

FRESH START

MODELS FOR CHURCHES

Eight “fresh start” models for churches are outlined below in order of the increasingly deeper adjustment that is required for a congregation to successfully embrace a new identity.

Most of the models involve revitalization as well as multiplication. Both terms are useful in a discussion about planting churches, and it is impossible to tell where one leaves off and the other begins.

IT WAS 10:45 A.M. ON A SUNDAY MORNING.

The members of New Life Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, descended the flight of stairs to make their commute home after worshiping with a shrinking band of longtime friends. They could no longer afford a full-time pastor—building repairs had to be prioritized. The church bus had been donated to another ministry in town, and children’s Sunday school classes had stopped meeting years earlier.

However, as the members of New Life Reformed departed, the stage was being reset with mic stands and monitors, a keyboard, and a drum set. On their way to their cars, they were greeted by skipping children grasping the hands of their young parents. The newcomers were there for the 11:15 a.m. worship service of The Branch, an RCA church that moved into New Life’s building.

The young families that attend The Branch are the new inhabitants of the neighborhood homes where the New Life folks once raised their own families. Since The Branch moved into New Life’s building, the nursery has gotten a fresh, bright coat of paint. The classrooms now echo with children’s laughter, and the baptismal font is once again filled with

water, as children and adults are sealed into the faith.

This transformation started seven years earlier. The leaders of New Life Reformed recognized that their church was declining. So when RiverTree Community Church asked whether they would be willing to share their building with a new congregation, they agreed. Part-time copastors Chris and Andy moved into the neighborhood and began to build community with their new neighbors, inviting them into a relationship with Jesus. The community of believers that grew from this effort became The Branch.

By the time that New Life Reformed Church celebrated its final worship service in December 2013, The Branch had grown large enough to assume responsibility for all the facility expenses. In addition, a group of Nepalese immigrants had begun worshiping in the building on Sunday evenings. On the Easter following New Life’s final service, Alas Conexion (RCA) was launched for Spanish-speaking members of the community.

Even as members grieved the closure of their church, New Life Reformed Church left a living

legacy in the Alger Heights neighborhood of Grand Rapids. New generations and cultures will continue to be introduced to the gospel of Jesus Christ through their church's generous conclusion.

Eventually this building housed three congregations: the Branch and a Spanish speaking and Nepali speaking congregation. All three congregations are thriving and reaching new people with the hope of Jesus.

This is one of a growing number of fresh start stories of new life budding out of a church that is closing. Perhaps your congregation is nearing the stage of life when a fresh start should be considered. The models below are all viable options your church can prayerfully consider as ways to breathe new life into a fresh start in ministry.

1. Nesting

A struggling church provides space and resources for a new congregation that reaches a different demographic; the new congregation eventually assumes the assets of the former church (a "charitable trust").

Benefits

- Joy and satisfaction of birthing a new church and blessing the next generation.
- Least depth of adjustment required as the former congregation usually lives on for a few more years and the new congregation nurtures the remaining believers.
- Good stewardship of existing assets.
- When done well, it involves the fewest issues related to the transfer of property.

Challenges

- Requires a great spirit of hospitality and the complete release of control to the new congregation in accordance with a specific plan.
- The adjustment may not go deep enough; control issues may surface and prevent a new church from flourishing. If the new congregation

falters, two struggling congregations will be huddling in the same building looking at an uncertain future.

When to Use This Model

The nesting model is appropriate if the present pastor and/or consistory of an aging church can graciously host an RCA church plant and relinquish control intentionally over a year or two with classis guidance.

2. Adoption

A struggling non-RCA congregation becomes a full partner with a classis or a healthy church in order to survive and thrive.

Benefits

- The non-RCA congregation gains strength from the family of churches to which it now belongs.
- The classis or healthy church engages mission in a new context.
- Partnerships with other denominations may be enhanced.

Challenges

- Making a smooth transition from a former denomination takes lots of time and good communication.
- To walk through the process well, a classis often needs a strongly empowered team or leader.

When to Use This Model

Adoption is an appropriate model when the theology and polity of a non-RCA congregation align with that of the RCA, when the denomination of which the non-RCA church has been a member agrees that its property may become part of an RCA classis, and when a strong classis or partnering church can bless the remaining members of the adopted church as they become part of something entirely new and different.

3. Mass migration

The infusion of a struggling church with a large migration of new, healthy members from another church. (Macedonian call: a struggling church says in effect, “Come over here and help us.”)

Benefits

- Humility and trust are on display.
- The culture and ministry of the receiving church are entirely reshaped.
- Thanks to an infusion of “DNA” (Divine presence in the new saints joining them, Nurturing relationships, and Apostolic mission), outreach in the community of the struggling congregation may expand rapidly.

Challenges

- The sending church needs to mobilize a sufficiently large group for this model to succeed, usually two or three people for each person in the receiving congregation.
- The leaders of the receiving church need to wholeheartedly welcome the leadership roles and ministry direction of the members of the infusing group, including big changes in the consistory members and perhaps staffing.
- It takes lots of love and long-term trust for the groups to thoroughly integrate.

When to Use This Model

The mass migration model is appropriate when a church with the capacity to send a transforming gift of human capital exists near a church that is struggling. In addition, the struggling congregation must be absolutely certain that it wants to be part of God’s mission in the world in a vital new way (become healthy, growing, and reproducing), and in the process give up much of its former history and identity.

4. Multiracial/ multicultural/multi- congregational

A church morphs from one demographic group to two or more groups over a period of years with the leadership of a pastor who is skilled in serving in a multicultural setting.

Benefits

- Minimizes disruption for an existing congregation since it usually remains as one of multiple congregations meeting in its facility.
- A single-culture church is transformed into a multifaceted church that lives out the unity of God’s kingdom across cultural lines. This results in outreach to new ethnic, racial, and/or economic groups through specific planting leaders for each group.

Challenges

- It takes people with a deep commitment to cross-cultural ministry and lots of energy to embrace people of another culture, even when this does not mean meeting together in a single worship service.
- The leaders of the established and the new congregation(s) must be willing to share power.
- The pastor of the established church must have the skills to serve in a multicultural setting.
- The consistory of the existing church will undergo significant changes.
- The existing congregation must be willing to take on a new name and identity, and to adopt a new way of reaching out to its community.

When to Use This Model

It’s appropriate to adopt this model when the people who live in a church’s neighborhood are of racial or ethnic groups that have not yet entirely adapted to the dominant culture (i.e., people who have recently immigrated and who tend to live together in one area of a large city). It’s also appropriate when a congregation has sufficient funding and energy and a multiculturally skilled

leader but for some reason still cannot reach out to the community and grow. The congregation must be totally committed to power-sharing and to embracing people of another culture. (This can involve reaching out to people of a different economic status, to young people, to people dealing with addictions, or to people with disabilities.)

5. Multi-site reallocation

A larger, healthier church adds a nearby congregation that is closing as an additional location under the governance structure and staffing of the larger church (collegiate model).

Benefits

- The ability to be both here and there, large and smaller, new and established, unique and connected at the same time (not either/or but both/and).
- In some cases, by becoming the second campus of a healthy congregation, a church that was beyond revitalization reaches out in vital new mission in its community at a reduced cost and with a high likelihood of success.

Challenges

- The closing congregation must be willing to be assimilated into a larger nearby church (usually less than 20 minutes away)—with the goal of becoming one church meeting in two (or more) locations.
- Issues related to staffing, budget, governance, and administration grow more complex.

When to Use This Model

This model is appropriate when two churches of similar culture are close enough geographically to make this kind of sharing of resources, staff, and leadership structures a win-win situation. It is also appropriate when the pastor of a congregation that is closing is ready to retire, resign, or transfer to a new call, or when he or she is the right person to add as a staff member of the larger church.

6. Sabbath rest

Activity at a church ceases for seven months or longer before a new congregation with a new identity is launched.

Benefits

- True closure and celebration of the former congregation's history, identity, and impact can occur. Assets (the building and property) remain available for a year for a new congregation to begin ministry in the same location.
- New discipleship and outreach leaders emerge during the planting phase; since worship services are no longer held in the building it is not the focal point of congregational identity and activity.
- If a church is disbanded (as opposed to "dissolved" as described in the *Book of Church Order*), its nonprofit status is maintained in state and IRS records, and a new church plant in the same location will be allowed to utilize it.

Challenges

- When a closure is done well it requires a significant investment by the classis and the congregation.
- If the closing pastor is also the new church's pastor/planter, he or she will need unique skills and be able to persevere as the identity of the church and its ministry direction change significantly. There are a lot of administrative details to oversee throughout the process.
- Usually less than a third of the former congregation will choose to be part of the new church that eventually begins ministry in the same building.
- It may take longer than usual for the new church to become self-supporting. (Usually very little in the way of funds is carried forward from the former congregation, and it can take a significant amount of money to pioneer a new work.)

When to Use This Model

This model is appropriate when the closing

congregation is very small (under 20 people) and its members are older, if the closing congregation experienced deep division or a crisis or had a bad reputation in the community, or if the five Fresh Start models outlined above are not options.

7. Remnant

An existing church is disbanded, and the pastor and members who are willing to do so move to a new location.

Benefits

- Relocation presents the opportunity to reach a new community, build a new reputation, and live out a new vision.
- The core members of the former church go on an adventure with God.
- Ties to tradition (“the way we’ve always done it”) are looser, which can lead to fresh, creative ways to reach the new community.

Challenges

- Closing the old site and establishing a new identity and vision can take a long time and involve a lot of pain.
- The deep changes involved require strong, gifted pastoral leadership.

When to Use This Model

This model is appropriate if the existing property location is literally a “dead end street” or if changing demographics put the remnant out of reach for their community; if the condition of facilities is so poor that the cost of renovating or updating them for a new church is prohibitively high (poor road access, very limited parking, no disability access, deteriorated structures that would cost \$75,000 or more to repair or get up to code).

8. Leaving a legacy

A church is dissolved and its assets are distributed to other RCA ministries. (The classis is the custodial partner.)

Benefits

- Depending on property values, significant financial resources may become available to start new churches and revitalize existing churches.
- A classis can maximize the use of resources for the future.
- A church can bring resurrection life and exponential kingdom impact as it “lays down its life” for another, and dies to self like the seed in John 12.
- Closure and the celebration of the church’s ministry can be well planned.

Challenges

- This model involves the deepest level of change in terms of the former congregation’s history and identity; it requires lots of grace and truth.
- It’s important to take proper care of the remaining people and possessions, and for the remaining assets to be carefully reinvested in the classis.
- In some real estate markets, it can be difficult to find a buyer for the property.

When to Use This Model

This model is appropriate when none of the other seven models are a better option.

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