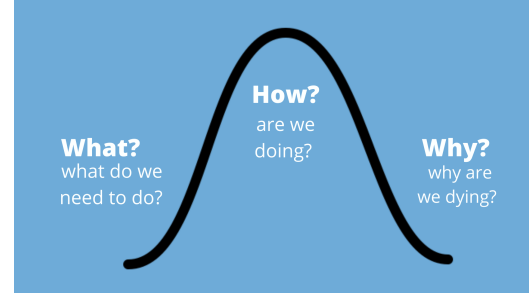
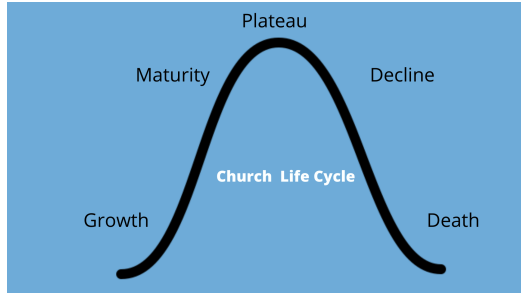


The Revitalization/Replant Window

Developed by Bob Bickford

Seasons of growth, plateau and decline are present in almost every church at some point in its history. For some churches a season of decline could lead to its eventual demise. The task of every church is to be keenly aware of where it is presently and what steps toward its future it must take.



The question a growing church asks: What must we do?

A growing church is a blessing and, if you ask some pastors, that growth can be a challenge. Handling ever larger crowds, demands for finding, caring for and equipping children's ministry workers, assimilating guests-these are all good things, even if challenging. A growing Church often focuses on answering the "what" questions on a regular basis.

What can we do?

- What can we do about parking?
- What should we do about membership?
- What would improve our discipleship and assimilation strategies?

The question a plateaued church asks: How are we doing?

The majority of churches in N. America find themselves in state of plateau, experts indicate up to 80% would qualify for that category. A church in this condition may not feel a sense of urgency nor celebration. Often, churches in this stage ask the "how are we doing?" question as a sort of status check. When the answer comes back that we're neither growing or declining it can lead to a sense of apathy which rarely sets off alarms. The church continues perhaps stumbling into continued growth or slipping into decline.

The question a declining church must ask: Why are we not growing?

You'll rarely meet a declining church who isn't aware that it is in decline. Yet, this church may not have a clear picture of just how steep the decline may be, nor how long it has been occurring, and they may not have a clear idea of when the downward trends actually began. After a while this church may ask the "why" question and the answers often fall along these common replies.

Why are we not growing?

- The community has changed.
- We've had a few Pastors that didn't work out.
- People are not interested in church much these days.

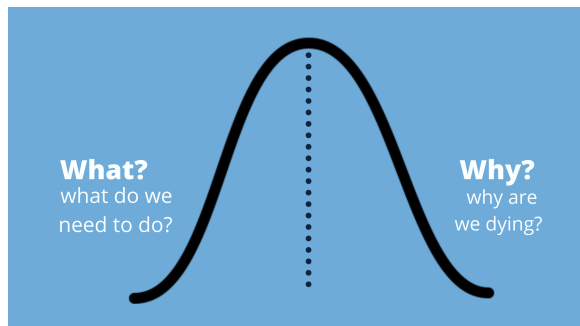
Frequently the answers given are external of the body or assigned to a circumstance or someone or something beyond the declining church's control. Yet, in reality, the reasons for church decline are often attributable to the church and the actions of its leaders, and the attitudes and spiritual condition present in the congregation. Add in historical conflict, hidden sin and divisions and it's easy to begin piecing together why the church is where it is in terms of health and vitality.

Why are we not growing? (Answers which are true but you probably won't hear)

- We run off pastors when they challenge us to mature in Christ or let go of our preferences.
- We moved out of the community and don't really want to reach the people who replaced us and now live by our church.
- We've tolerated sinful behavior, we haven't addressed divisions and conflict and good people left our church.

Whenever a church is in decline, it is first and foremost a spiritual issue.

A declining church often asks the wrong question. It asks "what can we do?" rather than, "why are we dying?"



Asking what they can do may lead them to engage with resources that are more rightly utilized on the growth side of the lifecycle. Much of what is marketed to churches in need of revitalization is really rebadged church growth material. (i.e. outreach, guest assimilation strategies etc.) A church in decline must deal with the internal and underlying issues which are leading to its decline first. Once those issues are addressed it can then move on to "what" to do after it has answered the "why" question.

The Revitalization Window

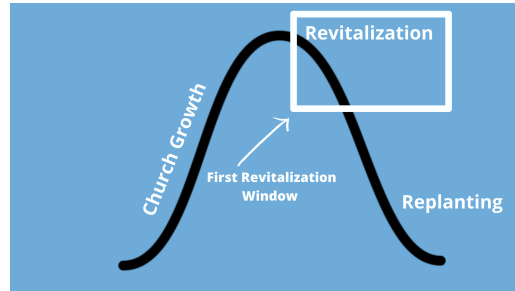
There is a time period in the life of a church when it has the opportunity to ask the right questions, discern the answers and then chart a course in a new direction. This is a “revitalization window.” There are perhaps one to three revitalization windows in the life of a church.

Revitalization Window 1 - Plateau Stage or onset decline

Revitalization Window 2 - Persistent/continued decline

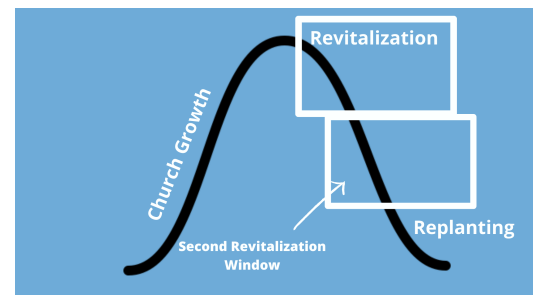
The First Revitalization Window

The decline is in its early stages, budget and attendance are waning but there are a good number of folks still active in serving, mission and leading. If the church asks the right questions, focuses on finding the right answers and then responds and plans accordingly, with God’s help the church may be revitalized.



The Second Revitalization Window

If decline persists and the underlying causes causing it remain unaddressed, a church will enter into its second “revitalization window.” This window is characterized by further attendance decline, decreased giving, and continued and perhaps accelerated departures of lay leaders and active missional laborers. Full time staff may be reduced and a bi-vocational pastor may be required from lack of resources. Mortgage payments may go to “interest only” and ministry and missions budgets are cut to simply survive financially.



Visualize an airplane in a steep dive. The longer the dive, the sharper the decrease in altitude, the more accelerated the descent, the quicker the aircraft will arrive at an inevitable point of “no return” after which no matter how skilled or determined the pilot may be, the forces of decline cannot be overcome nor the aircraft saved.

We often say it this way; **“Church revitalization is possible but in some cases it is just not probable.”**

The longer the decline and the further down the life cycle a church goes the more radical changes are required to arrest and reverse the church's trajectory.

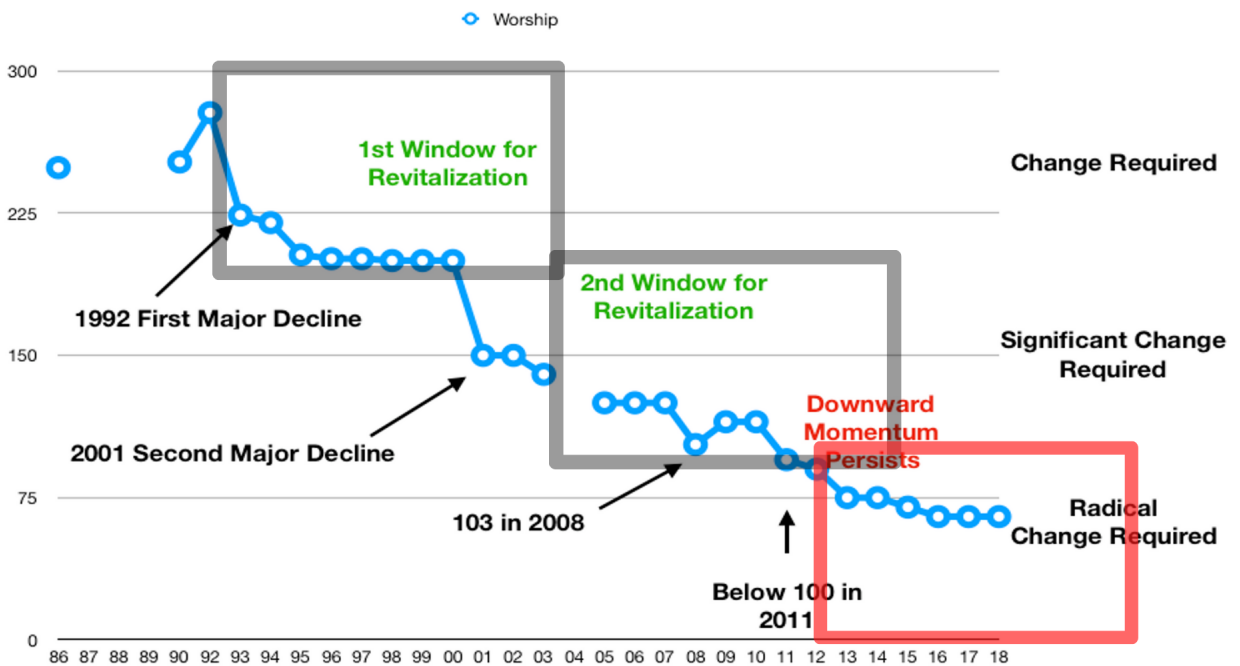
Let's return to our window guide, notice now the inclusion of the replant window.

Revitalization Window 1 - Plateau Stage or onset decline (**Change required**)

Revitalization Window 2 - Persistent/continued decline (**Significant change required**)

Replant Window - Late/critical/significant decline. (**Radical change required**)

Here is a case study from an actual church consultation.



1st major decline in 1992 due to internal staff conflict and member departure. This was their first revitalization window with required change.

2nd major decline in 2001 due to continued conflict, pastoral transition and a new church planted in the immediate neighborhood which drew away young families. This time significant change was required.

Downward momentum persisted and the church dropped below 100 (critical mass) in 2011 and the church did not address the underlying issues that were perpetuating the decline.

A new pastor was called in 2013 and while he was faithful, a good preacher and a good pastor he could not overcome, by himself, the decades of decline that preceded his tenure.

The aged congregation of 40 people had 200K+ in restricted reserves in the bank, very few young families and internal conflict over worship and other matters. Very few guests ever visited and certainly did not stay.

The church had determined that the Pastor would likely have to become bi-vocational in order to pay for building expenses. Revitalization was now longer an option for this congregation, radical change is now required.

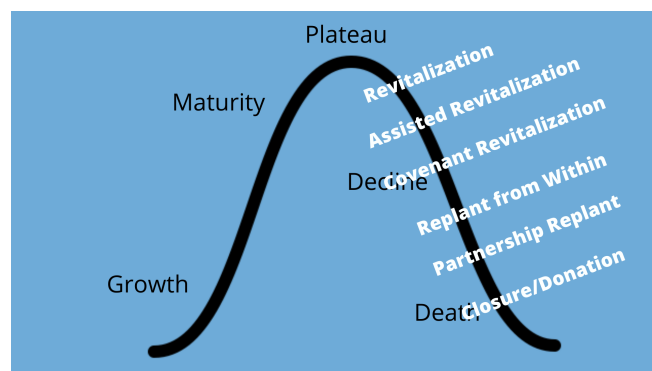
The Replant Window

The season in the life of a church when factors clearly indicate that revitalization is not a strong probability. The congregation is aged, unable or unwilling to engage the unchurched/lost community, resources are thin or unavailable due to account restrictions, budgets are continually reduced and morale is low. Infighting may be present and departures of members and leaders regularly occur. The mission becomes survival not reaching people for Christ.

When revitalization is beyond probable a church must be Replanted. Generally speaking, replanting is an intentional reset, much like the reboot of a computer but with a new operating system. The old goes away and the new works within the framework of the facility and history of the original congregation but with new leaders, new decision making structures and a qualified and called Replanter.

Options and the Church Life Cycle

What options should a church consider as it faces decline? Which ones are best for it as it faces an uncertain future and a continued downward trend? The following are offered as representative suggestions for a church that finds itself in steep or prolonged decline.



Revitalization: a deliberate, dedicated and protracted effort to reverse the decline or death of an existing church.

Assisted Revitalization: a deliberate, dedicated and protracted effort to reverse the decline or death of an existing church with outside help and oversight from a partnering denomination, association or consulting agency.

Covenant Revitalization: A mutually agreed upon process involving a pastor, church in need of revitalization, and at least one outside relationship for mutual accountability for the accomplishing stated benchmarks indicative of a vital gospel proclaiming, disciple making congregation.

Replant from Within: the intentional and official decision of a church to discontinue its previous way of ministry and call a qualified and assessed Replanter and to relaunch as a new church with existing people on the foundation and legacy of the historic church. Often occurs with minimal or no outside partners or resources.

Partnership Replant: the intentional and official decision of a church to surrender it's assets and facilities and accept leadership of a healthy partnering congregation for the purpose of relaunching a vital gospel proclaiming, disciple making church in its location. (several types are described in general terms below)

- **Adoption** - the adoption of a struggling church by a healthy church
- **Marriage Merger** - the joining together of a stronger church and a struggling church
- **Fostering** - the temporary partnership of a stronger church and a struggling church
- **Family Network** - the absorption of a struggling church by a stronger regional church

Closure and Donation of Property: the intentional and official decision of a church to cease operating and donate its property and assets for kingdom purposes through church planting and replanting.

Diagnosing A Church

Determining the condition of a local church requires a variety of expertise and insight. It is art mixed with a little science. Surveys, studies and congregational interviews are helpful in presenting an overall picture of the church as it is today. Assessing the level of readiness for change and commitment to do critical self-reflection and hard work on the part of the congregation must be part of the consultation process.

As a consultant your role is to help a church identify its trend lines and the dialogue with them about the realities which are revealed in the consultation process. Assist them in recognizing which window their church presently resides.