

Fostering Churches Back To Health

A Manual for
Church Fostering

Replant
|>> NAMB



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Foreword

We are fortunate to live in a time when a great deal of effort is being expended toward reclaiming declining churches. God is on the move in His church! More and more leaders and increasing numbers of churches are seriously taking on the task of helping churches that are struggling to find new life and new direction.

One of the most successful processes God is using to transform dying churches is “fostering.” This model displays a kingdom mindset, a generosity of resources and a genuine concern for Christ in His Church. The Replant Team brings a wealth of missions experience to this manual. They offer tremendous insight and direction for churches seeking to foster other churches or to be fostered by another church.

I highly recommend this resource to you. I’m delighted it is available. And I’m confident God will use it in many ways for His glory and for His Church.

Mark Clifton
Senior Director, Church Replanting
North American Mission Board
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Endorsements

“As we consider how to best come alongside and help declining and dying congregations experience fresh life and renewed vibrancy, church ‘fostering’ is a biblically faithful, God-honoring, effective strategy for many churches to consider. Thankfully, the NAMB replant team has developed one of the best resources I know of to help guide you and your church step by step through the fostering process – and you have it in your hands! Whether you are in a struggling church needing to be fostered or a healthy congregation that desires to foster a hurting church toward hope and health, I am confident you will find this manual to be an incredibly encouraging and helpful resource.”

– Mark Hallock, Lead Pastor of Calvary Church, Englewood, Colorado
Author of *Replant Roadmap*

“America is facing the harsh reality of a post-COVID world. As a result, churches have declined in numbers and sometimes the ability to recover on their own. Fostering Churches Back to Health is a great guideline for churches that need extra help getting back.

“Fostering is a new concept for today’s churches. Simply defined, it is the opportunity for a stronger healthier church to lend a hand to those struggling to recover from the pandemic and other issues.

“Fostering Churches Back to Health not only defines the process but it gives many helpful pointers on how church leadership and associational leaders can help the two churches connect for the short duration required for both churches to be healthy, growing ministries.”

– Dr. Dan Eddington, Associational Director of Missions
Three Rivers Baptist Association, Shorewood, Illinois

“The NAMB Replant Team has created a fostering manual that equips and facilitates partnership with associations and state conventions for this timely process of revitalization. This manual is clear, well thought out and gives some ground-level tools for the frontlines in ministry. The practices are solid biblical insights from the field, not an ivory tower. The strongest contribution of the manual is that it highlights and underscores the role of the church in assisting other churches to flourish for Jesus.”

– Dr. Terry Long, Church Health & Revitalization Strategist, Ministry Strategies Group
Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, Cary, North Carolina

Welcome to Replant Foster Care!

The “foster care” system around the globe goes back historically to least the 14th century in Japan. Over the past 200 years, almost every country has developed some form of foster care to assist abandoned or suffering minors, who require temporary help in meeting their needs. In most instances, the system places a minor into the responsibility of a caregiver, the “foster parent,” who will provide for the concerns of the minor until such a time as the child is adopted or able to assume responsibility for his or her own well-being. Usually an outside agency or entity monitors the parameters of the relationship, from its beginning to its dissolution. The objective is for the minor to become a healthy, viably functioning adult in society, contributing effectively to the community and life in general.

We on the Replant Team at the North American Mission Board recognize that many struggling churches are at-risk and need help from others. We have asked, “What if a healthy church in a similar fashion would come alongside a struggling church for a time, to enable it to regain health and re-assume responsibility for its own well-being as a contributing member of the kingdom of God? Wouldn't this enable the church to reclaim glory for God and make a difference in their community for Him?”

In the past two decades, interest in foster care has been on the rise in the United States. This is both positive and negative. Positively, more children in need are finding families willing to invest in them and help them to work their way out of their plight. Negatively, more children in need means more families are required to foster children, and in some places there just are not enough families to cover all the current needs.

This is true in church life as well. While more churches seem eager to assist in some capacity, including fostering struggling churches in need, there tend to be more churches still without a healthy church to come alongside them and provide what is required: an ongoing relationship that will help love, model, nurture and equip them back to health and the ability to stand on their own.

Sometimes churches and their leaders ask, “What's in it for us personally?” Hopefully, this is not your first reaction. Our society tends to encourage us to be a transactional

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people, providing something of tangible good for every service we provide. But God's Word teaches us to ask a different question, "What's in it for us collectively?" Because we as the Church belong to Christ, He sets the agenda and the guidelines for our collective work as His Church. The resulting benefits include synergy, partnership, spiritual formation, character development, kingdom impact, hell's population decreased, the Devil failing to triumph over a church's demise and, as Mark Clifton, NAMB's Senior Director of Church Replanting would so aptly declare, God's glory reclaimed. Most, if not all these benefits and blessings are intangible, yet they may be more real and of more eternal benefit than any transactional offering the relationship could provide. Moreover, the vitality and joy it brings to both congregations cannot be measured. Fostering churches makes a tremendous difference!

So why doesn't your church do this? Why isn't your association encouraging this option? My guess is there are a couple of reasons. First, it is a newer strategy for churches – at least as a repackaged, reclaimed strategy. In a previous generation, something similar to this may have been called "watchcare churches" or "reverting to mission status." In the past couple of years, Thom Rainer's *Church Answers* organization and a few state conventions have begun to talk about it. Still, it is a relatively new concept for most of us in America today. Second, this option is not widely used because there is little education on it: what it is, how it works, etc. This manual is an attempt to address this particular issue, at least in an introductory fashion.

Much of what needs to be learned and shared remains to be discovered. You'll find only sparse examples in this manual, because we are yet aware of few examples. Where we have learned principles and insights, we've shared them. Perhaps we are waiting for you to join the army of churches fostering other churches to add additional insights and wisdom. Forgive the cliché, but perhaps God is calling you to join us in "boldly going where no one (well, almost no one) has gone before."

Foster churches are desperately needed. To that end, we outline here a strategy and its component elements for churches – either fostering or those needing to be fostered – to discover, instruct and apply in their own settings. To make that happen, we start first with definitions and descriptions, just to make sure we're all starting on the same page.

Join us on the journey to reclaim at-risk churches and, through partnership with God and one another, to free them once more to bring great glory to our Father.

Let's Start Here

Foster Care, as applied to church life, requires us to define terms and explain concepts that may be foreign to many of us, but are necessary for our understanding. If we are going to be able to grasp the idea, equip those who need to be involved, implement the principles and make sure we are “in sync” with our partners throughout this process, we must make sure we are clear on the terminology and parameters involved.

So, what do we mean by “foster care?” By definition, we would say church foster care is a “time-bound strategic partnership of a stronger church and a struggling church whereby the struggling church receives and accepts coaching, care, wisdom and resources aimed at returning the struggling church to vitality and full autonomy.” Let’s unpack some of the key words and phrases here to make sure they are understood.

A “time-bound strategic partnership” is a commitment between two or more churches that agree to enter into a mutually-beneficial relationship for a specified and agreed-upon period of time. This relationship is similar to a covenant, in that it is a spiritual agreement before God to help one another during the specified time. Each will receive companionship from the other during the process. The time period of the commitment may be lengthened or changed, as needed and desired, provided all parties involved agree to the changes and acknowledge the advantages of doing so. We recommend the strategic partnership be put into a written document, elaborating expectations, boundaries and obligations each church makes to the others involved. An example of such a covenant can be found in the Appendices.

What do we mean by a “stronger church” and a “struggling church?” Perhaps it would be best to say first what we do not mean by these terms. We do not mean to suggest a “stronger church” is bigger in number, facility or budget. What we mean is they are healthier, have more vitality, show evidence of strength within the congregation and greater impact in their community. Nor do we mean to suggest that a “struggling church” is smaller or of little to no value. Rather, by the “struggling church” terminology we mean to suggest they are currently in decline and, more likely than not, at risk of dying within the next five years, if some effort is not made or found by which the Spirit of God turns around the church. There obviously are many such ways the Holy Spirit can once again infuse the struggling church with life and, in

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fact, we recognize that He does not need our efforts to do so. However, “one another” experiences in the Bible are encouraged, and thus we believe such partnership efforts to aid another honors God and edifies the body of Christ. It keeps us from being myopic and self-centered in God’s eternal, global work.

We also believe the relationship requires something from each church. From the stronger church, it will require these things: initiative to take on this opportunity, sacrifice of time, resources, energy, investment and sharing wisdom and experience. From the struggling church, it will require honesty in admitting their own need and humbly accepting the help a stronger church can give. This very likely will include relinquishing some control in its own situation for the specified period of time. This kind of partnership will enable the stronger church to model, equip and release the struggling church to a healthier place when it transitions out of the fostering relationship to refocus on its own mission field for Christ. This is what is meant in the definition by “accept and receive” coaching, care, wisdom and resources to assist in its recovery and turnaround. At the risk of being repetitive, for the stronger church it will mean taking initiative and sacrificing some of what it now has to help a sister church in need. For the struggling church, it will mean giving up full control of what happens during the agreed-upon commitment of partnership and trusting the stronger church to keep its promises to assist the church. Both are sacrificial in nature, and both are Christ-honoring in behavior.

Finally, we suggest the purpose of this relationship is to “return the struggling church to vitality and full autonomy.” The end in mind here is not for the stronger church to impose its will upon the struggling church, nor is it for the struggling church to become a clone of the stronger church. Instead, the objective is for the stronger church to release the struggling church back to completely independent ministry, thriving with evidence of Spirit-led life throughout the congregation and making an impact on its local community. This is a win for both churches, as the stronger church has accomplished its objective of serving and strengthening the struggling church; moreover, the struggling church is no longer able to be described as “struggling,” as it has regained its health and vitality. Now it, in turn, is able to look beyond sustainability to multiplication and even assistance to other churches who, like they were formerly, may need a partner to aid them in the church foster care system.

In summary, a fostering relationship combines one or more healthy, established churches providing wisdom, support, and resources partnering with a struggling church to assist them for a defined period of time, so the struggling church might regain vitality and full autonomy.

The Fostering (stronger) Church should have certain strategic and intentional characteristics typical of a healthy church as it enters into this relationship with a church in need.

It should be:

- › **Established:** having a solid foundation of priorities, personnel and finances, in order to help for a period of time, typically lasting between six and 18 months
- › **Sacrificial:** giving time, wisdom, resources and nurture to the church being helped for the duration
- › **Kingdom-minded:** desiring to see the church regain health, stability and opportunity to extend the kingdom as a partner to the fostering church, but not seeking to take it over or assume its assets
- › **Healthy:** honoring God with its service, on mission for Him, discipling the saved and reaching out to the lost in Word and deed, with a positive reputation in the community and among the Christian community
- › **Cooperative:** valuing the synergy and significance of working together in partnership, rather than simply being involved in unilateral efforts for their own good
- › **Emulative:** modeling, mentoring and equipping the at-risk church being helped in the right ways to guide a local church in the service of our Sovereign King

These churches obviously are among the best of the churches we know among us. They are leaders in the work of ministry, both among their own people and in their own community, but also among the sister churches she influences. Often stronger churches like this already are involved in some cooperative efforts, including church planting. However, the work of church foster care needs this kind of church to recognize the opportunity and advantages these struggling churches afford. They have history and heritage, which speak to the impact they have had over the years. In many instances, they have carved out a unique niche in the fabric of the community and, while it now is waning, the community may indeed lose something of value if the church dies.

These at-risk churches usually have some advantages that it may take new churches a decade or more to experience. They likely have a facility that can continue to be used for worship and ministry; often they no longer pay a mortgage on the property. While maintenance and repairs need to be made to keep the building attractive and serviceable, these costs are usually far less than buying new property or building a facility would be. In addition, the church may have other assets it owns that can be of immediate help in the revitalization journey. Add to these items some people – perhaps not a lot, but often enough to assist a stronger church in regaining traction and momentum for the turnaround.

Because of these items, stronger churches should recognize the tremendous opportunity these struggling churches can offer in terms of ministry effort. With an infusion of passion, wisdom and initiative, they will see quicker return on their investment in a shorter time than in working with church plants.

On the other side, it will cost the stronger church some things. This speaks to its value as an investment and as a cooperative venture with both God and His church. This investment will require at least the following:

- › **Commissioned leadership for a period of time** (up to the duration of the relationship). We recommend these be hand-picked by the stronger church's governing entity or persons for strategic impact and skillful ability, especially in the early months of the effort.
- › **Resources** (financial and material assistance, as needed, for the duration of the relationship), which will aid in building momentum and underwriting the turnaround effort. This would be monies and materials, determined by the stronger church from its own financial means, in addition to whatever resources the struggling church already had at its disposal.
- › **Relational investment** (mentoring the pastor, staff, or other leaders in the church being helped). This may be the most critical piece of the investment cost to the stronger church. The key is to give the time necessary to train and equip those in the struggling church to carry on in a positive, healthy manner after the stronger church removes its leadership team from the effort. This requires not just instruction, but also an understanding of the context, the "whys" behind the actions and the engrained habits needed to sustain the struggling church as it regains its own autonomy.

While more than one church certainly can work in tandem on a foster care project like this with a struggling church, more times than not, one healthy church will do this without additional partners (beyond the association and/or state convention, which will be supportive "from a distance"). However, when it does happen that two or more healthy churches are eager, interested and willing to assist such an at-risk church in a fostering relationship, the stronger churches must be clear with each other and with the at-risk church about who will lead the replanting or revitalization effort. One could be more in charge of supervision and mentoring, of training and equipping, likely also providing more people and resources, etc. It is not that two or more churches can't do this, or even do it well; it's just simply a matter of clarity in communication, expectations and, eventually, actions that are needed. Clarity is needed not just for the relationship to run smoothly between the partners, but also so the struggling church knows where to go to find the help it may need in any given situation.

The Fostered (at risk) Church is defined as a struggling church that has entered into a relationship with a stronger and healthier church for a defined period of time to receive support, coaching and care so they might return to vitality and autonomy.

It should be:

- › **Humble:** remembering the church belongs to Christ, not themselves
- › **Eager to Learn:** watching and applying the wisdom passed on to them within their context for the glory of God
- › **Focused on the mission:** allowing God’s mandate to be the prime directive in the decision-making process during this time
- › **Cooperative:** valuing the synergy and significance of working together in partnership, rather than simply unilateral efforts for their own good
- › **Willing to adapt:** allowing the fostering church to provide the leadership and instruction needed for the partnership, and then implementing the proper processes to keep the church healthy as it moves forward again when it stands on its own

Perhaps surprisingly, it will cost the to-be-fostered church some things, as well. These are critically important to the process and to the success of the partnership itself. The to-be-fostered church will have to willingly offer the following to the fostering church:

- › **Authority needed for the duration of the relationship.** The fostering church needs to have the freedom to do two things while in a partnership with fostered church. First, the church needs to have the ability to influence the development of healthy, effective practices that will benefit the struggling church. While these may be different from the current or former practices of the fostered church, they are necessary to produce new habits and behaviors that will benefit the fostered church for years to come. Second, they must have the freedom to model healthy behavior as they have learned and experienced it in their own church’s life. These likely will be different (at least to a degree) from what the fostered church has lived out previously. This relinquishing of control is for the benefit of the fostered church, if they will receive it, for it will help the struggling church forge new paths toward health and viability on its own in just a few months. This should be viewed as a learning opportunity, even as the fostering church seeks to handle the fostered church with love and the best of care. Please note: it is not the intent of the fostering church to turn the fostered church into a clone or duplicate of its own church. Rather, it is seeking to model and implement healthy practices and decision-making that will assist the fostered church to work through these steps and gain skills for use in the future.
- › **A spirit of gratitude.** The fostered church must recognize that the fostering church has no greater joy than helping it become fruitful again. Its efforts are unselfish and not an attempt to “take over” or make the church into a replica of itself. The fostering church is simply attempting to glorify God by extending kingdom efforts to help a sister church regain her strength and equilibrium for the impact she can make in the coming days. In such instances, churches should be

thankful for the sacrifices and investments a fostering church is willing to make as a “sibling” in God’s kingdom work.

- › **Willingness to learn, adapt and apply** (the lessons taught and seen). Unless the fostered church is eager to learn through the experience, it will fail in the future. As harsh as this sounds, it needs to be said. The fostered church needs to recognize it has been given a learning laboratory experience with a front-row seat to observe, examine and later apply its lessons in a way that continues to help the church be healthy and fruitful in the future. If it fails to glean insights and understanding into the decisions made or practices used, it will fail to learn the valuable keys to reversing its previous decline. Understanding and evaluation are significant parts of the implementation process.

Some churches will reject these requirements to be involved in the replant foster care process; they will consider the costs too great a price to pay. But before they summarily dismiss the process out of hand, may we suggest they reconsider? Jesus taught us to “count the cost,” knowing that sacrifice was a necessary part of our obedience process in following Him. It will be difficult and will cost us something, but the church was never meant to be about our preferences or opinions. On the flip side, since the church belongs to Him and is His bride, could assisting a church to reclaim the glory due to God be any more precious or valuable? On this note, let’s look at what the Scriptures have to say.

The Fostering Church Relationship: Why It is Needed and Should Be Considered *A Theological Reflection*

In the past few years, the reality of churches needing revitalization and replanting has received consideration attention, at least among evangelical denominations. This reality is necessary and must occur (see Revelation 2:5b, which speaks to the danger, if it is not addressed). In a recent study of 34 Protestant denominations, LifeWay found an increasing number of churches closing, from 3,700 in 2014 to 4,500 churches in 2019. Another study suggests an even more stark picture: In the past decade, between 3,850 and 7,700 churches have closed annually. Additional research suggests that somewhere between 67% and 80% of all churches in North America need revitalization and renewal. Add to all this the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on congregations, and the situation today appears grave and concerning.

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However, it is not without hope. Many organizations and networks have formed, or at least added to their focus, an emphasis on revitalization and replanting (“restarting” is the term used by some). Early data and anecdotal evidence show this emphasis is making kingdom impact.

The Southern Baptist Convention is no different. The North American Mission Board estimates somewhere between 800 and 900 of the annually closed churches are from our own tribe. Many other churches in the SBC need significant revitalization. As a result, within the past decade NAMB began an emphasis on replanting that has now exceeded expectations. As the responsiveness of pastors has grown over the years, so has NAMB’s understanding of it. In fact, over the past decade the Replant Team has come to realize there are many different ways to replant or revitalize a church – e.g., legacy churches “turning over the keys” to another church, marriages (in the business world, known as mergers), adoption (of a dying church as a “site” of a stronger church), sharing facilities with a church plant, etc. This document intends to introduce you to another way of revitalizing a church: the fostering church relationship.

A fostering church relationship is the time-bound strategic partnership of a stronger church and a struggling church, whereby the struggling church receives and accepts coaching, care, wisdom and resources aimed at returning the struggling church to vitality and full autonomy. In other words, a healthy church comes alongside an at-risk church to nurse it back to health through modeling, mentoring and equipping, then releases it to stand of its own again. The term “fostering” may have first come into use with Church Answers (the Rainer Consulting Group), but the concept can be found elsewhere as well (In the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, these are called “covenant churches” and in the South Carolina Baptist Convention, these are called “adoptions,” not to be confused with the way NAMB speaks of adoptions above). It may actually have historical precedents in the work done in previous generations, often under the terminology of “reverting to mission status” or “watchcare.” (These were terms used by Harvey Kneisel in his book *“New Life for Declining Churches,”* 1995, or *“The Lazarus Effect,”* 2012, for a process very similar to what we are discussing here.)

Why foster churches? There are many solid biblical reasons. *First, it is a reminder that the Church, all of its manifold expressions and its collective whole, belongs to Christ* (Matt. 16:18). He is the Bridegroom of His called-out people (Mark 2:19-20; Rev. 21:2), and, to change the metaphor, is the Head of the Body (Eph. 1:22-23). Thus, He has the final say on what is best for the Church, individually and collectively. Our preferences and opinions are bridges to reach differing peoples on the earth, but in no way discounts His leadership or considerations that His Church be presented to Him spotless and without blemish (Eph. 5:27).

Thus, we function as stewards, caretakers and managers of His body, and responsible to Him for it (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28; Hebr. 13:17). Individually, we like to preach that if one member of the body suffers, all within the local church suffer. The same is true in the corporate Church: When one part of the body suffers, it affects us all (1 Cor. 12:25).

Second, kingdom of God theology reminds us to look beyond ourselves, to recognize the reign of God among us (Mark 1:14; Matt. 12:28; Acts 28:31). It tells us we can never settle for the status quo, or simply be worried about our own lot and ministry, for the kingdom is always and everywhere bigger than any one solitary church. Too often pride, individual interests and selfishness motivate our responses to the needs of other churches, near or far away, who need our help (Matt. 25:40). God places our sister churches there to reach people, who would likely never be reached by our own church. We must give up our personal kingdoms for His kingdom; we must set aside our rights and glory in our privileges as siblings in God’s family.

Third, one of the great lessons of the early Church was its recognition of cooperation as the means to greater impact for the King of Kings. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3), the ministry of the apostles (Paul chief among them) to call forth and watch the new, young churches help one another (2 Cor. 7-8; Phil. 1:3, 4:15) – these all are examples of the early Church demonstrating cooperation in the body of Christ, so the gospel would still meet needs in the church and go forth in power. We must challenge the attitudes of indifference (“not my problem

or concern”) and comfort (“I’m fine with things as they are since it doesn’t affect me”) with the biblical values of sacrifice (“whatever it takes”) and love of neighbor in need (the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37, comes to mind). These self-centered attitudes have invaded the Church like a virus, and must be confronted, rejected and replaced with God-exalting attitudes (Phil. 2:3-5).

Fourth, on this note, we turn to the reality that our Sovereign God can do anything – nothing is beyond His scope or ability. While we acknowledge that in God’s divine plan it may be best for a church to die at some point (that is, to see her candlestick removed, Rev. 2:5), it is interesting to note that all seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation are given prescriptions and promises to extend their life and ministry by means of obedience to our Lord. No church in the Scripture is told to die or, by implication, that it is God’s will that it die. However, different remedies are needed in each situation, depending on experience and context, for every church mentioned (Rev. 2-3).

The obvious corollary to this reality is that God can, and is eager to, provide all the church needs to bring glory to Him once again (Phil. 4:19). He operates out of what some have called “an abundance mentality;” His resources are never exhausted (Ps. 50:10-12). What we are left with here on earth, are matters of trust and time – trusting God enough to take Him at His word, and patient enough to allow God to do what only God can do in His time, and not on our clock or agenda (2 Pet. 3:9). However, too many churches operate on a “scarcity mentality” when it comes to resources – and by implication – relationships, especially with other churches, peoples and even their own community. They falsely believe God’s storehouse contains only limited resources and they cannot afford to offer them – resources or the relationships that will inevitably require resourcing – without a loss to selves. This is very telling, and dismissive of what God can do through them – and even for them – in times when their outstretched arms to other churches in need would be seen as the “hands of Christ” (Acts 11:28-30).

God can, and will, provide all the church needs to bring glory to Him *once again*.

Fifth, the priority in Scripture is always on people, above personal concerns or possessions. Think about the story of the Rich Young Ruler (Luke 18:18-30) and the story of the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment (Matt. 26:6-13). Think about the contrast between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 4:36-5:11). People come first because God loves them most. God’s people should too. Remember, the Bible teaches us to be faithful in little, and then we can be faithful in much (Matt. 25:23).

Churches that are strong and healthy should fill the obligation – moreover, the privilege – of grabbing the hand of a sister church about to go under the waves of struggle and defeat. The opportunity we have to bless others as we have been blessed is a mandate that goes back as far as Abram (Gen. 12:2). Why not apply this to our blessing our at-risk sister churches as well?

Why not just make the at-risk church a part of our own? Why not just allow them to become a multisite of our church, especially if our reputation is solid, our impact considerable and our own status is healthy? In some instances, this kind of adoption would be best, no doubt. However, in others it would not be.

If the axiom is true, “It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people,” then the adoption mentioned will eliminate a different kind of church reaching another slice of the population. And if “It takes all kinds of people to reach all kinds of people,” then another voice or personality that others might connect with uniquely would have been discarded unnecessarily.

What is needed is for churches to step up and recognize that when our collective health is strengthened, we all benefit – and even more, the kingdom of God benefits. So, we give ourselves away, or simply for the benefit of the at-risk church, but we give ourselves away to God, to use His people and His Church as He sees fits. And we do it all to His glory and honor, the One who has made even the opportunity possible for us to consider.

Once healthy, we will again have two strong, vital, courageous churches proclaiming and living out the gospel, then four, then eight – can you see where this is going?

Let’s not consider such an option, thinking only about us, “our” church; rather consider it from God’s perspective, the kingdom’s perspective, the at-risk church’s perspective and even the perspective of the lost. “If you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto Me.”

By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18, ESV)

Foster Care Church Strategy

Having counted the cost and reflected on the words of Scripture for us in how we serve Christ within His Church, we turn our attention to the strategy process itself. Assuming the fostering church is healthy and has a vision to help make kingdom advances throughout the region, evidence of the description and criteria mentioned previously should be seen. If the church does and is eager to get involved in fostering a struggling, at-risk church, what comes next? What steps should it take?

Preparatory Steps

Prior to engagement with a to-be-fostered church, this healthy, established church either (1) recognizes by their own initiative, (2) is approached by associational or state convention leaders about a church in need or (3) is made aware by colleagues in ministry of a church that could use help for a given period of time. As a result of intentional prayer and dialogue with internal leaders and external partners (obviously including the church to be helped) the healthy, established church commits itself to assisting the to-be-fostered church for an agreed-upon period of time. Usually the process should continue for six months to 18 months, but this should be revisited regularly as a part of the ongoing dialogue between the two congregations in relationship. The established and healthy church should be sure to work through the proper processes in its polity before this agreement is finalized and needs to determine what investments of its life, energy and resources will be extended to the fostered church during the months ahead.

Usually the process should continue for six months to eighteen months, but this should be revisited regularly.

If no church is yet known to be in need of such a partnership, the healthy church should inform the association, state convention or individual churches of its willingness to help in a fostering relationship. Consequently, these outside entities can be on the lookout for a receptive church that meets the criteria. When one or more is discovered, both churches can begin the relationship-building process, which would potentially enable such a partnership to be made in the future.

The to-be-fostered church must acknowledge its own need for such a partnership and agree to welcome the loving, supportive efforts of the fostering church (the healthy, established church) for the defined, agreed-upon period of time needed in the process. This also should be done through the proper, required decision-making

It is highly recommended that a written covenant of relationship, along with benchmarks or mileposts of completion, be determined and agreed upon by both churches before the actual covenant is in effect.

procedures of the church. A sample covenant of relationship for the churches may be found in the appendices at the end of this manual.

It is highly recommended that a written covenant of relationship, along with benchmarks or mileposts of completion, be determined and agreed upon by both churches before the actual covenant takes effect. This allows for clarity regarding objectives and process

and removes confusion in the procedures and decision-making process during the partnership. Both churches should share with each other the signed fostering covenant of relationship, spelling out the actions and nature of the relationship, including:

- › lines of authority
- › communication
- › coordination of these efforts over the coming months

This covenant also should delineate “out” clauses for both churches should they become necessary. This is not a preferred or desired outcome, by any means, but should be an option if circumstances change (e.g., one of the pastors departs, an insurmountable conflict comes up, etc.).

Engagement with Church to-be-Fostered

In most instances, relationship precedes resourcing. Pastors and/or key leaders know each other or, at least, know of each other and the credibility of their lives and ministry. Need flows out of that. However, in the absence of prior relationship, other individuals (ADOM/AMS, state convention staff, etc.) could broker an introduction between the two churches, in hopes that it develops into church foster care.

1. *Prior* to the beginning of the official, formal foster care relationship, the individuals from the churches involved should begin to meet together to prayerfully talk, share and consider how their relationship could lead to something more meaningful. The fostering church should eventually send a few members to attend the services of the to-be-fostered church. At the appropriate time, when they feel this is a part of God’s will and plan for their congregations, the fostering church may initiate a meeting schedule with the church to be fostered. That meeting should include discussion and dialogue regarding a potential partnership, with the goal of assisting the struggling church with regaining its strength and vitality. Together, they should agree to do a data analysis of their trendlines, facilities and community. They should discuss candidly the to-be-fostered church’s perspective

on their needs and hopes for the future.

If such conversations and prayers lead the churches to agree on a fostering relationship, they should extend the dialogue to include the following expectations: (a) pastoral leadership from the to-be-fostered church who would join the regular, on-going fostering church's staff meetings and (b) the establishment of a "team of representatives" from both churches who will meet together regularly but consistently to direct the process and navigate the concerns and issues that surface.

2. *During* the process, the fostering church will use its leadership and resources to first analyze and discern reasons why the fostered church has struggled (diagnosis). Input and interviews from those within the church and outside from the community will be a vital part of this step. The fostering church will then develop a growth and development plan to address these concerns (prescription). The goal is to mentor and equip leaders within the fostered church or for the fostered church (if not found within) to maintain and build upon these findings. These strategies also will be informed by the understood priorities and healthy characteristics of congregational life and ministry, as exhibited in Scripture. Careful attention to context will need to be addressed to "customize" the plan for the fostered church, remembering a church's address speaks loudly to the way ministry needs to happen.

It is important that the fostering church use its leadership and resources to model priorities and healthy elements of congregational life and ministry, including vision and vision-casting, community exegesis, gospel-centered preaching and teaching, the priority of prayer, discipling pathway(s), community engagement and service, evangelistic outreach, leadership development, decision-making polity, a facility analysis, dealing with the past and a budget analysis. All these elements should be addressed during the course of the covenant relationship.

A Foster Care Council should be created with several leaders from both the fostering church and the church being fostered, because the need for consistent, ongoing communication will be one of the biggest challenges both churches face.

A Foster Care Council (name is not important, but role is) should be created with several leaders from both the fostering church and the church being fostered. It is our suggestion they meet regularly and often, because the need for consistent, ongoing communication will be one of the biggest challenges both churches face during the relationship. (A sample agenda for such meetings has been included in the appendices.)

Sharing ongoing information needs to be a staple in the relationship of the council with their congregations. Updates from the pulpit, articles in newsletters and on the website and perhaps even a visualization of the path they are pursuing together should be made for all to see and hear. Periodic feedback sessions, including a question-and-answer time, should be afforded to both churches, whether in small groups or congregation-wide. This is critical to minimizing criticism and potential opposition to the renewal efforts.

Regardless of how good the relationship between the two churches appears to be, conflicts likely will arise at some point during the partnership. When they arise, it would be best if they are resolved by both churches working together. This models redemptive action and the value of collaborative relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ. However, if it is not possible to find a mutually acceptable agreement between churches, then the fostering church's decisions should be implemented throughout the process, as agreed upon previously in the signed covenant agreement.

At the end of six months, we recommend the leadership of both churches schedule an additional meeting, specifically for evaluation and feedback, to assess their progress and relationship; they will do the same again at 12 months, if the relationship is to last a full 18 months to complete. If a moderator is needed, an objective third entity, such as a director of missions, could be invited to join the discussion. While there will no doubt be disagreements about some issues and strategies implemented – after all, the need is obvious that some things must be done differently to bring about changed results – both churches should be discouraged from leaving the relationship and commitment before the completion of the process. Perseverance is a key to any replanting effort and, in fact, is necessary for changes in behavior to take root and become habitual patterns in the congregation for the future. However, if it is necessary and both parties agree that it is in the best interest of all involved, the relationship can be ended early. For this very reason, an “opt-out clause” may be wanted in the covenant document before the relationship begins.

3. *At the end* of the formal covenant relationship, the churches need to mark the closure of the fostering relationship by celebrating together. This should be planned and experienced in a way that acknowledges God's goodness, as well as the transition in relationship that will now be happening. This is especially important if benchmarks have been met; the heroic efforts of those involved and of the great God who provides must be celebrated! This will most often be done in a joint worship experience, but could be done in a banquet, a fellowship time or some other gathering where the congregations mingle and acknowledge each other relationally. This means rejoicing in God needs to be at the center of the experience for all who participate – not in human achievement or efforts.

What if benchmarks or goals have not been realized as expected? We would encourage the churches to still gather to celebrate and rejoice! Progress likely has been made and the fostered church has seen improvement in health and outlook, even if exact expectations have not fully been reached. God is still a great God, and all we have is because of Him.

We must trust God *in the process*; but we also *must* trust God *with the process*.

Regardless of the results, a relationship between churches has been deepened, key progress has been made and the future can be anticipated with greater hope than before. The kingdom of God has been strengthened and the King has been honored, as His bride has been better adorned for life-giving service to her community. Hearts of gratitude and thanksgiving must be offered, for this is God's work, and He knows what He's doing in His time. Parenthetically, we should acknowledge this even if the relationship comes to a premature end, regardless of the reason. We must trust God in the process; but we must also trust God with the process.

Should the relationship be extended at the end of the agreed-upon relationship, as previously determined in the covenant? There certainly are a variety of options that could be considered at this stage, including a continuation of the process for months, if both parties agree. While local church autonomy permits each church in this kind of relationship to determine this consideration for themselves, the fostering process does not lend itself to a longer relationship. Lengthening the relationship and commitments may have an adverse effect on the viability of the fostered church in the future, as it gradually becomes more dependent on the fostering church to provide everything it needs. This also may tempt the fostering church to seek to take over the fostered church permanently, though this was not the original intent. A better solution may be in order for both churches if they truly want to extend the relationship – and that is adoption.

Adoption is another form of replanting in which a stronger church, in this instance the fostering church, assumes responsibility for the weaker church, taking it to be a part of its own church family. This option may be a viable long-term solution for churches seeking a more permanent form of the relationship with the fostering church, especially if a lack of health still is pervasive at the end of the agreed-upon timetable in the covenant. However, it should never be expected, assumed or planned by either party entering into a fostering relationship. This is not the objective; rather it is to help reshape the weaker, fostered church to stand on its own again, with momentum and encouragement from a sister church and Almighty God.

4. *After* the relationship ends, the fostering church needs to evaluate the experience and apply its learnings for its own growth and development. The experience hopefully will be a positive one and a catalyst to further engaging the process with another church in need in the days ahead. The fostered church also needs to evaluate the experience and the “why” behind the changes that brought new energy, life and encouragement to the congregation. These need to be valued and incorporated more deeply into the life of the church for the years ahead, as they have meaning and impact. Finally, both churches should take time to reconnect in future months to grow the relationship to another level (maybe working together on a new fostering project with a different church in need?) and to take time to appreciate what God has shared with them in the journey they have experienced together. This can be as simple as a phone call between pastors, a thank you note to those who blessed the church in some way or something as elaborate as another joint worship service or fellowship celebration.

Fostering Relationship Gates/Mileposts

For some of us, a timeline helps visualize this process more clearly. And for some, it provides a way to measure progress toward the goal in providing the care needed. In this section of the manual, we seek to do just that: Give you the reader some “markers” to effectively know where you’re at on the journey, what comes next and a means to measure your success in the process. **Please note:** This list, while logically accurate, can and should be flexed or adapted in your field of ministry as needed and desired. It may be that some steps can even be skipped or done in a different order. You will need to determine this based upon the setting of the churches involved, as well as the implementation calendar. For most, it will give a simple step-by-step model of the process, so that the elements mentioned to this point can be applied appropriately to the relationship. Other elements have samples found in the appendices in the back of this manual.

Just as the ancient Temple in Jerusalem had several gates you entered as you moved closer to the Holy of Holies, so this process uses the “gates” analogy to symbolize moving deeper and deeper into the necessary experiences of foster care between churches. These gates are stages on the journey. For example, Gate 1 is preparatory work that needs to be done before the actual fostering relationship is underway. Then within each gate, you will find several mileposts that need to be achieved for progress to be made in completing the stage. These are the steps to be completed before entering the next gate, or stage, in the relationship.

This list, while logically accurate, can and should be flexed or adapted in your field of ministry as needed and desired.

With this in mind, here are the Gates and the Mileposts, with brief descriptions given of each.

Gate 1: Preparation

This gate informs both the fostering church and the to-be-fostered church of the steps to be taken *before* entering the covenant relationship with each other. They have to do mostly with communication and agreement of the leadership and congregations involved, so a clear understanding of what will be happening is gained by all before the process begins. Since it will create changes that will affect everyone’s lives, it is best to have the churches wrap their heads around this before it challenges their hearts. This is an attempt to ease the transition coming and gain trust for the

process through open disclosure. It also will ferret out many obvious objections at this stage so that they can be dealt with in a pre-emptive fashion, if needed.

Milepost 1: Pastor and church agrees to be a fostering church. The pastor, already convinced by God (and possibly encouraged or influenced by others), recognizes God is calling the church to implement the foster care strategy. It fits the purpose of the local church and is a means to help it live out the vision God has given the church for the future. The pastor studies, shares and agrees with church leadership that this is God's desire. He presents it to the church through the polity it holds, and the church affirms God's desire for the church to move toward foster care with a church in need. Some churches will have polity that permits this decision to be made by elders or a select group of people and announced to the congregation, while other churches will bring a recommendation from its leadership to the body and the congregation will make the decision. Regardless, the church may desire to have the affirming entity sign a document of intent at this point (an example is in the appendices). This is for clarity and to make sure everyone is "on the same page" in regard to this ministry effort.

Milepost 2: Church selects/invites an in-need church into the relationship. The fostering church will find and initiate the possibility of a fostering relationship with a church nearby. They may lean on partners, like the association or state convention, to help them discover a church to help. However, in terms of trust and credibility, it is better if the fostering church knows already the church it is desiring to help, as this will strengthen the relationship and allay the fears of the church to be fostered. At this milepost, the fostering church begins the relationship, answers the questions and concerns and removes doubts as to intention and motivation on its part.

Milepost 3: In-need church agrees to consider the fostering relationship. The church in question is willing to consider this relationship, as its leadership is convinced of its merit, the purity of the relationship and the overall strategy involved. It prays, discusses, debates and determines whether it is God's will for them to enter into this relationship. It also leads their own church to sign a document of intent, based on its polity (representatives or the whole church, whichever is appropriate), and for the same reasons, clarity and communication. It informs the fostering church of their decision.

Milepost 4: Both churches affirm the parameters of the relationship. The fostering church invites the to-be-fostered church into dialogue about what the relationship will be. They discuss and agree on the objective(s), the process, the boundaries, the dynamics involved (including decision-making) and the length of the fostering relationship. These items form the framework for the covenant the churches will share in Milepost 6 below. These items are common to virtually every fostering relationship, though they need to be adapted to each situation. There is a sample covenant in the appendices, which illustrates this milepost and the next two mileposts as well.

Milepost 5: Both churches agree on the benchmarks for health. Whereas the parameters of the relationship will be rather consistent and will mostly vary only in the length of the relationship agreed upon as the journey begins, the benchmarks of health will be fully and uniquely determined based upon the churches in this specific relationship, especially the church that is being fostered (the one in need of help). The fostering church will seek to help nurse the struggling church back to health in the areas of greatest need first, or at least the areas where, if health is recovered, it will have the greatest impact on the other areas of need. These particular areas will differ from church to church, as each has unique and individual needs and concerns. The fostering church also must consider its ability to help and may realize it is inadequate to supply the needed effort, equipping or resources in a particular area because it is not an area of strength or capability within itself. This should not be a reason to disqualify the church from a fostering relationship, but rather identify an area where partners can lean in to assist. In the appendices, an extensive list of benchmark subjects has been listed, with the hope that churches will pick and choose those germane to the specific needs within the fostering relationship. It is not expected that a fostering church be able to help with all these areas in a limited amount of time.

Milepost 6: Both churches sign the covenant of relationship. A formal (not legal) covenant of relationship is written by the representatives of both churches, based on the agreements they have made regarding items mentioned in earlier mileposts. The covenant is presented to each church for approval, according to their polity process for decision-making. The document is approved and the other church is notified. A beginning date for the official relationship to begin is announced. The decision is celebrated by both churches, with glory given to God for the opportunity to make much (more) of Jesus. This document is then shared with the congregation in appropriate fashion, whether that be mailing it to every active member, reading it at every business meeting or posting it in appropriate places within the church facility, like the foyer, fellowship hall or small group locations. (The church could choose to do all of these things or other things of its choosing.) Reminder: A sample covenant is in the appendices.

Gate 2: The First 100 Days

Once a date has been announced and the work gets underway, it is critical to build trust and gain momentum quickly. The first 100 days (roughly three months and a week) are often mentioned in our society in terms of setting a tone for what is to follow. Creating a welcoming and accepting culture will be one of the biggest challenges for the fostering church and, at the same time, one of its most significant accomplishments. With that in mind, the following mileposts will help the churches move toward critical issues they must address in the future.

Creating a welcoming and accepting culture will be one of the biggest challenges.

Milepost 7: Fostering church begins fostering work on site. The fostering church begins having a presence at and with the church it is fostering. The fostering church selects a leadership team to be the onsite coordinators for the duration of the work, including a transitional pastor, if needed, and other complementary leaders needed to round out the work that needs to be done in the process. These individuals typically will come out of the fostering church's membership, but may on occasion be selected from other associational personnel resources, or even from the fostered church itself (but this is not encouraged).

If the fostered church has an ongoing pastor (often this may be an individual who has been there for a lengthy period of time), the fostering church needs to work in a collaborative way with him. Issues of authority and process need to be handled with sensitivity and respect for his previous work and efforts. At the same time, it may be that the pastor needs to also experience some of the changes that will bring greater health and vitality to the church and its systems. Clarity on roles and actions during the covenant relationship, along with excellent communication, will assist both churches in building the trust and credibility necessary within the fostered church.

Other complementary leaders will be based on personnel resources available within the fostering church, as well as the needs of the church being fostered. They need to be visibly seen, tangibly interacting with the fostered church actively, from the beginning of the covenant relationship. This builds awareness and begins relationship. Both are key elements to the success of the endeavor.

Milepost 8: Churches jointly celebrate the beginning of relationship. The two churches find a way to combine congregations for a joint time of celebration during the first couple of weeks they are in this partnership relationship. This can be a worship service, a picnic on the grounds or at the park, a prayer/commissioning gathering or perhaps something else. The purpose is to celebrate God and the gift of relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ. This cooperative blessing reminds all this is a partnership given by God's grace and for His glory, not our own effort or honor. Both churches unite their hearts as one before their Father and unite their effort for His kingdom, not a single church. This sets the tone for what is to come.

Milepost 9: Fostering church and its leadership builds credibility, trust and momentum through relationships and small wins over first 100 days. In the early days, the intentional on-site presence of the fostering church focuses on meeting with the people of the fostered church, listening to their stories, concerns and convictions about the church they love so much. They ask questions more than suggest solutions. They recognize the members of the fostered church are the true experts on the church they are seeking to help. In their future efforts, they learn, appreciate, value and apply their insights toward the actions that will take place. But for now, they love the people, care for them well and build the necessary relational equity to gain trust and credibility for the future. This generates the momentum needed for future change. Please note: This milepost must be evaluated before moving forward, to see if trust has truly been gained. Why? Because trust is the currency of change and is

absolutely necessary for the church to embrace the healthy lifestyle it needs to stand on its own again.

Milepost 10: Fostering church initiates prayer campaign. This is the first corporate, collective strategy to be implemented in the fostered church. A 40-day prayer campaign is recommended, with devotional thoughts and prayer challenges for each day of the journey. Some state conventions have developed such plans for local churches to use, or the church can develop its own strategy. Regardless, the objective is for the church to recognize that the turnaround, if it happens, ultimately is a spiritual endeavor and completely depends upon God's intervention in their midst. At the end of the 40-day effort, the entire church should gather for a final corporate time of prayer, much as the people of Israel gathered together for special, spiritual occasions (the dedication of Solomon's Temple or the recitation of the Law in Ezra's day when the people had returned from exile.) This is a holy, yet joyous moment, entering into God's presence, experiencing thanksgiving and, at the same time, begging Him to act in their midst on behalf of His church.

Milepost 11: Fostering church completes evaluation and analysis of congregation, community, facility and polity. During these same days of visiting among the membership and focusing them on prayer, the fostering church is studying the church and its community. It is exegeting the community, learning who is there, their characteristics and their needs. It is comparing that information with who is in the church, their characteristics and their needs. They look for commonality between the two and for opportunity to build bridges to the community through engagement in the future. In addition, they analyze the church facility: What needs to be addressed through maintenance, upkeep, or disposal? What needs to be enhanced or improved? Does any of this need to be done soon, or should it wait until a later time? Why or why not? Finally, the fostering church leadership also reviews the structural documents of the church, especially the constitution and bylaws. These can be a hindrance to development and growth, if they were created decades ago or at a time when the church was a different size and thus had different needs. Insights are gleaned in all these areas, and options for dealing with them are recorded for a later time in the process.

Milepost 12: Fostering church prioritizes areas to be addressed, based on benchmarks and local context/needs. The onsite leadership coordinators from the fostering church prioritize the needs and propose ideas on action steps that need to be taken over the course of the remainder of the covenant commitment. These are first shared with the fostering church leadership (back home, not on site), and decisions are determined for action. Personnel needs and budget allocations are approved for use. The fostered church is made aware of the findings and the decisions for upcoming action. Time for listening to concerns, objections and simple processing of the information is given before action is taken. How much time? This can only be determined locally, but the reminder is this: The fostered church has to live with the impact of these decisions and action steps long after the fostering church has left. Wisdom and discernment is applied to the most strategic steps to take and they are

prioritized, due to their significance or leverage on other actions that will likely follow. Action steps need to be within the boundaries of the covenant. Remember: The goal is to help the church stand on its own again, not turn it into a clone of the fostering church.

Gate 3: The Centerpiece

Much as the centerpiece of flowers or decoration adorned the dinner table and all that transpires there, this gate is the stage in the experience of the church partnership

The centerpiece is the hub of activity and the generator of change for the fostered church, an engine stoked by the efforts and wisdom of the fostering church.

where most of the transformation takes place. Individual church needs and concerns will differ from situation to situation, from relationship to relationship, but this is where – with trust being established and momentum beginning to make progress – necessary modeling and transition must take place. This is the hub of activity and the generator of change for the fostered church, an engine stoked by the efforts and wisdom of the fostering church. We now turn our attention to this part of the process.

Milepost 13: Both churches evaluate progress and concerns at the six-month mark.

Between months three to six, the fostering church continues to make progress in relationship-building with the people of the fostered church. Modeling a healthy routine of staff engagement, with invited members of the fostered church participating as needed and desired, and worship ministry, with determined, shared collaboration, has begun in earnest. The worship experiences focus on gospel preaching; many options for early impact can be used, from Jesus' life and ministry (Mark or John are often used), to Paul's ecclesiology (Ephesians comes to mind), to revitalization issues and concerns (Exodus-Numbers wilderness wanderings are possible), and there are many others. The important thing here is to help the fostered church understand "why we are doing what we are doing" in preaching, musical worship and other elements of the service. Teaching healthy patterns, even healthy disagreements, models right behavior before the church, which it needs to embrace. In addition to relationship-building and the worship elements underway, out of the action steps created at the end of Milepost 12, the churches will begin ministry addressing some of the other benchmark areas of agreement in the covenant. By the six-month point in the relationship, the leadership of both churches should sit down together to evaluate the progress made, and any areas of concern that have surfaced and need to be addressed or rectified. A few churches may choose to end the relationship after only six months, but those who do should at least have seen the value of modeling, the rationale behind the common elements of church life in worship and decision-making and a limited number of strategic efforts aimed at the weaker areas of ministry within the fostered church. These typically include missional engagement in their community and disciple making. Both will be highlighted in a

significant way for those churches that continue the relationship for at least six more months (see below).

Milepost 14: History/heritage review and plan of action. This review and highlighted action underscores the value and worth of the fostered church within the kingdom of God, and His plan for them. Attention should be given to the purpose that brought them into being, their significant impact in the community over the years, evangelistic and missions efforts and the eternal fruit of their efforts. A celebratory event may be planned to express thanks to God for the faithful ministry of forerunners in the church's ministry, highlighting lessons learned from them, including the need to take advantage of opportunities to engage the community in ways that will gain response and to be on mission for Jesus. This can be used to leverage future change in the church, by pointing out these pioneers were willing to take risks, thought of others before themselves and made decisions not out of personal preference, but for the good of others who needed to know Jesus, too. A "hall of faith" exhibit or a memory wall near the coffee area is a way for these former heroes to continue to cheer on the current members to transformation and growth as they run their race for Jesus (Hebr. 12:1-3).

Milepost 15: Discipleship pathway, including membership expectations, implemented.

By this time a new, or more comprehensive, pathway for discipleship should be in place. This pathway shares an intentional churchwide strategy for all members and attendees to make forward progress in their walk with Jesus. This should be done in identifiable steps that enable the participant to realize where he or she is in the process at any given time. Rick Warren's Baseball Diamond is an example of such a pathway (We are not expressing an opinion on the content of his pathway, only the illustration that such a pathway adds clarity and simplicity which all can understand.). This pathway should include a beginning point, such as a (potential) new members orientation class, which would talk about doctrine (what we believe) and how we live it out (faith and practice), but it also should speak to the issues of church personality (what makes us different from other churches in terms of mission, vision and priorities), church boundaries (our values and vision as filters for who we are and where we are headed) and commitment (expectations and benefits of membership, perhaps in the form of a covenant). High expectations yield high return – and usually produce qualitatively healthier members. This pathway is integral to the success of the fostering relationship. It is hoped the fostering church will not simply implement it, but equip the fostered church and its leadership with its value and use for years that are subsequent to their own withdrawal from the partnership relationship.

Milepost 16: Community engagement and outreach strategies begin in earnest. By this time (after six months), the fostering church should have gained enough trust and credibility to immerse the fostered church in community, missional engagement. It is not enough to get the community into the church. The greater need may be that the church needs to get into the community. Outreach activities need to be an ongoing, calendared part of the strategy over the next six to 12 months. These may be implemented collectively, in small groups or by age group, as well as individually. The members of the fostered church need to partner with those from the fostering church

to see how this is done effectively (modeling), equipped to do it themselves and engaged regularly in efforts to live out and share the gospel in their community. There are many ways to do this, but it must be done. Community needs must be discovered, and the churches should determine which needs can be met. The manner of doing this will follow, hopefully, in concert with the community advising them of needs and ways they can be good neighbors and a blessing to those among whom they live. Your church address is not an accident; God placed the church there to make a difference among these specific people. No fostering effort is complete if it does not engage the community.

Milepost 17: Repairs and revisions made to facility and the bylaws. These are lumped together here because both repair and revision must be addressed during this time. However, they could easily be separate mileposts. With facilities, first impressions can tell visitors much about the church itself: how they value it, whether they are expecting and anticipating guests, even their priorities. The facility needs the eyes and observation of the fostering church to see things the fostered church has filtered out of its mind and vision long ago. Clutter needs to be removed; worn-out items replaced or renewed. Smells of must or decay must be eliminated. If replacement expenses are too high, that is OK. However, polishing pews, cleaning the carpet, washing windows and throwing away dangerous toys should still be done. Make sure adequate, clear, welcoming signage is available to direct guests appropriately. As for the bylaws, the fostering church likely will recognize the need for some changes to be made. This is due to the fact that the fostered church was living in a different era – both what the world was expecting and doing around them and the size and dynamics of the congregation inside – than it is now. A simpler structure will allow the church to be more efficient and streamlined in moving toward ministry and impact for the future. The fostering church needs to move these things forward, but within the appropriate time frames, so the fostered church doesn't feel rushed or bullied into these key changes. Again, sharing and showing “why we do what we do” is a critical piece for the fostered church to observe.

Milepost 18: Future leaders identified for transition. The final “centerpiece” milepost focused on surfacing future leaders and equipping them for the fostering church's departure. This is one of the fostering church's key roles: While modeling and implementing healthy practices within the fostered church, it is eagerly on the lookout for the right leaders to implement these practices after the transition out of the covenant relationship. In other words, they begin immediately to “find someone who will eventually replace themselves” within the fostered church. These leaders from the fostering church will spend more time with this person or persons as their shadow or, to change the analogy, their intern during the process. They will invest time and energy in equipping them to understand and apply these healthy practices within the fostered church long after they have left. If persons are not found to fill such roles, substitute plans are suggested or made with the collaboration of those in the fostered church. This is a key to the long-term impact and effectiveness of the foster care relationship.

Gate 4: Riding the Wave

To change the metaphor again, the foster care partnership of these two churches now rides the momentum, much the way a surfer rides a wave for direction and forward progress. The challenges may be high and difficult but they are not insurmountable. They are seen as opportunities that can bring powerful movement into the future if navigated correctly. The focal efforts of the former gate and its subsequent mileposts should have provided the momentum and progress; the relational equity and validation should buoy the decisions that are yet to be made within this gate. The fostering church will complete the efforts at hand, those agreed upon in the covenant and any subsequent concerns that have arisen. They will then move to hand back to the fostered church “the keys” to their life and service for our King. The mileposts below continue to measure the foster care process between them.

They will hand back to the fostered church “the keys” to their life and service for our King.

Milepost 19: Both churches evaluate progress and concerns at the 12-month mark.

Having arrived at the one-year anniversary of this journey together, the leadership of the two churches gather to evaluate and assess the progress made in the areas they agreed in the covenant must be addressed. Diagnosis and prescription are both analyzed. The fruit of these labors are highlighted and implications for future ministry efforts are expressed, with some options for how to deal with them, as needed, after the fostering church has departed. For many churches in a foster care relationship, 12 months will mark the end of the covenant arrangement. For others who are continuing on for another six months or so, it will be a time for reviewing progress, refocusing priorities for the final few months and renewing their commitment to God, each other and the work at hand. Clarity in communication is a key to success at this point, regardless of whether the churches are continuing forward or completing the relationship. No question needs to be more clearly answered and understood than “Why are we doing what we are doing?” This may also be an “opt out” moment for the fostered church, if they are unable to allow the fostering church to guide them beyond this moment. However, if the original intent was to continue longer, we would strongly encourage every effort be made to keep the original plan and let the finished work speak for its value. Short-circuiting the process may seem in some cases like a win for the fostered church, but in all likelihood it will not produce the desired and needed result. Rather, it will cause the fostered church to revert to former habits and patterns of behavior that proved to be unhealthy.

Milepost 20: Big community-wide win celebrated. By this time in the relationship, some 12 to 15 months in, it is hoped there will have been at least one major “victory” experienced by the fostered church, impacting them and the community of which they are a part. Some ministry efforts with community leadership collaboration, or some outreach ministry resulting in evangelistic fruit or some multiplication effort in leadership needs to be highlighted and celebrated in a significant way. This moment to stop and celebrate should include worship, hopefully baptism and stories shared

by new believers, testimonies of those touched by a community ministry effort and new relationships grown. Guests from the community and partnering entities, like the association, should be invited to participate. Symbolic mementos may be created and given to all present to remember this “Ebenezer” moment in the life of the church. The objective here is to nail down the significance of the journey together and what God – and God alone – has done through it. It also is not to miss, in the hurry of getting on to the next great thing, the wonder and grace of God acting on our behalf. This is needed and certainly worth celebrating. In fact, it makes the progress made over the previous months feel more permanent, more certain. This is important for the churches as they begin to plan for life apart in the not-so-distant future.

Milepost 21: Outside analysis for future tweaking and report given. We suggest the churches encourage a third party, such as an associational leader or revitalization/replant team, provide their own assessment of what has been accomplished and what they have observed in the process. This should be both in terms of the relational aspects involved and the task objectives addressed. Insights and lessons learned, questions unanswered, concerns not yet addressed or gaps to be filled should be shared with both churches in a written document that helps both churches evaluate the experience from an caring outsider’s perspective. We say “caring” because the associational leader(s) have a vested interest in the success of your journey and are cheering you on in the process. While some churches in a fostering relationship will be tempted to skip this step, “there is wisdom in many counselors” (Prov. 27:9), and we all have blind spots, things we need others to help us see. Outside analysts should use the covenant as the benchmark to evaluate effectiveness and success in the venture. Follow-up conversations about the written document should be held with both parties together. This will prevent misunderstanding and hopefully bring synergy on what yet remains to be done. This milepost will fuel the churches toward the finish line as they head into the last stretch of joint ministry.

Milepost 22: Future leaders installed. In order for the fostering church to transition out effectively at the end of the covenant agreement, the leaders who have been on site during the relationship should have been working diligently to equip those who will replace them. These may include pastoring and preaching, worship leadership in music, children and other age-graded ministries, outreach and disciple making, etc. Even other pastors, elders, deacons, ministry leaders, etc. may be a part of this significant role in preparing the church for the years ahead. Not all future leaders will differ from those who served prior to the fostering church’s arrival, but likely not all will be the same. Differences in strategy, perspective, experience and motivation may lead to some new leaders. This probably is good for the fostered church, as it will be too easily tempted to revert to “how we used to do things around here” after the fostered church has departed. But this would be a mistake. New practices should lead to new habits, for which the fostering church has shown there is an important rationale and result. A special time needs to be put on the calendar to recognize, install and commission these leaders who will take over as the fostering church departs. In fact, the smarter way to do this is to have the newly commissioned

leaders in charge, leading the ministries for the final month or so, while the fostering church leadership is still on site. This helps with support, encouragement, correcting (if needed) and mentoring these who have been placed in leadership positions, as experience itself is a different schoolmaster than theory or counsel alone.

Milepost 23: Agreed-upon benchmarks met. A final discussion among church leaders from both churches focuses on the benchmarks that were surfaced and included in the covenant of relationship. An overview of what was completed, how it was done and what needs to follow is determined. In the same way, what was not yet completed, why it has not yet happened and what next steps need to take place are analyzed. Prayers of thanksgiving and petition are offered in this milepost, reviewing and handing off the responsibilities and tasks of ministry.

Milepost 24: Final joint celebration held with prayer of commissioning. The final Sunday of the joint relationship is held with worship and celebration. This may all be done in the worship experience or may include a fellowship meal and testimonies of affirmation and gratitude as well. Regardless, it needs to be a time in which public thanks is offered by both churches to God and to each other for the trust and skill offered sacrificially for the greater kingdom effort seen throughout the fostering partnership. The fostering church should publicly commission the fostered church and its leaders during this time. The fostered church should offer a gift to the fostering church, as a keepsake and memento of the difference they have made in their service to the congregation.

Gate 5: Reflection

The follow up to the joint church partnership is important. Too often churches, especially larger ones, look at the process as something else to simply check off their list: We've done that; now let's move on to a new adventure or challenge. Rather, deeper reflection should rule the day. This should be time of thanksgiving, recovery and preparation for the next cycle of ministry in the lives of both churches. And while the two churches will not share the same "closeness" they shared during the covenant foster care relationship, their relationship will never be what it was before the partnership.

This should be time of thanksgiving, recovery and preparation for the next cycle of ministry in the lives of both churches.

Milepost 25: Both churches evaluate the process and share analysis and lessons learned. The reflection period should be a time of gratitude to God for the privilege and opportunity He's given a fostering church to help another, as well as a time of recovery from the experience itself. The recovery is needed since the church likely has lost some key elements in their church: Some families may have stayed to help the fostered church more permanently and some resources have been expended. But while these things have been lost, some things have been gained too: New insights

into ministry and, more importantly, into God have been gleaned, new leaders have surfaced and been equipped and the kingdom has been strengthened. Both churches, then, need to assess the process for lessons learned about God, self and the actual steps they took in the process. What has been discovered? What will we discard? What needs to be applied? What must we make sure we don't lose in knowledge or in experience? It might be wise to schedule a time for leadership from both churches to dialogue about these insights together.

Milepost 26: Both churches desire and plan to help another church. We would hope that both churches hunger to do this again, each with another church that is struggling and in need of a fostering church. After a period of recovery and new preparation, sometimes up to a year or so in length, the fostering church should consider starting the journey again. The fostered church may want to be involved in the process of helping another church too. Discernment about that church's own health and strength need to be objectively evaluated before jumping into such an effort. The heart desire is pleasing, but the desire needs to be matched by their capacity to help, lest the church spread itself too thin and struggle once again.

There you have it. The process, spelled out in "gates" and "mileposts," a series of steps for the churches to follow. While this is simply a template, it would be wise to consider these steps in each fostering relationship you have and, at the very least, know why you're doing - or skipping - any given part of the process. Happy Fostering!

A Post-Script

Everything presented and suggested here is negotiable and should be determined by the churches involved. For example, the churches may agree the relationship will last shorter (or longer) than recommended in this manual. Or the churches may determine the fostering church will not provide any people to help in the process, only using individuals already a part of the fostered church. Certainly, there are reasons we have suggested these elements, and others, be done as we have recommended. Ultimately, however, the entities involved will have to make the determination of what's best. When in doubt, we recommend you consult with your local associational or state leadership for counsel. They can make some suggestions and perhaps even share some examples from other churches that have done this.

Regardless of the specifics in the arrangement, the basis for the entire relationship is a stronger church caring and demonstrating its willingness to help another church through a more challenging time in their ministry. This is kingdom-hearted and God-honoring, blessing others as God has blessed them. It remembers the Church belongs to Him and is for His glory. With these things, He is pleased.

This manual is fluid, in the sense that, as we learn more, and have better models that have fostered churches well, we may add or subtract information and elements that will benefit future users in their own efforts at fostering churches. We are continually seeking to learn how churches can help other churches on this journey.

The basis for the entire relationship is a stronger church caring and demonstrating its willingness to help another church through a more challenging time in their ministry.

Fostering Churches Back To Health

A Manual for Church
Fostering

Appendices



Fostering Church Agreement Sample

(This is an internal church congregation document for leadership to present and gain approval from the membership of the fostering church before engagement with a to-be-fostered church.)

We, the fostering church, as God has graciously and abundantly blessed us over the past years, commit ourselves to use our collective heritage, wisdom and resources to come alongside the to-be-fostered church in a partnership for a period of up to 18 months, with the goal of restoring the health, vitality and full autonomy of the to-be-fostered church, if agreed-upon benchmarks are met.

We do not desire or seek to take over or incorporate the to-be-fostered church within our own church. Rather, we seek to help her once again be vibrant, gospel-centered, mission-focused and kingdom-relevant in our region for the glory of God. Our sole intent in this process is to assist the to-be-fostered church through modeling, mentoring, equipping and relationship to regain strength, health and stability to once again be a Spirit-powered force in ministry and impact for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To that end, we pledge ourselves as brothers and sisters in Christ to serve them humbly as Christ has served us, lead them wisely as God has shown us, and bless them graciously as God has blessed us.

We are willing to offer the following for assistance during the time in question:

- › Pastoral leadership and/or direction and assistance
- › Modeling of healthy systems and processes
- › Evaluation and analysis of current systems and processes
- › Temporary volunteer mobilization
- › Financial assistance and material resources, as stated in the financial agreements for this relationship
- › An ongoing collegial relationship of prayer, support and love
- › Equipping of your own people/others to take the reins as we transition out

What we ask of the to-be-fostered church during the time in question:

- › Adoption and acceptance of oversight by our church for the duration of the fostering agreement, to be agreed upon by both churches
- › Willingness to appropriately budget for the process during the partnership, so that healthier systems and processes, along with its subsequent ministries, can take place, to be agreed upon by both churches
- › Eagerness to observe, equip and implement emerging leaders for the fostered church's future, to be agreed upon by both churches
- › An ongoing collegial relationship of prayer, support and love

Fostered Church Agreement Sample

(This is an internal church congregation document to be presented by leadership to gain approval of the to-be-fostered church before commitment to partner with a fostering church.)

We, the to-be-fostered church, as God has graciously and abundantly blessed us in the past, recognize that we are currently challenged and struggling in areas of church life and ministry. We corporately desire God to reverse this trend and commit ourselves to use our collective heritage, wisdom and resources in partnering with a fostering church, for a partnership of up to 18 months to meet agreed-upon benchmarks for health and vitality as a church. (These are found later in this document.) We believe the best is yet to come.

To that end, we understand and believe that a fostering church has no desire to take over or incorporate us, the to-be-fostered church, within their own church. Rather, they seek to help us stand on our own once again, to be vibrant, gospel-centered, mission-focused and kingdom-relevant in our region for the glory of God. Their stated sole intent in this process is to assist us, the to-be-fostered church, through modeling, mentoring, equipping and relationship to regain strength, health and stability to once again be a Spirit-powered force in ministry and impact for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To this end, we pledge ourselves as brothers and sisters in Christ to submit to them humbly as Christ has commanded us, learn from them wisely as God has invited us, and welcome them graciously as God has accepted us.

We are humbly and thankfully willing to receive the following assistance from a fostering church during the time in question:

- › Pastoral leadership and/or direction and assistance
- › Modeling of healthy systems and processes
- › Evaluation and analysis of current systems and processes
- › Temporary volunteer mobilization

- › Financial assistance and material resources
- › An ongoing collegial relationship of prayer, support and love
- › Equipping of our own people/others to take the reins as they transition out

What we give to the fostering church during the time in question:

- › Adoption and acceptance of oversight of the fostering church for the duration of the fostering agreement, to be agreed upon by both churches
- › Willingness to appropriately budget for the process during the partnership, so that healthier systems and processes, along with its subsequent ministries, can take place, to be agreed upon by both churches
- › Eagerness to observe, equip and implement emerging leaders for our, the fostered church's, future, to be agreed upon by both churches
- › An ongoing collegial relationship of prayer, support and love

Fostering Church Covenant

Between Fostering Church and Fostered Church Any Town, USA

Month, 20xx – Month, 20xx

(cooperative document signed between the two church congregations after agreement has been reached through dialogue, recommendation and official approval of both parties for the duration of the partnership)

We the leadership of the fostering church and the fostered church in Any Town, USA, do enter into covenant to glorify God, edify the Church and further God's kingdom through this "foster care" covenant of relationship. In this covenant we commit to pray for each other, support each other, speak highly of each other and empower each other to do the tasks necessary to enable both churches to grow healthier and thrive in ministry for years to come.

To that end, *the leaders representing and affirming the desire of the fostering church, do agree to assist and support the fostered church in the following ways:*

1. We will provide pastoral leadership for the fostering period in question (as needed). If the fostered church is currently without a pastor, it agrees not to begin (or it will suspend) efforts to discover and call the next pastor for the church until this fostering relationship with the fostering church is complete. If the fostered church currently has a pastor, his role during this partnership will be mutually agreeable to both congregations. He will serve in collaboration with the leadership of the fostering church and will function as a member of their pastoral staff during the partnership agreement.

2. We will work with the fostered church to implement healthy systems and processes in all areas of church life, through the following methods:
 - a. Evaluation and analysis of current systems and processes, establishing improved practices for positive health and development, modeling these healthy systems and processes and equipping member leaders within the fostered church to take charge of their ongoing function for the future
 - b. Providing temporary volunteers to lead or assist in the implementation of these systems and strategies
 - c. Providing a monthly financial supplement to the fostered church to assist with the ongoing ministry support needed during this time, knowing that the fostered church has granted us the authority and is in agreement to budget and expend funds necessary to implement the systems, processes and strategies necessary
 - d. Having the fostered church accept a temporary decision-making process for the period of the foster care partnership agreement, that is, suspending their own bylaws for the period of the covenant and agreeing to the process to be used
3. We will maintain an intentional and determined ministry of prayer, support and love for the fostered church, which will be shown in tangible ways during this time.
4. We will have consistent, ongoing weekly foster care council meetings for coordinating efforts, building trust, addressing areas of growth and implementing strategies for positive alignment needed during this time; simultaneously, the pastoral leadership of the fostered church will join our own staff meetings to learn, coordinate and share progress or concerns that need to be addressed; membership of the Council will be made up of three leaders from each church, plus the pastor of the foster church.
5. We will hold special “progress evaluations” with the recognized church leadership at the fostered church each six months to evaluate our joint efforts and address the concerns that have been raised.
6. We will communicate with the fostered church in person quarterly during this process in “town hall/church family” gatherings and more often in written and oral form, in order to pray together and celebrate what God is doing, to keep them apprised of the progress being made and to hear and address their questions or concerns.

We at the fostered church agree to this, and in doing so, affirm the following:

1. We will grant moderated direction to the fostering church in the agreed-upon parameters of leadership, finances and decision-making for the duration of this covenant agreement, believing that the fostering church has our fostered church's best interests and God's glory at heart in what they determine God is leading them to do.
2. We will not undermine or sabotage the efforts of the fostering church to implement healthy, life-giving systems and processes within our church, nor will we allow any of our members to do this. (If individuals are discovered doing this, we will confront them biblically, even to the extent of church discipline, if necessary.)
3. We as leaders will embrace the modeling, coaching and equipping of the fostering church for our current church leadership roles during the time in question and allow the fostering church to help us improve our abilities for the future, as they work beside us and then support us in resuming the roles we hold in a healthier manner.
4. We will coordinate with the fostering church on the availability of our budget, as it will be needed for the process of provision and investment in this process only (including outreach, facility maintenance, etc.) during this partnership agreement, but not for ministry after the covenant is completed nor for any funds diverted to their own site or activities.
5. We agree to be trained, encouraged and equipped by the fostering church for the future effectiveness and ministry of the fostered church.
6. We also will have an ongoing relationship of prayer, support and love for the fostering church during this time and for these efforts.

Together we at the fostering church and at the fostered church agree to the following:

1. We will jointly agree to benchmarks of a healthy church that we will, under the Lord's direction, seek to see achieved during the time of this covenant. These will include (check the ones that apply)
 - a. Community assessment
 - b. Priority of prayer and our spiritual condition
 - c. Development of a disciple-making pathway
 - d. History/heritage review
 - e. Worship attendance

- f. Membership requirements
 - g. Small group/Sunday school involvement
 - h. Missional community engagement
 - i. Review and update of bylaws
 - j. Giving mechanisms
 - k. Outreach opportunities
 - l. Facility upgrade
2. We at the fostering church and at the fostered church agree to find and implement a joint way of celebrating this covenant relationship at both the beginning and the end of the agreement, as a means of expressing glory to God, partnership in the gospel and gratitude for all He has, and will do.
 3. We both agree not to end the process prematurely unless the following happens:
 - a. The benchmarks set at the beginning of the process have been met
 - b. The time of this covenant has been completed
 - c. The fostered church insists the fostering church withdraw its assistance. If this choice is made, it must be done by a written ballot vote in which two-thirds of active members vote in the affirmative. (“Active members” will be defined as those who have attended at least 50% of the Sundays during the time in question, attend a small group or Sunday School class, have participated in some outreach or fellowship activity promoted by the church during this time, and are monthly contributors to the fostered church.)

We affirm the fostering church’s desire is to provide support and assistance for this defined period of time and that it does not desire to pursue a formal, permanent relationship with the fostered church. The objective is to help her find the ability to stand on her own again in a vibrant, healthy way, so the gospel may go forth from the fostered church as it did in the past, in boldness and the power of the Holy Spirit. To that end, the goal is to love her, strengthen her, equip her and empower her for God’s glory and their own good.

However, if at some point during this covenant relationship, the fostered church feels it may be God’s will and in the best interest of its own church to pursue a change in relationship from “fostering” to “adoption,” (that is, becoming a part of the fostering church family), the fostered church alone may initiate that conversation and dialogue may ensue. No commitment of this will be predetermined on the part of either

church before this time. Rationale would have to be based on the belief that (1) God is leading this direction, (2) it would be a kingdom “gain” and (3) it would be best for the people of both churches.

We have added additional concerns and items of mutual interest here and agreed that this is how we will handle them.

(Of course, feel free to add, delete or modify anything written previously to meet your own fostering relationship, as desired. These are only recommendations based on experience and our learning.)

We, the undersigned, do affirm this covenant of expectations and responsibilities.

Names

Church

Date

Fostering Church “Prior to” Checklist

- _____ Prayerfully consider the Foster Care Church Plan (this manual, interviews with leaders who have been involved in this elsewhere, etc.)
- _____ Affirm God’s direction for us to follow such a plan in assisting at-risk churches
- _____ Evaluate what our church can offer in partnership to assist an at-risk church with regard to people, resources, time, etc.
- _____ Count the cost for all involved: Is this the right time to invest in ministry this way?
- _____ Gain agreement and ownership from staff, influencers and program leaders in our church
- _____ Secure church approval to pursue an at-risk church in need of a fostering relationship (sign internal congregational agreement)
- _____ Discover churches in need of being fostered
- _____ Evaluate determining factors for a to-be-fostered church to pursue
- _____ Issue invitation to foster the church in need
- _____ Meet with pastor of the potential to-be-fostered church to answer questions and clarify roles and objectives
- _____ Meet with leaders of the same church (same)
- _____ Meet with congregation of the same church (same)

- _____ Communicate progress to our church
- _____ Gain approval from church to work with the to-be-fostered church
- _____ Interview people to work with the to-be-fostered church
- _____ Determine budget allocation for the to-be fostered church
- _____ Hammer out benchmarks we seek to accomplish together with the to-be-fostered church during the partnership relationship
- _____ Gain approval from church for strategic plan and process, timeline for implementation
- _____ Sign Covenant of Relationship
- _____ Make leadership and budget adjustments in conjunction with the fostered church, including members to serve on foster care council
- _____ Begin planning for joint inaugural celebration of both churches
- _____ Implement, learn and evaluate the plan continually

To-Be-Fostered Church “Prior to” Checklist

- _____ Prayerfully consider the Foster Care Church Plan (this manual, interviews with leaders who have been involved in this elsewhere, etc.)
- _____ Pray and study what the Scripture says about church and kingdom cooperation
- _____ Secure church approval to pursue a foster church eager to serve in such a relationship, signing internal church agreement
- _____ Receive invitation to consider fostering relationship with a specific, potential foster church
- _____ Learn, as needed, about the foster church, including on-site visits
- _____ Meet with pastor of potential foster church to discern God’s leadership, to understand the strategy/process and to get questions answered
- _____ Share with church leadership and influencers to gain support before moving forward
- _____ Meet with pastor of potential foster church for further dialogue to work on modifications of plan, process or timeline (if needed)
- _____ Hammer out benchmarks we seek to accomplish with foster church during the partnership relationship
- _____ Share modified and agreed-upon proposal with church congregation
- _____ Gain approval of congregation for plan, process and timeline
- _____ Share decision with the fostering church

- _____ Sign Covenant of Relationship
- _____ Make leadership and budget adjustments in conjunction with foster church, including members to serve on the foster care council
- _____ Begin planning for joint inaugural celebration of both churches
- _____ Implement, learn and evaluate the plan continually

Fostering Relationship Gates/Mileposts

(adjusted as needed by context/calendar)

Gate 1: Preparation

- Milepost 1: Pastor and church agree to be a fostering church
- Milepost 2: Church selects/invites an in-need church into the relationship
- Milepost 3: In-need church agrees to consider the fostering relationship
- Milepost 4: Both churches affirm the parameters of the relationship
- Milepost 5: Both churches agree on the benchmarks for health
- Milepost 6: Both churches sign the Covenant of Relationship

Gate 2: The First 100 Days

- Milepost 7: Fostering church begins fostering work on site
- Milepost 8: Churches jointly celebrate the beginning of relationship
- Milepost 9: Fostering church and its leadership builds credibility, trust and momentum through relationships and small wins over first 100 days
- Milepost 10: Fostering church initiates prayer campaign
- Milepost 11: Fostering church completes evaluation and analysis of congregation, community, facility and polity
- Milepost 12: Fostering church prioritizes areas to be addressed, based on benchmarks and local context/needs

Gate 3: The Centerpiece

- Milepost 13: Both churches evaluate progress and concerns at the six-month mark
- Milepost 14: History/heritage review and plan of action
- Milepost 15: Discipleship pathway, including membership expectations, implemented
- Milepost 16: Community engagement and outreach strategies begin in earnest
- Milepost 17: Repairs and revisions made to facility and bylaws
- Milepost 18: Future leaders identified for transition

Gate 4: Riding the Wave

Milepost 19: Both churches evaluate progress and concerns at the 12-month mark

Milepost 20: Big community-wide win celebrated

Milepost 21: Outside analysis for future tweaking done and report given

Milepost 22: Future leaders installed in positions

Milepost 23: Agreed-upon benchmarks met

Milepost 24: Final joint celebration held with prayer of commissioning

Gate 5: Reflection

Milepost 25: Both churches evaluate the process and share analysis and lessons learned

Milepost 26: Both churches desire and/or plan to help another church

Foster Care Council Sample Weekly Agenda

Our Objective: to coordinate efforts, build trust, address areas of growth and implement strategies needed for positive alignment

1. Scripture and Prayer (Suggested Scripture for council: Nehemiah, Ephesians, Revelation 2-3, etc.)
2. Team-Building Exercise (aimed at building trust and heightening appreciation and credibility for those who are a part of the Council)
3. Review of Process/Milepost “Timeline” (reality check) Where are we in the process? How do we know this to be true?
4. Celebration: Where do we see God is at work in our midst? Who is being impacted or transformed? What evidence of these realities do we have? Based on these positive results, what changes or modifications do we need to make to our plan and processes?
5. Areas That Fell Short: Where did we miss the mark? Why? (Were the expectations wrong? The personnel? The timing? etc.) What could we have done differently or better? What should we change as a result? What would these changes look like and what would they cost us? (time, money, etc.)
6. Team Updates and Sharing: What about your role and responsibility for our council? How’s that going? (progress, obstacles, next steps, etc.) What are you hearing and seeing from others in the church? How do we deal with this in a positive, culture-building, God-honoring way?
7. Next Steps: What are our agreed-upon action steps this week? Who needs to know? What resources might we need for this to take place? How can we help each other?
8. Closing Prayer

Definitions and Types of Replants

Replant (defined): The process in which members of a church facing imminent closure discern God's leadership to dissolve their current ministry and work with other churches or denominational bodies to begin a new church for a new season of ministry in their community.

Replant = new qualified/skilled leader + existing people + new structures/approaches + outside partners + new people + history

This includes a variety of types:

1. **Replant from Within** – Church has hired a replant pastor and is making significant leadership changes and structural changes with the help of an outside entity (association most likely)
2. **Closure/Donation (aka Legacy)** – Church has been closed and donated to a plant/sending church/association/state convention
3. **Church Marriage/Merger** – Church has merged with an existing church or church plant
4. **Adoption/Campus** – Church has become a campus of, or has been adopted by another church
5. **Church Share/Plant** – Church is sharing their building with a plant or other church
6. **Foster Care** – Help for a struggling church in a time-bound relationship, seeking to assist it in becoming healthy enough to stand on its own again

This is distinguished from:

Church Revitalization (defined): The supernatural work of God that restores health and vitality in a plateaued or declining church, evidenced by submission to God's Word, right relationships among members and a renewed commitment to Great Commission ministry.

Revitalization = existing church + existing leaders + existing structure + history + renewed/new effort

A photograph of a church steeple with a cross on top, set against a blue sky with light clouds. The steeple is made of light-colored stone or concrete and has a brick base. The cross is a simple wooden cross.

Replant

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