

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

The Challenges of Church Decline - Episode 293

The Challenges of the Church Lifecycle

The majority of churches today self-assess that their church is currently in decline, and the leaders of those churches are asking what they need to do to turn things around before it's too late. In this episode, Tony and Amy will walk through the key challenges of the declining/right side of the lifecycle—maintenance phase, preservation phase, and life support—and offer next steps for moving back to health.

The overarching challenge is this: **Churches on the right side of the lifecycle must overcome the challenge of finding clarity of mission.**

The Maintenance Phase

When a church is in the maintenance phase, the attendance growth typically plateaus or begins to decline. The church has become insider-focused and their vision has become stale. Many times, the church remains financially healthy in this phase due to the [giving lag](#).

Key Challenge: Complexity constraints, as more and more ministry programs are added to serve the needs of people who are already a part of the church.

In the maintenance phase, there are 3 key things churches can do to get back to health:

1. **Renew their vision** and embrace the change before the emergency forces the change. The vision clarifies where the organization is going in the future. For a church that has plateaued, this is a critical first step to return to health.
2. **Prioritize reaching new people** and fight against an insider-focused mentality. To return to healthy growth, you must address this key question: What are we willing to do to reach people outside the church and outside the faith?
3. **Curtail the complexity creep.** The most common form of complexity we see is churches that are over-programmed. It's much easier to add a program than it is to redefine a strategy—but a unified ministry strategy helps you determine how to use space, invest money, leverage leaders, and engage volunteers in ways that actually fulfill the mission your church is called to.

The Preservation Phase

In the preservation phase, both attendance and finances are declining. Most of the strong leadership has left the church because the church isn't willing to change. Ministry methods have become sacred over the mission, and people start reminiscing on the church's "good old days."

Key Challenge: Unity constraints, because there is more and more division about how to preserve the past.

Change demands intentional leadership—it's not possible to keep everyone happy and experience the changes that produce health. Churches in the preservation phase need to create urgency around change, address the warning signs before it's too late, and:

1. **Hire a new leader** (or empower a new approach to leadership) to implement a fresh vision and turnaround strategy. Change is essential to get out of Preservation.
2. **Look backward in order to move forward.** Reflect: *What vision shaped the early years? What values did the leadership embrace? How has the leadership, community, and culture shifted? What ministries had the biggest impact?* This practice helps us recognize what contributed to past seasons of health and return to who God wants the church to be.
3. **Simplify governance.** Churches with a complex governance structure typically lack unity and trust. We've seen it work best if churches only have one lay leadership board, usually about 5 to 9 people, and if the board is strategically focused on the big picture rather than the day-to-day.

The Life Support Phase

In the life support phase, tradition wins over life transformation. There is no fruit from the ministry, yet no one is willing to change. If a church has reached this point, they need to close their doors or experience a total relaunch. Unfortunately, many churches would choose to die rather than experience a rebirth—and it's that attachment to the past that leads to the church's ultimate demise.

Key Challenge: Survival constraints, because the church is doing everything to keep the doors open and financial decisions supersede ministry priorities.

If a church is going to survive life support, there must be a consensus that the church will never drift back into health and that a new plan of action is required. This plan must include:

1. **Embracing a new mission and reestablishing why the church exists.** You must clarify the “why” before you can move forward with the “what” and “how.”
2. **Relaunching into a new lifecycle.**

There are three options to move a church from life support to a relaunch:

1. **Fire yourselves.** Imagine that your entire leadership team has been removed and a new team is going to start. Help the new leadership understand what’s working, what’s broken, and what’s missing. Communicate the new initiatives they need to tackle and the things the ministry needs to stop doing. Once the departing team has confirmed that new direction, become that new leadership team.
2. **Hire a new pastor** and give that person the authority to initiate changes. It’s most likely going to be difficult for a team that’s been involved in the church for years to make the changes necessary to create a new start. The current staff and lay leadership team need to give this new leader the freedom to chart a new direction.
3. **Give the keys to another church.** At some point, a conversation needs to happen around the stewardship of God’s resources. If your church owns its facilities, you have an asset that the right church could use for kingdom impact: They could relaunch ministry in that location or sell the property and reinvest the resources. Either way, it would be better for your resources to be used in a way that’s producing fruit.

Final Thoughts

The key to moving out of the declining side of the lifecycle is to abandon any methods and old ways that don’t serve the mission of reaching new people, and to be willing to do whatever it takes to reach your community again.

If you’re willing to change, then God can still use you. But what led the church to decline will not make it healthy again, so it’s time for God to begin a new work. The question is: **are you willing to join him in that mission?**

Listen to the full episode on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or at theunstuckgroup.com/episode293.

Take the Unstuck Church Assessment

Over time, most organizations start, grow, thrive, decline, and eventually end. But that's not God's plan for the Church. If you're unsure where your church sits on the church lifecycle today, [take the free Unstuck Church Assessment](#).

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