



*"And on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18b, CSB)*

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Research indicates that at best, 70% of churches have plateaued or are in decline. Additionally, a recent study reveals that 12% of Louisiana Baptist churches might cease to exist in the next 7 years if revitalization doesn't occur. How can a church leader diagnose the problem and determine what steps leaders should take to correct the situation?

## **PHASES OF DECLINE**

Declining churches descend through predictable phases. The farther down the scale a church descends, the harder it is to recover.

### **PHASE ONE: LOSS OF PURPOSE/LOSS OF VISION**

In this phase people realize that the church isn't working as well as it once did. The church is pressured on two sides: the glorious past and the scary future. Characteristics of this phase include:

- A selective longing for "the good ole days" (nostalgia)
- A weakened commitment to and energy for the present
- A possible bridge to the future if the glorious past is used as a stepping-stone to the future (i.e. the way we did it before was...)

### **PHASE TWO: DENIAL OF REALITY**

Doubt about the church itself begins to surface as members become angry, irritable, restless, and increasingly frightened. The actual goals of the church may come under fire.

### **PHASE THREE: GRASPING FOR SURVIVAL**

Battle lines are drawn, and conflict is now evident. Struggle divides church members into "us" versus "them." There is a polarization between leadership and membership about what we should do and what should change.

### **PHASE FOUR: DROPOUT**

People begin to give up and leave. Apathy or despair becomes a common theme.

*Robert D. Dale, To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2004), pp.105-126. AND George Yates, Reaching the Summit: Avoiding and Reversing Decline in the Church, (Sonlight Publishing Son C.A.R.E Ministries, www.soncare.net)*



Following are 21 questions you should ask about the church you lead or attend, separated into three categories: Perceptions, People and Programs. If you answer "YES" to 10 or more of the questions, the church may need a Fresh Start. However, answering "YES" to any of these questions may reveal an opportunity for a strategic ministry shift.

### **PERCEPTIONS**

1. Would the church be described as declining or healthy and growing?
2. Would the church be described as functioning, but not a place where there is a noticeable presence and/or movement of the Holy Spirit?
3. Is the church more nostalgic for the past than excited for the future?
4. Has the church lost its purpose and/or vision?
5. Does the church have a maintenance mentality instead of a growth mentality?
6. Is there a reluctance to change among church members?
7. Would you or others say there is a lack of a unified direction from the leaders in the church?

### **PEOPLE**

1. Is the community in decline or transition?
2. Has the median age of church members become substantially older?
3. Is there a lack of guests regularly attending the church and becoming members?
4. Have baptisms declined or plateaued in the last 5 years?
5. Have significant numbers of members left the church over the past 5 years for churches that better "meet their needs?"
6. Are there any unresolved conflicts or issues distracting the church from Kingdom work?
7. Have the finances of the church declined in the last 5 years?

### **PROGRAMS**

1. Has Sunday School or Small Group attendance declined or plateaued in the last five years?
2. Does the church lack an effective way to connect with your guests, share the gospel and integrate them into the life of the church?
3. Does the church lack an intentional prayer strategy for the lost?
4. Has the church had three or more pastors in the last 10 years?
5. Would you or others say you do not have a vibrant youth and children's program?
6. Has the church cut any ministry due to financial decline within the last 5 years?
7. Does the church give to missions, but not have many members personally participating in missions or local ministries?



## MODELS FOR A FRESH START

It is not the role of a state convention to decide if a church needs a Fresh Start. The leaders of the local church must decide, with its membership, if the need and desire to engage in revitalization or replant is present. When the local church, led by the Lord, seeks to pursue a biblical process of a Fresh Start, the church must select a path that is right for them. Through our research, most churches approach a Fresh Start by using one of the following models:

### REVITALIZATION – REVITALIZATION CAN TAKE ON ONE OF TWO FORMS:

- **RETOOL** – Has your church lost its passion for God, one another, and your community? A fresh start may mean rediscovering your churches' purpose and vision and "retooling" the structure, systems and leadership towards that purpose and vision. This process may only require someone to guide (like a Ministry Coach) your leadership and a Fresh Start Team to make the changes necessary to become a healthy, vibrant, and growing church.
- **REFOCUS** – As years go by and plateau moves to decline, it is time for the leadership and the church to refocus. Fewer people, fewer leaders and fewer resources force the church to rethink what they are doing. They continue to do the same things they have always done and get very little results. It's time for a change. In this situation, more assistance may be required. A Coach might need to be enlisted to walk the church through a series of assessments, discoveries, and transitions that will position the church for a better future. The church could also choose to partner with a healthy church to begin to walk through a process to adopt and develop a new vision, purpose, and plan for ministry in that community.

### REPLANT OR RESTART

- **RESTRUCTURE** –At this point, new resources and a new vision is required. The DNA of a dying church has set in and most likely cannot be reversed. It is time for desperate measures. The church needs help. They don't have the people, the leadership, or the resources to do this on their own. They need to restart. Churches might consider transitioning to another ethnic group or even relocating to a new ministry area that better represents the identity, culture, and values of the current congregation. A possible last resort might be to consider the possibility of a merger with another church in the area to combine resources and leadership for a stronger ministry presence. In this case, a consultant is a must because of inherent risks and issues that could damage the very process they are trying to accomplish.
- **RELEASE** – The inevitable has happened. Money has run out and very few people attend the church. There is not much more to do than to close the church. The one true church and the Kingdom of God will never die or go away, but sometimes local churches do. It is time to replant. It's time for new leadership, new people, and a new vision to come in and reach the community for Christ. Don't wait. Begin now to make sure your community has a church presence that will be a light in the community for the cause of Christ well into the future.



## WHERE DO WE START?

### STEP ONE: PRAY

Start immediately with intentional, fervent prayer. Ask God to reveal His plan to you. Gather key leaders in the church to pray with you for God's direction. In this season of prayer, it is important that everyone seek God and His will for the future of the church.

### STEP TWO: CONTACT US

The Evangelism/Church Growth Team of the Louisiana Baptist Convention can help you evaluate your current situation and make recommendations. As you choose the path that is right for you, we want to create a partnership with the local Associational staff and the LBC staff, to assist you as the Lord leads you through the revitalization process.

Your Louisiana Baptist contact:

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### STEP THREE: PREPARE

A Fresh Start isn't easy. It takes lots of work. There are many aspects to leading a church to rediscover God's purpose and plan. There is no "silver bullet." There is not one program or plan to bring a Fresh Start to every Louisiana Baptist church. It will not happen quickly. You will have to make hard decisions and wrestle with tough ideas. However, those who are desperate enough to depend fully on God and work diligently and strategically for the Kingdom can see a fresh start begin. With God, there is always hope.