

Viability Assessment: Consideration of Church Viability & the Four Options

These viability standards are the standards adopted by the POA for their use and can serve as an example for what your presbytery might want to consider. Your presbytery should develop and adopt appropriate standards for baseline congregational vitality that work in your context. The purpose of these standards is not to penalize small churches because they are small. We recognize that there are many small churches that are healthy in their context. But we also recognize that there are many more small churches that are stuck and see no way to move forward in a proactive and healthy way. So, it is our intent that these options be seen as pastoral in nature. It is our desire to offer support for these churches and provide helpful alternatives that can move them to greater ministry effectiveness for the Kingdom of God and toward full appropriation and application of the Great Commission. Of course, many of these churches will choose to do nothing and that is their choice. But many desire something different and it is for them that we recommend these options or others like them.

- I. As a standard, the Presbytery considers a church to be viable when at least four criteria are evidenced.
 1. They meet the following criteria:
 - Have at least 30 adult members
 - Have set forth in writing God's call and vision for their church
 - Have established clear goals for their work for the next 3 years
 2. They provide their own leadership, including elders or elder candidates ready to be ordained and installed.
 3. They are fruitful in ministry and in the process of fulfilling their God-given calling.
 4. They are financially self-sustaining.
- II. Conversely, functional viability can be called into question by corporate concerns that include, but are not limited to these:
 - Lack of vision
 - Lack of effectiveness in carrying out the mission
 - Lack of converts
 - People consistently leave the church
 - Only an aging population in the church
 - Lack of funds
 - Lack of effective leadership
 - Changing community with cultural distance with the community

- Lack of outreach to community
- Sin in “the camp”

III. These issues may also be evidenced by personal concerns such as:

- Internal fighting
- Territorialism
- Absence of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5)
- Defensiveness
- Control struggles
- Unwillingness to seek help
- Lack of humility, faith, prayer, and spiritual maturity

The above criteria (and others deemed appropriate) shall be used to determine possible “non-viability” for a local church or applying group. The Ministerial Committee, the Church Health Committee or the Church Development Committee of the Presbytery will exercise utmost discernment in determining viability for a local church or group, considering the inter-relatedness of these criteria and any other extenuating circumstances.

Should this Committee determine that minimum viability does not exist, nor is there any realistic expectation that it may exist in the future, it shall recommend to Presbytery one of the following four options:

1. The Presbytery partner with the church to begin a process of revitalization (*ReFocus*);
2. A neighboring church comes alongside the marginally viable church for a season or seasons (*Fostering*);
3. A local church be reclassified as a mission church (*Adoption*); or
4. The church be dissolved (BOG 5-9) (*Close, Bless, Celebrate*).

IV. A Plan for Partnership and Revitalization

1. Upon a determination of possible non-viable status, the CDC or CHC will enter conversation with the church to conduct an assessment of viability.
2. Once an assessment has been completed the CDC or CHC will determine which of the four options stated below is best to pursue.

The Four Options for a Declining Church

REFOCUS: The church embarks on a focused journey towards revitalization, beginning with a dedicated church health process. Ideally, a Transitional Pastor is brought in to guide this crucial work, but if not, a church health coach is assigned to the Session to oversee the efforts. This process demands wholehearted commitment and energy from both the Session and the congregation, requiring them to set aside non-essential concerns to embrace a renewed vision. The central question, “To whom is God sending us?” is answered with clarity, leading to the formation and execution of initial implementation plans. All resources are then channeled towards enhancing worship quality and fostering an inviting, evangelistic, and disciple-making culture within the church, setting the stage for a vibrant future.

FOSTERING: a spirit of collaboration and renewal, a thriving neighboring church or churches offer their support to the existing congregation for a defined period. They provide essential leadership, training, and dedicated individuals to help restore health and invigorate the mission of the declining church. This fostering church may send talented worship leaders, evangelists, coaches, and mentors to guide and uplift the community. Together, the churches work out a detailed agreement to ensure the partnership is effective and respectful, allowing the declining church to retain a measure of control while benefiting from the expertise and support of its vibrant neighbors. This cooperative effort aims to foster a renewed sense of vitality and purpose within the existing congregation.

ADOPTION: In this inspiring scenario, a vibrant, nearby congregation steps forward to revitalize the existing church, infusing it with renewed energy, leadership, and potentially financial support. The adopting church establishes a fresh vision and a strategic plan to breathe new life into the congregation, tailoring the worship style and structure to better connect with the community. This transformation might involve a Church Planter, who brings a dynamic vision for sharing the Gospel and effectively uses the remaining resources of the declining congregation to advance this mission. As the Evangelist, the Church Planter leads the effort in shaping the renewed faith community, guiding it with enthusiasm and a clear direction towards a hopeful and flourishing future. (Note the 2025 Bart Hess award winner: Forge Church, NC.) *Modified Refocus, Assessing and Enhancing the Health of Your Church Page 13 of 17.*

CLOSE, BLESS, AND CELEBRATE: In a spirit of grace and hope, the church has made the thoughtful decision to conclude its journey, entrusting all its assets to the presbytery for the advancement of mission work in ways deemed most impactful. This transition will be marked by a heartfelt closing service, celebrating the rich ministry and enduring contributions made over the church's many years of service. The service will honor the legacy of the community's efforts, reflecting on the faith, dedication, and compassion that have defined their shared journey. (Note North Hampton in the old Mid-Atlantic Presbytery.)