

LIFE CYCLE

This fall I had the opportunity to lead a workshop for a wonderful faith community in the Annapolis Valley. Participants gathered to discern what might be appropriate changes that could enhance the life and vitality of their faith community. *Status quo* wasn't an option. Throughout the workshop, participants tapped into the creative energy of *the Spirit* that entwined their own creative energy and, after exploring the question "who are we?" they discovered that a multitude of strengths historically rooted within their faith community were still present today. Some of the strengths identified in the life and ministries of their forebearers included the ability to risk, make disciples, build community, be inclusive, provide spiritual care, offer hospitality, and to give corporate witness and service beyond church doors. Even though the shape of earlier programs and ministries often looked different than the expressions of today's ministries, it soon became evident that all generations of the congregation had created relevant programs and ministries that were built upon deeply rooted strengths and abilities that had crossed time and space within their faith community. After much hard work and attentiveness to *the Spirit*, they arrived at recommendations that continued to reflect their core values and the essence of who they had always known themselves to be as a congregation. They were then able to articulate more clearly "who they were" which helped them to explore their original question "where was God calling them today".

Every congregation called into being by God has a unique part to play in God's intention for the world. Because it is impossible for congregations to be all things, it becomes every congregation's mission to find its particular place within God's intention so that it knows to what it is being called. Change holds more possibility for success when it is embedded within the essence of the congregation's being, culture, spirit and personality. When proposed changes aren't reflective of

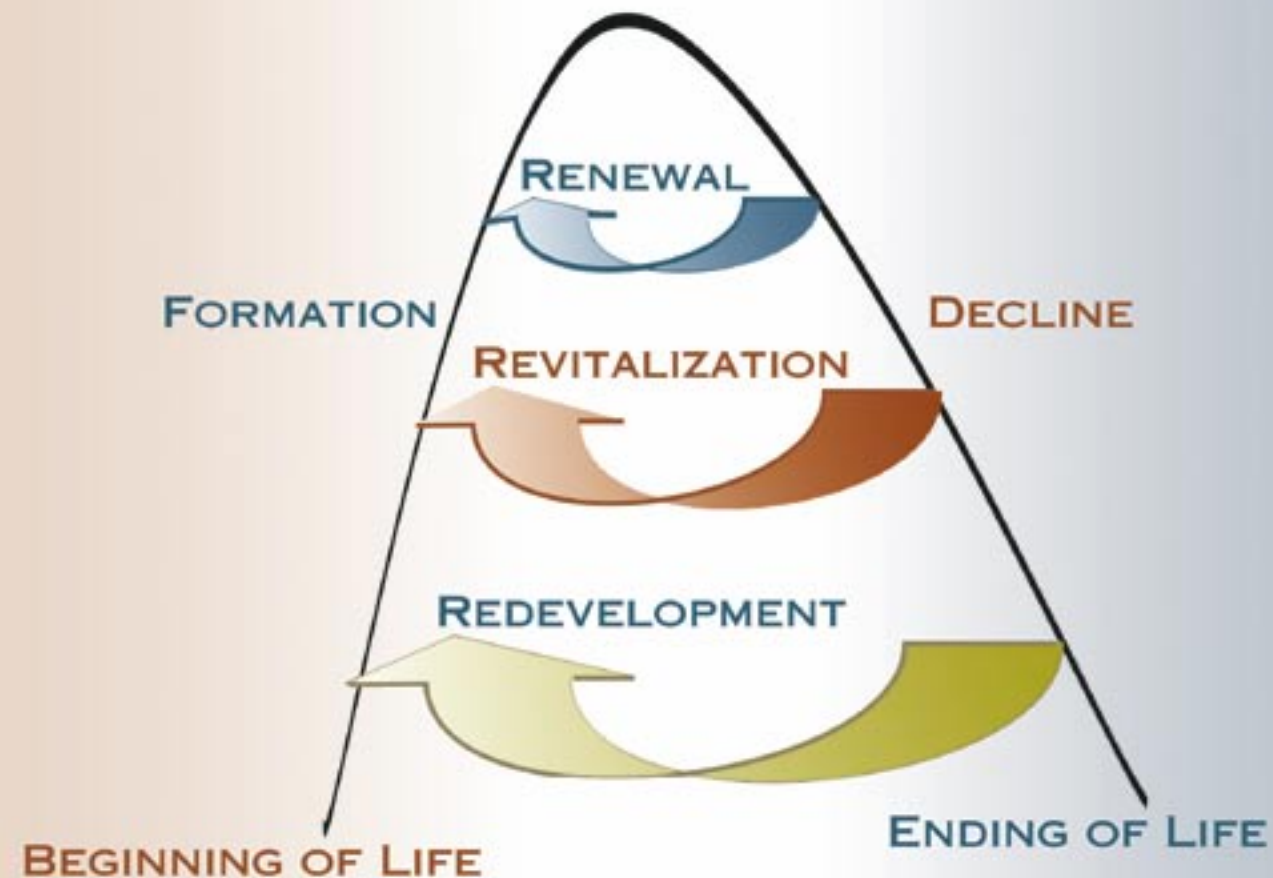
the culture and personality of the congregation, nurturing change will be difficult.

Many scholars tell us that, like other living things, every congregation has a life cycle. [1] On the exciting side of its life cycle, a congregation moves from birth to formation to stability. Following its birth there is an abundance of activity as the budding faith community wrestles with three formation questions: *Who are we? What is God calling us to do?* and, *Who is our neighbour?* Perhaps, but not always, their ensuing activity involves the decision to construct a building for its church. At the same time, an infrastructure (boards, committees, etc.) will begin to take shape to support the congregation's life and work.

When the congregation explores the question "who is our neighbour?" it may discover that its neighbours are farmers or fishers or miners. As a congregation struggles with the question "what is God calling us to do?" it may conclude that part of its mission is to provide farmers and their families with space and programs for them to learn together what it means to give faithful witness as children of God whose lives revolve around farming. Having gained clarity on who they are and what they are called to do, the means are then put into place to support their mission. If all goes well, eventually the congregation will reach stability. Stability provides an opportunity for celebration and for rest from all the birthing and formation activity. However, this is also a time when a congregation is at risk of becoming satisfied with the *status quo* and, before it knows it, the congregation could find itself on the unexciting and often painful side of the slippery slope (decline). If downward movement isn't interrupted, death will beckon.

The good news, however, is that intervention is possible. The diagram shows how a congregation can *loop back* to reanimate its life. *Looping back* requires communal engagement with the three formation questions:

LIFE CYCLE OF A CONGREGATION



Who are we? What are we called to do? and *Who is our neighbour?* A congregation that still has lots of vitality and energy can travel back on the renewal loop. In the past, old time revivals have met the need to refresh and renew communal life.

More resources, energy, time, and commitment are required for revitalization to occur when a congregation finds itself further down the decline with waning vitality. As it revisits the formation questions, a congregation may discover that, even though its mission is still relevant today, it is in need of some *fine tuning*. A mission that focuses on *farmers* may need to be adjusted in order to support farming families who now struggle to make a living or who may be experiencing family break-ups.

When a congregation has experienced decades of decline, redevelopment may be its only option. At this stage in its life cycle

there is significant loss of vitality and membership. Getting on the *redevelopment loop* requires major spiritual, emotional, financial and relational resources. Congregations that redevelop have radically different identities and missions. Generally, congregations facing redevelopment are experiencing major changes in the demographics of their surrounding communities.

Through the exploration of the formation questions, a congregation may decide that it has faithfully completed its mission, that it has accomplished what God has called it to do. If such a decision is reached, it is then the congregation's responsibility to find ways to celebrate what has been and to do the work of letting go in order that it might offer a grace-filled and holy death to God with thanksgiving for what has been.

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[1] *This reflection and its accompanying diagram is an adaptation of Robert Gallagher's (consultant) and Alice Mann's theory on the life cycle of congregations (from Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline. Bethesda, Maryland: Alban Institute, 1999).*