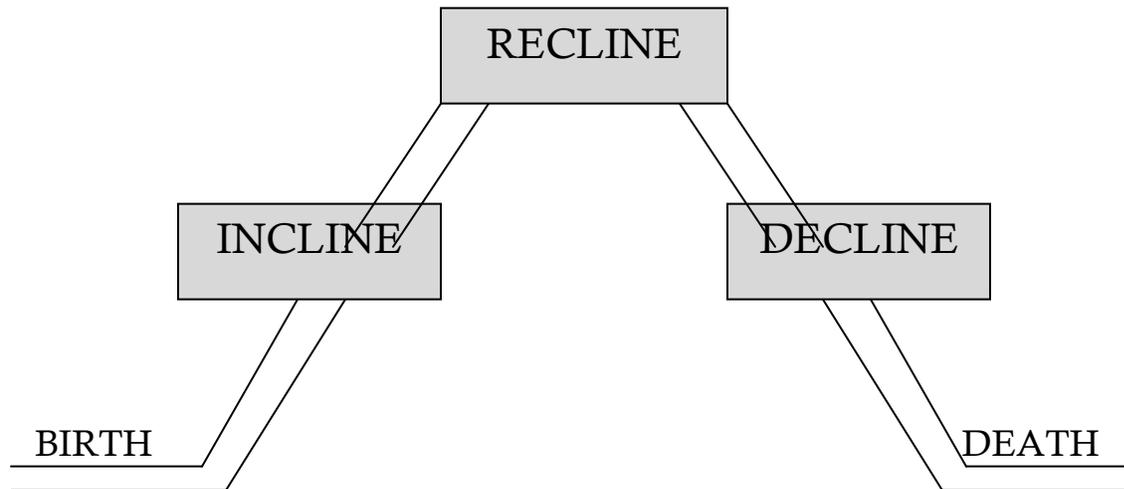


The Church Revitalization Lifecycle: Three Primary Stages



Principle: In a fallen world, vitality is lost over time.

Incline. Ministry capacity of the church is increasing. Over time, the church is doing more and more ministry and the quality of that ministry is better and better. Incline is a strong stage featuring health, growth and multiplication. Primary identity of the church in this phase is its vision, or calling from God.

Recline. Ministry capacity of the church levels off into plateau. Over time, the church is doing the same ministry over and over at more or less the same level of quality. Recline is a tepid, tread water stage featuring ministry management by routine, filling in the blanks. Primary identity of the church in this phase is its programs.

Decline. Ministry capacity of the church is decreasing. Over time, the church is doing less and less ministry and the quality of that ministry is more and more compromised. Decline is a weak stage featuring decreases in membership, attendance, giving and overall impact in the community. Primary identity of the church in this phase is its structure.

Churches on the upside of the lifecycle (Incline and early Recline) are facing moderate revitalization, while churches on the downside of the lifecycle (fully developed Recline and Decline) are facing a much more severe revitalization treatment.

Since vitality decreases over time, church revitalization needs to be an ongoing process.

It is much better for churches to embrace revitalization early in the lifecycle rather than late, as revitalization is much more accessible from a position of strength than a position of weakness.

Why don't churches turn to revitalization sooner rather than later? It's because church leaders are reluctant to tamper with ministry that's working.

Distinctive Characteristics of Incline, Recline & Decline

In considering Incline, Recline and Decline, it's helpful to note certain distinctive characteristics that separate them.

Orientation

Inclining churches are **Future-Oriented**. Inclining leaders are always looking ahead, making decisions today based on their implications for tomorrow. Leaders of Inclining churches would never trade what is best for the future for what is best for the present. There is a sense of destination and all energy, resources and focus are fixed on reaching that destination.

Reclining churches are **Present-Oriented**. Reclining leaders are quite satisfied with how things are and if they could they would freeze time, preferring an eternal present where all Sundays would be just like this Sunday, characterized by a solid congregation with solid finances, good staff, good programs, and nice facilities.

Declining churches are **Past-Oriented**. Declining leaders desire to go back to some former time in the church, perhaps when Rev. So-and-So was here. Decline has a point of reference, a point from which things declined. So the natural tendency is to want to return to the way it used to be, a time that is perceived as better and a time that is sugar coated with nostalgia.

Drive

Inclining churches are **Vision-Driven**. Inclining leaders have discerned God's vision for their churches and are fully committed to that vision. All decisions are made in light of and for the benefit of that vision. The rightly discerned godly vision is the point of reference from which all else flows.

Reclining churches are **Program-Driven**. Reclining leaders are convinced that the success of their churches lies in the strength of the programming. All decisions are made in light of and for the benefit of the programming. The programming is the point of reference from which all else flows.

Declining churches are **Structure-Driven**. Declining churches are living in a church world that is devoid of vision and devoid of effective programming. In light of this void, these leaders cling to the structure of the church as evidence that the church is still alive. They are preoccupied with elements such as organizational charts, boards and committees, finances, payroll, and building maintenance.

Focus

Inclining churches are **Community-Focused**. Inclining leaders give priority to the group of people that is living in the community, as yet unreached by the church. These community residents are the objects to key Scripture passages such as the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Who are the neighbors in the Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself? They are the people of the community. When the Great Commission commands us to go and make disciples, to whom are we to take the gospel? We are to take the gospel to the people of the community.

Reclining churches are **Congregation-Focused**. Reclining leaders give priority to the group of people that is inside the church, those already reached. Surely, a healthy church will focus on both community and congregation, but the natural inclination for leaders is to focus on the congregation at the expense of the community. Inreach has its own voice, but outreach needs an advocate. Otherwise the focus will be so heavily weighted toward the congregation that the community will be ignored. The church that fails to reach its community ultimately finds itself on the backside of the lifecycle.

Declining churches are **Core-Focused**. Declining leaders focus on a remnant of the declining church whose influence becomes stronger as the church grows smaller. Key influencers in this core often prove to be barriers to growth as they remain entrenched in their authority and hold the congregation hostage by means of that authority and influence. One key element that is leveraged in this way is money. Often the influencers in the core give significant percentages of the church's budget. Others in the core believe that the church couldn't sustain without that income, so they acquiesce to the influencer's demands.

Attitude

Inclining churches are **Innovative** in their approach to ministry. They keep abreast of new ideas and developments and thrive on making good ministry better through creativity and experimentation. Inclining leaders will adjust, modify and even replace ministries, programs or systems that are working well if they determine that something new would bring greater benefit. Constantly being in research and development mode, and putting new prototypes on the field is labor intensive, but Inclining leaders are willing to pay that price.

Reclining churches are **Routine** in their approach to ministry. If the machinery of ministry is working, don't mess with it. This approach might best be described as fill-in-the-blanks ministry. Make sure people, curriculum, programming and the like are in place and let the system run. Templates are developed as much as possible for standardization, such as a Sunday morning template that gets filled in by ministry leaders with song titles, sermon title and text, announcements, etc. Often in this environment, leaders of different ministries or department rarely communicate but simply make sure the blanks for which they are responsible are filled.

Declining churches are **Complacent** in their approach to ministry. It's not that Declining leaders don't care, it's that they are resigned to the belief that they cannot make the future happen, but can only wait and let it happen. In a sense, they see themselves as victims of circumstances and consequently hope that these external circumstances change so that they will be less victimized. This is a passive posture that incubates in the wishful thinking that somehow God will do something to better their plight. They believe that God does great things through His church, but struggle to believe that He would do something great in theirs.

Faith

Inclining churches exercise **High-Risk Faith**. Inclining leaders are committed to following God wherever He leads without contingency. As such, no risk is too high when God's leading is ascertained. Given this proclivity, much time and energy is invested in pursuit of God's leading with an expectation that God will in fact guide these leaders on their journey of faithfulness, a faith journey that is willing to risk all but that faith.

Reclining churches exercise **Low-Risk Faith**. Reclining leaders are surely committed to following God, but are also committed to guarding resources and all that has been accomplished carefully. These leaders are willing to try new ideas, but in a controlled environment where not much is at stake if the new endeavor fails.

Declining churches exercise **No-Risk Faith**. Declining leaders are committed to protecting whatever limited resources remain and therefore will not put those resources at risk. They see this as prudent, as stretching resources out as long as possible in the hope that God will make some unanticipated move at some point and make ministry better.

Decisions

Given its High-Risk Faith, Inclining churches make **Faith Decisions**. Inclining leaders will move forward in faith despite the fact that things might not add up on paper, despite the fact that not all of the needed resources might currently be available, and despite the fact that the outcome is uncertain and there might be much at risk. This is predicated, of course, on the belief that a godly vision has been rightly discerned and that God's leading is clear, compelling leaders to act decisively though there might be holes in the initiative.

Given its Low-Risk Faith, Reclining churches make **Resource Decisions**. Reclining leaders will move forward only when all of the necessary resources are on hand or anticipated, and when those resources need not be diverted from current programming. They see this as wise and prudent and in keeping with counting the cost before undertaking a new initiative.

Given its No-Risk Faith, Declining churches are paralyzed by **Indecision**. Declining leaders are fearful of making mistakes and falling further into Decline, so they hesitate in making decisions or fail to make decisions altogether. Ironically the decision not to make a decision is a decision, usually a wrong decision.

Servanthood

Inclining churches place people in serving positions by identifying their **Gifts**. Inclining leaders understand that people are most productive and most fulfilled when they are serving in their areas of giftedness, talents, passion, experience and calling. Care is taken to deploy people in ministry accordingly in order that they are utilized to their full potential in a manner that is sustainable over long periods of time. When people are integrated into service through this approach, they understand that they are serving as a privilege, not as an obligation or as a means of simply helping out.

Reclining churches place people in serving positions through **Slot-Filling**. An inventory is taken to determine how many slots need to be filled to man each program. The congregation is then grabbed by the collar and dragged through the grid of these slots in the hope that a live body will land in each slot. Once this is done, the nominating committee reasons that its work is done since each program has proper coverage. Though all slots might be filled, this approach is not fulfilling for those involved and leads to burnout and ineffective ministry as people are not matched properly to service.

Declining churches place people in serving positions by **Default**. There are typically more slots to be filled than there are people, so those remaining in the church are likely to fill a slot because "somebody has to do it." Usually those willing to serve commit to serving in multiple slots, wearing so many hats that they are spread too thin to be effective.

Finances

Inclining churches approach money like an **Investor**. Inclining leaders regard the funding that God has provided as money intended to produce the fruit of ministry, so they invest that money in ministry with the expectation that ministry fruit will result, thirty fold, sixty fold, a hundred fold.

Reclining churches approach money as a **Provider**. Reclining leaders are driven by the church's programming and see money as the financial provision to keep those programs running. The focus is on hosting program activities rather than on the fruit of ministry that might be produced.

Declining churches approach money as a **Preserver**. Declining leaders see the church's money as the financial means of the church's survival. The focus is on stretching the church's ability to stay live as long as possible in the hope that God might unexpectedly move at some point to create more viable ministry that recaptures the past.

Leadership

Inclining churches are always seeking the development of **New Leadership**. Inclining leaders understand that for the church to continue to grow there is always the need for new leaders to move into existing and newly created ministries. This commitment to new leadership is reflected in aggressive discipling toward leadership and the sending out of existing leaders to create new ministry and open doors for new leadership.

Reclining churches are led by **Established Leadership**. With programming reaching capacity and leveling off, the leadership positions have been identified and filled, leaving little room for the emergence of new leadership. Those who come into such a ministry with leadership giftedness and potential are unable to realize that giftedness and potential, so their growth is stunted or they migrate elsewhere to apply their leadership calling.

Declining churches are led by **Incumbent Leadership**. Declining leaders have often been in place for long stretches of time, perhaps even serving for decades in the same leadership position. Routine prevails as the same kinds of decisions are made the same way based on the same criteria with little change or progress being seen. The prevailing attitude is to things the way we always have in the hope of a better result. At its best, this is wishful thinking.

Growth

Inclining churches grow by **Conversion**. A significant percentage of growth can be attributed to people's coming to Christ and making professions of faith. Inclining leaders commit to the regular presentation of the good news of the gospel and strategically provide opportunities for people to voice those professions.

Reclining churches grow by **Transfer**. The programming emphasis of the Reclining church draws already Christian people, providing programming for all in the family that is appealing to the Christian who might attend a church with less attractive programming. Since transfer growth is adding to the church's growth statistics, Reclining leaders sense that they are fostering church growth and miss the fact that significant conversion is not taking place. The church grows by transfer, but the kingdom of God does not grow when already Christian people church hop.

Declining churches by definition experience **No Growth**, or perhaps negative growth would be more accurate. With programming failing through lack of resources, the church offers less and less, losing more and more people in the process.

INCLINE	RECLINE	DECLINE
Future-Oriented	Present-Oriented	Past-Oriented
Vision-Driven	Program-Driven	Structure-Driven
Community-Focused	Congregation-Focused	Core-Focused
Innovative	Routine	Complacent
High-Risk Faith	Low-Risk Faith	No Risk Faith
Faith Decisions	Resource Decisions	Indecision
Serve by Gifts	Serve by Slot	Serve by Default
\$ = Investor	\$ = Provider	\$ = Preserver
New Leadership	Established Leadership	Incumbent Leadership
Conversion Growth	Transfer Growth	No Growth