

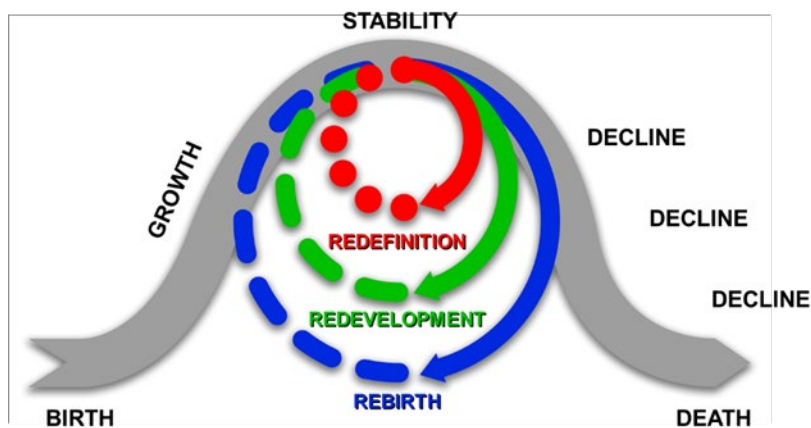
A Repotting Strategy

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Helping Declining and Dying Churches Restart

In Synod 2018 the Church Planting Taskforce (CPT) alerted the CRCA of the need to investigate innovative ideas for repotting older congregations needing significant revitalisation. There are churches and church leaders who sense that the ongoing ministry of their congregation may soon face significant challenges. In many ways the local church in its present form might not be sustainable and people realise that they need to make important decisions about its future. Churches also desire to be good stewards of the resources that God has given them for ministry and mission.

The Congregational Life Cycle



Churches, like any organisation, go through life cycles. The congregational life cycle looks like the diagram on the left. New churches are planted or birthed with a strong vision for the future. Relationships are made. Clear strategies for church growth are in place. In the growth cycle churches

move from start to stable. When you have vision plus strategy plus structure the church will see **incline** or growth. Many churches decide when they reach the stability phase to simply move into maintaining where they are at. They choose to **recline**. If that happens the church will move from being stable to being stagnant. Church growth will become minimal or non-existent.

When churches reach stability, this is the optimum time for churches to redefine the direction of their church. Ongoing church development is critical. At this stage in the congregational life cycle the church would do well to engage NCD (Natural Church Development) or NCLS (National Church Life Survey) and consider what redefinition or redevelopment is necessary. If a church continues to neglect church development, they will move from being stagnant to sick. They will **decline** in number, and more importantly, in gospel impact. Decline will happen in stages, just like the human life cycle – from maturity, to empty nest, to retirement. If a church waits until ‘late aging’ to seek a turnaround, they are unlikely to experience a positive and successful future. All that sustains congregations on the aging side are programs and management. These church also might not avoid death.

Churches in Serious Decline

As the depth of a local church’s decline increases, more interruption and letting go is required. When churches get to this stage, they might resist letting go of what they have. Often churches

minimise the seriousness of the decline. But there is no gain for underestimating decline. There is also no penalty for overestimating decline. Without rebirth, decline will lead to death.

At this stage, one of the options these struggling churches might consider is to bring the current ministry to a close and then restart in the same location or other location with a new and different church ministry. This will lead to the rebirth of the church. To rebirth a seriously declining ministry requires radical change. Rebirth will involve a different purpose or ministry. It is not just doing the old thing differently; it is doing a new thing. And perhaps in a different place or with different people. This will require a repotting strategy.

Self-Examination

Before a seriously declining church begins to think about a rebirth, the church needs to go through the important work of self-examination as a church community. They need to consider how well they are making use of the resources God has provided them. Resources include people, gifts, buildings, time, and energy. Is the church being fruitful or can the church imagine better ways to use the resources that God has given them?

Churches in the growth or stable phase of the congregational life cycle would do well to engage in regular church health surveys such as NCD or NCLS. Churches in serious decline need to be examined not just in church health but church vitality. This self-examination will look for signs of church life. The current realities of the church need to be honestly identified, such as, membership numbers, church attendance (rate of decline), age demographics of the congregation, financial health and giving, existing programs, volunteer engagement, etc. Accurate diagnosis is critical. For a church to be rebirthed will require a spiritual breakthrough. The people in the church need to feel divine discontent, that things cannot remain the way they are. They realise that they need to make better use of the resources God has given them.

A Repotting Strategy

Through self-examination a congregation might discern that it is time for it to close and be repotted/rebirthed. This decision is never an easy one, but it is also not without hope. Just as parents are filled with hope with the imminent birth of their child, so too an older and declining congregation can look forward with anticipation to the new birth that God will bring about. Once self-examination has been completed the church is ready to move into the repotting phase. There are five strategic steps to the repotting of a church:

1. De-Structure

Before the dying church can move forward, it must first move back. Not back in returning to the old ways of doing things – but undoing what has happened in the past. The current structures of the church have the potential to block any real attempt to develop, and move toward, a new vision. The church could simply reduce the number of people who hold offices, reduce the number of committees and meetings, and refashion policies and procedures to enable quicker, easier, more decisive decision-making. A more severe de-structure would be actually to dissolve the church session/leadership board, suspend the by-laws, and thus creating the opportunity for a completely new approach to decision-making.

2. Authorization

A leadership void is created by De- Structure. Authorization fills that void. In this phase, authority to make decisions and set direction is placed in the hands of a small group of visionaries. This group should include up to three leaders who are clearly visionary and capable of developing strategies appropriate to a new vision. With authority in the hands of visionaries and with structure taking its hands off the wheel, the church returns to being right side up. Vision is back in the driver's seat. This new vision will be supported by strategies and eventually a redesigned structure that supports the vision and strategies.

Along with authorizing a new group of visionary leaders, it is important that the church engage a church consultant. This consultant will provide objectivity, experience, and reduces emotional reaction to what needs to happen during this time of rebirth.

3. Revision

The original vision of the church in decline has faded and needs to be replaced by a new formulation of a desired future. Not a return to the old vision – but a re-vision. A new look. Two questions will drive this phase: 1) How does God want to express himself through this church in this community at this time? and 2) What will this look like in reality?

The unique vision that God has for this church must be found. This new vision must also focus on the particular community the church is called to reach. The community must be known and understood. Because communities vary, visions to reach them must also vary. Vision must understand the times we are living in and adapt itself accordingly. This revision will include:

- a. **Identifying the Core Biblical Values** that will give direction to establish the new church.
- b. **Setting Community Targets** that understands the surrounding community, who the church is called to reach, and what needs they have.
- c. **Developing a Compelling Vision** that describes what God would have this church to do and to achieve.
- d. **Developing Missional Strategies** that detail how the church is going to reach the lost for Christ(Outreach), what they are going to do with them once they are reached (Discipleship), and what are the intentional strategies to keep moving these ministries forward.

4. Innovation

A new structure will be determined to provide the support that the new vision and its accompanying missional strategies will need. The church now knows the direction of their ministry. Now they need the structures that will help them achieve their vision and missional strategies. Like a church at birth, with a new vision, new strategy, and new structures in place and everything properly aligned, the church will have the opportunity to re-enter incline and growth.

5. Assimilation

The next step is assimilating the remnant congregation and newcomers. One cannot assume that the existing congregation will automatically own the new vision once it is

articulated. The church ready to be rebirthed needs to make sure that the remnant is truly behind the new vision and not just giving lip service to accepting what it sees as an unavoidable transition. There needs to be an ownership of the revision.

The church is ready to be rebirthed. Repotting has been complete. Through the various outreach strategies identified, by God's grace and blessing, people will be drawn to this rebirthed church. These newcomers are also assimilated into the new vision and into the life of the church. The challenge here is to make sure that the newcomer is being assimilated into the new church vision and not the declining church, which would pull the newcomer toward the past rather than the future.

A Repotting Strategy Timeline (12 Months):

- a. Review – 1st Month
- b. De-Structure – 3rd Month
- c. Authorization – 4th Month
- d. Revision – 5th Month
- e. Innovation – 9th Month
- f. Assimilation – 10th Month
- g. Launch – 12th Month

A Partnership in the Gospel

As CRCA churches we are better together than we are alone. Considering a repotting strategy is not an easy choice to make. It is even more difficult to face the realities of a seriously declining church, to let go, and give oneself to the process of rebirth. But as churches we are not alone. Jesus has promised that he will build (rebuild) his church (Matthew 16:18). As churches we are all part of a regional Classis which provides support, encouragement, and prayer. The CPT, particularly through Ministry Formation and the MDC, are also well equipped to walk alongside churches to guide them in this journey to rebirth and a future of growth and gospel impact. The CPT and the MDC welcome contact from any seriously declining church to explore options to consider and partner together toward a better future. The MDC can also partner with the church and provide consultation through the repotting strategy.

Some churches might decide to not pursue a church repotting strategy. They might decide to close, sell all their assets, and strategically invest the proceeds. In such cases a church's legacy could be marked by the sale of assets and the realisation how these proceeds can partner with other ministries. The CPT encourages such churches to consider how these resources could be stewarded toward the planting of churches in other parts of Australia and the world.