

There are multiple paths to the future! God is doing a new thing to birth a new Church through us. Each congregation has to discover the best path for itself as its community opens its heart to discern the Holy Spirit's call at this time. The path is different for to each church. The task is to be faithful to the context of your congregation and the unique setting of your ministry. And, whatever path you consider, we hope you will do so with prayerful deliberation and discernment listening to God's voice.

Your Association staff or an outside consultant can work with you through this process. Do not hesitate to connect with us.

There are three visioning questions that beg to be considered during this time of deliberation:

- Who are we today?
- Who is God calling us to become in the future?
- Who is our Neighbor - what is happening in the wider community in which the church is located, and what are the realities and the needs?

POSSIBILITY: REVITALIZATION

This process requires:

- A "new" pastor: A minister who is new to that congregation or a pastor who has had a transformative experience and has a "new" sense of passion for ministry.
- A willingness on the part of the congregation to focus on spiritual development and discipleship.
- An outward focus on the community around the church with the needs of those not yet in church taking priority over the needs of the current congregation.
- Lots of change around church structure, finance and leadership.

Churches that want to consider this option need:

- Lots of support
- A pastor who will need to spend 20% of their time in the wider community
- High energy level for new ministry
- To grasp that "church" is not only Sunday mornings but anytime a community gathers in Christ's name to change the world into a place of love, peace and justice.
- A mission field around the church, the wider community

The whole journey takes lots of energy, commitment and 5- 8 years.

POSSIBILITY: RIGHT- SIZE

In our present world most churches can benefit from right-sizing. Churches that are growing and churches that are dwindling in membership need to right-size.

However, smaller churches with living ministries struggling with the cost of day today expenses, churches who can no longer sustain all the ministries they once did, all the staff persons they once

employed, and all the boards and committee members they once boasted can find revitalization through rightsizing as they continue to do vital ministry.

Right sizing requires:

- Accepting your new reality, remembering that it's okay to be small.
- Redefining your purpose, mission and vision
- A different staff configuration
- A new governing structure
- New ways to use your church building
- Resources and imagination. Please reach out to your Association for resources and guidance
- To evaluate their ministries and programs to determine what to keep and what to let go

Small yet viable churches do vital ministry but they cannot do everything. No church can! Discerning a purpose can help. Resizing the church then can be adaptive process as it seeks to continue its vital ministry at a scale that fits your context and increases its impact.

POSSIBILITY: CONSOLIDATION and NEW LOCATION

A consolidation is when two or more churches sell their buildings, change their leadership and move to a new location with a new sense of ministry and usually a new church name.

The advantages of a consolidation include:

- Elimination of the “turf” wars of “whose” building we stay in
- A new location with new pastoral leadership can often give two or more former congregations a fresh start.
- Budgets, buildings and resources are consolidated for one mission.
- A new church building can help launch a new sense of ministry and mission.

This option can be very successful but it does require a lot of prayer and strategizing by two or more congregations. There is often much turmoil when all financial resources are put into one pot and at times congregations may argue over keeping a former pastor in this new venture. People have to be ready to give up their old sense of identity and accept this consolidation as a “new” church. If one of more of the congregations view themselves as a closed club for their members and their own needs as paramount, consolidation will not work. However, if this option is done well, there is an opportunity to move to a new mission field or community and for a new venture to blossom.

POSSIBILITY: MERGER

A merger is when two or more churches move together into one of the existing buildings and share resources. In many cases, a merger allows two struggling congregations to share one pastor and to pool dwindling resources, enabling a continued ministry and presence in a community.

The difficulties of merging into an existing building include:

- Turf issues of “whose” church is it.
- Questions about which pastor remains as leader of the merged congregations.
- Questions about which feelings of one church “winning” and the other “losing”.
- Power struggles
- No new sense of mission or energy

It is also important in your reflection to understand “Merger Math.” If one congregation has 100 members and the other 50, it does not always mean the merged church will end up with 150 members. Usually, after two or three years, the congregation will be back to the size of the larger congregation. Merger may be the best option in some settings in which there are limited resources and obvious duplication of buildings and efforts. However, prayerful consideration should be given to the long-range effects on ministry and mission rather than just the short-term advantages. Are we fulfilling God’s vision for our mission field or are we simply postponing the inevitable?

POSSIBILITY: YOKING

For some congregations yoking is the best option. A yoking occurs when two or more congregations agree to remain in their existing buildings but share one pastor for both congregations. This option can be helpful in terms of having a full-time pastor in a community and offers the opportunity for two or more congregations to work cooperatively towards a shared vision.

The challenges that need to be prayerfully considered as well:

- A pastor’s time is divided and often congregations argue over who is getting more of the pastor’s time.
- There are limitations of a pastor’s availability.
- If there is a large geographical distance between the churches a yoke can be difficult.
- There are a limited number of pastors who enjoy yoked situations.

In considering a yoke situation it is very important to weigh the benefits and challenges in your particular setting.

POSSIBILITY: ADOPTION

A growing number of smaller congregations are looking at adoption as a way to maintain ministry. Adoption is when a smaller congregation approaches a large, healthy congregation and asks to become a satellite or branch of the large church. Adoption means a smaller, struggling congregation becomes part of a larger church but maintains its building and presence in the community. The larger church can then offer staffing, resources and their healthy DNA to this smaller church.

The challenges of the adoption approach are:

- The smaller church becomes part of the larger and falls under that church’s vision for the future.
- The smaller congregation loses its own identity and turns its building and resources over to the larger church.

Churches that are looking at this option have to value keeping a presence in the community over their own needs to maintain the heritage of the current congregation. If a congregation values serving the community this is an appropriate option.

POSSIBILITY: NESTING

Since the building may be one of the biggest barriers to viable ministry some churches choose to “rent” space in another’s building. They nest in another’s building, using space devoted to their activities. Sometimes the nesting church joins the “host” church in ministry, in programs and new relationships and possibilities are born.

Advantages of Nesting include:

- No more building expenses. Only one bill to pay to the host church.
- More opportunity for pursuing new ministries and mission
- Opportunity for experiencing diversity
- Possibility of merger down the road
- Both congregations benefit financially

Nesting, sharing space and collaboration hold the possibility toward a common future, they can bring opportunities for new ministry and new ways of being church.

POSSIBILITY: PART-TIME OR LAY PASTOR

Some congregations, faced with dwindling resources, will opt for a part-time pastor who is bi-vocational or a lay pastor. Part-time, ordained clergy do provide the essentials ministries for a church and they often understand the stresses of many of the parishioners as they are working in the secular world as well. The pastor's workplace may provide an entry into the community and often stronger lay leadership is needed to make up the difference.

The challenges include:

- Lack of availability of the pastor and scheduling conflicts.
- Lack of authority especially if the lay pastor is a member of the
- Clear job descriptions help so the church does not expect full-time service for part-time pay.

A lay pastor is often an alternative and at its best it produces a more realistic expectation of what the pastor will do. The pastor may be a member of the congregation and already know the region well.

With either a part-time ordained pastor or a lay pastor it is important to think through the long-range implications. What is God calling us to do and be in this community and how can we best fulfill those goals?

POSSIBILITY: CLOSE AND RE-OPEN AS A NEW CHURCH

In this option a church chooses to end its ministry, to close the doors for 6 to 12 months and then re-open as a new church start. This option means that the existing congregation recognizes that it no longer can reach its mission field and that someone else will do so in the future. The existing congregation agrees to go and find other congregations to join, while the building and assets are turned over to the denominational judicatory who finds a new church start pastor who will begin a new church reaching new people (it is not an option for existing members to come back to the new church as this would just repeat an old pattern of behavior; something completely new is being birthed).

This option works best when:

- The members of the congregation value a presence in the community over their own needs to maintain the status quo.
- A congregation has grown old and can no longer reach a community
- The community in which the church is located has had radical demographic change and the congregation no longer fits in or matches it.

That kind of perspective only comes after much thought and prayer. Turning over the “keys” to the building is a kind of letting go that is remarkable when done well. A new pastor who matches the new demographic can be called and can reach this population that the existing congregation could not.

POSSIBILITY: LEGACY CHURCH

Some congregations reach the point where they feel it is time to close the church, sell the building and turn all the assets over to the denominational judicatory for further mission use. Many congregations discover that maintaining a large building in a place where they cannot reach their mission field is poor stewardship and that some remarkable work that can be done when the assets are used creatively for other ministry and mission.

This option requires:

- Sober realization of the existing situation
- A period to grieve the loss of the church many people have loved
- Finding new church homes for existing members

The benefits of a Legacy Church are that significant. Resources are released to:

- Birth new ministries that could change communities
- Start other congregations
- Fund churches that are turning around
- Develop new mission efforts

Members of a Legacy Church can often find a deep sense of satisfaction and faith in seeing their gifts blossom in new ways.

Each option listed above has advantages and disadvantages. Only you know your church situation and your mission field and God’s call for your church’s future. Do not hesitate to contact Association staff. We will be glad to walk this journey of discernment with you.

Resources used:

Options for Struggling Congregations – Southern New England Conference UCC

Toward A Better Country by L. Gail Irwin

Church Legacy and Closure Resource – www.ucc.org