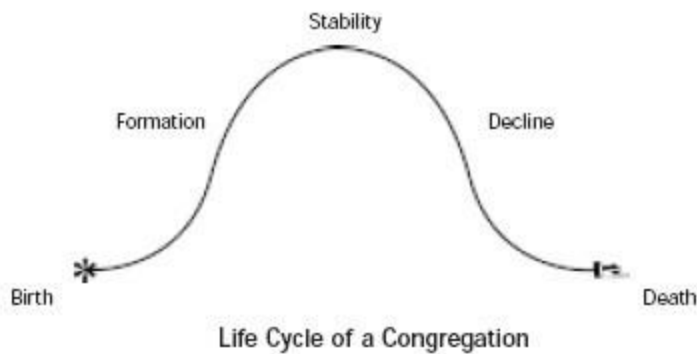


# Jim's Tool Box

## Turning Around the Cycle of Decline

Last month I discussed the life cycle of a congregation from birth through formation, stability, decline, and death. I noted that many of the congregations in our district are either in the stage of “stability” or in some phase of the stage of “decline.” Below is the diagram of the life cycle to which I referred last month. Here is a [link](#) to the Tool Box article from last month. By the way, there is an archive of my Tool Box articles since January 2008 on the district web page. Look for the “Jim’s Tool Box Archive” link in the navigation panel on the left of the web page.



In the article last month I asked, “**Where is your congregation on the life cycle journey?**” I suggested that you might take this article to a church board meeting or to a pastor/staff parish relations committee and ask that question.

I concluded my article by saying that there is hope. We have just come through the season of Advent which is a time of waiting, expectation, and hope as we prepared our hearts to celebrate again the

coming of Jesus Christ into the world. While we have new life in Christ, it is possible that congregations can have new life also.

As Alban Institute consultant Dr. Alice Mann writes in her article about the Life Cycle of Congregations, “Sometimes a terminally ill person will risk trying an experimental treatment – a radical and somewhat unpredictable intervention that could conceivably offer a new lease on life. Similarly, some courageous congregations facing serious decline attempt the difficult path of redevelopment.”

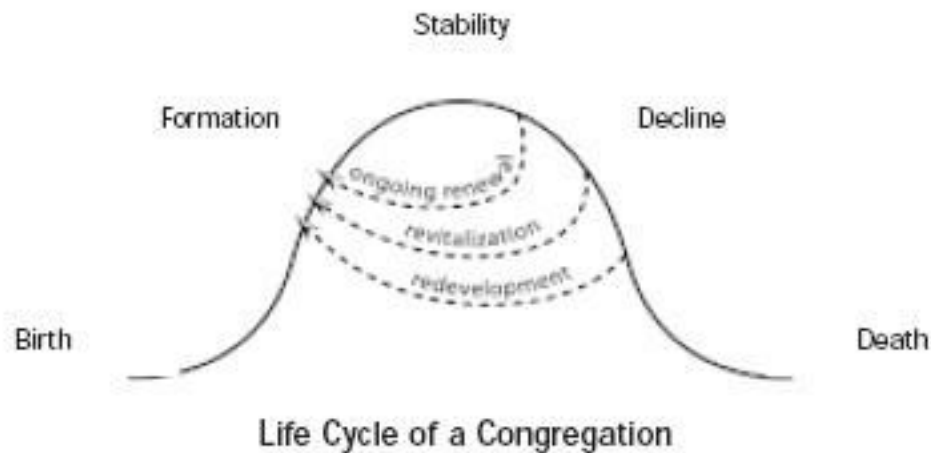
Here is what Mann includes in the path of redevelopment:

- Recognizing the death of the congregation’s previous identity and purpose.
- Reallocating the bulk of the congregation’s resources to discovering and living out a new identity and purpose.
- Finding and empowering leaders who can, in effect, start a new congregation on an existing site.
- Caring for the remaining members of the previous congregation – sometimes by providing a separate chaplaincy ministry as long as needed.

Alice Mann notes that the redevelopment congregation finds substantially new answers to the three formation questions: Who are we? What are we here for? Who is our neighbor?

Depending on how far a congregation is down the slope of decline, different strategies are needed to return the congregation to growth, health, and a new period of stability with a renewed sense of mission and purpose (with fresh answers to the formation questions listed above).

Below is the life cycle chart with loops that feed back for ongoing renewal, revitalization, and redevelopment. I have enlarged the chart so that it is easier to see the three loops that lead back to a new formation stage for the congregation.



In her article Alice Mann discusses each of these strategies. Here is a brief description of each of these strategies:

**Ongoing Renewal:** Congregations that are doing relatively well and experiencing stability can undertake what Mann calls “Ongoing Renewal.” This is a congregation that is fundamentally healthy that seeks to enter into strategic planning to refocus the congregation on the basics and to ask challenging questions about identity, purpose, and context (the basic questions of “**Who are we?**” “**What are we here for?**” “**Who is our neighbor?**”). As you can see from the illustration above, if a congregation can undertake an intervention and ask anew the formation questions, the ongoing renewal can lead to a new cycle of formation and stability.

Why don’t more churches initiate ongoing or periodic strategic planning? Alice Mann notes that there are two barriers that keep congregations from revisiting the formation questions when everything is working. First, the renewal event, self-study, or planning process may be rejected outright under the banner, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Second, the congregation may undertake the process but discount any disturbing trends or hard questions that come to the surface. Some would suggest that a system (such as a church) will never question its fundamental assumptions until the pain induced by present practices becomes tolerable.

**Revitalization:** A little further down the decline slope, there is the revitalization path. When a congregation is in the early stages of decline, it is possible for the congregation to regain some motivation by revisiting the formation issues (“**Who are we?**” “**What are we here for?**” “**Who is our neighbor?**”). Mann comments that if some way is found to look hard at the facts, avoid blame,

and engage in new learnings, the congregation can experience revitalization. Mann says that the term “revitalization” implies that there is still substantial vitality present that can be refreshed and refocused. Many congregations expect that the appointment of a new pastor will accomplish this automatically, but a change in leadership will not, by itself, alter the curve. “If the new pastor has the skills, information, and political support to raise the formation questions again effectively,” says Mann, “a new era of vitality might ensue.” However, more typically, the forces driving the decline – internal dysfunction, external change, or both – will be ignored until things get worse. Mann concludes, “In that case, the new pastor will experience (and often collude with) the congregation’s two most destructive illusions: the fantasy that growth can occur without change and the fantasy that change can occur without conflict.”

**Redevelopment:** Alice Mann points out that when a congregation has been declining steadily for years, even decades, when it has sustained significant losses in people, energy, flexibility, and funds then the path back to the formation questions is far more costly. As she puts it, “The farther you slip down the decline side of the curve, the more capital it takes, -- spiritually, financially, and politically – to create the possibility of turnaround. Yet there may still be tremendous potential for spiritual growth, invitational outreach, and community ministry.”

In many congregations, redevelopment efforts are “undercapitalized” in all three ways. Many are set up for:

- *Spiritual failure:* The congregation has not really faced the fact that it is dying – that most elements of an old identity and purpose must be relinquished if anything new is to occur.
- *Financial failure:* Leaders are working with an inadequate budget or overly optimistic revenue projections.
- *Political Stalemate:* Leaders – at both the congregational and denominational levels – severely underestimate the amount of political resistance that redevelopment efforts can provoke.

As difficult as the redevelopment task is, Alice reminds us that redeveloping congregations are important to the church for several reasons:

- Often they are located in communities where the needs for ministry are enormous.
- Since all congregations will eventually face similar issues, these churches are engaged in important learning.
- Whether or not they succeed in establishing a new era of stability, redeveloping congregations live out the mystery of death and resurrection by “losing their life to find it.”

**Once again I ask you, “Where is your congregation on the congregational life cycle?”** And perhaps more importantly, *what if anything is your congregation doing about what it will take to get back to the formational questions (“Who are we?” “What are we here for?” “Who is our neighbor?”)* that lead to a new sense of mission and purpose for the congregation. If the congregation is willing to risk answering these basic questions again, it can reconnect with the community/with the needs around the church building. Only through answering these questions can the congregation gain a renewed sense of its mission and ministry (beyond survival especially as it descends the decline curve).

For a healthy congregation, the formation questions are the basis for ongoing strategic planning, and they are helpful in keeping the congregation “on top” of its mission and purpose for being. For a congregation that has begun to decline but still has internal strength, these questions are the basis for revitalizing the sense of mission and vision for congregation as it seeks to recover its mission.

*Unfortunately, I fear that many of the congregations in our district (annual conference and in fact our denomination) fall into the group of churches that Mann describes as “declining steadily for years and even decades” having “sustained significant losses in people, energy, flexibility, and funds.”* Such congregations face the daunting (but not impossible task) of using the formation questions as a means of turnaround and recovering a new sense of their mission and purpose.

If I can be of any assistance to your congregation as you wrestle with these questions and these issues wherever your congregation may be on the life cycle, feel free to contact me at the district office ([jwaugh@wocumc.org](mailto:jwaugh@wocumc.org) or at 614-222-0600).