

Facing Significant Decline In Your Congregation

A. Facing Reality

- Decline and death are a reality in the life of congregations. When decline occurs, it is normally not because the congregation has failed. No person(s) or institution(s) can or should be blamed.
- Decline is often the result of a number of factors:
 - Greying (aging) of the congregation;
 - Significant drop in pledges;
 - Reduced Sunday attendance;
 - Fewer families;
 - Other time commitments of parishioners
 - Increased costs for building maintenance and repair coupled with shrinking income and pledges
- Listed below (**Recognizing the Signs**) are some realities that may already exist that strongly suggest that the congregation is experiencing decline.
- When one or more of these circumstances is discovered, it is time to take action immediately to address them and what this may mean for the congregation's future.
- The responsibility for the life of the congregation rests with clergy, vestry and wardens, and parishioners, and all must participate equally in discerning the congregation's future.
- The congregation must be willing to face its reality and be willing to accept the inevitability of change—that may even require embracing the ending of everything it has come to know and cherish. The conversation **is not about survival**.
- There must be an open and honest facing of the reality in which the congregation finds itself. The Diocese can assist in facilitating that conversation and helping people face and talk about the anxiety, fear, and loss.
- The congregation must look to God's future, and have faith that God is always doing infinitely more for us than we can either ask or imagine.

B. Recognizing the Signs

1. What is the commitment of this congregation to truly discern what God might be calling you to do, including accepting the possibility of ending the ministry.
2. Do the people of this congregation have the commitment, capacity, capability and desire to **radicalize** this present ministry in response to God's vision?

3. Have we experienced a long-term and continuing decline in membership and attendance?
4. Are we a predominantly elderly congregation where issues of energy and ability to provide financial support cannot be ignored?
5. Has our level of stewardship declined to the point where we cannot continue to afford our present ministry, i.e., we are no longer financially viable?
6. Are we truly connected to our surrounding community and doing significant ministry there? To what extent are our members actively engaged?
7. Is our present facility conducive and adaptable to sustaining a new vision of community ministry and mission?
8. Can we imagine a future not necessarily tied to being in this church building?

C. Ministry Options in the Face of Decline

1. Continue the present ministry in the present location. **Note: Doing more of the same (or even trying harder) is not likely to help reverse the present situation**
2. Radically reduce the scope of the mission and ministry. **Comment: This strategy will normally lead to further decline.**
3. Arrange to rent/share the building with another congregation or organization. **Comment: This places finances in a very precarious position of dependence on rental income.**
4. Explore collaborative ministry arrangements with other congregations: Yoking, Clustering, Consolidation. **Comment: Congregations typically need 1+ years in exploration, conversation and planning to make this a possibility.**
5. Close the doors and discern what your legacy will be and how it will be lived out, both people and property.
6. Congregation resolves to engage in radical re-imagining and re-vitalizing of its ministry. **Comment: See, B.2 above.**