

Congregational Health Assessment

In the beginning of the book of Revelation, the writer addresses seven churches in Asia Minor, following the prompting of God's Holy Spirit: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." It is clear that the Spirit cares passionately about the health and faithfulness of the churches. Those congregations vary in many ways. Some are strong; others are weak. Some are faithful; others are less so. At times, the Spirit praises them, "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance." At other times, the Spirit criticizes them, "But I have this against you," and pleads for their repentance. Some of the Spirit's criteria are: do people love one another? Is there commitment? Are they growing spiritually? Are they engaged in service? Is there accountability to the gospel of Christ or do individuals simply do what they please? The Spirit warns of the very real possibility that not every congregation will survive. One congregation is told, "You have a name of being alive, but you are dead." Harsh words!

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we believe that God's Holy Spirit still cares passionately about the health and faithfulness of our congregations. We also acknowledge that change is upon us – in our congregations and the communities we serve, in our presbyteries, in the denomination as a whole and in Christ's worldwide church. Looking back over history, we see that Christian communities have undergone monumental changes, over and over again. The only thing that is "permanent" is God's Spirit.

In the Presbytery of Hamilton in recent years, there have been significant changes, some resulting in reallocation or realignment of resources: amalgamations of congregations and the sale of properties and transfer of assets; disuniting of multiple-point pastoral charges; dissolving of congregations; full-time ministries becoming part-time; replanting an existing congregation that now has two ministers; launching an ethnic outreach mission.

To be good stewards and to provide the leadership our church needs in these changing and changeable times, we must learn how to be proactive, rather than simply reactive. To accomplish this, each of our sessions needs to develop a good understanding of the level of health of their congregation. Perhaps the congregation has strengths that can be further reinforced; perhaps with shifts in attitude and practice, the congregation could improve its health and Christian witness; perhaps a realignment or reallocation of the congregation's resources would enable it to continue its legacy in partnership with others. At the same time, the presbytery needs to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the congregations under its care. For this reason, it will be critically important for the sessions to share with the presbytery what they have learned about their congregations. In the part of Christ's body that is represented by our presbytery, we are interdependent and we are stronger together.

The criteria for assessing congregational health were developed by this presbytery's Visitation Committee, who adapted similar documents in use in other denominations, including the Anglican Diocese of Toronto. The presbytery adopted the criteria at its meeting in November 2015.

CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH CRITERIA

	<u>Sustainable</u>	<u>Strategic</u>	<u>Unsustainable</u>
Overall Health and Leadership	<p>The congregation has a clear sense of mission that is founded in the Gospel, and supported by the leadership.</p> <p>The leadership of the congregation seeks to understand the community context in which they abide, and is visible and vibrant in that community.</p> <p>The process of decision-making is clear and effective.</p> <p>The leadership of the congregation seeks to identify and equip new leaders.</p> <p>Communication is open.</p> <p>Conflict is dealt with in a spirit of love and understanding.</p>	<p>Same as Sustainable</p>	<p>The congregation is not mission focused, but driven by self-preservation.</p> <p>The congregation is inward-looking and makes no difference in the surrounding community.</p> <p>Decisions are not broadly based.</p> <p>Leaders are long established. There are no new leaders being developed.</p> <p>Communication is limited.</p> <p>Conflict or tension interferes with effective operation.</p>

Sustainable

Strategic

Unsustainable

Worship

Worship nurtures people’s faith by allowing them to encounter God corporately and in their daily lives.

The membership of the church (those on the roll) is accurately reflected in attendance at worship and in participation in the life of the church.

Worship engages those in attendance.

Worship has clear biblical and theological foundations.

Same as Sustainable, plus: Worship equips people to share their faith with others.

Visitors are frequent.

Worship fails to engage those in attendance. Few people are involved in worship.

Attendance at worship is very low (small percentage of membership). The roll is not properly maintained (many inactive members).

Visitors are infrequent, and very rarely return.

Discipleship

Opportunities exist for all members to be “equipped with practical guidance for living one’s faith in the world.”

Discipleship activities are carefully structured to build up followers of Christ, at various ages and/or stages.

People talk about the role of their faith in their life during the week.

Faithful leaders continue to be identified and engaged in discipleship ministries.

Similar to Sustainable, with some emphasis on newcomers:

Discipleship opportunities are structured to appeal to newcomers and to engage them in a faith journey.

Members are equipped to share their faith with others.

New leaders are being identified and mentored to ensure continuity of programs as the congregation grows.

There are few opportunities for discipleship.

Programs for children and youth are virtually non-existent.

There may be great difficulty in finding leaders for discipleship programs.

Sustainable

Strategic

Unsustainable

Fellowship

Opportunities exist for all members to be involved intentionally in the sharing of God’s love with each other.

New members can be integrated into the community of faith, and feel that they are part of the Body of Christ.

Same as Sustainable

Apart from the post-service coffee hour, there are few opportunities for members to be in relationship with each other.

Fellowship consists mainly of closed gatherings for members.

Mission

The congregation addresses need in the community within and beyond the walls of the church.

The community (both within and beyond) knows that the church meets needs and heals in Jesus’ name.

The congregation uses its knowledge of the community in which it abides to be effective witnesses to Christ within that context.

The congregation and its leaders are active in welcoming the community and bringing new people to (or back to) Christ.

Same as Sustainable, plus:

The congregation is growing rapidly as the community responds to a visibly active congregation.

The congregation is not engaged in mission activities (beyond an occasional food drive and/or PWS&D appeal).

There is no active mission group (or there is one that has little impact).

The needs of the congregation are so pressing that there are no financial or human resources available to reach beyond their own walls.

Sustainable

Strategic

Unsustainable

Stewardship

The resources of the church (finances and building) match the size and structure of the congregation.

Members give of their time and income “with glad and generous hearts” to sustain the work of the church, as well as maintain the building.

The congregation makes a reasonable attempt to meet its suggested allocation to Presbyterians Sharing.

There are resources (human and financial) for mission and service in the community.

Members give of their time and income “with glad and generous hearts” to further the ministry of the church.

The human resources of the church are strategically allocated to grow the congregation.

Grants may be used as seed money, but givings are increasing such that the church is expected to become sustainable by the time grant money runs out.

Mission may be supported by church sources outside the congregation in situations where mission in this community is needed.

The congregation is unable to maintain the church property on a day-to-day basis, or has significant repair needs they are unable to fund.

The congregation has been depleting capital assets to pay for current expenses over several years.

Commitment to Presbyterians Sharing falls far short of the suggested allocation, and the congregation struggles or is unable to meet this commitment.

Much of current income is from sources beyond congregational givings (rentals).

Overview

Sustainable

It has clergy and active lay leadership with the skills to manage the programs and property of the congregation to meet its own sense of mission.

It has the energy and resources to meet the challenges of the community it serves.

It relies mainly on the freewill offering of its members for its core financial support.

It has the resources and appropriate leadership necessary to carry out its calling.

It can provide for the future wellbeing of congregational life.

It generates financial resources from its members and those it serves, and does not deplete its capital reserves or capital assets.

Strategic

It is most significantly in the area of Stewardship that the distinction between Sustainable and Strategic becomes evident. There are certain ministries that are strategic to the mission of the Presbytery but are unable to sustain themselves, financially or in terms of other resources, either temporarily or in the long term. There may be good reason for these ministries to call upon the wider church for help. Although there is a promise that the needs will be considered prayerfully, there is no assurance that such help will be available.

The activities of the congregation make a discernible difference in individual lives and in the larger world around it.

It is mission-focused and in alignment with the vision and priorities of the Presbytery.

It is outward-looking, geared to mission and active in extending God's reign in the community.

It is strategically located for the mission it provides, and may be designated as such by the Presbytery.

Unsustainable

Where a congregational ministry is no longer strategic and not financially self-supporting, it cannot be supported indefinitely and absorb resources that would otherwise go to strategic ministries within the Presbytery. Such a ministry may be considered "unsustainable."

It is not designated as a strategic ministry.

It is not mission-focused and unable to come into alignment with the strategic priorities of the Presbytery.

It is inward-looking and makes little difference in its surrounding community.

It exhibits some of these characteristics:

- It is depleting its capital assets to pay for its current expenses.
- It is unable to maintain its property and have sufficient capital reserves for its longer term property needs.
- It cannot cover current operating expenses without cutting back on important ministry.
- It is unduly reliant on sources of funding outside the freewill offering of its members.

Extracts from the *Policy on Sustainable & Strategic Ministry* of the Anglican Diocese of Toronto (May 2004) are adapted to our Presbyterian context and used with permission.