

Q&A: When there are more rabbits beneath the church than believers attending, is it time to fold-up?

St Paul's Vestry asks: *When there are more rabbits beneath the church than believers attending, is it time to fold-up?*

Hi Vestry,

I don't know, there can sometimes be a *lot* of rabbits beneath the church – 10's, 100's! ☐

Your question goes to viability and numbers, but also goes to the essence of 'what is church' – what exactly would be "folded up"?

1) Essence of church – without wanting to put in a big ecclesiological treatise, let us say that a church is a local community of the people of God through which the Spirit is at work in the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

2) Numerical viability. At what numerical point does this essence disappear? Obviously you cannot have a church of one. Jesus talks about where "two or three are gathered" (Matthew 18:20) in the context of bearing witness to the truth in confronting sin – perhaps that's enough. Early churches, based on the synagogue model, expected 10 men to form the community – it might be myth, but I've heard this was the basis in early-Anglican-reformation days for only having a service of Holy Communion if 10 households signed up to receive it. More recently viability has been financially determined – the ability to support a paid cleric who can provide the ministry of word and sacrament, or where the ministry is provided voluntarily and locally, to simply maintain the necessary

organisational infrastructure. One wonders what the correlation to the essence of church is, however – after all a lounge room doesn't take much to maintain and it may have a lot of rabbits underneath!

So if by “folded up” you mean ceasing to meet and no longer being church – my answer would be “not necessarily”, even “no!” – particularly if there were no other churches nearby.

If by “folded up” you mean something like “change the way in which the ministry is organised” or “sell the building” – my answer would be “probably” – but you wouldn't really be folding up, you would simply be changing the form in which the essence of the church is held.

Of course, if a group meets in the name of Christ only but is not essentially the church then it should either get serious or pack up and go home, irrespective of size or the local rabbit population.