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### 'Losing a common space to connect'

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Hendrik Pieter de Roest

## “Losing a Common Space to Connect”: An Inquiry into Inside Perspectives on Church Closure Using Visual Methods

**Abstract:** Church closures are often charged with emotions. People feel grief over losing a cherished place. But what is it people treasure? What characterizes their affective bonds of attachment to the building? These are the first interrelated questions addressed in the research behind this article. Second, we try to understand these feelings by interpreting them in relationship to research about anticipated loss and to theory formation about the attachment to places in general and sacred places in particular. In order to get an answer to our questions, an explorative case study was designed in a Dutch congregation, focusing on the period of nine months before the fixed date of the closure. The primary method used was photo-reflection, a method of gathering data from respondents who reflect on pictures. It was applied to depict the values that churchgoers attribute to the church building when they have been informed that the building is about to be closed down.

**Zusammenfassung:** Kirchenschließungen sind manchmal emotional angespannt. Die Menschen erfahren, dass sie etwas verlieren, wenn ein Kirchengebäude schließen wird. Sie haben Kummer über den Verlust von einem geschätzten Ort. Aber was schätzen die Menschen eigentlich? Was charakterisiert die affektive Gebundenheit an das Gebäude? Das sind die ersten Fragen, die beantwortet werden in der empirischen Untersuchung, die diesem Artikel zugrunde liegt. Zweitens versuchen wir diese Gefühle zu verstehen mit Hilfe von Theorien über antizipierten Verlust und über Bindung an Orte. Der Autor präsentiert die Ergebnisse einer explorativen Fallstudie, entwickelt in einer Niederländischen Kirchengemeinde, in der er fokussiert auf die neun Monate vor der Kirchenschließung. Die primäre Methode war Foto-Reflektion, eine Methode um Daten zu sammeln von Befragten, die Fotos kommentieren. Mit dieser Methode war es möglich, die Werte, die Kirchenbesucher dem Kirchengebäude zumessen, zu beschreiben.

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## Introducing the research topic

“It may be just as interesting to study dying congregations as flourishing ones. There is much to be learned from them.”<sup>1</sup> In Western Europe and the United States, dying congregations are not uncommon and constitute a field of research which is an important locus of inquiry. A dying congregation creates a situation or episode that is highly instructive. As both Bruner and Swidler have argued, a situation in which the ordinary and habitual are unsettled is a “fertile location for observing the construction of new narratives.”<sup>2</sup> Grace Davie points out that under the pressure of an anticipated loss, “the implicit becomes explicit.”<sup>3</sup> In dying congregations, for example, physical artefacts (the church building, symbolic objects) and specific practices connected with them may assume a new or intensified significance when their loss is imminent. Research into place attachment suggests that people can become conscious of their feelings about a place, particularly in situations where change occurs, such as times of transition or relocation.<sup>4</sup> In the same way, an expected church closure can cause people to become more conscious of the building. We may therefore expect that the values associated with a church building will be explicitly named when the building is about to be closed.

## Common traits

Each closure has a different and sometimes complicated story to tell. Still, these stories show common traits.<sup>5</sup> Earlier research in this field, which is quite scarce,

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1 Matthew. F. Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead, eds., *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, Aldershot, UK (Ashgate Publishing) 2004, xvii.

2 Nancy T. Ammerman and Roman R. Williams, *Speaking of Methods: Eliciting Religious Narratives through Interviews, Photos and Oral Diaries*, in: *New Methods in the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Luigi Berzano and Ole Riis, vol. 3 of *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, Leiden (Brill) 2012, 130.

3 Grace Davie, *Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge*, in: *Everyday Religion. Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2007, 29.

4 Lynn C. Manzo, *Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places*, in: *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23, no. 1, 2003, 53.

5 Beth Ann Geade, ed., *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, Bethesda, MD (Alban Institute) 2002; H. Bisseling, H.P. de Roest and P. Valstar, *Meer dan hout en steen: Handboek voor het sluiten en herbestemmen van kerkgebouwen*, Zoetermeer (Boekencentrum) 2011.

and my examination of the rather extensive media attention (newspapers, websites) demonstrate that these processes are often charged with emotions for both pastors and members.<sup>6</sup> Depending on the duration and intensity of experiences, the building has become significant for both regular and non-regular churchgoers. For many it has become a precious place. Individuals have grown up with the church building, some from infancy, some from marriage, through the baptism, confirmation and marriage of their own children, and, for some, through the death and burial of a spouse or child. There are those to whom the building, or a particular part of it, is a source of sacred connection to a departed loved one. To them, to lose their church means loss of a regular contact with sacred memories.<sup>7</sup> According to Jennifer Clark, a church building supports and sustains religious, congregational, personal, and community memory. These memories sit as “inter-connected platforms in accommodating tension until church closure triggers a displacement and a reconstitution of memory.”<sup>8</sup>

Through my inquiries into Dutch newspaper articles and websites I found that members do not always understand why their church has to close down.<sup>9</sup> What is euphemistically labelled as ‘cooperation’ with another congregation is sometimes experienced as being absorbed by it. Losing their building can fuel, among other emotions, a sense of anger among churchgoers toward church authorities, whom they perceive as betraying them.<sup>10</sup> There is not always permission and safe space in which people can express their emotions. Also there is not always adequate time given to say goodbyes. Many are too timid to confront ecclesiastical authority.

In church closure processes it also seems to be common that the leadership thinks it necessary to accelerate the process in order to avoid too much emotion. Often the leadership also denies the importance of place in theological terms.<sup>11</sup> But then, the perceived time pressure and the theological legitimating cause problems. People do not feel acknowledged in their attachment and their grief.

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**6** Tanya S. Rasmussen, *The Members’ Experience*, in: *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, Bethesda, MD (Alban Institute) 2002, 45; N. Nelson Granade, *The Pastor’s Experience*, in: *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede, Bethesda, MD (Alban Institute) 2002, 55; Jennifer Clark, ‘This Special Shell’: The Church Building and the Embodiment of Memory, in: *Journal of Religious History* 31, no. 1, 2007, 70f.

**7** Clark (n. 6), 61.

**8** *Ibid.*, 60.

**9** *Friesch Dagblad*, June 19, 2010, 1.

**10** *Leeuwarder Courant*, Feb. 9, 2011; *Trouw*, Sept. 2, 2011; *Nederlands Dagblad* Nov. 13, 2012; *Tubantia*, Dec. 17, 2012.

**11** Cf. Clark (n. 6), 71f.

Precisely this feeling of not being heard may cause the closure of the building to act as an accelerator of membership decline.

For the pastors who guide others through the joys and pains of life, it turns out to be especially difficult, being simultaneously part of the decision-making and being the advocate of the faith community.<sup>12</sup>

Often, emotional resistance against closure also occurs among the wider public.<sup>13</sup> The public feels a unique landmark in their area is about to be lost or, in terms of what Grace Davie labels as ‘vicarious religion’, a place will disappear “where religion is performed by a minority on behalf of a much larger number, in a ritually, morally and believing way.”<sup>14</sup> Davie underlines the “symbolic importance of the church building both for the community of which it is part and, in many cases, for the wider public.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, a large majority of the Dutch population states that the government should guarantee that at least one church building will remain in each village or city. A majority of the population also wants to be able to make use of the church’s services at threshold moments in life, like birth, marriage and death.<sup>16</sup> In The Netherlands, since the early 70’s, we have often observed how civic committees were formed to oppose a proposed closure. Sometimes these committees, consisting of both churchgoers and unchurched villagers or city dwellers, were successful. Protests led to the decision being postponed or reconsidered, and, in a number of cases, to the church being taken over or reopened. Resistance in other situations, however, often produced greater loss than gain.

## Reasons for church closure

We need not ponder extensively on the reasons for church closure in Western Europe and The Netherlands in particular. Mainstream churches are facing declining support with little expectation of the trend reversing.<sup>17</sup> The demo-

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<sup>12</sup> Granade (n. 6), 57f.

<sup>13</sup> “Our villages should go to the bishop with all their brass bands and they should sound the horn until the bishop comes out of his house.” De Gelderlander, June 30 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Davie (n. 3), 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> J.W. Becker and J. De Hart, *Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuiving in de binding met de kerken en de christelijke traditie*, Den Haag (SCP) 2006, 17; T. Bernts, G. Dekker and J. De Hart, *God in Nederland 1996–2006*, Kampen (Ten Have) 2007, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Becker and De Hart (n. 16), 40ff. C.J.A. Sterckens, *Church Development in the Netherlands: Socio-Religious Changes in Relation to the Development of a Pastoral Discipline*, in: *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13 no. 1, 2009, 144ff.

graphics of church connection are weakening. On a macro level, it suffices here to mention briefly the impact of secularization, the shift from a culture of duty to a culture of choice or from ‘obligation’ to ‘consumption’,<sup>18</sup> changing patterns of institutional commitment in society at large causing *long-term commitments* to face-to-face associations to wane,<sup>19</sup> generational changes in attitudes to participation,<sup>20</sup> people re-imagining themselves in ways no longer Christian,<sup>21</sup> many people no longer needing the church in order to deal with existential questions,<sup>22</sup> a rejection of moral authorities outside the self,<sup>23</sup> and a process that is labelled as ‘inner secularisation’, i.e. the phenomenon of unbelief within the church.<sup>24</sup> On a meso level, there is the influence of demographic changes in the physical or local context of the church building.<sup>25</sup> Several congregations suffer the impact of local conditions, like a changing religious ecology, for example due to a transforming ethnicity in the neighbourhood. Nancy Ammerman asserts that “congregations that do not try new programs and new forms of outreach when they are faced with environmental change are not likely to survive past the life spans of their current members.”<sup>26</sup> We add that the church leadership has also often responded inadequately to all the aforementioned changes. On a micro level, disappointments with pastoral care, worship or other practices of faith have also lead to a decline in both attendance and membership. We must also say that we cannot speak about closures without the abuse crisis coming into it. All of these trends put

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**18** Davie (n. 3), 281.

**19** Paul Dekker, *Vrijwilligerswerk vergeleken. Vrijwilligerswerk en de civil society III*, Cahier 154, Den Haag, (SCP), 1999. Joep de Hart, *Maak het nieuw. Over religieuze ontwikkelingen en de positie van de kerken*, Den Haag (SCP), 2011, 46.

**20** Peter Hall, *Social Capital in Britain*, in: *British Journal of Political Science* 29, 1999, 417–461. Cf. Paola Grenier and Karen Wright, *Social Capital in Britain*, in: *Policy Studies* 27, no. 1, 2006, 27–53.

**21** Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800–2000*, London (Routledge) 2001, 181ff.

**22** Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2004.

**23** Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Malden (Blackwell) 2005; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 2007, 475. However, Charles Taylor argues contra Heelas that “being allergic to moralism” does not necessarily contradict “heeding and conforming to a source of significance which ultimately transcends the life of this world.” Taylor, 509.

**24** G. Dekker, *Belonging without Believing*, in: *Religie & Samenleving* 4, no. 1, 2009, 5–15.

**25** Rein Brouwer, *Geloven in gemeenschap. Het verhaal van een protestantse geloofsgemeenschap*, Kampen (Kok) 2010, 186.

**26** Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregations and Community*, New Brunswick (Rutgers University Press) 1997, 323.

financial pressure on the congregation. A decision by church sessions or bishops to close a building is usually made as a result of the church being in a permanent state of slow and seemingly inevitable demise, by an accompanying diminishing of resources, i.e., lack of funds and staggering repair bills, and no energy for renewal. We deliberately write ‘usually’, since closure can also happen as a result of two congregations merging to experience the benefits of a larger congregation.

## Some general figures of the two major churches in the Netherlands

In terms of the basic resources needed for church vitality, i.e. members, leadership (professional and volunteers), money and time,<sup>27</sup> the two major churches in The Netherlands, the Protestant Church in The Netherlands (PCN) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) demonstrate an overall process of shrinking during the last four decades. From 1970 to 1998, a sharp decline in churchgoing members can be observed. For example, in 1970 regular churchgoing was common among 41% of the population; in 1998 the percentage had decreased to 14% and even to 4% in a city like Amsterdam.<sup>28</sup> During this period congregations crumbled at a high rate. In Amsterdam alone, thirty church buildings have been closed, Protestant and Roman Catholic. What has been the case in Amsterdam has, since the early seventies, been occurring throughout The Netherlands. Church buildings have either been given a new purpose, for example as a shop, cafe, multicultural stage, book store, apartment building or pop temple, or they were demolished. Some have been transformed into heritage sites for historical-religious tourism. Today in The Netherlands, the flood of church closures has not abated. In the last ten years alone, the RCC went from 1782 buildings in 2002 to 1654 in 2012. In roughly the same period, the PCN went from 2877 to 2638 buildings.<sup>29</sup> In ten years from now approximately 25% of the RCC and PCN church buildings will have become superfluous. At a rough estimate, that is about 1050 buildings (out of about 4200) by 2023.

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<sup>27</sup> Helen Cameron, *Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches*, London (SCM Press) 2010, 46 ff.

<sup>28</sup> J.W. Becker and J.S.J. De Wit, *Secularisatie in de jaren negentig. Kerklidmaatschap, veranderingen in opvattingen en prognose*, Den Haag (SCP) 2000, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Bisseling, De Roest and Valstar (n. 5), 14.

## The case study

In 2009 a congregation called ‘The Cornerstone’ (in Dutch: De Hoeksteen), is faced with the upcoming closure of its building. At that time it is one of the nine PCN church buildings in Zwolle, the capital city of the province of Overijssel. In 1982 the church is designed and built as a multifunctional building, paid for by the members of the congregation themselves. The church hall has a hexagonal structure, with the implication that the churchgoers sit around the pastor, in a semicircle. The architect, Cees Groen, is at that time well known for his application of special brickwork: the bricks behind the pulpit represent enormous swarms of little birds. Students of the Academy of Art are involved in the construction of the pulpit, the table and the font. At the time the church is built, the residential area houses many young families. Church membership reflects the demographics of the area. A basement is added to the church, especially for youth. According to a count in 1987, on average there are 340 churchgoers present in a morning service and 70 in the afternoon service. In 1988, the age-group of 35–50 years old is well represented in The Cornerstone. The congregation consists of mid-life families, with a lot of children and youngsters. That year, students who are doing some research in the congregation describe it as a “tranquil liberal community, characterized by openness, tolerance and absence of tensions.”<sup>30</sup> In 2006 its ‘signature’ is described by a trainee as “multiform” and “moderately progressive” and as “an active, vital, lively community.”<sup>31</sup> That year, five years before the closure, on average there are 200 churchgoers per service.

In the fall of 2009 the so-called ‘General Church Session’ of Zwolle faces serious budget problems. Cutbacks of 200.000 Euro per year are considered unavoidable. The session decides to close down one of the church buildings in order to cover the deficit. After much discussion, The Cornerstone is selected. Not long afterwards, in the minutes of a common meeting of The Cornerstone and the neighbouring ‘The Eastside Church’ (in Dutch: De Oosterkerk) held in January 2010, we read: “As a congregation we could not exercise any influence on the process that has finally led to closing down The Cornerstone. We did not have a say in the decision to sell our church. We do want to communicate to the General Church Session, however, what the decision has done to us, how it affects us. Well,

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**30** Jan Kroon and W. Biesheuvel, *Kerkelijke kaart van wijk D van de Gereformeerde Kerk van Zwolle, Kampen* (Theologische Universiteit Kampen) 1988.

**31** Frederik Ziel, *Kerkelijke en sociale kaart van de gemeente De Hoeksteen in de wijken AAlanden en Holtenbroek in Zwolle, Kampen* (Theologische Universiteit Kampen) 2006, 3.



*the decision has caused pain, disappointment and rage. But we also sense resignation and acquiescence....We do think that The Cornerstone in fifteen years time will be too small to continue by itself. It has brought us into conversations with other congregations in Zwolle-North, whereby the Eastside Church proved to be the most promising partner. A common plan will be created to build a whole new congregation together.”* After January 2010, the council of The Cornerstone and its pastor, rev. Margo Jonker, who has been pastor in this congregation from 2000, arranges several meetings to speak about the trajectory of the closure and the prospects of the congregation. The minutes of the meetings in the spring of 2010 and a report of a congregational advisor demonstrate, however, that the main conversation topic is not the past or the feelings that the imminent closure evokes, but the shape, culture and vision of the new congregation that is about to emerge after the closure. The focus in the talks is upon the possibilities for cooperation between the two congregations and the formulation of a common vision for the future. A steering committee examines all the aspects. Both congregations are well-informed in separate meetings. The first joint worship service is held in June 2010, knowing that one year later the congregations will have to be merged. In January 2011, the details of the merger (pastoral care, leadership, diaconal structure etc.) are communicated, both in The Cornerstone and The Eastside Church.

## Entering the field

In August 2010 the three pastors of the two congregations ask me to reflect with them on the future. First, however, we together decide to focus first upon enabling a common process of grief. This is partly as a result of what the pastor of The Cornerstone tells us about her experiences: *“When I came back after a holiday and walked into my church it suddenly struck me. I had to cry. In one year’s time, this will all be gone ...”* We think that a form of research may be helpful to combine their interest in a well-guided process with my interest in learning more about what is at stake when a church building is about to be closed. The church session of The Cornerstone decides in favor of an agreement with me, although the chairman of the council hesitates. Could it not be that my research will trigger too many emotions? After another conversation, I manage to convince him that this research could be exactly what they need.

My research in this congregation takes place from September 2010 until June 2011 and the final leave-taking service is held on June 5<sup>th</sup>. From September to January I read newsletters and the minutes of meetings. With two colleagues I also start editing a comprehensive manual for guiding church

closures.<sup>32</sup> I plan to use photo-elicitation as my primary method. To my surprise I hear that one of the churchgoers, an amateur photographer, has taken more than 200 pictures of the life of the congregation in the years 2003–2010. I hope that members will also take pictures themselves but it is helpful that this photographer agrees to take new pictures too. Churchgoers can even ask him to take a special picture for them. I decide that all the respondents should be enabled to add written comments to the photographs that they select. In addition, I will make field notes during a group session in which oral comments about the photographs are exchanged. The congregation plans to organize an exhibition of the photographs, at which I will also make field notes. In December I write a letter to the congregation that is published in the congregation news. I inform the congregation about the project and write: *“I want to ask you to take pictures of something (for example a scene, an object, a part of the building, an angle, etc.) that shows what you will miss most when the building is closed down. In addition, I would like you to tell me what it means to you. You can also pick one or a few pictures out of the pictures taken by Mr. Matsers or ask him to take a picture for you of something that you will miss when the building is closed down.”* In addition the pastor writes about the research project: *“Pictures are fine memories of times gone by. And connected to pictures are always stories. Memories, thoughts, unforgettable moments. This will be true about The Cornerstone too. It is good to share these images and stories together. Therefore, in February and March 2011, we will share pictures and stories of The Cornerstone. It will be about your picture with your own story.”*

## The research method

Photo-elicitation, originally developed in the discipline of anthropology,<sup>33</sup> is employed as the major empirical method, rather than as supplement to a broader-based investigation. I use photo-elicitation to establish a method of “deep cultural probing.”<sup>34</sup> Ammerman and Williams write: “It is curious that visual methods are not more prevalent in the sociology of religion and that the literature in the

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**32** We have called the manual ‘Meer dan hout en steen’ (‘More than wood and stone’), a line from a song that was written for a closing service. Bisseling, De Roest and Valstar (n. 5), 3.

**33** J. Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as Research Method*, Albuquerque (University of New Mexico Press) 1967.

**34** John Rieger, *Teaching Visual Ethnography*, in: *Eyes across the Water: Essays on Visual Anthropology and Sociology*, ed. Robert M. Boonzajer Flaes and Douglas Harper, Amsterdam (Het Spinhuis) 1993, 224.

field does not approach the range of methodological possibilities currently available."<sup>35</sup> As a form of visual anthropology or sociology, photo-elicitation thrusts images into the center of a research agenda, although, I must add, personal comments by participants, both oral and written, make it more capable of "mining deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews."<sup>36</sup> It offers "new and valuable routes to people's experiences, knowledge and values."<sup>37</sup> Photos work as vessels, in which people store up meanings, knowledge or experiences. They serve as windows into the world of research participants. They can evoke memories, feelings, and more in the research participant which might otherwise have been inaccessible,<sup>38</sup> as well as offer an "alternative grammar that is not always encountered or expressible in oral interviews."<sup>39</sup> Until recently, photo-elicitation studies concentrated on areas like identity, community, culture and social class.<sup>40</sup> In 'classic' photo-elicitation, the researcher intentionally presents research participants with photos chosen by the researcher and tries to elicit oral reactions and information.<sup>41</sup> The method that I employ in this project can properly be labeled as *photo-reflection*, since respondents add written and oral comments to their own photographs,<sup>42</sup> as well as select pictures taken by a 'third party.'<sup>43</sup> The photographs are used to elicit responses from participants, to 'draw out' or 'evoke' answers from a person, by asking them to comment both orally and in writing upon the images.<sup>44</sup> I do not use the photographs to invoke discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview.<sup>45</sup> Through the photographs taken or chosen by the participants, I try to learn which

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35 Ammerman and Williams (n. 2), 123.

36 Douglas Harper, Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo-Elicitation, in: Visual Studies 17, no. 1, 2002, 23.

37 Sarah Pink, Doing Sensory Ethnography, London (SAGE) 2009, 94.

38 Ibid., 93.

39 Ibid., 112.

40 Harper (n. 36), 16; for recent application in research on 'lived religion', cf. Nancy Ammerman, Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life, New York (Oxford University Press) 2013.

41 J. Collier, Photography and Visual Anthropology, in: Principles of Visual Anthropology, ed. P. Hockings, 1975, repr., Berlin (Mouton de Gruyter) 1995.

42 Cf. Alice Vera Sampson-Cordle, Exploring the Relationship between a Small Rural School in Northeast Georgia and Its Community: An Image Based Study Using Participant-produced Photographs, PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2001.

43 Marisol Clark-Ibañez, Framing the Social World with Photo-Elicitation Interviews, in: American Behavioral Scientist 47, 2004, 1507–1527.

44 Pink (n. 37), 68.

45 Marcus Banks, Visual Methods in Social Research, London (SAGE) 2001, 87.

parts of the church building or symbols have become important or precious to them and what is at stake in their emotional attachment to them.

## The findings: pictures, written and oral comments

I received written picture-comments from 110 respondents (from a total of on average 150–160 churchgoers), with 79 pictures selected; several are selected more than once (10 pictures 5 times or more). Of the respondents, 47 have been regular churchgoers from the beginning; they have attended the church for 28 years. Another 30 have been attending longer than 10 years (77 > 10 years). More than 80% of the respondents are over 60 years old and 69% of them are female. All the pictures have a written comment, some short, some longer (a few sentences) and I receive one whole letter. In the group session and the exhibition oral comments are added. It turns out that most respondents tell the others what they have written down. Some add a story to their picture, most stick to their text. Already in 1975 the first anthropologist to use the method, John Collier, wrote that “the photographic record can remain wholly impressionistic unless it undergoes disciplined computing.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, I use *Atlas.ti* in order to ‘read’ the pictures, label the quotations and write memos. The first step consists of turning all the labels into a list of codes, both ‘open’ and ‘in vivo’. In total, I distinguish 205 codes. Next, I bundle the codes into clusters by continuous comparing and connecting, with the intent to look for integrating concepts (i.e. values) that glue the ‘elements’ together.<sup>47</sup>

As for the data, first, it turns out that often people choose two or more pictures. They need more than one picture to demonstrate their different attachments. The pictures and comments demonstrate on the one hand an awareness and positive evaluation of a comforting and sustaining community. On the other hand the building has a religious quality in its use of symbols and performance rituals. Pictures seem to refer simultaneously to the social and the sacred. The building enables a community to emerge and symbols and rituals help the sacred to ‘happen’. One respondent even explicitly comments: “*This building enabled a wonderful combination of sociability and faith.*” Another: “*Meditative moments and playful alternately.*”

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<sup>46</sup> Collier (n. 41), 248.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons: A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*, Delft (Eburon) 2010, 120.

Second, I found that churchgoers experiencing church closure look more carefully at symbolic objects and specific *scenes* in the church which assume a new significance for them when their loss is imminent. Of course, I focused the attention of the respondents in a deliberate way, yet it turned out that they were already engaged in this process of careful reflection. The process that I started enforced and made explicit what was already taking place.

Third, the photographs taken by the amateur photographer over several years, helped to evoke emotional memories. They shaped the building into a ‘*lieu de memoire*’.<sup>48</sup> They served to bring back sensory and emotional experiences. In the group session, I observed how the picture-selection enabled the participants to share their feelings and stories with each other, giving them a sense of commonality. Making a comment or telling a story turned out to become a community-strengthening event. I found that the stories were on the one hand related to community events and on the other hand to threshold moments in life, to baptism, marriage or the funeral of a loved one. An example is the story of a woman, commenting on her picture of the remembrance corner. “*This is my picture,*” she says. She shows a picture of the worship centre with the coffin of her daughter and tells the group how she and her husband had experienced God’s comfort during a time of great sorrow, when their daughter had passed away: “*I often went to this spot in the church, I just stood there, and it was a good place. The colours, the light. It reminded me also of the sustenance you gave me, as a community. You stood around us, you know. Now, when we are about to say goodbye to our church, it all comes back to me – the funeral, her illness, your support.*” She falls silent. “*We do have a good memory of her funeral, no matter how sad it was.*” Another woman raises her voice: “*We won’t let you down. We will hold your hand ...*” Everyone is visibly moved. After the group session, one participant says: “*What an enriching evening. I came with a lot tension. I was very upset about it all. But this was very good.*” Another woman, standing at the threshold of the church, hesitating, almost leaving the building, says: “*Now this evening the shell of my grief has been peeled off.*” Based upon pictures, written and oral comments, I am able to construct six concepts that give a picture of the values associated with the church building. To each, I add some quotations.

### 1. “Common Place of Sacred Memories”

The building is valued in relation to joyful life events, like baptism and sorrowful life events. Respondents comment extensively on how the church building en-

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48 Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History. Les Lieux de Mémoire*, in: *Representations* 26, 1989.

ables them to remember the departed. In this respect a so-called ‘remembrance corner’ proves to be particularly valuable. In this corner there is a colourful, stained glass window and a table to which a stone is symbolically carried when it is announced that a church member has passed away. On the one hand this corner communicates a message of God’s goodness and faithfulness; on the other hand it is valued as a place for remembrance, thinking about deceased loved ones.

*“For me this place is precious. It is an image of the everlasting circle of life and God’s faithfulness, lasting forever from birth beyond the threshold of death.”*

*“The whole image of this part of the church will stay in my memory. The remembrance corner especially ‘spoke to me’.”*

*“I treasure this image of Light, an image of God’s goodness in life’s moments.”*

*“The stones that we brought back with us from our trip to the island of Iona are used in the remembrance corner. For me this has always been a very special place.”*

*“I really love these windows and the stones. I often see people standing there who miss someone that they loved.”*

*“All the photographs of the remembrance corner are precious to me. I would love to have them all together on a poster.”*

## 2. “Place of Common Attentiveness and Solidarity”

Placing a light on the table in the worship centre and writing in and reading from the so-called ‘attentiveness book’ is a valued spiritual moment. It particularly focuses people’s attention on those in need outside the church. It encourages them to become committed to people who suffer. It evokes sympathy, a sense of belonging together and of living one’s life in the Light of God...

*“The lights on the table, everyone can see them. Light: commemorating others, Light: sign of the Spirit, Light: in dark situations, sorrow. Light: pointing to the outside world.”*

*“The attentiveness book, together with the lights, are appealing symbols of being dedicated, to each other as fellow members of the church and to the world.”*

*“The book of attentiveness. It was new to me. Together with the moment where we stand, supported, in the remembrance corner. That one is supported with one’s worries... Due to my neurological impediments, I was very well supported here. You really belong here.”*

## 3. “Cherished Welcoming Fellowship”

The building is a treasured place for contact and familiarity. Remarkably, among the respondents who emphasize this value are several widows, who tell how they were welcomed and comforted by the community, for example by being asked to

fulfil a specific task. The joys and sorrows of life can be shared here. A number of different pictures show that the choir, as an inner circle within the community, is especially valued.

*“This is a familiar place where I met my brothers and sisters, shared ups and downs; it is the community that I will miss.”*

*“Due to my neurological impediments, I was very well received here. The picture that I took [of people surrounding people] expresses my sense of belonging.”*

*“This community supported me at the burial of our daughter, and afterwards.”*

*“The choir: such a warm group of people.”*

From my field notes of both the group session and the visual documentary I learn that churchgoers particularly fear that the fabric of the social life of their congregation will be destroyed. Will we still have this sense of sustaining each other in the new merged congregation? Or is our community likely to fall apart? This concern is justified by what I hear at the exhibition. Each participant reconsiders his or relationship to the community. Shall I attend church at the Eastside Church, start hopping from church to church, go to another denomination or quit going to church altogether?

#### 4. “Creative, Unconstrained Atmosphere”

Many different photos show that participants strongly value the informal and unconstrained atmosphere in The Cornerstone. The ample space that is given to children greatly contributes to this cherished, playful and creative atmosphere. Story-telling for children is highly appreciated.

*“Young and old ‘playing’ together. Very informal. Together we are one community, with a lot of creativity.”*

*“Most of the time everything was cheerful, I enjoyed it immensely. It is what church is all about.”*

*“For children in this church, a lot is being organized. The children are all seen, acknowledged, affirmed. It always moved me. Children are given lots of room.”*

*“Children are involved. They cooperate in a fantastic way.”*

*“The room for children has been very important for me. We listen to them with great attention.”*

*“Fantastic, the way children are given freedom. I really cherish the storytelling.”*

The children who contribute to the research choose pictures of the basement of the church, a place to play (‘hide and seek’): *“There are really nice pillows to play on.”*

*“This is where I like to play.” One child adds: “The church hall where we could play tag.”*

##### 5. “Participatory Worship Centre”

The worship centre in The Cornerstone with its intimate semicircle creates a symbolic space for both concentration and participation. It has aesthetic qualities, but also invites the churchgoers to join in, to participate, to belong, to celebrate together. Music plays an important part and several comments explicitly mention the instruments, but also the musicians (organ player, guitarists, choir), always relating them to the space in which they perform. The comments also mention symbols, to which the shape of the worship centre helps to draw attention. Now it may seem that the values attributed to the worship centre are exclusively ‘religious’ or ‘sacred’, but it is particularly the participatory and communal character of the worship centre that is considered enriching. There is a faith community shaped by it.

*“This is my picture: the beautiful worship space, the semicircle, the organ and grand piano; the space for music in The Cornerstone, for me this was always very important.”*

*“The worship space enables the best possibilities for participation. It enriches my emotional life and religious experience.”*

*“The centre of the building is very important to me. This is where it all happens: Easter candle, Scripture, music, symbolic flowers, people gathering around it, the interaction. It is all very specific to this building. I will really miss it.”*

*“It is all highly unconstrained. I will miss the informal atmosphere in the worship centre. Grand piano playing, band, organ, children, it is all very festive.”*

*“I took this picture as a memory of the Sunday service, here I always sat, this is what I saw, facing ‘the Source’...”*

Remarkably for a Protestant church, within the worship centre it is not the ‘sermon-associated spot’ (i.e. Bible, pulpit) that is especially valued. To my surprise, there are no photographs taken or selected of the Bible, or the pulpit, or a preaching pastor. In The Cornerstone, members highly value their pastor in connection with the symbolic flowers and the cloth on the table for the Lord’s Supper, which is embroidered by one of the members of the congregation. These are treasured. The photographs also evoke scenes. They evoke ‘moving memories’ with regard to the inspiring and symbolic way in which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated.

*“The embroidered cloth. I always looked at it during the Lord’s Supper. Made with love.”*



*“Breaking and sharing, for all people. Symbolized also by our beautiful cloth.”*

*“Margo, our pastor. A moving memory for me, celebrating the Lord’s Supper. She especially pours out the wine in a symbolic way. The act of pouring out! The setting: table, cloth, flowers and cups.”*

*“This all really ‘speaks to me’, for I did not know it this way in the old tradition. And because I really value Margo, our pastor.”*

#### 6. ‘Shelter and Landmark’

The exterior of the building itself has a symbolic value. The tower is a symbol, pointing the neighborhood to God. As a place for community and belonging it promises and provides comfort.

*“A warm shelter in a cold winter.”*

*“All the time when I see the tower or the building, it gives me a sense of a place that I belong to, where I can profess my faith.”*

*“The building, so nearby to my home address. So familiar.”*

*“I made this picture because it is a beautiful building and in the building and its tower I see a reference to the Lord and his heavenly throne.”*

The six clusters together can be integrated in a conceptual whole. There are two bridging ideas, sociability and religiosity. Together they constitute the dimensions of what is at stake when a church is about to be closed. A church is meaningful to people when it has become *a common place to connect with God and each other*.

## Analytical remarks to the findings

Our findings can be interpreted in terms of theories about place, sacred space and anticipated loss. Ritual theory is helpful too, but for the sake of space I will leave that aside. Initially I thought that theories about bereavement could be used, since people at leave-taking services have told me that it feels “like going to a funeral.” In Marc Fried’s study on forced relocation from Boston’s West End, he finds that intense reactions to it are comparable to mourning the loss of a dear one.<sup>49</sup> In our case study, however, the relocation of the congregation has not yet

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<sup>49</sup> Marc Fried, *Grieving for a Lost Home: Psychological Costs of Relocation*, in: *The Urban Condition: People and Policy in the Metropolis*, Leonard J. Duhl, ed., New York (Simon and Schuster) 1963, 151–71. Also in *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*, J. Q. Wilson, ed., Cambridge, MA (MIT Press) 1966, 359–379.

taken place. Bereavement theories may help to understand responses to the definitive character of the decision, but Fried's findings about the deep anticipatory sense of loss may also help interpret emotional attachment. He found a strong correlation between pre-location commitment to an area, the intensity of experiences in the area and a reaction with marked grief.

Place attachment has often been researched in relation to residential places.<sup>50</sup> It has, for example, been measured in terms of rootedness in a neighborhood based on length of residency. If we try to understand the reasons for attachment to a church building, it is important to note the length of attendance, yet we find that the relationship between the length of attendance and attachment is not a linear one (the longer the attendance the stronger the attachment). It is not chronological but psychological. Someone who has been attending the church for a few years may already have become emotionally attached, whether to the faith community or its symbols and practices, particularly when they are related to life events. In his classic works *Topophilia* and *Space and Place*, Yi-Fi Tuan asserts that people attach meanings to space in their lives. An 'undifferentiated space' evolves into a 'place' as we come to know it better and endow it with values.<sup>51</sup> In another classic, *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph defines identity with place using the concept of *insideness*, which indicates the degree of attachment, involvement, and concern that a person or group has for a particular place. The strongest sense of place experience is *existential insideness*.<sup>52</sup> In his book about the meaning of lost places, Peter Read points to the importance of place in identity formation and development.<sup>53</sup> He states that "the meaningful events in our lives are inseparable from the place in which they occur."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the place – as an intersection to meet or connect as Doreen Massey described it<sup>55</sup> – is valued for the role it plays in the lives of individuals and communities. Connecting these insights to our findings, we see how, for the participants, the church building, precisely as intersection to connect with each other and with the sacred, has created a sense of *existential insideness*, particularly when meaningful life events are connected to it.

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<sup>50</sup> Manzo (n. 4), 48.

<sup>51</sup> Yi-Fi Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, MN (University of Minnesota Press) 1977, 6. Cf. Yi-Fi Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ (Prentice-Hall) 1974.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London (Pion Limited) 1976, 141ff.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places*, Melbourne (Cambridge University Press) 1996, 71 cited in Clark (n. 6), 73.

<sup>54</sup> Read, 72 cited in Clark (n. 6), 73.

<sup>55</sup> Doreen Massey, *Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place*, in: *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird et al., London (Routledge) 1993.

Holsappel-Brons, in an inquiry into ‘rooms of silence’ at airports, healthcare institutions and penitentiaries, applies the aspects of definition, design and use in order to structure the description of ‘place’. In a place, experiences and meanings come together and interact, constituting the “specific setting of this place.”<sup>56</sup> First, place is defined and designated. Second, individuals redefine space and time through ‘value-distinctions’ in and through their practices. Third, place is an active component, a dynamic constituting element, related to time, to its environment, and to actors. Place plays a constituting role. It *creates* particular experiences. Applying these aspects of place to our research, churchgoers redefine the building through their ‘value-distinctions’, through processes of constructing meaning, and simultaneously experience is formed by the architecture, by the building and its interior design. The last point is well formulated by Margaret Visser, who describes the church building as a structure that “nods to each individual.”<sup>57</sup> She writes that it is a place that *creates* sentiment, mood, and emotion; it stimulates thought; it promotes self-reflection. Every aspect of the building is part of a ‘language’ that forces introspection. According to Leisch-Kiesel, the *shape* of a space and its *intended function*, together with the *experience*, create the corner points of a domain in which the sacred is constituted.<sup>58</sup> So again, in sum, space is constituted, used and experienced and it is ‘active’. The space shapes the practices that take place in it, the community that gathers in it and the relationship to the environment.<sup>59</sup> According to Kim Knott, following Lefebvre, the space is not to be seen as “the passive container or backdrop in or against which religious activity takes place.”<sup>60</sup> In our empirical research these differentiations with regard to the interaction between the individual and the church building are confirmed and particularized. The church building can be experienced and treasured as a place for sacred memories; its worship centre facilitates active participation; by their common practices individuals redefine the place, in our case, into a place of sustaining fellowship with an unconstrained,

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56 J. Holsappel-Brons, *Ruimte voor stilte. Stiltecentra in Nederland als speelveld van traditie en vernieuwing* [Trans. Space for Silence. Rooms of Silence in the Netherlands – where tradition and transformation meet] vol. 10 of *Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy*, Groningen (Institute for Christian Cultural Heritage) 2010, 386.

57 Margaret Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church*, London (Penguin) 2000, 11–12, cited in Clark (n. 6), 60.

58 Monika Leisch-Kiesel, *Über die Schwelle*, in: *Kunst und Kirche* 68, no. 3, 2005, 157 cited in Holsappel-Brons (n. 56), 29.

59 Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, London (Equinox) 2005, 129 cited in Holsappel-Brons (n. 56), 30.

60 Kim Knott, *From Locality to Location and Back Again: A Spatial Journey in the Study of Religion*, in: *Religion* 39, no. 2, 2009, 155.

creative atmosphere, a place for young and old. It is this particular building that, by its *polycentric* character (worship centre, community hall, remembrance corner) and *hexagonal* structure, stimulates these experiences and the accompanying positive value-distinctions. It ‘nods’ to the community.

With regard to the way people use rooms of silence, Holsappel-Brons also found a shift from a traditional, specified context to an *individual* construction of meaning. In most rooms of silence visitors can light a candle or write in a visitor’s book. She explicitly focuses on tradition and invention coming together in commemoration rituals: “*Most often, the participants can put objects with names inscribed on them in the room of silence where there is sometimes a special monument or memorial wall.*”<sup>61</sup> In our project we found that the opportunities for constructing individualized meaning, provided, for example, by the remembrance corner and the book of attentiveness, contributed strongly to the force of the emotional response.

Research on the anticipated loss of a residential environment indicates that the subject may not be conscious of the existence of a bond of attachment until its loss imminent.<sup>62</sup> The mere idea of loss creates an awareness of the bond. It is the argument with which we started our inquiry. There are, however, individual differences in emotional attachment to the residential environment. According to another classic study, grief about an expected loss can be minimal, moderate or severe and the greater the importance of the place, the greater the intensity of attachment.<sup>63</sup> With regard to a place of residence, Fried emphasizes the influence of important events in the life of an individual (e.g. birth, first home, home in which the children were born, etc.). Through these events, the place becomes unique and impossible to replace. A final point relevant for our study is that the opportunity to participate in a meaningful planning process reduces the level of pre-relocation grief.<sup>64</sup> With Manzo and Perkins, Jourdan underlines that “failure to understand the dimension of place attachment at the community level may result in community opposition to plans which fail to understand the social acceptability of change.”<sup>65</sup> Our inquiry into attachment to a church building demonstrates that not only is a participatory process of planning necessary, but

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**61** Holsappel-Brons (n. 56), 391.

**62** Relph (n. 52), 40.

**63** Fried (n. 49), cited in Manzo (n. 4), 47.

**64** Dawn Jourdan, Reducing Pre-Relocation Grief with Participation in a HOPE VI Grant Application Process, in: *International Journal of Public Participation* 2, no. 2, 2008, 42–66.

**65** *Ibid.*, 50; cf. Lynn C. Manzo, & Douglas D. Perkins, Finding Common Ground: The Importance of Place Attachment to Community Participation and Planning, in: *Journal of Planning Literature* 20, no. 4, 2006, 335–350, esp. 341.

also a participatory process of grief. With these last remarks we enter into the strategic dimension of how to guide processes of closure, a dimension that is implicitly addressed in our inquiry, but calls for new research.

## New questions

The limitations of this study are clear. First, the research is explorative, limited to a case study, with specific situational and contextual details. The findings cannot be generalized to Roman Catholic parishes and or even to every Protestant congregation. Yet, context-dependent knowledge does provide reliable information and contributes to *phronesis*, practical wisdom, about a broader class.<sup>66</sup> Second, other case studies of ‘dying congregations’ could, for example, contribute to a better understanding of the competences that are needed to guide a congregation in times of transition. Third, in my inquiry, to give yet another example of a promising research question, I encountered the powerful use of legitimizing theological metaphors by church authorities to put pressure on the members of the congregation to give up their resistance to the closure: “As Protestants we should not be attached to bricks and stones. We are people of the Way, pilgrims, people on the move.” In leave-taking services Psalm 84 is often sung, emphasizing this ecclesiological metaphor of “Gods people on the way.”<sup>67</sup> The aim of church authorities in applying this language is to loosen the ties the congregation, individuals, or community has to a specific church building. The message of the ‘placelessness’ of the Christian faith, no matter how inspirational it may sound, is at odds with the psychological need of congregations and the individuals within them to cling to their sense of place and the memories that place carries. Discourse analysis could turn out to be helpful here. Fourth, we also do not yet know if the level of education or gender of the congregants makes a difference. Fifth, we did not inquire how the new church is evaluated by the former congregants of The Cornerstone and if the sorrow tends to be felt over a long period or is quickly forgotten. Sixth, there is another weakness too: because of the close link between the anticipated loss of the building and the question asked (“*What will you miss most...?*”) positively valenced affective bonds with the place are made conscious. Manzo points out that literature on place attachment commonly refers to positive values and that “while the residence can be a haven

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66 Bent Flyvbjerg, Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research, *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2, 2006, 220. Cf. Bonnie Miller-McLemore ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Chichester (Wiley-Blackwell) 2012, 10.

67 Cf. J. A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in context*, Kampen (Kok) 1993, 167.

to many people in many instances, evidently this is not always the case.”<sup>68</sup> Consequently, that quality should not be overemphasized when research is done regarding people’s emotional relationships to places.<sup>69</sup> In short, a church building is also likely to be a “cluster of positively and negatively valenced cognitions.”<sup>70</sup> For our research this means that those churchgoers who stopped attending in the years 1982–2010 may have a different story to tell. Further research is necessary here.

## Conclusion

My knowledge-interest in this study was primarily hermeneutical: descriptive, interpretative. I wanted to hear (and see) particularly from those who had a meaningful attachment to their church building, what they most treasured when thinking about their church. My knowledge-interest in this case study was however emancipatory too.<sup>71</sup> I wanted to give a voice to the congregation and demonstrate the importance of its common space, its practices and symbols for the individual. Finally, I had a specific practical ecclesiological ‘agenda’. I hoped to identify some indications for how to guide processes of church closures. In retrospect, the research could be labeled as an ‘action research project’,<sup>72</sup> and, therefore, my conclusion is framed in strategic terms. Looking back on the case-study, I have come to consider resistance to a proposed decision to close a church building to be a sign of strong commitment to both the faith community, its distinct practices and symbols, and to the building that shapes these practices and ‘nods’ to the community. It is a commitment that grows even stronger when the threat of losing what is considered precious increases. The values that the building has are more clearly seen and explicitly named when its closure is imminent. Anticipatory loss creates an increased attachment experience. In this situation, when a decision has been made, ‘transition pastoral care’ will prove helpful: group meetings are necessary in which emotions can be shared, mem-

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**68** Manzo (n. 4), 48f.

**69** Manzo (n. 4), 50; cf. J. Dixon and K. Durrheim, *Displacing Place Identity: A Discursive Approach to Locating Self and Other*, in: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 39, 2000, 27–44.

**70** H.M. Proshansky et al., *Place Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self*, in: *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3, 1983, 62.

**71** Following Jürgen Habermas, Henk De Roest, *Communicative Identity: Habermas’ Perspectives of Discourse as a Support for Practical Theology*, Kampen (Kok) 1998, 89ff.

**72** Peter Reason and Hillary Bradbury, eds., *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London (SAGE) 2001.

ories, photographs and maybe even videos exchanged and stories told. It requires ample time and a safe space in which to share and cherish what has been valuable. This communal pastoral care makes grief less ‘harsh’ or ‘sharp’. A church closure does indeed threaten to destroy the fabric of the social and spiritual life of the congregation. Yet, the process of taking and picking pictures, commenting on them and talking about them, offered the participants a stimulus toward a process of recovery. The building was lost, but there may have been a community regained.