remedy a wealth of church family projects, issues and conflicts.

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See also the *Western Standard* review of this book at:
<http://www.westernstandard.ca/website/article.php?id=22>