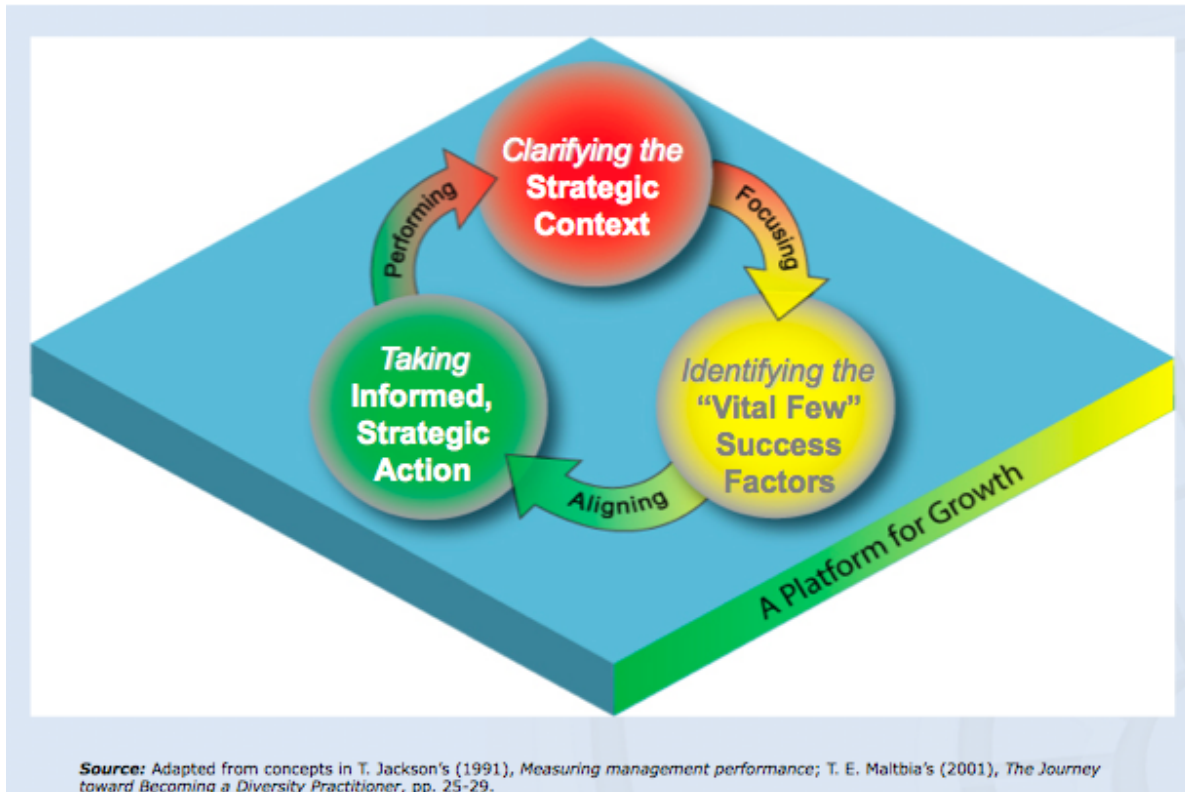


**A Plan for Discernment and Implementation  
of the UM Vital Congregations Planning Guide  
Prepared by Matt Curry (pastor@mountkiscochurch.org)**

“Change is an act of learning”  
”Engagement leads to commitment”



**Pre-work for Session 1:**

- Select and invite leaders to participate
- Have the leadership team:
  - Read the Introduction (Pages 1-4)
  - Complete the Context questionnaire on Pages 5-6
- Prepare demographic information and historical data for meeting

**Session 1: Context**

- + Begin with worship
- + Reflect on the Call to Action report findings, and the statistical/demographic material included on the Vital Congregations site. Ask the question: How does this match my experience of our church and community?

**NCD** – Take some time to reflect on what we have learned about ourselves in the NCD process. How do we bring our NCD learning and other efforts to bear in the work of defining our congregational context?

**Any Church** – Take a moment to reflect on visioning/goal-setting efforts over the last 5 years, and ask the question: What have we learned about ourselves and our ministry context?

- + Go through the Context Questionnaire on pp. 5-7
- + Activity (*choose one* - see appendix):
  - \*1) Finding our Bible Story
  - 2) Lifecycle of the Church
  - 3) Drawing our lifelines
  - 4) Congregational time-line
- + What does our learning in this session call us to focus on in the upcoming sessions?
- + Closing Prayer
- Take Home Assignment:
  - Share what you have learned with two other people
  - Review the 16 Ministry Drivers – Page 4

### **Session 2: Content**

- + Begin with worship
- + Review: What do the findings from Session I tell us about ourselves? What are our areas of focus going forward?
- + Take time to complete the “Building Blocks of a Vital Congregation” worksheet together

**Review your church’s mission statement and “Our Theological Foundation” p. 3**

Let’s get to the balcony level and ask ourselves: What are our stated values, and what are our lived values? Where do they coincide? Where do they contradict each other?

- + Set your Vital Church Goals (page 8)
- + Activity (choose one, see appendix)
  - \*5) Name Our Hymn/Song
- + Pose the question: What people, resources and priorities need to be aligned to meet the Vital Church Goals?
- + Closing Prayer

### **Session 3: Conduct**

- + Begin in Worship
- + Taking into account the work of the previous sessions, we now sit down with the Drivers of Vitality and discuss how we will enact our concrete goals. At the end of this session, we will have:
  - 1) a SMART plan related our concrete goals (pages 9-10)
  - 2) a lay person identified to spearhead each of these items
  - 3) the beginning of a list of:
    - a) needed resources
    - b) necessary changes (and who these will affect)
    - c) concrete next steps/timeline for a five year plan
- + Activity: Write the history of our future (from Debra Noumair’s presentation)
- + Discuss: How will we celebrate our work together? With whom shall we share our story?
- + Closing Prayer

## **ACTIVITIES:**

### **\*1) Finding our Bible story** (adapted from Gil Rendle: *The Multigenerational Congregation*, p. 52)

1) Split the group into smaller groups, if necessary, so there are no more than four to a group

2) Pass out Bibles to each participant

3) Give the following instructions: “Find the Bible story that our congregation is now living. As you find a story that you think might fit, read it in its entirety and pay attention to the details you may have missed or forgotten.”

4) Report back to the whole group.

Keep in mind:

- This may take some time (up to an hour, if the time is available).
- This is a creative, spiritual exercise that calls us to approach scripture as metaphor, and requires a sense of play.
- There will be no “exact fit,” and if the group cannot reach consensus on one story, that is OK.
- If the group is struggling to find its story, you may suggest we expand our search to include looking for a hymn.
- Keep the story/stories in mind as you participate in the rest of the sessions (e.g. you may want to use these stories as the basis for worship, or a lectio divina in the next session)

### **2) The lifecycle of the church**

(from Craig Kennet Miller’s article in the *School of Congregational Development Live Guidebook 2001* <http://gbgm-umc.org/scdlive/2011scdliveguidebook.pdf>)

Your church and the lifecycle:

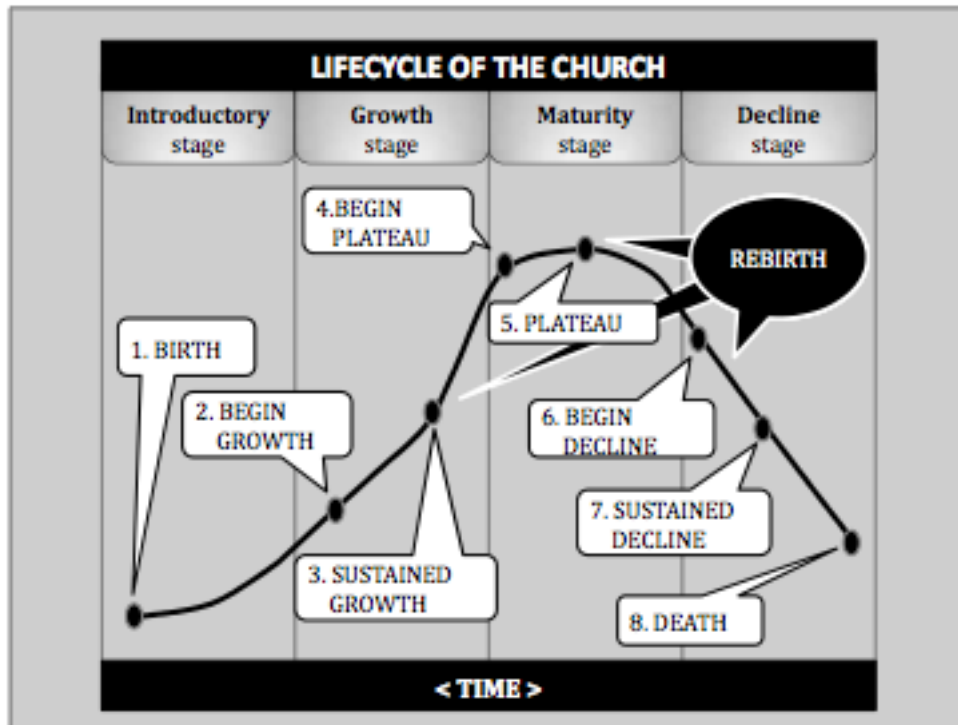
- Where are you on the lifecycle?
- Does your congregation need incremental change or radical change?
- Are you ready for Rebirth?

The Lifecycle of the Church is a tool that has been used for many years in the field of congregational development as a way to understand the different stages congregations move through as they age and grow. There are many variations of this that have been used over the years. The basic premise is that once a congregation understands where it is in its lifecycle it can then make the decisions necessary to bring about renewed vision and life. There are two kinds of improvements congregations can make to bring about change that gives new vitality to the ministry:

- Incremental improvement builds on current strengths to move forward. For example, if someone is in good health, incremental improvement may be to lose five pounds and walk five times a week instead of three.
- Radical improvement needs to happen when the whole system is in danger. For example, a person who discovers he or she is a diabetic will have to radically change his or her diet and develop a whole new exercise program.

The same is true for ministry. If a ministry is in the Introductory and Growth Stages of the lifecycle and it is doing well, chances are Incremental Improvement is needed. If it

has reached the Decline Stage, it probably needs Radical Improvement. During the Maturity Stage as the ministry moves towards plateau, either one of these types of improvement may be needed.



**Introductory Stage:** All ministries have a start. A person or a team of individuals discovered an unmet need in the community and designed a ministry to meet that need. Before budgets, buildings, or the first public gatherings, a vision to meet this need was articulated. As this vision spread, a strategy was designed, a team was put together, and the first baby steps were taken. This stage is filled with excitement. It is during this stage that Step One: Birth takes place.

**Growth Stage:** As people gather around the vision, the ministry moves into a growth stage. As people are enlisted, systems for growth are put in place. The Growth Stage starts with Step Two: Begin Growth and moves into Step Three: Sustained Growth. As the ministry grows, more people connect to the vision. A church will see growth in worship attendance and growth in spiritual maturity as people participate in small groups, Christian formation, and ministry to those outside the church. A youth ministry will see a growth in participants and spiritual maturity. An outreach ministry will see a growth in people served. A regional ministry, with the goal to equip and build up local churches, will see sustained growth among the churches served.

**Maturity Stage:** As ministries grow, they move into a stage that is marked by higher levels of activity, but lower levels of excitement. In many cases, ministries lose sight of the original vision. The original vision casters may no longer be part of the ministry.

While their systems may be efficient, those in ministry do not remember why they are doing them. During Maturity, two steps take place. Step Four: Begin Plateau starts when ministry results begin to level off. For example, if a church has moved from a 7% growth in worship attendance to 2%, it is moving into plateau. At Step Five: Plateau, worship attendance levels off with no growth. During Maturity, a ministry still has the resources and energy to move back into the growth stage if it is willing to revisit its vision and develop new strategies to move it into a positive future.

**Decline Stage:** The decline stage is marked by little action and a lack of enthusiasm. The further into decline a ministry goes, the harder it is to turn around. Step Eight: Begin Decline is experienced as numbers in worship, small group participation, and finances decline. By the time a ministry gets to Step Seven: Sustained Decline, the ministry is near death.

**Rebirth** happens when a ministry seeks God with all its heart to recapture its first love of God, and then takes a fresh look at all it does in order to effectively reach the people who now live within the sphere of its influence. Rebirth can happen at any stage of the process and becomes essential during the Maturity Stage.

What about death? In some cases, a ministry has reached such a stage of decline that Stage Eight: Death is the best option. Instead of pouring in time, energy, and finances to keep it alive, it is better to let the ministry go and put those resources to better use.

### **3) Drawing our Lifelines**

1) Have individuals draw a timeline that reflects the highs and lows of their lives, including such things as:

- Family milestones
- Personal achievements
- World and national events

Ask the questions: When did you feel closest to God? When did you feel farthest?

- 2) Spend time sharing the “lifelines” with a partner
- 3) As a group, draw your church’s “lifeline.”

### **4) A Congregational Time-line** (Consider using a process like the one found in Roy M. Oswald & Robert E. Friedrich, Jr. *Discerning Your Congregation’s Future, Chapter 4*)

- It will take planning and effort to abbreviate this process and fit it into one meeting.
- The goal is not accuracy or total consensus, but rather gleaning meaning from our congregation’s shared story.

### **\*5) Naming Our Hymn/Song** (following Marshak’s *Covert Processes at Work*)

- 1) Pass out hymnals to each participant
- 2) Ask them to find a song that describes our congregation (they may decide that a secular or sacred song not in the hymnal is most appropriate)
- 3) Have them share their songs with the group

- 4) Ask the question: Is this song about who we have been, who we are or who we are becoming as a church?
- 5) Does our church have a song? If so, what does it say about us?
- 6) Sing the song(s) together.

**\*6) History of the Future** (Adapted from Professor Debra Noumair, Teachers College, Columbia University)

- Talking about a story in the past tense allows for a more vivid, interwoven story than when asked to develop a story in the future tense
- Working backwards from the future allows us to think more concretely, weaving together planned and coincidental events
- Imagine actions, successes, mistakes, moves and countermoves
- Take a step back to connect up our imagined future with our current choices

Storying our future . . .

STEPS:

1. Imagine our future and how we got from here to there
2. Consider inputs related to the Vital Congregations Planning Guide
3. Create your “History of the Future”
4. Identify 1-3 action steps you can take to get to where we want to go in the immediate future and share them with our congregation

Our Congregation’s FUTURE

••

It is Christmas 2015...

Describe our church and other important areas of shared ministry. Our story should be as concrete as possible.

- Looking backward from Christmas 2015, write your story (working in pairs or threes)
  - + What did you do -- what did you learn, change, or make happen in order to get from here to there?
  - + What ALMOST kept you from doing what you wanted to do and needed to do?
- Once complete, read your story over to be sure that your imaginary life journey informs how you got from here to there

Action Planning

Consider 1-3 major steps you need to take in the next year to start on your path toward your History of the Future Story

- + Be concrete and specific
- + Identify the time frame for each step
- + Consider the human, material, and knowledge resources you will need for each step
- + Consider how you will enlist support