Mission Day

Church Planting:
Re-Planting Churches

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https://www.swbaptists.org.uk/pathways

Our vision as a national Baptist movement is to "grow healthy churches in relationship for God's mission"[1]. We believe our churches are called to be Beacons of Hope[2] in their communities, sharing the good news of Jesus in the places he has put us. Our national Baptist Union of over 1,800 churches is supported by staff in thirteen regional associations and four national specialist teams based in Didcot, Oxfordshire. We presently have 87 churches in the South West Baptist Association (Devon, Cornwall, most of Somerset, and a small slice of Dorset).

BUT…

The number of our churches and members has fallen in recent times – in the SWBA we have closed five churches since the COVID pandemic - and this trend looks set to continue, not least of all because of the changing demographics in our churches. Simply put, our church congregations are getting older – a demographic time-bomb - and smaller. Today, 10% of our churches nationally already have less than ten members and in some Associations half of their churches have less than 10 members (10% in SWBA). Nationally, nearly half of our members are over 60 years of age and overall our membership has fallen by 10% since 2019.

1 – https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/226987/Vision_and_Values.aspx
2 - https://www.baptist.org.uk/Group/Group.aspx?ID=220180

Closing churches is extremely sad for those who have given their lives to them. Some have a family history going back generations who have 'hatched, matched & dispatched' in the church. Many can remember coming to faith and being baptised in their local chapel. These places have become important in the discipleship journeys of hundreds of fellow Christians over many, many years.

Some would say there's no reason to keep a church open if that Christian community (and the chapel they use) have come to the end of their witness and usefulness in the mission of God. Sometimes, that might be true. But sometimes we close churches when we're convinced there remains great Kingdom value if a Christian community was to remain there, resourced by a building of some kind that is being used for God mission.

We should care greatly if we lose a church within our Association family; for those few members who are left who must find new communities of faith to belong to, but especially if the witness for Christ in that community is diminished or disappears.

Practically speaking, in a Baptist context, once a church officially closes their

building must be sold and the proceeds of sale distributed according to the ‘ultimate trust deeds’ on the building(s). In reality, no more than 50% of the proceeds of sale stays in the area to be recycled for Kingdom use. After years of faithful giving by God’s people to establish and maintain a building as a place of worship and witness in a community, tens if not hundreds of thousands of pounds is lost to the witness for Christ in that community. The remaining proceeds of sale normally go to the building’s trust managers, in most cases the Baptist Union Corporation, who spend a considerable amount of money managing the building's trust deeds and offering specialist legal advice on matters involving the building.

1. **Allow 'nature to take it's course',** accepting this is simply the natural life-cycle of every church, and accepting the pastoral and financial consequences of closure.
2. **PRAY**(!) and discern if the Lord still has plans and purposes for that Christian community. If so, what part will you and/or your church play in the ongoing witness for Christ in that place? >
3. > **Commission and send a team** from your membership to become part of the church at risk of closure; in doing so, strengthen their ministry, their witness, and their finances.
4. Or… **form a relational, covenantal partnership** with the struggling church. Just as you keep in contact with, pray for, and give to an overseas missionary, do the same for the church at risk of closure. Believe that God's Spirit is at work and by walking together and watching over each other in Christ's love, new life will be born in both churches.
5. If the Christian community looks like it is coming to an end, but the church building(s) (or the financial resource they represent) are still useful for the witness for Christ in that community, talk with the Association about forming a '**Missional Steering Group'** to save the church from closure and therefore avoid the necessary sale of the buildings. A 'Missional Steering Group' is

basically a new group of Member/Trustees of the church who satisfy the governance structures according to the church's legal constitution, and who would then be able to discern how the Lord might be leading to use that building (or one that may replace it) for the witness for Christ in that community for the next season.

6. **Get creative!** Could part of the building (or a building that replaces it) be used to generate an income that could then be used to support missional ministry in that community?[1] Or could the building itself be used differently to engage in new ways with the local community?[2]

7. E.g. 1 – Social Housing – see 'Faith in Affordable Housing' - https://housingjustice.org.uk/faith-in-affordable-housing-England
8. E.g. 2 – Urban Abbey – see the story of 'Bonny Downs Baptist Church' (especially from 3:40mins) - https://youtu.be/UV8_0FfrVrk?si=yDIja4saAn-Otzgc

Do you know of a Baptist church in your area that may be at risk of closing due to a small membership and/or limited resources?

Might the Holy Spirit be prompting you/your church to partner with them, send a team, and/or offer expertise (in mission, ministry or governance) that would bring new life to their witness for Christ?

Are you part of a church that may need to consider partnership with another Baptist church fairly soon to strengthen the missional witness to your community?

Do you have loads of creative ideas about how we might recycle the Kingdom resources held in old chapels?

Please contact Carl to chat through options and opportunities – carl@swbaptists.org.uk