

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

Accelerating Change: The Life Support Phase

Episode 158

Part 3: How the Pandemic Is Accelerating Decline in Churches That Were Already on the Declining Side of the Typical Church Lifecycle

Google “Covid Accelerating Change.” It’s happening everywhere—it’s rapidly changing the workplace, our habits, digitization, how we connect and much more. From our research with 15,000+ churches, more than 85% self-identified as being on the declining side of the typical church life cycle *before* this crisis began. And more discouraging—17% landed in “life support,” the last stop before a church closes its doors permanently. Those churches are most susceptible to closing during normal circumstances, but in situations like we’re experiencing now? Things go bad even faster. In the last part of this 3-part conversation, Tony and Amy share some of the warning signs to watch for, and three options churches have when they find themselves here.

Characteristics of Churches in the Life Support Phase

- **Priority focus:** Reach new people with old methods. Even in this season, we are seeing many churches double down on their traditions.
- By the time they reach Life Support, churches are typically bleeding both people and money, and they are constantly operating in crisis mode. There’s often a key family or a key donor who is keeping the doors open. A financial crisis is usually the primary trigger for a church to recognize that it’s on life support.
- Broken systems and ministry strategies usually hasten decline.

“Once a church ends up here, they either close their doors or experience a relaunch. Many churches would choose to die rather than experience a rebirth. It’s that attachment to the past that leads to the church’s ultimate demise. Traditions win over life transformation.”

-- Tony Morgan, *The Unstuck Church*

3 Options for Churches in Life Support

If you wait until this phase to lead changes, the changes feel *huge*. You almost have to become a completely different church if you hope to ever return to sustained health as a ministry.

- **Option 1: Fire Yourself**
Try this exercise: Imagine your entire leadership team has been removed and a new team is going to start.
 - Write down the key issues you've never tackled and the changes you wanted to make. Help the new leadership understand what's working, what's broken, and what's missing.
 - Once the departing team has confirmed that new direction, *become that new leadership team*. Start over, but this time follow through with everything you just agreed to do when you were out of a job.
 - This exercise is helpful because it makes it easier to remove the emotions connected with core issues and new initiatives. A new leadership team wouldn't have attachments to old ministries or programs. They would start fresh. That's what you need to do as well.
- **Option 2: Hire a New Pastor**
 - More likely than not, it's going to be difficult for a team that's been a part of the ministry for years to make the changes required to generate a new start. You may need a new leader from outside the church to help you experience a new launch.
 - Give the new pastor appropriate authority to initiate changes. The key will be giving up control. Your current staff and lay leadership team needs to give this new leader the freedom to chart a new direction. One good way to begin moving in this direction is to hire an executive search firm to find this new pastor.
- **Option 3: Give the Keys to Another Church**
 - Have a conversation about the best way to steward 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 they could sell the property and reinvest the resources in ministry initiatives. Either way, it would be better for those resources to be used in a way that's producing fruit.

Next Steps

- **Where is YOUR church in the lifecycle today?**
An honest, objective perspective of where your church is today is essential if you want to start building a strategy and plan for the future. [Take the Unstuck Church Assessment](#). It's free, and it can help guide you in your next steps towards building a healthy church.
- **If you're in Life Support, do you need to consider giving the keys to another church?**
Listen to [Episodes 154](#) and [155](#). These conversations with Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird about church mergers, as well as their book [Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work](#), are good starting points. We can also help merging churches navigate the process of clarifying the future for the new church. Learn how at theunstuckgroup.com/mergers.

Listen to the episode on iTunes or at theunstuckgroup.com/episode158.