**Handout #5-1 – Decisions**

Congregations often have a difficult time making decisions. When it comes to decision-making at such a critical time as this one in the life of your congregation, it is important to remind yourselves what can happen if the congregation *doesn’t* face up to the challenge of making a radical decision for its future.

Sometimes congregations fall into the trap of thinking that 100% of the congregation has to approve any change. Making unanimous consensus the goal means that the one “no” vote prevents the group from moving at all; therefore, no decision may be made, and the church continues the insanity of “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Doing *nothing* almost guarantees the slow death of the congregation and the gradual consumption of valuable resources.

At other times, congregations avoid making hard decisions by spending all of their energy on small, problem-solving decisions. One church spent two months and countless hours in meetings to decide whether or not to remove an old, dead (but once beloved) tree from their courtyard. This use of time kept them from having any time to discuss the missional issues that the church could address.

Sometimes people are just overwhelmed by all the choices. It would be easy to feel “paralyzed” and remain the same out of fear of choosing the wrong path or out of worry that it could take too much energy to live out new choices. But in the face of this temptation to be paralyzed, Jesus speaks to us: “Stand up and walk!” And we take courage, knowing that God is our faithful guide.

Finally, some congregations don’t make decisions because they lack imagination and conviction. Every time someone comes up with a creative idea, someone will be quick to say, “We’ve never done it that way before,” or “It’s not in the budget.” Gil Rendle, a church development consultant, states that in any congregation 2% of the people will be ***against*** any new idea, and 10% will be likely to lean in the negative direction. This means that 12% of the congregation will probably ***never*** go along with ANY change! So don’t worry about gaining 100% agreement! On the other hand, Rendle also says that another 12% of the folks in any congregation will tend toward saying “***yes***” to anything. This leaves *three-quarters of your congregation* who will be genuinely interested in learning about the situation and who may lend their support for the strategic direction for your congregation’s future. Don’t overlook this large group in the effort to please a few “nay-sayers.”

In the case of New Beginnings, as you will discuss later in this session, the decision that must be made by your congregation is not just a decision about a “technical fix.” Right now, your congregation’s decision is NOT a decision about adding some contemporary songs to worship so younger people are drawn to your church. Neither is it a decision about how to fix the leaky roof. The decision your congregation will be asked to make is a bold decision about future direction that will then have many, many implications into the future. It is a potentially life-changing decision on how the congregation will adapt its mission to a new set of circumstances in a radically changing world. The following example gives you an idea about how one organization (in this case a hospital) adapted its service over time to fit with the changing circumstances around it.

*Dr. Macklin was a missionary who served in Nanjing, China. When he arrived there in the early 1930’s, China was still an empire in chaos. He started the Drum Tower Hospital with the hopes that it would serve the basic health needs of the people in Nanjing. He could not imagine what would happen next.*

*In the late 1930’s, Japan invaded China, and the famous “Nanjing Massacre” occurred with more than 300,000 Chinese civilians being systematically murdered in just 30 days. Dr. Macklin kept that small hospital open throughout the war. The hospital remained open through the overthrow of the Republic by the communists, and continued operating during the cultural revolution.*

*With each change of the culture around him, Dr. Macklin continued to find ways to adapt to the situation. If he had no electric power, he used candles. If the army surrounded his hospital, he would sneak patients in late at night during guard shifts. If there was no morphine, he used rice whiskey. He gained support for his mission from whichever government was in charge at the time. He was a grass-roots organizer and an adapter.*

*Today, in communist China, there is a statue of Dr. Macklin in front of five large towers that house one of the largest hospitals in China. Dr. Macklin could not have imagined this kind of hospital in Nanjing. Dr. Macklin didn’t think that far ahead; however, he found ways to continue to* ***adapt*** *the hospital’s services to its rapidly changing world at each step of the way. He did so by bold steps, not small incremental changes.*

Today, our church faces the need to adapt to meet the changing circumstances of our world. In this session, we are going to explore ways in which we might adapt.

**Handout #5-2 – Possible Options for Moving Forward**

**Stay the Same / Do Nothing**

Following any kind of assessment, there is always the possibility that an organization will choose not to make any decision regarding the information contained in the report. Albert Einstein penned the phrase years ago that is often repeated when the potential for organizational change comes up: “Insanity is doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results.” Many would say that the church, in all of its forms, has become expert in this practice of insanity! Yet, there are implications to staying the same, doing nothing, or only making minor changes. By making any of these decisions, the trend lines in the report will continue to decline and the gaps between community and congregation will continue to widen. **Most people genuinely do not want to spend generations of assets to maintain an operation that is in decline**. In the case of a church, most people genuinely do not want to spend more operational resources on a dying mission. In fact, the idea of closing a congregation and distributing the assets to other life-giving ministries is much more faithful than allowing current assets to be consumed by practicing ‘insanity.’

The good news is that most congregations in decline are not yet at the point where closure is the **only** option. While closing one ministry to start another may be the best decision for your congregation, there are strong, faithful alternative choices that most congregations can consider for their future.

The following options (except for closure, which is discussed at the end of this handout) **all** require that there are some resources in terms of energy of the congregants, financial capacity, and an ability to articulate a clear vision for the future. *And there are* ***many congregations*** *who have been in decline for years that still have these resources!*

**Descriptions of Options**(Note: Hybrids are also possible, such as combinations or variations of these options)

**Mission Redefinition:**

Mission Redefinition is a spiritual, systemic, and strategic visioning process taken on by a congregation that is striving to realize what God has called it to be and do in brand new ways. It is when the congregation says, “We have fulfilled the mission God had for this church’s previous season, and we are entering a new season of mission.” This long-term re-visioning has to do with changing the soul and passion of the congregation so that it is *singularly* focused in a particular direction within the community, *to be and to share the good news of Jesus Christ*. This option calls for hard choices to break with certain structural and programmatic ways of “doing church.” But these decisions are necessary in order for the church to move further to the right on the “Missional Continuum” chart handed out in Session Four (#4-2). It requires that a congregation have high passion/energy/spiritual maturity, the ability to come to clear agreement on kinds of ministries its community needs, and high resources (financial/building/human resources). These high resources are necessary so they can be leveraged for use in outwardly-focused mission and ministry. This process of redefining the mission may take three to seven years, but the process is rich and meaningful for leaders who participate. Because it takes so long, **this may not be a realistic option** for a church with urgent financial or building-related challenges. Often, Mission Redefinition will be paired with one or more of the Redevelopment options listed below.

**Redevelopment:**

Redevelopment recognizes that the congregation’s ministry is **not sustainable as it is** and that it must adapt with a more urgent, radical change if it is to continue as a vital, Christian witness in the community. Most Redevelopment options are chosen because the congregation recognizes the large gaps between the demographic profile of its current constituency and the profile of the majority constituency of its neighborhood/community. In order for redevelopment to be successful, there needs to be evidence of SOME available resources, SOME passion/energy, and SOME awareness of the need in the community – though these do not need to be at high levels. What Redevelopment congregations also discover is that the surrounding community needs **a very different form of mission** than the congregation has been used to providing. Redevelopment is a bold reinvention of the congregation in a way that transforms it into a mission station that intersects with the needs of the people who live in the surrounding community.

There are various forms of redevelopment, including:

Redevelopment Strategy #1 – **Relocation**:

This strategy has the congregation selling its facilities and using the assets to relocate to an area in which the congregation has more affinity. This strategy is effective for “right sizing” a facility to the congregation as well as improving affinity between the people of the congregation and the people of the surrounding area. In situations where: a) there have been entire population shifts (often urban areas); b) where most of the congregants no longer live in the area; or c) where there is population decline in the area, Relocation is a viable option for congregations who have clarity of mission and can move to a target area that fits the profile needs of that mission.

Redevelopment Strategy #2 – **Restart**:

This strategy has the congregation closing down for at least one month, dissolving the bylaws, structure and mission of the original congregation, calling a new pastor and then restarting as a brand new congregation. In this situation, it is imperative that the congregation work with the larger denominational bodies to close out one ministry and begin an entirely new one. Core leaders (who are often new as well) will then work with a new pastor in a “new church development” project. Often this choice is the best decision when a congregation has substantial assets (building and financial), but has few people with energy for ministry that meets the needs of the community in which the congregation is located.

Redevelopment Strategy #3 – **Parallel Start**:

Some congregations find that they have an aging membership in an area where there has been a dramatic shift in population profile over several years. The congregation usually demonstrates low affinity with its neighboring community and low energy for doing ministry in the neighborhood. But there still may be assets in terms of people, building, and financial resources. In this situation, a parallel start of a new congregation alongside the continuance of the current congregation may be a viable option. **This strategy has the congregation utilizing 75% of its assets for starting a new congregation in the community. The remaining 25% is used for providing ministry for the existing congregation.** The ministry to the existing congregation provides for regular worship and pastoral care, but little for program development with the existing congregation. The new congregation (either with 75% of the current pastor’s time or with a new pastor) would work quickly to develop a new congregation that is contextually relevant for that community. At the end of two years, the existing congregation would have a choice to close and join the new congregation, or to continue in its previous format. Benchmarks would be set along the way so that the new congregation gradually assumes financial sustainability. From its start, the new congregation is free from the governance of the host church. Eventually, as the new congregation outgrows the host church, it would likely assume responsibility for the facility.

Redevelopment Strategy #4 – **Adoption**:

Increasingly, congregations who have low energy and few resources (except for their facilities) are entering into “adoption agreements” with other larger congregations of their denomination in their area. In these situations, the larger congregation invests some of its resources (financial, staff, participants, mission and programming) to start a new church in the location of the declining church. In exchange, the adopted church relinquishes control of the church, including leadership positions and property title (depending on the denomination). In essence, the original congregation is “morphed” into a satellite location for the adopting congregation. This can be a very successful way to build on the strengths of a neighboring congregation and allow leaders of the existing congregation to enjoy a break from maintaining the church.

A Unique Form of Redevelopment – **Sale of Facilities with Lease-Back Agreement**:

Some congregations find themselves in situations where their building is much larger than their needs or in such high need of repair that they can no longer afford to maintain it. Other congregations find themselves in situations where great amounts of energy, pastoral time, and financial resources are spent managing facilities or placating tenants (who share the facility but are unrelated to the congregation’s mission). In order to get relief from these encumbrances so that more resources and time can be spent for mission, some congregations sell their facilities to one of the tenants (or to another buyer) with the agreement that the congregation can lease back the space they need for ministry in the same location. Though the church loses ownership of the facility, it is now free from the burdens of managing property and can drastically reduce its operating expenses. *This option needs deliberate consideration, as many churches have been seduced to sell their valuable property for a much lower price than it is worth. Please consult with your denominational bodies if you are considering this option*.

**When is Closure an Option?**

Churches can and do close. In fact, since 1900, more than 60,000 U.S. churches have closed across all denominations. Consider the fact that every local church that St. Paul started has closed. Since churches – like all organizations – have life cycles, it follows that closure will be a tough choice for local congregations at some point in their life-cycles.

While closure is most often not the popular option, closure may be necessary – and, indeed, the most faithful choice – when two or more of the following conditions exist:

1. Lack of energy and vision (passion) on the part of the congregation and its leaders;

2. Lack of resources (few people, low finances, or facilities with major deferred maintenance);

3. The congregation has little to offer in program and ministry, and/or

4. When the congregation’s mission is no longer relevant for the area in which it resides.

Any combination of two or more of these factors is a strong indicator that the congregation needs to consider closure.

As indicated above, there are good ways to close and poor ways to close. A poor closure is when the congregation spends all of its remaining assets to take care of itself. This is a selfish expenditure of generous gifts from previous generations and it is a poor use of the assets with which the church has been entrusted. *Note: By NOT making a decision for a New Beginning, many churches are selecting this option for a poor closure. By not choosing a bold, new strategy for redevelopment, some churches with low energy, resources, and passion are opting (by their indecision) to gradually consume the resources provided by previous generations – until nothing is left.*

A **better way to close** is to be intentional by engaging your larger denominational bodies in helping “write a will” for the church. Churches in this sort of situation need to discern how the church’s remaining assets could be invested in a new community of faith in another location, or how they might leave a legacy for existing ministries which are important to people in the congregation. Denominational offices are helpful in establishing funds to perpetuate the life-giving mission of the congregation. They can help your church make sure the congregation’s faithfulness and memory live on in another location.

**Handout #5-3 – Possible Decisions for the Congregation**

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| --- |
| **REDEFINE THE MISSION** |
| Participation |  | **2** |  |  |  |
| Leadership |  | **2** | **3** |  |  |
| Church Budget |  | **2** | **3** |  |  |
| Community |  | **2** | **3** |  |  |
| Building Use |  | **2** |  |  |  |

|  |
| --- |
| **RELOCATE** |
| Participation |  | **2** | **3** |  |  |
| Leadership |  | **2** | **3** |  |  |
| Church Budget |  | **2** |  |  |  |
| Community | **1** |  |  |  |  |
| Building Use | **1** |  |  |  |  |

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| --- |
| **PARALLEL START** |
| Participation | **1** |  |  |  |  |
| Leadership | **1** |  |  |  |  |
| Church Budget |  | **2** |  |  |  |
| Community |  | **2** | **3** |  |  |
| Building Use |  | **2** | **3** |  |  |

|  |
| --- |
| **CLOSE/RESTART/ADOPTION** |
| Participation | **1** |  |  |  |  |
| Leadership | **1** |  |  |  |  |
| Church Budget | **1** |  |  |  |  |
| Community | **1** |  |  |  |  |
| Building Use | **1** |  |  |  |  |