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## Congregational Renewal

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT REQUIRES

*The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,  
the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.*

*I am the church. You are the church. . . .*

*Yes, we're the church together.\**

“**F**inances are tight, and our numbers are dwindling. The congregation is looking to me to turn things around. So is my denomination—that’s exactly what I was told when I was appointed here. And, frankly, that’s my expectation too. Isn’t that my job?” Janna, pastor of a United Methodist congregation that has been experiencing decline for many years, voices the belief of many congregations, denominations, and pastors: when a congregation is declining, it is the pastor’s job to fix it.

Here’s the hard truth. If you’re a layperson in a congregation that’s experiencing decline, whether the congregation thrives is ultimately up to you and the other members. Your pastor can teach, guide, lead, support, inspire, even cajole. But in the end, congregational health is a function of how people in the congregation relate to one another, to God, and to their community. A congregation is a microcosm of the greater church, a local embodiment of the body of Christ. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We believe this is

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When a congregation is truly being church, people:

- find hope,
  - experience belonging,
  - extend and receive forgiveness, and
  - discover a sense of purpose and direction.
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one of the primary messages that a healthy congregation embodies for its members and its surrounding community.

A congregation that is truly being church brings people into a loving, life-giving relationship with God and others that is transformational. This is the nature of the kin-dom of God, where covenant relationships model the best aspects of family. People find hope. They experience belonging; they extend and receive forgiveness. They discover a sense of purpose and direction. They learn to live with appreciation and joy no matter what the circumstances. Although a pastor can preach and teach this message, the message has power only to the extent that the people in the congregation live it and practice it with one another. Practicing loving, life-giving relationships transforms congregation members. Witnessing such benefits draws others who want something similar for themselves and their families.

Businesses are based on the premise of offering something of value—goods or services—to a customer in exchange for money. Successful businesses “give value for money.” Gimmicks and fancy features may bring people through the door, but people won’t buy unless they believe they’ll receive something of worth. And they’ll return and recommend the business to others only if they receive something of value. Congregations are not businesses, yet they can fall into a similar trap of thinking that it’s the features and the gimmicks that people want. A congregation’s greatest asset, the unique gift it offers, is the people who make up the congregation and the possibilities for transformation they embody.

When we talk about congregational renewal, we mean a renewal of the people's ability to notice and experience God in their midst, a renewal of the congregation's desire to partner with God in achieving God's aims for the world. The term renewal implies that the congregation knew how to do this at one time and that the work is a reclaiming of a lost skill. We find that's not always the case. Some congregations we've worked with have no memory of ever having been a church that talked openly about God and matters of faith. The people have no memory of the congregation's ever having had an evangelistic bent. However, we have yet to encounter a congregation that, when asked to recall moments when its church was really "being church," couldn't name sacred moments when God seemed present and people found healing and hope.

The church-growth movement is often blamed for leading congregations down the path of thinking that bigger is better and that increased numbers equal health and growth. That movement did, however, help raise the question of how to measure congregational health. If the measure is not dollars in the bank or people in the pews, what is it? We hear congregations and pastors wrestling with questions that weren't on the table twenty years ago. "What's the fundamental purpose of church? What difference is a congregation supposed to make in the lives of its members and in its surrounding community? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What does it mean to be spiritual? What difference do spiritual practices make?"

When we hear people wrestling with questions like these, we smile. These challenging questions are the foundation of renewal, the building blocks of a new future. They are not, however, the point at which most congregations start. Fear of having to close the church or to reduce the services offered to members typically prompts a congregation's desire for renewal: "We need to do something now, if we're going to still be open a decade from now." This desire to avoid death drives many renewal efforts, and it certainly provides energy. But if the congregation

What's renewed in congregational renewal is the people's understanding of their relationship with God, their relationship with their community, and their sense of calling.

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itself doesn't ultimately trade its fear of death for a longing for life, the efforts will end as soon as the danger has passed.

The aim of renewal is not a bigger building or high-tech worship or a slew of professional programs, but a new way of looking at church, the work of a congregation, and what it has to offer the world. Congregational renewal is a renewal of the people's understanding of their relationship with God, their relationship with their community, and their calling. In the most fundamental sense, congregational renewal happens through "people renewal."

No pastor, no program, no resource can make renewal happen. On the other hand, almost any pastor, program, or resource can help renewal unfold when the people of a congregation deeply desire a new and better life and are willing to do what it takes to get there. The hard part can be developing that desire. As long as life together is satisfactory, there is little impetus for change.

Often congregations first start talking about renewal because demographic changes in the community are affecting them. On a barrier island of New Jersey, wealthy summer residents now dominate the once primarily working-class community. The long-standing community church wonders how long it can stay open. In a small town in California, 75 percent of those now living in the neighborhood around the Presbyterian church speak primarily Spanish. In a neighborhood of Seattle, the new neighbors of the United Methodist church are young families stretched for time and money who have little or no church background. In each case, the declining local church provides an accurate historical snapshot of the people who lived in the neighborhood thirty years ago and what they valued.

Over and over we hear congregations wishing that the people in the community would become active in their church. What drives that desire is revealed in their response to the question “Why?” Any time a significant number of people answer, “To keep our programs running and our doors open,” we know that the congregation is in trouble. It has moved to the point at which the people beyond its doors are valued primarily for what they can bring to the church. People in the community are seen as the congregation’s salvation, rather than the other way around.

Attempting to lure the new population group, the congregational leaders add programs and make changes they imagine will appeal to the people. Surprised and frustrated when their changes show little result, they redouble their efforts to find the right program. This work is misdirected. The congregation is not declining because the community around it has changed, or even primarily because the church’s form of ministry and worship feels foreign to those in the neighborhood. The real and deeper issue is that the congregation has lost connection with a Christian church’s basic mission: helping people experience God and connect with the gospel message of life and hope.

Without this sense of mission to keep the congregation focused beyond the doors of the church, the congregation turns inward and loses connection with its community. Only when the congregation’s well-being is threatened does the issue of connecting with its community arise. All of its efforts however, are infused with a mind-set and a heart-set that value strengthening and preserving the congregation over serving the needs of the people in the community with whom members and leaders

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want to connect. This approach never works. People know when they're being used. Before others will turn to a congregation as a life-giving resource in their lives, the congregation has to be a place that offers life. When traveling by plane, passengers are reminded that in the event of an emergency they should put on their own oxygen masks before helping others. In congregational renewal, a congregation reminds itself of and intentionally engages in the basic practices of Christianity. It realigns itself with the basic outward-focused mission of church.

Each denomination has its own way of describing this work. Each congregation has its own emphasis. We've heard it said that congregations lean toward either the great commandment—love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34–40)—or the great commission: go forth and make disciples (Matt. 28:16–20). Although both are found in Matthew's Gospel, we find that people generally do emphasize one over the other. While able to engage in acts of love directed toward the neighbor, many pastors and congregations we talk with express a deep ambivalence about disciple-making. They wonder if evangelism has a place in today's world. At the same time, they tell us that they rarely talk about these doubts with anyone. This inner and unspoken conflict has left many congregations unsure of what their "good news" is and why they should share it, let alone how to share it. They don't know the value they offer.

## What Happened to Our Church?

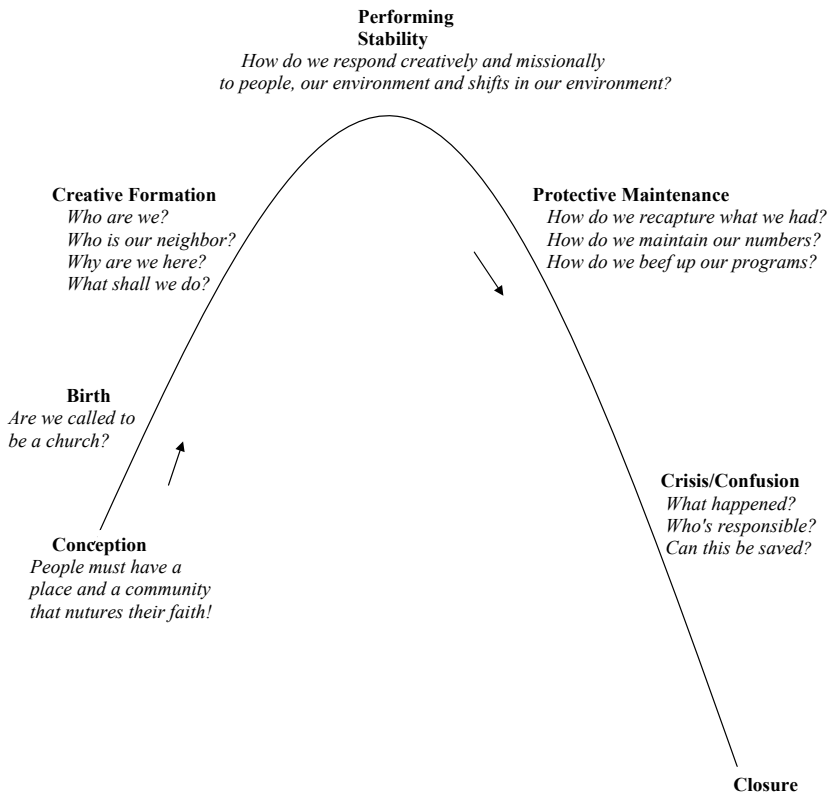
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It's easy to blame the decline of a congregation on a series of "bad" pastors or a dramatic shift in the demographics of the community. And without a doubt, many portions of North America are less church-friendly than they were fifty years ago. Although these externals can certainly contribute to and exacerbate decline, they generally aren't the real reasons for it. A decline in congregational health has both an outer and an inner component. The

outer, more visible aspect of decline is the weakening of the congregation as an organization. The less visible but more damaging facet of decline is the congregation's understanding of itself and its purpose. Let's look first, however, at the organizational aspect and what commonly happens to congregations across time.

Congregations are organizations, formal associations of people who come together for a common purpose. Organizations, much like living organisms, move through predictable stages of development. So common is this phenomenon that we think of it as a natural aging process. We identify the stages a congregation goes through as conception and birth, creative formation, performing stability, protective maintenance, and crisis and confusion.

### The Aging Process of a Congregation



## Conception and Birth

Ideally, congregations are conceived out of a missionary zeal and birthed by a small group of people who have experienced the foundational difference Christ makes in their lives. These people believe deeply that developing a relationship with God in the manner of Jesus can make a tremendous difference in people's lives and, through them, in the world. With this conviction, they set about creating a place and a community where other people can be introduced to and nurtured in Christian discipleship.

The birth of the Bothell United Methodist Church is typical. In 1885 Mary Ann and David Bothell looked out at their small town and saw people moving in. They had high hopes for the growth of their community and were pleased to see friendships and business relationships forming. Concerned that they saw no place for faith and spirituality to be nurtured, they concluded, "This is not acceptable."

Not knowing what to do, but convinced that something had to be done, they invited sixteen people to their home for hymn singing, Scripture reading, and sharing. This fellowship grew quickly, and soon twenty-five families in the village were gathering for regular times of worship, spiritual nurture, and the development of caring relationships. The group, in time, began asking, "Are we called to be a church and to bring what we've found to others?" They answered yes, even though they weren't fully sure what that call would entail. Their sense of being called by God for a specific purpose spurred them to move beyond what had become familiar and comfortable. The people did what was needed to connect with and meet the spiritual needs of others.

## Creative Formation

A period of creative formation follows this ideal birth, as the people figure out who they are as a congregation and what shape their life together will take. As they talk and work together, they form answers to fundamental questions: "Who are

we? Who is our neighbor? What does God want for this place and these people? What's our part in what God wants to accomplish?" And, once those questions are answered: "What shall we do and how shall we do it?" Their focus is outward, on the impact they want to have on the wider world. "What's the difference God wants for others and for this community? Let's roll up our sleeves and get busy!"

As the people create together, they experience energy and grow in faith, both as individuals and as a community. At this stage, everything is a "first"; no one says, "We've never done it like this before." It is an exciting and magnetic time. God's presence is felt; everything seems touched by God's Spirit. Drawn to the congregation's energy and joy, people come and join with the members and find their lives changed in positive ways. As the congregation develops, administrative and physical structures are created as needed to support and house the work. Roadblocks arise, but no challenge seems to block the people for long. The congregation's clear, deep commitment, combined with relationships that are mutual and generative, allows it to address creatively whatever comes along. The congregation at this stage in its life is best described as a movement—a growing network of people with a common passion working together to achieve a common aim.

### **Performing Stability**

As the people of the congregation continue working together, patterns develop and norms are set. Life becomes more predictable, and the church moves into a period marked by both outward extension and inner stability. The congregation is firmly attached to achieving a common aim while enjoying stable institutional structures that advance its work. The congregation is successful both in introducing people to Christian discipleship and in supporting them in their ongoing development. Typically, at this stage in its life the congregation has sufficient human and financial resources to create a highly rewarding

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communal life in addition to supporting its primary work of making disciples. Its mission, its understanding of what it means to be church, guides the congregation's decision making and its life together. The congregation seems continually to be responding to an unspoken question: "How do we respond creatively and missionally to people, our environment, and shifts in our environment?"

The congregation, in this stage of its life, still maintains a distinctive outward focus. Leaders and members ask, "Whom does God want us to see and serve? How can we best nurture discipleship?" At the same time, the congregation finds more of its time and energy being taken up by administrative and building-related demands. Commitment to achieving a particular mission is paired with stable and functional organizational structures. At this point, the congregation is a movement housed in an institution.

Over time, the congregation experiences internal change. It just happens. Key leaders move away. Newcomers arrive with new passions, new gifts. Most significant, the majority of people drawn to the congregation stay because the church serves their needs. This motive is in marked contrast to what attracted the earliest church members—the opportunity to help create a place that served the spiritual needs of others. If the congregation does not introduce new members to and equip them in the disciple-making mission of the church, an increasing percentage of church members become consumers of the church's services rather than providers. The congregation's mission shifts from creating a place for others to maintaining a place for its own members. This shift is a key factor in congregational decline.

## Protective Maintenance

If this loss of a missional heart is not detected and corrected, the culture of the church will start to shift—from a mode of missional zeal and high creativity to one of protective maintenance. Members feel protective toward the culture and the programs that proved effective in their own lives: “It worked fine for me and still does, so why change it?” Content with what they experience, the members focus on maintaining and improving what’s already there.

The early stages of protective maintenance are easily missed. Energy seems just a bit off, getting folk to help out with the ministries a tad more difficult. Everyone has an explanation: “It was a snowy winter . . . a beautiful summer . . . people are just real busy right now.” Attendance may drop a little, but that too gets explained away: “I don’t think Jim is counting those folks who come in late.” When the loss is finally addressed, the driving questions become “How do we recapture what we had? How do we maintain our numbers? How do we beef up our programs?”

People are truly proud of their church and take pleasure in sharing it with visitors. Church members like the difference that church involvement makes in their lives. In this stage of the congregation’s life, however, the majority of members can’t readily explain what that difference is. Instead, they point to features they appreciate. People share their “church” rather than their faith. “Come hear our preacher—she’s great.” “Come to the Christmas cantata; our choir is terrific.”

At the same time the congregation is experiencing these changes, other changes are taking place in the community around the church. Local industries open and close. Demographics shift. New groups of people arrive, bringing with them their own cultural preferences and unique sets of gifts and needs. And beyond the immediate community, the world shifts.

When the congregation was at its best, it was aware of both the internal and the external changes taking place; it adapted in

whatever ways were needed to live out its mission successfully. At the congregation's heart was a passionate commitment to make a particular difference. It looked for God in each moment and sought to align itself with God's aims. It lived in the present and walked with intention into the future. As a congregation moves more deeply into protective maintenance, it focuses increasingly on the past. The emphasis becomes protecting what God has already done and the previously successful forms of programming, leadership, and ways of relating through which the congregation experienced God.

Concerned with its own well-being, the congregation, often without realizing it, ignores or minimizes the importance of the changes taking place in the surrounding community and the wider world. The preservation of the church as institution becomes more important than its mission. When the mission dies, the congregation begins to die.

As this stage progresses, the signs of decline become more visible: worship attendance declines; financial stability slips; fewer visitors become members. Believing that any problem can be reversed, members put their efforts into working harder at what worked in the past. When that approach fails, a new program is added, a campaign mounted, or a change in pastors initiated.

Newcomers are valued for the way they enhance the experience of current members. One woman put it this way: "I'm always delighted to see newcomers in worship. Worship feels better to me when the seats are full." Another put it more bluntly: "We need new people so that the church can stay open." Events publicized to the community (like rummage sales and pancake breakfasts) are thinly disguised fund raisers designed to help the church meet its financial goals and obligations. The church becomes vampirelike, feeding off the energy and resources of its surrounding community.

The result is a self-absorbed, inward-focused congregation. In crass terms, it's as if the employees of McDonald's came to

work each day and focused all their energy on feeding each other. They go home feeling successful; they know they've worked hard, that they've fed one another and fed themselves. A business can't get away with that for long, but a church can survive in that mode for as long as the money holds out.

### Crisis and Confusion

Once the money runs low, the congregation generally grows more open to trying any strategy that promises to fix the church. When the fixes don't work, frustration rises, blaming increases, relationships deteriorate, and the slide escalates until finally the congregation arrives at the point of crisis and confusion. The foremost questions for the congregation become: "What happened? Who's responsible? Can this church be saved?"

The congregation finally faces an unavoidable decision: "Are we going to have to close our doors?" Some congregations, sensing that their work is done, choose to close while they still have some control over the process. Others, either unsure of what to do or afraid or unwilling to do what it takes, choose to do nothing. They continue on the path of decline until their resources are gone and they're forced to close. And some congregations, sensing that God still has work for them, give themselves up to the process of renewal.

Organizational renewal is ideally addressed while a congregation is still in the stage of performing stability. The sense of being a movement is still strong. Attachment to institutional forms is relatively low. Congregations tend not to reflect on issues of renewal at this point in their lives, however. Why spend time and energy fixing something that doesn't appear to be broken? Most congregations wait until the level of discomfort rises to the point at which it can no longer be ignored. By then, the congregation is faced with a major task: transforming a congealed institution into a fresh and impassioned movement.

Were organizational transformation the only aspect of change to be considered, renewal would still be a considerable challenge.

Take a look at the business section of your local bookstore or do a Web search for organizational renewal, and be prepared to find a flood of resources. Leading organizational change is extraordinarily challenging. That said, the challenge facing congregations that need to change is doubly so.

In a business and in the majority of nonprofit organizations, leaders determine the purpose, the product, and the norms that will govern behavior. In this era, leaders work hard to function collaboratively and to bring people along with them. But ultimately, their will is imposed on the rest of the organization. The employees of a shoe factory make the shoes that management decides will be made. As long as the workers work and the shoes get made and customers buy them, the factory does fine. Management may want employees to be dedicated to the purpose and values of the company and to get along well with each other. Positive attitudes enhance the efficiency of the operation. But in the end, the company's product can be produced regardless of employee attitudes.

That's not true for the church. While the people in the pews do the work, just as the employees of a company do, in a church the product finally is a community that embodies the mind and heart of Christ. A congregation may produce good works and show signs of organizational strength, but the unique transformational aims of church require the work to be done in a particular way with a particular attitude. Only with a Christlike mind-set and heart-set will a church embody the kin-dom of God and align itself in service to the well-being of the world.

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A congregation can produce good works and show signs of organizational strength and still be in decline.

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## Marks of Health and Indicators of Decline

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Congregational decline is, at heart, an inner matter. It's a reflection of a congregation's abandoning its fundamental purpose of embodying church, being a community that brings people into a loving, life-giving, transformational relationship with God, with one another, and with the world. When we assess a congregation's vitality, we look for three marks of inner health:

- continual spiritual formation as an essential for everyone rather than an activity pursued by some
- relationships among people that embody the kingdom of God; relationships that are honoring, forgiving, loving, caring, mutual, and generative
- a deep, pervasive concern for the temporal and spiritual well-being of those beyond the doors of the church—a concern that manifests in action

These are indicators that the congregation is an embodiment of the biblical concept of church as modeled by the early church in New Testament writings. They provide a way to look inside the heart and mind of a congregation. Yet a congregation may appear to be outwardly healthy according to its organizational stage of life—for example, to be in the creative formation stage, and still not be inwardly so; that is, and not embody church. Mainline denominations are investing huge amounts of time, energy, and money in trying to start new congregations. It is important for them to find ways to ensure that these hallmarks of congregational health are present from the start. Starting intentionally healthy Christlike congregations can be challenging when the laity and clergy working to start these congregations have limited or no experience in being part of such a faith community.

When assessing inner health, we look also for five indicators of decline. These tendencies cripple a congregation. When they

are present in the early stages of a congregation's life, that congregation doesn't grow to become much more than a service club. Service clubs are fine organizations, but congregations are called to be something else. These tendencies can also develop later in a congregation's life. When this is the case, these shifts in how the congregation functions and views its purpose drive the transition from performing stability to protective maintenance. By the time the shifts are evident, the congregation has come to see this way of being and doing church as normal. At this point, a new inward-focused trajectory has been set. For this reason, we consider any church that exhibits these tendencies a declining congregation. Decline may not yet be detectable in the statistics the church uses to measure success, but it's simply a matter of time.

How do we define decline? A declining congregation gives itself to:

- growing the church rather than witnessing to faith
- running the church rather than forming disciples
- being people-led rather than being Spirit-led
- participating in mission projects without having a mission
- fixing rather than creating

Growing the church, running the church, being people-led, participating in mission projects, and fixing can all, at certain times, serve a congregation and contribute to health. However, when these become the primary focus, the congregation is in serious trouble. Congregational renewal efforts must address these foundational issues of health rather than simply developing and strengthening the institution. We value a developed and strong institution—but that strength needs to be a fruit of a faithful congregation, not its primary aim. And a fruitful congregation develops only through the continual spiritual formation of the congregation's members.

**In a declining congregation, members share their church rather than their faith.**

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To help you assess whether your congregation is in need of renewal, let's take a closer look at these five hallmarks of declining congregations:

### **People Focus on Growing the Church Rather than on Witnessing to Faith**

Conversations focus on the nuts and bolts of running the church or the events and concerns of daily life. Members are out of touch with their own faith stories and how their lives have been changed through their own spiritual formation. They don't know how to talk with others about God and faith issues. Members share their church, rather than their faith, with people.

A declining congregation views people outside its doors more in terms of what they can bring to the church than in terms of the life-changing difference the church can make for them. Visitors who look as though they would fit in and have something to offer are warmly welcomed. Those who seem out of the ordinary or needy may be noticed, but they receive very different treatment. The marginalized and hurting people in the community are viewed not as potential pew-mates or fellow disciples, but as recipients of the church's benevolence.

### **Efforts Focus on Running the Church Rather than on Forming Disciples**

The congregation sees its work as offering classes, activities, and services rather than nurturing the spiritual and faith development of people. It is attached to offering certain programs and ministries and to carrying them out in particular ways. Tiring, yet needing to have these activities staffed, the congregation sees newcomers as resources to be mined. Faithfulness is

defined by a person's willingness to do what's needed to keep the church running.

In a declining congregation, efforts serve the preservation of the institution. People attend meetings because they're on the calendar. What the church needs to keep it running takes precedence over what the participants need to grow as disciples of Christ. Leaders spend time and energy enticing and motivating people to serve on committees and to take on tasks, rather than creating opportunities and venues for their development as followers of Christ.

### **The Congregation Is People-led Rather than Spirit-led**

People are confident in their ability to run the church and do not think of turning to God for guidance in running the church. Leaders strive to direct the church as a business, adopting the best practices of the business world, without undergirding those practices with a radical dependence on God.

The declining congregation depends on the pastor, church members, or other human experts for guidance and direction. Meetings are for business. They may include a token reading of Scripture or an opening prayer, but rarely if ever does a group think of bringing faith into the discussion at hand. People think of and refer to the church as "our church," not as "God's church."

### **The Congregation Engages in Mission Projects but Doesn't Have a Mission**

There is likely a missions committee that plans several mission projects across a year's time. These projects flow out of and reinforce the congregation's self-image of being "mission-minded." Projects generally reflect not a shared missional aim of the congregation, but the mission interests of individuals or groups. Success is measured by the amount of support generated for the project and the degree of satisfaction the congregation derives from the work.

The declining congregation may have a mission statement printed at the top of the worship bulletin or posted on the

narthex wall. That mission statement, however, is not used to align human and financial resources. Leaders may be able to recite it, but it does not drive planning. There's no shared and compelling sense of purpose underlying congregational life and ministry.

### Leaders Focus on Fixing Rather than Creating

The member's strongest desire is to feel comfortable in the church. When challenges or new situations arise, people view them as problems to be solved so that the church can get back to normal, rather than as opportunities to move in a new direction. They feel most comfortable replicating what's been done before. Though this way of doing things saves a great deal of time and effort, it lacks the energy that comes from creating something new.

In a declining church, leaders strive to keep the congregation happy rather than to lead members in faithful living. Leaders are wary of taking risks and making mistakes. When faced with new challenges, congregational leaders look to others for their answers. They seek out experts—a new pastor, a consultant, denominational staff people, and the like—who will tell them what to do. At the same time, leaders and members balk at engaging in activities that seem new or different.

## The Shifts Become the Norm

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These inner shifts happen so gradually across the years that even the once-healthy congregation is unaware that changes have taken place. Members have no memory of those moments when decisions began to define a new way of being and “doing church.” This shift of focus and attitude has been prevalent for so long in mainstream Protestant congregations that many people who have grown up in the church have never experienced anything else. Typically, so long as the church can maintain

a satisfactory level of programming and services for the congregation, no one notices that anything is wrong.

Renewal is not just for “sick” congregations. Any congregation whose life together and decision making reveal a preference for serving itself rather than others, running a church rather than forming disciples, turning to the pastor or other leaders rather than to God, or supporting missions rather than having a mission, is at risk of decline. Destructive attitudes and values are already infiltrating the decision-making process. Just as with organizational renewal, the ideal time to address this renewal of heart and mind is at a time when everything is going well. If it is done then, before any shifts have become ingrained, the renewal is a matter of slight realignments. But most congregations don’t address renewal then. “Things are fine. Why give energy to something that isn’t causing us any problems?”

Once decline becomes noticeable, a significant shift in focus and attitudes has already taken root. But generally, congregations ignore the signs. Most congregations don’t think about renewal until life has reached, or is nearing, a state of crisis and confusion. When a congregation finally does respond, it does so by moving into a “fix-it” mode. Seminars and books offer a myriad of solutions to a congregation’s stall or decline—recommending that the congregation learn to welcome visitors more effectively, move to a growing suburb, renovate the nursery, upgrade marketing, add video screens to the worship space, change the music and the preaching style, or start a small-group ministry. When such “fixes” prove ineffective, the congregation then turns to the personnel committee, demanding that its members figure out what’s wrong with the pastor and “fix” him or her. A new pastor may provide a shot of energy and hope, but most typically the congregation returns to its previous state in short order—if not during the tenure of that pastor, then after his or her departure.

## The Work of Renewal

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The church seeking renewal must look beyond simply improving its programs and its building, though both may ultimately be changed. Pastors and laity leading renewal in their declining congregations are asking people to make fundamental shifts in their perspectives, their attitudes, and their behaviors. The work demands a great deal from a people and a pastor. If you've ever remodeled a house while attempting to live in it, you have a sense of the chaos and complexity of congregational renewal. It will take far longer, cost you more, and prove messier than you ever imagined at the start. People who have worked with both church starts and church renewal will tell you that starting a church is "easy," compared to renewing one. The difficulty lies in the work itself. Pogo's line holds true: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Your congregation is what it is today not because of what a bad pastor did to it, or because the neighborhood has changed, or because our culture is going to hell in a handbasket. Although those occurrences and many others have had an impact, your congregation is what it is today because of how it responded, or failed to respond, to the realities it faced. What your congregation will be in the future is up to you and the other members and how you work together to create something new from the realities you face.

What you do or don't do now will make the difference. Your actions will either reinforce the patterns that have become established in your congregation, or start to counter and shift them. The leadership provided by your pastor can help or hinder, but it cannot make your congregation succeed or keep it from ultimately achieving the goals you set for yourselves.

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Renewal requires people to make fundamental shifts in their perspectives, their attitudes, and their behaviors.

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### The three phases of renewal:

- developing readiness
  - surfacing a guiding vision
  - living into the vision
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Some wonder, “Is it even possible? Can people with little or no experience of their congregation’s being church in this way create this kind of community?” We’ve seen it happen enough times to know that the hope is true and that renewal is possible—not easy, but possible. The path to renewal looks different for each congregation, but some common elements can be observed. Here’s what we know.

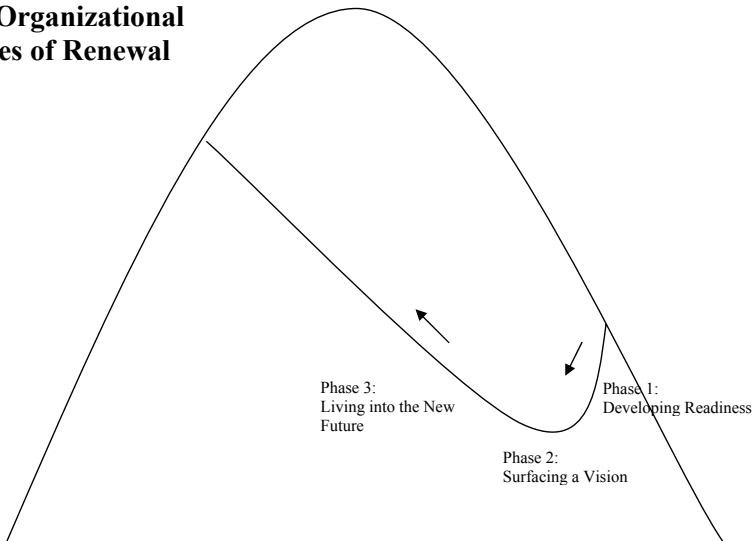
Just as decline has outer and inner aspects, so does renewal. To move to a new place, a congregation must tend to both. Organizationally, there are three phases of work:

1. Developing readiness: preparing the leaders to lead the congregation in a new direction.
2. Surfacing a compelling congregational vision that will guide decision making.
3. Developing and implementing strategies that move the congregation toward the envisioned future.

These three fundamental tasks frame the work that ultimately realigns a congregation. Addressed sequentially, they break renewal up into understandable and manageable phases of work. The work of the first two phases culminates in pivotal decisions that prepare the congregation to tackle the final phase of work. Phase 1 results in leaders’ declaring the congregation’s current trajectory unacceptable and committing to lead in a new direction. Phase 2 results in a vision of a better future, discerned by the congregation and formally adopted by the congregation’s leaders.

While making such decisions might be a simple thing for an individual, it takes a fairly long time for a congregation to make informed and “owned” choices. Whatever the congregation decides must be desired, claimed, and lived into. It’s one thing to say that you want something; it’s another to want it enough that you follow through and act on the intention. Phase 3 focuses on exactly that—creating the future that’s been envisioned.

### **The Organizational Phases of Renewal**



Each of these three phases demands significant work on the part of the people involved. The real work of renewal, however, is inner work. It is here that the greatest challenge lies. To complete these organizational tasks, the people of the congregation must make inner shifts, making the transition from one way of thinking about the congregation to quite another. During

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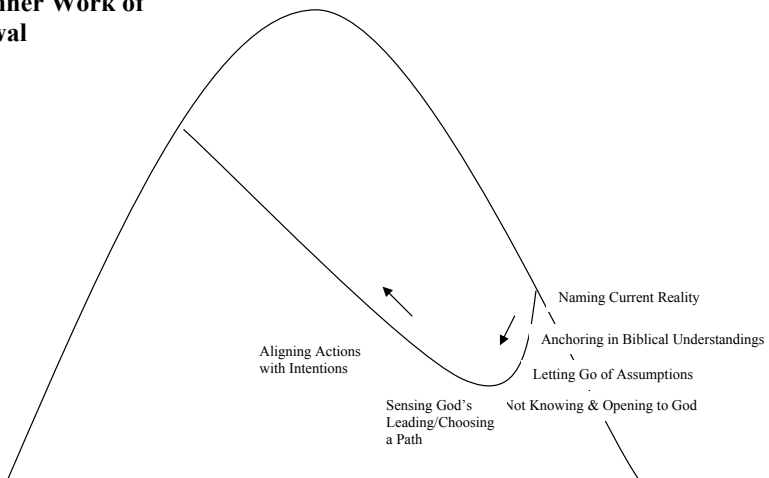
The real work of renewal is inner work, making the transition from one way of thinking about the congregation to quite another.

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renewal, people let go of what feels right and normal to create a new normal for themselves.

The congregation's inner work of transition has multiple steps. It begins with the recognition that something is wrong—that congregational life, while adequate, is missing something. Because a congregation is an outpost of the Christian church, the next step is to become anchored in a biblical and historical understanding of the purpose of church. When that purpose seems clear, the next step is to name and let go of preconceived notions about the form ministry should take. This step leads to a period of genuinely not knowing what to do. Rather than jumping in and filling that void with a quick solution, the challenge is to open ourselves to God and wait. From that place of expectant waiting, God's leading is sensed and a path forward is chosen. Finally, actions are aligned with intent, and a new way of being and doing church is created. The congregation moves through these steps of transition only as individuals in the congregation are able to move through these shifts.

### The Inner Work of Renewal



This inner work is the real work of renewal, and it is a work of the people. Pastors and outside consultants have much to offer, but they can't do the work for the people. Think of renewal as physical therapy for the body of Christ. The body is renewed as the people engage in practices that develop and strengthen the muscles of Christian discipleship and community. The chapters that follow describe in detail the work that needs to be done during each of the three main phases of renewal. They also provide insight and helpful ideas for how to help the people make the inner shifts each stage demands.

## Taking Time to Reflect

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We've given you a lot to think about. Take some time now to reflect on what you've just read. We hope that you're reading this book along with at least one other person from your congregation. Make time to get together with that person to have a conversation centered on the following questions. Go beyond simply reporting your answers. Give yourselves permission to probe beyond the initial words so that you understand each other's thoughts and feelings.

1. What excited you about this chapter? What challenged you? What "aha's" did you have? With whom would you most like to talk about the ideas in this chapter?
2. Think back on the various churches you've been a part of. Where in their life cycle do you think they stood? Where do you place your current church in its life cycle? Why?
3. The authors name three indicators of congregational health. On a scale of one to ten, with one being low and ten being high, score your congregation on each.
4. The authors name five hallmarks of declining congregations. On a scale of one to ten, with one being "doesn't

exhibit this at all” and ten being “this describes us exactly,” where would you place your congregation in relation to each hallmark?

5. Today, on a scale of one to ten, with one being “not at all” and ten being “with all my heart,” how much do you want the kind of renewal outlined by the authors? What contributes to your answer?
6. Today, on a scale of one to ten, with one being “not at all” and ten being “let’s get going right now!” how willing are you to be a part of making sure that outcome happens? What would you need for your level of willingness to increase?

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