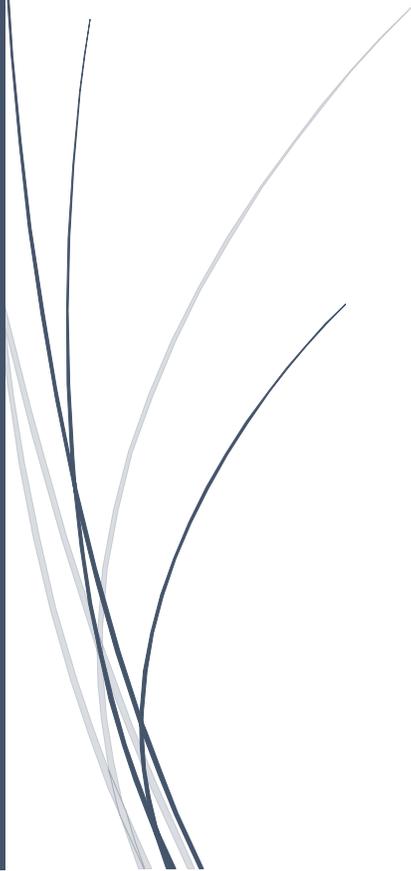
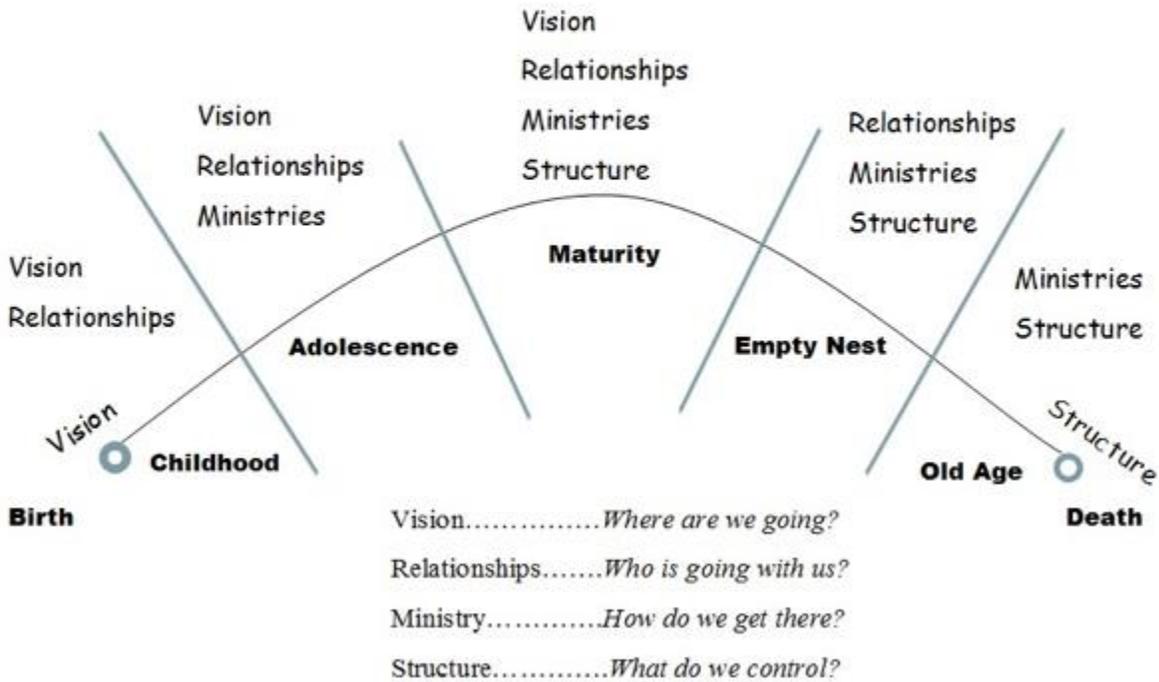




*A Workbook for
Congregations as They Assess
the Health of Their Church*



Life Cycle of a Church



The Church Lifecycle can be considered in three primary macro-stages.

Incline is the stage of church lifecycle when the ministry capacity of the church is increasing. Over time, the church is doing more and more ministry, and the quality of that ministry is better and better. Incline is a strong stage featuring health, growth and multiplication.

Recline is the stage of church lifecycle when the ministry capacity of the church levels off into plateau. Over time, the church is doing the same ministry over and over at about the same levels of quality. Recline is a tepid, tread water stage featuring ministry management by routine, filling in the blanks.

Decline is the stage of church lifecycle when the ministry capacity of the church is decreasing. Over time, the church is doing less and less ministry and the quality of that ministry is more and more compromised. Decline is a weak stage featuring decreases in membership, attendance, giving, and overall impact in the community.

Distinctive Characteristics of Churches in Incline, Recline & Decline

	Incline	Recline	Decline
Orientation	Future Oriented	Present Oriented	Past Oriented
Driving Force	Vision	Programs	Structure
Focus	Community	Congregation	Core
Attitude	Innovative	Routine	Complacent
Depth of Faith	High Risk	Low Risk	No Risk
Decision Making	Faith	Resources	Indecision
Servanthood Basis	Gifts	Slots	Default
Finances View	Investor	Provider	Preserver
Leadership	New	Established	Incumbent
Growth	Conversion	Transfer	None

The Church Lifecycle: Three Primary Stages: Summary

Incline is the lifecycle stage when the church is increasing its ministry capacity, doing more and more ministry better and better over time, yielding both qualitative and quantitative gain.

Recline is the lifecycle stage when the church's ministry capacity levels off as the church does more or less the same ministry year after year at the same levels of quality and quantity. Quantity levels off when a resource is fully used and no increase in that resource is developed. Quality levels off at a place that is acceptable to the family of insiders, often less than what is needed to hold newcomers.

Decline is the lifecycle stage when the church's ministry capacity decreases. Less and less ministry is done year after year with execution more and more compromised, yielding both qualitative and quantitative loss.

Refer to the Distinctive Characteristics of Incline, Recline, and Decline. Go through each of the characteristics, determining which of the three stages given most identifies your church. Place a check beside your selections and then tally.

How many checks were placed on Inclining characteristics? _____

How many checks were placed on Reclining characteristics? _____

How many checks were placed on Declining characteristics? _____

Based on this simple analysis, where is your church on the lifecycle?

My church is on the Incline. _____

My church is on the Recline. _____

My church is on the Decline. _____

Does your church show evidence of vitality lost over time? Please explain.

Will your church's vitalization be moderate, severe, or somewhere in between? Please explain.

Viability Assessment: Determination 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.

As a standard, the Presbytery considers a church to be viable when at least four criteria are evidenced.

1. They meet the following criteria:
 - a. Have at least 30 adult members
 - b. Have set forth in writing God's call and vision for their church
 - c. 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.

The above criteria (and others deemed appropriate) shall be used to begin a conversation about viability for a local church or applying group.

The Church Health Committee or 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 partners 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*).

A Plan for Partnership and Revitalization

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

The Four Options for a Declining Church:

- 1. Refocus.** The church embarks on a focused journey towards revitalization, beginning with a dedicated church health process. During a leadership transition, a Transitional Pastor may be 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.
- 2. Fostering.** In 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.
- 3. 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 this year’s Bart Hess award winner: Forge Church, NC.)
- 4. 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.)