



Baptist Union
of Victoria

Church decline: Early warning signs

In "Pathways to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregations" (Alban Institute, USA, 2008), Daniel Smith and Mary Sellon describe a pathway from congregational plateau or decline to renewal and growth.

Smith and Sellon identify five indicators of decline and observe that these seeds of decline are often sown while churches are still appearing to be healthy and growing.

"By the time the shifts are evident, the congregation has come to see this way of being and doing church as normal. As this point, a new inward-focussed trajectory has been set...Decline may not yet be detected in the statistics the church uses to measure success, but it's simply a matter of time."

Wise Leaders, with a commitment to church vitality and growth, will be vigilant in detecting and active in correcting these trends.

The five indicators of church decline are:

1. People focussing on growing the church rather than on witnessing to faith

"Members are out of touch with their own faith stories and how their lives have been changed through their own spiritual formation. They don't know how to talk with others about God and faith issues. Members share their church, rather than their faith, with people."

2. Efforts focussing on running the Church rather than on forming disciples

"What the church needs to keep it running takes precedence over what the participants need to grow as disciples of Christ. Leaders spend time and energy enticing and motivating people to serve on committees and take on tasks, rather than creating opportunities and venues for their development as followers of Christ."

3. The congregation being people-led rather than Spirit-led

"Leaders strive to direct the church as a business, adopting the best practices of the business world, without undergirding those practices with a radical dependence upon God...People think of and refer to the church as 'our church', not as 'God's church'."

4. The congregation engaging in mission projects but not having a mission

"(Mission) projects generally reflect not a shared missional aim of the congregation, but the mission interests of individuals or groups. Success is measured by the amount of support generated for the project...There is no shared and compelling sense of purpose underlying congregational life and ministry."

5. Leaders focussing on fixing rather than creating

"When challenges or new situations arise, people view them as problems to be solved so that the church can get back to normal, rather than as opportunities to move in new directions...Leaders and members balk at engaging in activities that seem new or different."

Leaders can monitor these dynamics of church life by periodically allocating time on Leadership Meeting agendas to review them. This could take the form of sharing stories that suggest a rise or fall in each indicator of decline.

This chart provides a framework for a more formal review. It could be used as part of a strategic planning process. Church members could be invited to participate through a forum or survey. In addition to indicating how true each dynamic is of the church as whole, members could be invited to indicate how true it is of them individually.

| INDICATOR | CONGREGATIONAL SCORE (1= NOT US AT ALL; 10=EXACTLY US) | TREND LAST 3 YEARS | ACTION FOR IMPROVEMENT |
|-----------|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| #1 | | | |
| #2 | | | |
| #3 | | | |
| #4 | | | |
| #5 | | | |

Churches might also measure their performance on these dynamics using metrics such as:

1. Asking members to report how many unchurched people they have spoken to about Jesus Christ over the past 6 or 12 months;
2. The number of people participating in groups or mentoring relationships that are intentionally focussed on discipleship;
3. The number of people participating in corporate prayer gatherings with a focus on discernment;
4. The proportion of the Church’s Budget that is allocated to projects, people or programmes aligned with the Church’s Mission strategy. Or, the number of members engaged in activities related to the Church’s Mission strategy;
5. The number of new initiatives commenced and existing activities closed over the past year.

The BUV’s Church Health and Capacity Building Team is available to assist churches to assess and overcome the seeds of congregational decline.