



Congregational Lifecycle Explanation for Scoring & Appropriate Response

Scoring Scale

Score	Rating	Need
Lower than -7	Growing/Maturing	Improvement
-7 to +4	Slipping	Refocus
+4 to +12	Declining	Restructure/Redevelop
over +12	Dying	Re-birth

By applying the above scoring method you should be able to roughly determine an initial “diagnosis”.

We strongly encourage this first attempt at determining the position of any church on the Congregational Life Cycle to be followed through to get a more thorough assessment. NCLS, NCD, the Association’s Health Indicators or similar might be useful.

The broad terms we are using to describe the appropriate response for various stages of the Lifecycle are;

1. Improvement
2. Refocusing
3. Restructuring (or Redeveloping)
4. Rebirth

Improvement:

Even churches that are vibrant and thriving can always find areas in which they can improve. The fact that they are healthy and vibrant means that will have been attending to this type of ongoing assessment consistently for a number of years.

Improvement is usually focused on a narrow work area and will not normally entail a major disruption to normal church life. It will usually require focused attention and planning and some additional energy directed toward that area, at least initially.

These type of things often happen “under the radar” without major disruption.

Refocusing:

Often, called “Re-visioning”, this requires a church to determine its God given vision for the next period of the church’s life. This happens optimally before a church “heads over the hump” on the Lifecycle graph. But is also essential for churches in the early stages of the decline phase. (Many churches do this type of process as part of a pastoral call process).

When the vision has been determined, or discovered, the church then needs to assess all its ministries in light of this call from God upon the church. Asking how each ministry is helping the church achieve the God given vision?

This means that ministries and structures will be reviewed, and this process can be traumatic for some people, especially if review has not been a normal part of ministry life. Questions about staffing positions and even staff members should be asked, and it is likely that some structural, ministry, and even role changes will occur.

This level of change will create some pain and disruption. It will be important to affirm the past without reproducing the past in this process. An understanding of change and transition will be very important as will be the ability for the pastoral leaders to be able to remain “self differentiated” amidst the dynamic of an unsettled period in church life.

When done well a church should emerge from this process with a sense of being in an exciting new chapter of the church’s life.

This process can definitely not happen “under the radar” it needs to be overt and well communicated.

Restructuring or Redeveloping:

This process is a big deal! It involves an almost “blank sheet of paper” approach to the vast majority of church ministries and ways of operating. That does not mean everything will change, but it does mean that everything is up for grabs.

Like “refocusing”, it will also require the development of a new vision, but additionally it will require the, often heartbreaking, realization that the church is in quite a dire situation and that without major change it will eventually die, even though that might be decades in the future.

It is highly unlikely that the present pastor (if they have been there for more than 4 or 5 years) can remain, or lead this process forward. And similarly it is highly unlikely that the past leadership can remain as leaders in the process or in the next phase of church life. If the pastor and leaders had the required skills and personality they would have already done what is necessary.

So a new leader, and leadership, the laying down of past ministries and processes for operating often at a time when people resources are limited or have declined make this type of transition very, very difficult. Not impossible! Indeed some churches are testimony to a complete restructuring that has lead to a new and vibrant life for the

church, but a significant number of churches in this decline phase of the Congregational Lifecycle don't make the journey from start to finish.

This type of transition will be virtually impossible without the assistance from people outside that local church's system. Consultants, denominational staff, Intentional Interim Ministers, and other forms of support people will be required.

One of the reasons that churches get to this point is the failure to do the work of Refocusing, which in comparison is a significantly easier journey. Or unhelpful factor is that they have tried to put Band-Aids on gaping wounds.

Rebirth:

Some churches will have been in decline for so long, or will have become so depleted, that they no longer have the people resources or energy to engage effectively with the demands of Restructuring.

Most churches in this phase hope for a legacy for what has gone before, even if they are not personally part of this new life. The vast majority of the people will not be part of the new life that will emerge. In most cases it will involve a different target group, developing a different vision, and a radically different methodology. It requires the previous congregation and its leaders to give up control and influence over how things happen.

Rebirth requires a good closure, and hopefully a celebration, of the previous church congregations' life and achievements in order to have a "clean slate" from which to work forward. Connection with the church planting staff and resources of the Association or denomination would be very helpful in this process.

Without rebirth decline will inevitably lead to death. The death of a church is "closure without vision for the future", and sadly this is how some churches end their life.

Conclusion:

Being able to determine where on the Congregational Lifecycle a church is located. Is very important, but for a good outcome to be grasped it is just as important for a local church to embrace the appropriate responses (Improvement, refocusing, restructuring, or Rebirth). And in order for this to happen the right type of leadership and people resources will need to be or become available for the journey ahead.