

WHAT'S NEXT?

SOME OPTIONS FOR CONGREGATIONS¹

Ministry-centric Options

Transformation / Reinvention of Ministry

One congregation seeks to radically change itself to bring new vision and life to its members and community. Make a change. Changes may be minor or dramatic and may include targeting a new audience. A revised ministry plan must be developed to include strategic and tactical considerations. Requires pastor, elder and congregational consensus.

- Energy required: high
- Financial resources required: high
- Spiritual challenge: high

Parallel Development

A new, “young” congregation is started within another congregation that may be declining. Celebrate the past with intentionality while inviting a future of new creation. Differs from “Nesting” below in that intention of all is for the younger congregation to increase while the older congregation decreases (i.e. “John the Baptist” model for ministry).

- Energy required: low (older), high (younger)
- Financial resources required: medium to high
- Spiritual challenge: very high (especially for older)

Church Without Walls / Mission-Shaped Community

The congregation worships anywhere, with a focus on supporting mission in life and work. Requires significant organizational management. May have a "visiting" minister.

- Energy required: very high
- Financial resources required: low to medium
- Spiritual challenge: high

Total Ministry

The congregation itself does almost all of the ministry; presbytery appoints a Session moderator, but there is no pastor or CRE. Presbytery needs to provide consistent oversight.

- Energy required: very high
- Financial resources required: low
- Spiritual challenge: medium to high

Home Church

There is no church building; congregational life happens in homes. Best suited for those willing to view efforts as “cell division” rather than “closed circle” community.

- Energy required: high
- Financial resources required: low to medium
- Spiritual challenge: medium to high

Conversion to Social Ministry

Congregation closes and the building is converted to house one or several community-service ministries. Requires development of corporate status and clarity of focus, purpose, clientele and services.

- Energy required: high (initial phase), low to medium (later)
- Financial resources required: low
- Spiritual challenge: medium

Shared-Ministry Options

Yoked Ministry

Two separate congregations share staff. May form a parish. May also share other resources and programming. Challenge to be clear about boundaries when congregations are “unequally yoked.”

- Energy required: medium
- Financial resources required: medium
- Spiritual challenge: medium to high

Merger

Two or more congregations join together to become one, new congregation. They share in all aspects: building, worship, programming, staff, etc. Ministry model must be developed, and venue must be selected. New leadership of the new congregation will be representative of the predecessor congregations.

- Energy required: high to very high
- Financial resources required: low
- Spiritual challenge: high to very high

Fusion

Two or more congregations close and then form a new and different congregation. This new congregation may meet in one of the existing church buildings or else move to a building that’s new to everyone. Differs from merger in that intent and focus is on mutual dissolution / break from past in order to create something new: “We are all laying down what we had to become a new entity.” (Distinction from merger is subtle yet significant.)

- Energy required: high to very high
- Financial resources required: low
- Spiritual challenge: high to very high

Partnership

Two or more churches mutually support each other from their individual strengths. Differs from “Yoked” in that they do not share the same pastor but focus on sharing ministry-centric endeavors (e.g. routinely develop partnerships for crisis or specialty ministry, shared services, studies and/or worship events).

- Energy required: medium
- Financial resources required: low
- Spiritual challenge: medium to high

Satellite

One congregation has two or more sites. One Session oversees both sites' ministry, staff, etc. Care should be taken to avoid building ministry around a particular, charismatic leader.

- Energy required: very high
- Financial resources required: high
- Spiritual challenge: medium

Building-centric Options

Nesting / Shared Campus

One congregation "lives" in the building of another congregation. Staff, worship times, etc. are normally separate. Models vary, from allowing another congregation to "nest" in your space while the host congregation's ministry continues largely unchanged...to offering the bulk of the campus to other charitable organizations and hosting another congregation which becomes the dominant worshipping community on the site. Income derived helps to fund the host congregation's ministry.

- Energy required: medium
- Financial resources required: medium high
- Spiritual challenge: low

Relocation / Selling of Property

One congregation decides to sell their building and either move to a new location as a new mission opportunity, become a tenant in its former location, or rent space elsewhere. Property sale proceeds fund ongoing operations, mission, and ministry locally and beyond. Requires time to build consensus within the congregation before taking action.

- Energy required: medium
- Financial resources required: very low (until new purchase is made)
- Spiritual challenge: varies depending on model

Restart / Death and Resurrection

The church "goes dark" for a period of time and then "re-opens" as something new and different. Popular among non-denominational churches, this model involves new leadership, a new format, a new name...a new approach to ministry. Few current members would return.

- Energy required: very high
- Financial resources required: high
- Spiritual challenge: very, very high

Hospice / Chaplaincy Options

Age in Place

Do nothing significantly different. Cut expenses as needed through significantly reduced pastoral services (move to weekly pulpit supply and/or chaplain model) to extend life of congregation until it cannot be extended any further due to lack of funds. Congregation declines until it dissolves.

- Energy required: low (for members), high (for staff - caregiving)
- Financial resources required: low

- Spiritual challenge: medium

Return to Fellowship Status

The congregation is "dissolved." Gatherings continue elsewhere, membership to the presbytery continues. There is no Session (only a Steering Committee), presbytery can add them to their insurance (though they would need to reimburse the presbytery), no per capita, no Annual Report to GA, etc.

- Energy required: low
- Financial resources required: low
- Spiritual challenge: low to medium

Closure / Dissolution

One congregation dissolves. The building is sold. Any remaining assets are distributed by the presbytery for ministry elsewhere. The congregation dies a well-planned and well-organized death. Members transfer their membership to other congregations, which should be an intentional initiative among remaining staff and/or presbytery. Property sale proceeds fund a legacy endowment in the church's name to fund designated ministry (e.g. New Worshipping Communities).

- Energy required: low to medium
- Financial resources required: low
- Spiritual challenge: low to medium

Heritage Church/Chapel

Congregational life ceases but building is saved and used for significant community and heritage events. Deed and restrictive covenants need to be crafted that define the boundaries and restrictions for future use.

- Energy required: low
- Financial resources required: medium
- Spiritual challenge: low

¹ When the future seems uncertain, it always helps to know your options. Rev. Dana Lindsley, Former Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of New England, created a great list of options for churches who are on the edge of viability. Rev. Sara Dingman edited the list to fit Missouri River Valley Presbytery. Corey Schlosser-Hall edited the list further for the Presbytery of Northwest Coast, and the Presbyterian Foundation had a separate yet similar version that was folded into this document. Now we carry their ideas into our own conversations, giving thanks for this great cloud of witnesses.