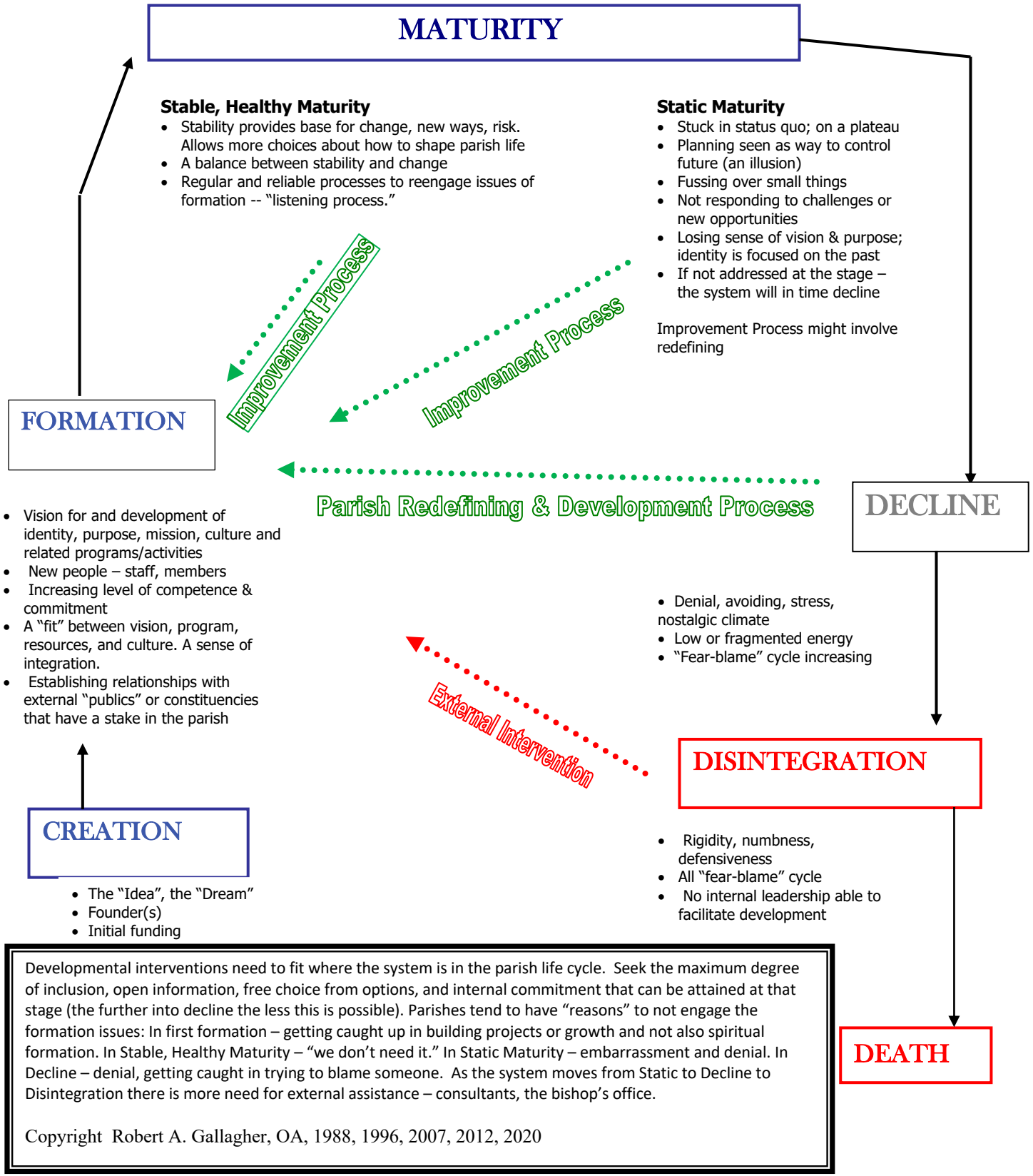


PARISH LIFE CYCLE



Where are we in the life cycle?

We want to begin a discussion within the parish. Where are we in the life cycle? Healthy, static, declining, disintegrating? If we are healthy and stable do, we have the appropriate processes and practices in place for what's called continuous improvement? If we are someplace else in the cycle do, we have processes to change things?

How do we figure it out? There are a number of factors to take into account

The best starting place in making this assessment is to work with the descriptors in the diagram above and the material below going into more detail.

- How well the parish focuses on the church's mission and the parish's primary tasks of worship, formation, and having a sanctifying relationship with the community.
- How healthy the parish is in terms of spiritual practice and emotional intelligence.
- How strong the parish is in terms of institutional factors such as finances and property upkeep.

Going a bit further might include seeing a healthy and faithful parish as one that continues to develop its capacity to:

- Renew people in their baptismal identity and purpose and send them, in Christ, for an apostolate with friends and family, at work, in civic life and in the church.
- Foster a strong life and ministry of worship, doctrine, action and oversight.
- Enable people to seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things and circumstances of life, through stability, conversion of life and obedience.
- Nurture the Christian life of people at all phases of maturity; give special attention to guiding and equipping those of apostolic faith; and encourage all toward a more prayerful disciplined and compassionate Christian life.

-- From *Fill All Things* page 18.

All these elements are interdependent. Strength or weakness in one will feed strength or weakness in the others. It also helps to remember that the organization's health depends on its routinely returning to address the issues of "formation."

It may help to know how to not do it.

Many will assess based on their current feelings--"I feel satisfied, therefore the parish is "stable and healthy," or I feel stuck in my own life, so the parish is in "static maturity." Another false approach is when the person's involvement is some excessively limited portion of the organization's life--a new member or only involved in Sunday worship and paying little attention to what else is happening. The third common mistake is to assess based on some personal "bug" you have. So, the parish may be growing but, in your opinion, not fast enough or with enough new members. Sometimes we become a single-issue-voter; one issue among many becomes your measure.

This is about shaping a healthy and faithful parish church

Your initial concern isn't with an abstract truth—are we static, in decline or disintegrating? Using the Parish Life Cycle as an intervention means that you want to help parish leaders or the larger congregation get engaged, mind, heart and spirit engaged. You want people to come together in shaping a healthier and more faithful parish church. That means the methods used need to be such so the end result is a healthier and more faithful parish.

The “green lines” of “improvement process” and “organizational redefinition and development process” are about significant parish development/organization development work. Improving elements of a parish's life is part of the routine work, usually both urgent and important. “Green line” work is parish development.

The Stages and the “Green lines”

We have a name for the lines going from Maturity or Decline to Formation. They are the “green lines.” The shorthand emerged when Robert Gallagher was consulting with a public-school faculty in Maine. He presented the model to the 50 or so teachers and administrators. He had drawn the lines with a green marker on the newsprint. Those present had come forward and placed a mark in the area of the cycle to indicate what they saw as the position of the school. The marks were spread among static maturity, decline, and disintegration.

As the group discussed its assessment, they began to call the lines the “green lines.” Some spoke from a place of deep distress—“we have no green lines.” Other from hope— “how can we create green lines?”

A word about the methods and skills to use in the green lines

The inexperienced will seek some sure method to move the parish from a static or declining life into revitalization. It does not exist. There are people that will tell you, “do three things and your parish will be renewed.” It's not so much that they are lying to you, they just don't know what they're talking about.

All the green lines, and the red line, can make use of the same theories, methods, and skills. The difference will often be in the wisdom with which we make the intervention.

Effective interventions (green lines) involve a mix of methods, skills, theory, and just plain wisdom. They require a level of emotional intelligence and spiritual maturity. We wish we could tell you that if you study the right book, learn all the methods and theory, and ponder them, you will have all that you know to turn around parishes. Not true. It's certainly part of what may help. That is, if it come along with a significant amount of experiential training, coaching by someone more experienced, and reflection on your own experience and the

experience of others. Plus, growth in the inner life and addressing those blank spots in your emotional intelligence that seem to keep getting you into difficulty.

At times the most useful skill the rector or parish consultant can have is the ability to see an opportunity and act on it at the time. Frequently, we stumble across the needed intervention.

An example. In a rather healthy New England parish, a consultant was facilitating a vestry weekend. They were working in small groups. As the consultant entered one group there was a brief discussion about some people wanting more silence during the liturgy. When the whole vestry had gathered together each group reported on its work. The consultant took note of the conversation about silence and asked the vestry to make use of a testing process. He drew a spectrum on the newsprint. It was a five-point scale. At one end was, "I'd like to see more silence" and at the other end was, "I'd like there to be less silence." In the middle was, "I'd like it to remain as it is now." There was a space between each item to allow for those in between. Almost all members wanted more silence. The rector was very surprised. That set off a process of having more silence. They also tested the views of the congregation as the experience took place. The parish continued to find more silence helpful even as a bit of resistance developed. The experience didn't just help around the issue of silence but opened up matters related to their ability to talk with one another about uncomfortable matters and the rector's inclination to avoid anything that might upset some people.

The Cycle has three stages with "green lines" and a "red line" as the pathway to renewal.

1. Improvement Process: from stable, healthy maturity to formation
2. Improvement Process: from static maturity to formation
3. Parish Redefinition and Development Process: from decline to formation
4. There's also a red line. External Intervention: from disintegration to formation

Improvement Process: from stable, healthy maturity to formation

The parish is "in good shape." The polarity between change and stability is well managed. Parish leaders face up to challenges that arise and engage opportunities that will advance the life and ministry of the parish.

The parish has stayed in this "stable, healthy" place in part because it engages in an improvement process (by whatever name). They have ways of listening to one another and taking note of what's happening in the community they are part of.

These improvement processes are best done as standard communal practices. Some are part of the yearly routine, others done as needed. The mix of high transparency and useful listening processes builds trust and provides the information needed for parish leaders to make decisions in a timely manner.

They will include activities designed to help the leadership listen to the Eucharistic community and for the people of that community to listen to one another. Some will be scheduled well in advance and done the same time each year. That certainly would include a survey with a check-in on people's satisfaction level, a look at some of the central processes of parish life, and usually a testing process that asked about some current issue or concern.

As with all green lines the parish is reflecting on basic matters of formation, such as—vision, culture, and direction; Christian proficiency; parish alignment and harmony. It's important to check overall satisfaction with parish life and ministry (very high to very low) as that allows people to have a context for understanding specific elements in the other parts of the assessment. It's a matter of wisdom and judgment deciding whether to stay with assessment models used in previous years or to vary the models, e.g., the three core tasks of a parish, or a look at the Renewal-Apostolate Cycle, or use the In Your Holy Spirit model. There are dozens of assessment worksheets available that are useful in exploring various dimensions of the parish.

It may help to assume that each year you'll use a testing process at coffee hour at least twice. These are usually done to quickly assess to gain a clear read on member's views in regard to some issue. See the section in the book on testing processes.

Some parishes have three parish meetings each year. One longer to include the broad yearly assessment with time for conversation and thinking about next steps; two others around some specific issue.

Many churches have historically managed this in an informal manner through the clergy and vestry members simply paying attention to things. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. However, it does open up the possibility that with a new rector, or a few new vestry members with "an agenda" for how things are to be run, it could all fall apart. Having public, reliable and formal processes for continuous improvement allows that to become part of the parish culture and expectations. That increases the likelihood of those practices being maintained over time and through changes in leadership.

If you decide to increase the degree of formality in the improvement process you may get some resistance along the lines of, "If it's not broke, don't try to fix it." So, persevere. Be gentle but steadfast.

Improvement Process: from static maturity to formation

There will often be considerable resistance in helping parish leaders face into their situation. They are "stuck." They need to get "unstuck." They will have a variety of rationalizations for what is happening—"parishes go through cycles", "we've been here before and things got better", "things are fine, there is no problem." Underlying all that may be a lack of awareness or a sense of embarrassment in not knowing how to improve things.

The signs of being stuck include: leaders don't see or respond to opportunities for a renewed spiritual life, membership growth or service; there's a tendency to bicker over small matters; there's little talk about the parish's future, about what changes may be needed; people are sentimental about the past with fond stories of former and deceased members but little conversation about how to build upon the parish's strengths.

A false green line approach may be taken. Without quite admitting that "the bones are dry" a few people press forward to launch a new initiative of some sort. It may be impossible to know if that initiative is something that will set off new hope or end in unacknowledged failure and a deepening sense of helplessness and hopelessness. It may help to ask if the project seems wildly overblown given the parish's capacity. Or, if it is significantly out-of-culture for the parish.

Another false green line may be "develop a strategic plan." This usually comes from someone with business experience but little understanding: of the unique dynamics of a parish church, the church's purpose, or of the ascetical practices that strengthen a parish's living that purpose. It's rooted in an illusion that forces impacting the parish are more controllable than in fact they are. Some people think that because they can envision something, they have the power to make it so. Others may go along with the planning because "Jim runs a successful business." The process takes a lot of time and energy. There may even be some changes in the first months of implementation and then the parish drifts along as it had before the planning took place.

A parish in static maturity needs to consider making use of a professional parish development consultant.

The bishop hoped the parish would become part of an urban cluster ministry. The vestry met with a consultant to discuss the possibility. The consultant used the Parish Life Cycle as a way of opening the discussion. The vestry split with half saying the parish was in static maturity, or sliding into decline, and the other half saying the parish was stable and healthy. Once the information was out in the open, they sat there for a moment. People looked stunned. They didn't know that they were not on the same page about this. What was even more upsetting was that the split had younger, Caribbean members saying things were static or beginning to decline; and the older, African American members saying that the parish was healthy and stable. They began to talk with one another. Using a tool such as the Parish Life Cycle is usually less about determining some abstract truth than as beginning a needed conversation.

It's not always clear what stage a parish is at in the cycle

This is especially true when many of the outward signs are those associated with health and strength. Here's an example.

The parish's average attendance was around 180. Finances were healthy. There was a rector and a few priest associates. A number of lay leaders had long experience in the parish. On the surface the parish was healthy and mature. It was one of the larger parishes

in the diocese. Except there was something else going on. Just a few years before the average attendance was closer to 275. There had been a drop of almost 100 people. The decrease had started during an interim period and continued into a new rector's work.

We wouldn't say the parish was in decline, but it certainly wasn't heathy and stable. So, was it in static maturity?

The primary symptom of that was that a significant percentage of the those attending the parish had declined and that wasn't being addressed. In fact, it wasn't even being acknowledged. Odd!

There were many factors involved in the declining number. One that stands out is the parish's long-term stance toward difficulties and conflict, or the possibility of such. The TKI model looks at five styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Our impression is that the parish was inclined to avoid facing into challenges and conflict.

During a period of growth, the parish had managed the tendency through the then rector's excellent skills at competing and collaborating. In fact, the congregation's inclination to avoid (or in some cases to accommodate or compromise) allowed the rector to push things along through a period of rapid membership growth. Once that rector had left the parish it reverted to its primary approach. The new rector aligned with that approach in a tendency to see conflict as a bad thing and to sweep difficulties under the rug. Attempts to raise the difficulties were likely to be met with anger. The first priest was likely to enter into opportunities and challenges; the second priest was more skilled at a branding and communication form of internal marketing and had strong interpersonal skills. Neither knew how to address the deeper issue in the parish's culture.

The parish needed to have developmental goals that would change the culture toward increased transparency, stronger listening processes, and an improved capacity to face into its challenges. The first priest adequately managed those things for the parish; the second avoided them and may have not even seen them.

Parish Redefinition and Development Process: from decline to formation

You probably need an external parish development consultant if you're to address issues of decline. At least get someone with a bit of parish development training and experience. There's a "fear-blame cycle" that usually takes hold. It's messy and complex. It's also too easy for the inexperienced consultant or diocesan staff person to catch the disease and find themselves fearful and blaming.

There was a New England parish of mostly 70 and 80 year olds that made a valiant effort to grow the membership by increasing communications with people in the neighborhood. These people were great at caring for, and being kind, to each other. They didn't have the

energy to stay with the growth project that one person had pushed them into. They also didn't have the skills needed to imagine, and act on, what changes were needed for the parish to draw the interest of the new people moving into that community.

A member of the diocesan staff came to the meeting and ranted at the members about how they needed to love Jesus more and persist in their effort. That succeeded in making them feel guilty and ashamed. It only served to deepen their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

On the other hand, there was a famous story back in the late 1960s of a parish that was stuck, in decline, and unable to pull itself together. A Parish Test Pattern consultant got them talking. One member organized them for a pizza party. It went well. They enjoyed themselves. It was the beginning of them doing things together again. In that case, no deep theory, no tricky process—listening, talking, and a party. The restoration of some energy and working together on a simple task, gave them a starting place.

A pizza party sounds like something any parish can do. Why not repeat it in every declining parish? Instinctively, most people know that's the wrong route. You can't simply take an intervention that was helpful in one parish and use it in a totally different setting. But why? Why is that true? One resource for helping understand interventions is the section on Intervention Theory. In short, if you want high ownership and commitment for an action you need that to arise from free choice; not pressure, not copying someplace else, and from a range of possibilities. And to have free choice you need valid and useful information.

Sometimes just being able to acknowledge the reality of the decline, or disintegration, can be energizing. We saw that in a city parish that seemed unable to talk about its situation. Just too painful. The bishop had asked them to meet with a consultant. He was ready to do a lifecycle exercise with them. The consultant sensed that they were willing to do what he asked, they would be cooperative, but the room felt unsettled and filled with sadness.

So, the consultant asked them to go around the table, and one by one share, "what it felt like to be at St. John's at this time." There were tears. Some anger. A sense of loss. The invitation to speak and be heard by one another broke something open in the vestry. They did the lifecycle exercise. And they acknowledged that they were deep into decline.

The consultant's being willing and able, to shift from what had been planned to what was happening among people in the room, allowed the parish to step away from its feelings of isolation and frustration. To let go of vague illusions of a magical transformation. He set aside his plan because some mix of training, experience and informed intuition told him that they need to grieve before they could act. That the bishop had sent the Canon-to-the Ordinary and a consultant to meet with them signaled that changes were coming. No doubt, some in the room were waiting for a sword to drop. The consultant's willingness to adapt and the vestry's willingness to speak openly of the loss already experienced, and the further loss anticipated, allowed everyone to move forward. To pick up on Intervention Theory again, getting their feelings and initial thoughts on the table was part of the base for making a free choice.

Not all consultants or parish clergy are able to engage such a process involving the difficult feelings and reactions of people. There may be a number of ways of developing that capacity in clergy and consultants. In our experience it requires a mix of psychological therapy along with participation in several human relations workshops (T-groups) to increase a person's ability to cope with their own feelings as well as those of others.

Helping a parish in decline face into what is real and true will call for a person with an advanced skill level. And, often that will show itself in a very simple set of interventions.

One example of that is that what people in a crisis often need first is someone to slow things down and provide a sense of order to things. It might look like this, the consultant says, "I want the rector and vestry to meet with me every three weeks for the next 5 months. We will have a weekend retreat away from the parish in a month or so. The bishop has said he'll cover half the costs involved; the parish will need to pick up the rest. During those months we'll work together to see if we can better understand what's happening in the parish and look for ways to improve things. Each of us will pray daily for the parish and by name for its leaders. If any of you find yourself concerned about what I'm doing, you agree you'll reach out to me by email or phone. Is all that agreeable? Let's go around the table and have each person respond." Whether consultant or parish priest, someone with legitimate authority needs to establish a sense of safety and stability.

The key in all that isn't the specifics of what's asked—five months or six months, half and half on costs or 70-30, it doesn't matter. Just so it's enough time and money and commitment to work that people hear this will be difficult, require a lot of you, and can be managed. The group needs to consent to some form of stability.

Some parishes deal with decline, or an anticipated decline, by changing their strategy. For example, instead of assuming we have to significantly increase our membership, we develop an endowment fund that allows us to go into the future requiring less membership growth. We know there are some who have ideological, they would say theological, objections—"If the current membership can't cover the costs, it's time to merge or close." Our belief is that parishes need ways of surviving through difficult times, whether a few months or a whole generation. Neighborhoods, generational cohorts, and whole societies change over time. There are a number of places in our cities where if we had found a way to stay open, or even to hang onto property, a viable parish could have emerged some years later. But once the property is sold, the cost of buying and building in those communities is prohibitive.

In some situations, a parish needs to redefine itself.

Redefining the parish requires an acknowledgment that the way we currently understand ourselves isn't working.

We have seen ourselves as a working class, family oriented, Rite Two, neighborhood congregation. We support the local food bank and enjoying getting together for coffee hour and a couple of pot-luck dinners each year. We love our church, and we quietly love Jesus Christ. The memories are about burials, weddings and baptisms (though fewer of the last two in recent years). When the bishop visits, she listens and is kind. Though when we ask how we can improve things, she seems as clueless as us. We suspect she assumes we'll close in the next 15 years or so.

We've been through several "identities" over the past twenty years—there was the couple who loved charismatic worship that got us to do that for a few years, then there was the young priest who insisted that we ditch using the Prayer Book and install large screens next to the altar. We didn't attract new people and our existing members keep moving and dying. And all around us the neighborhood and city are changing. There are a lot of younger people renting in the area; there's some gentrification with couples renovating homes and developers building condos. There are coffee shops, small restaurants, and rainbow flags. Our property taxes have gone up.

We're a warm, friendly group of people. We are very welcoming to visitors (the big screen priest kept talking about radical hospitality). But we don't seem to be able to stop the decline.

The parish knows it's not "working." So, they have been willing to try new things. The problem they face is that while it is not "working", it is "working." It is working in the sense that they are happy in the parish. It is a community of compassion and faith that they trust. It is filled with their hopes and prayers over a lifetime. They still look forward to seeing one another every Sunday. And, yet they know it's not working when it comes to survivability.

As with every system in creation they have to face into how much adapting is necessary to survive and, at the same time, how do they continue to exist in a way that works with who they are. If they don't change enough, they die. If they change in ways that are incongruent with their sense of who they are, they die. Organization development practitioners think of it in terms of the poles of necessary adaptation *and* institutional integrity, identity, and integration. Benedictines talk about it as the dynamic between stability and conversion of life.

Defining the parish is a statement of how we see ourselves; how we understand our identity and purpose as a congregation in relation to the external environment. It's not something that parish leaders usually spend much time thinking about. And, usually there's no reason to think about it. That changes when what was working is no longer working.

What we see in many declining parishes is some mix of:

- Avoidance - We know we're dying. We don't know what to do about it. We don't talk about it; what would be the point? We will live in what we have loved and known until we can't.

- Frustration and anger – This may get expressed in blaming someone, e.g., the priest or the bishop are usually good targets; maybe changes in the national church; or the worse choice, we blame one another and ourselves.
- Gestures – We try some quick fix. Usually something that doesn't call for significant change and appeals to at least a few members. Maybe we even use some slogan, e.g., “wherever you are on your journey ...”, “radical hospitality”, “inclusive and progressive.”

One or another of these forces might be predominate for a long time.

The starting place needs to be two-fold:

1. The redefinition must be grounded in the realities of our life as a congregation. What is us at our best? What are the long-term strengths and gifts of this congregation? And, if the answers to those questions will not effectively address the situation, it's possible that the parish needs to consider allowing a parallel congregation to be formed alongside the existing one or merging with another church.
2. Turning around the decline will take years not months. Think seven years not seven months. Think it will take as long to navigate ourselves out of the decline as it took to get ourselves into it.

A redefining process will include:

1. Creating a way of describing the parish that appreciates who we have been, and now are, *and* will draw the interest of new people.
2. Influencing the image people have of us. Members, and those outside the parish, have an image of this congregation. That image is the sum total of people's impressions and ideas about the parish. Parish leaders need to discuss what image they would like members and others to have of the parish. You are seeking something that people can understand and appreciate. And something that is true.
3. Being able to describe what sets your congregation apart from others. It needs to build on our strengths and be sustainable over the long term. You're looking for a “position” that is not easily duplicated and will cause some people to walk or drive past other churches to get to you. It isn't enough to be a “warm, friendly church.” Just about every other church says the same thing about itself. Of course, you have to be warm and friendly. And also, something more than that. The marketing people call it positioning.

There's also a red line. External Intervention: from disintegration to formation

The parish's life and systems have collapsed. Things are so broken that there is no capacity within the parish to put things right. People are too frustrated and demoralized. They are exhausted and numb.

The disintegration might take the form of institutional collapse. The vestry only meets once a year. No one remembers who's on the vestry. Records aren't maintained. The priest isn't trusted.

Maybe it's not the disintegration of the institution. There's a functioning vestry, worship occurs on Sunday, there are occasional dinners; in many ways it seems so normal. But there is some pathology, some illness of the soul, that has dug itself deep into the life of the parish. We know of a case where it was racism. Visitors were told the story of how the parish moved out of the city to get away from "them." There was another parish filled with rage at all the changes taking place in society and the church.

The need is for the Bishop to take over. They don't need a consultant; it's too late for that. They need someone to be in control and make sound decisions because they are no longer able to do that for themselves.

If the Bishop makes the mistake of insisting that they use a consultant, they may go along. But little will happen. A skilled consultant will quickly see things for what they are and withdraw. Less skilled practitioners may hack away at it for a time until they are absorbed and find themselves frustrated, demoralized, and exhausted.

The action taken will depend on all the factors involved in that particular situation. One bishop closed the parish, mothballed the property, and reopened the church some years later. Another bishop appointed a diocesan staff member to take charge for several months and "regularize" parish life. He did that by starting with Sunday morning. The liturgy would be Rite Two, BCP, every week. There would be a coffee hour each week. Another bishop announced to the very small Anglo congregation that next Sunday their Eucharist would take place at 8:00 am and be in English. And the new vicar would also have a 10:00 Eucharist in Spanish and that the new vestry would all come from the Hispanic congregation that was being developed.

In another case, a parish asked a priest with considerable parish development training to become their vicar, with the bishop's permission. On learning that the vestry had stopped functioning a few years earlier, the new vicar proposed that anyone in the parish who was willing would meet each Sunday before Mass for an hour. Do that for several months and together work out a pathway forward. Those who participated in every meeting would then become the vestry. They all agreed to the proposal. The priest set aside the canonical approach that would have the parish elect a new vestry before doing anything. He knew he needed a vestry made up of people who had spent a lot of time together praying and thinking through the issues. He knew the parish needed lay leaders who showed themselves to be steadfast.

Occasionally a form of the lifecycle appears proposing that after the death of a parish was resurrection. Institutions do die, parishes die. Most parishes that close, stay closed. Of course, there have been a few situations in which a parish closes and some years later a new parish is formed. Talk of "resurrection" is a form of cheap grace, false hope and spiritual sentimentality. The problem with offering sentimentality is that it asks people to

enter into an emotional and theological illusion. Under the best of circumstances, the death of a parish church means deep grief, the end of a congregation's life of prayer and service, and a loss for the community in which it was a sanctifying presence. It would be fair to say that new life for individual members was possible. Many go to other parishes. But that form of resurrection is about the individual and their new life. It is also about God's goodness in offering us new beginnings again and again.

Formation

In the initial process of forming as a parish the founding community finds itself having to:

- Create a parish culture; a sense of their identity and purpose. A style of liturgy would be established along with processes of formation.
- New people would have to be attracted to the parish. To survive they needed to grow beyond just the founders. A priest and other staff members would be secured.
- The level of competence & commitment would increase
- They would develop an adequate "fit" among vision, program, resources, and culture. A sense of integration would come into being.
- They would establish relationships with external "publics" or constituencies that have a stake in the parish. And, in so doing become a sanctifying presence in that community.

When a parish is returning to the issues of formation the primary concern is around adaptation and stability. The parish needs to adapt enough to both survive and to effectively carry out the primary purposes of a parish church: 1) the worship of God; 2) the formation of the People of God; and 3) a sanctifying relationship with the external "public" the parish is most connected with (usually the neighborhood around the parish, sometimes an entire town or city, other times a particular community, e.g., the performing arts. In practice each has its own integrity and also overlaps with the others. The parish needs to engage needed adaptation while maintaining its integrity, identity and integration.

Within that broader task the parish may, in its improvement or defining work, address particular aspects of the formation stage. For example, for many years we worked with a parish that was very effective at engaging all the formation issue except the size of its membership. It made use of external consultants, had a yearly vestry retreat, and assessed its life and ministry. The parish maintained its healthy stable life as it regularly returned to the matters of formation. Except it didn't easily replace members who moved or died with enough new members to maintain itself. That element of evangelization simply wasn't very high on their list of interests. In time they would have drifted into a static maturity and even decline. What we helped them do was this. Every three years or so, we'd make membership growth one of the central parts of the yearly retreat. They'd consider what action they could take to draw more members. Every time they did that, they grew. So, they stayed stable and healthy.

How to use the Parish Life Cycle with a Group

The cycle has been used with several thousand churches.¹ Here's the most common way of using it with a small or large parish group.

1. Walk through the Cycle stage by stage. Draw the life cycle on a couple of large sheets of newsprint in front of the group. Provide a copy of the diagram, in color, for each person. That will help them follow along with you and allow you to not have to write all the details in the model on the newsprint.

At the first two stages invite members of the parish, or parishes, present to offer pieces of the history. Who had the idea of forming the parish? When was that? Are there stories about the founding? Was it intended to serve a certain community—neighborhood, town, ethnic or racial group? Was it created around a particular liturgical and spiritual way? Get them talking about the Creation and Formation stages. If they disagree, put down all the comments. As you move into the later stages focus on explaining the Cycle. Include stories from other parishes that can illuminate each stage. Hold on any further exploration about this parish until after the group has indicated where they believe the parish is now in the Cycle.

2. Once you are finished presenting the Cycle have people come forward and place a mark on the newsprint. Where does each person believe the parish is now in that cycle?

If you are concerned that people will be overly influenced by the marks of others you can offset that by providing a copy of the Cycle diagram to each person and after completing the presentation asking everyone to place a mark on the handout sheet. Then they come forward to place a mark on the newsprint diagram.

3. You might then move in a number of different directions based on factors such as your sense of the group's ability to have this discussion and the amount of time you have available.

You may want to break into small groups for an initial 15 minutes to get people talking. Small groups are easier for some people to begin to express their feelings and thoughts. Or, you might want to "go around the circle"—have people speak one-by-one, making only one point at a time.

You might ask a question such as: why did you place the mark as you did?

Remember, you aren't trying to just have people talk in a way that enables loud voices and little listening. So, often it's important to slow things down.

4. If you did break into small groups, bring people back to the whole group and take it a next step, e.g., What was said in your groups? Or, do you see a way forward that will help the parish address the issue?

5. Consider bring the discussion to a close by have the three people “fishbowl”—sit in the center of the whole group. It might be the rector and wardens. Or, people who are highly trusted in the parish community. Or, people with a reputation and competence for careful listening and the ability to synthesize issues.

Ask that group to share—what have you heard this group say today? What do you make of that? What do you see as the next steps after today?

Examples of Parish Life Cycle Results

In the following pages there are examples of how other parishes saw themselves in terms of the life cycle.

St. Mark's (page 16 below)

A Northeast, inner city African American parish. About half were second generation from the Caribbean and half African American.

Each person placed a mark. When everyone sat down and looked at the results it was obviously a shock to half of the vestry. All the African American members had marked “stable, healthy maturity.” All the Caribbean members had said, “static maturity.” The African American members probably averaged 15 years older than the Caribbean members.

As they talked with one another it became clear that there were unspoken issues that came as a surprise to the African American members. They wanted to know why things hadn't been brought up before. The younger members said that was out of respect and not wanting to disrupt the harmony of the parish.

They did a Likes/Concerns/Wishes Process. The items were prioritized with the older African American members using green markers and the younger Caribbean members using red markers. That allowed them to identify areas that required further discussion as well as helping to focus on concerns and wished they agreed needed to be addressed soon.

St. Mary's. (page 17 below)

A large southern parish. Almost entirely white. This was the work at a vestry retreat that included other parish leaders along with the vestry.

The rector was new. The parish had been through a period of intense conflict. People were emotionally exhausted. The markings in the cycle were scattered. They engaged in a process of respectful conversation and identified several areas to work on. Consultants worked with the vestry for three years. A primary element of the work involved creating more listening processes and a listening climate (green lines). They made significant progress; the conflict faded into the background.

St. Andrew's. (page 18 below)

A historically African American parish on the West Coast.

The parish faced significant financial difficulties and seemed overwhelmed by the problems and a number of internal disagreements. Their overall satisfaction with parish life was middle to low. When asked about their satisfaction with the Sunday experience (Eucharist and coffee hour) the ratings scattered from low to high. They also saw themselves as having some strength in matters of spiritual life and the connection among them. They loved the liturgy, their rector, the diversity of the congregation, and their African American life and roots. They did agree that they wanted to grow. The parish used the weekend consultation as a launching pad to solve some problems and build upon the strengths and gifts they identified.

The life cycle work was part of a weekend consultation that opened up a number of areas for conversation and work.

St. Hilda's. (pages 19, 20, 21 below)

East Coast parish. Mostly white membership. The rector was still rather new. The former rector had been a bit heavy handed about decision making.

The life cycle from three different years is provided. The first two done by the vestry, the third was a survey open to all in the parish.

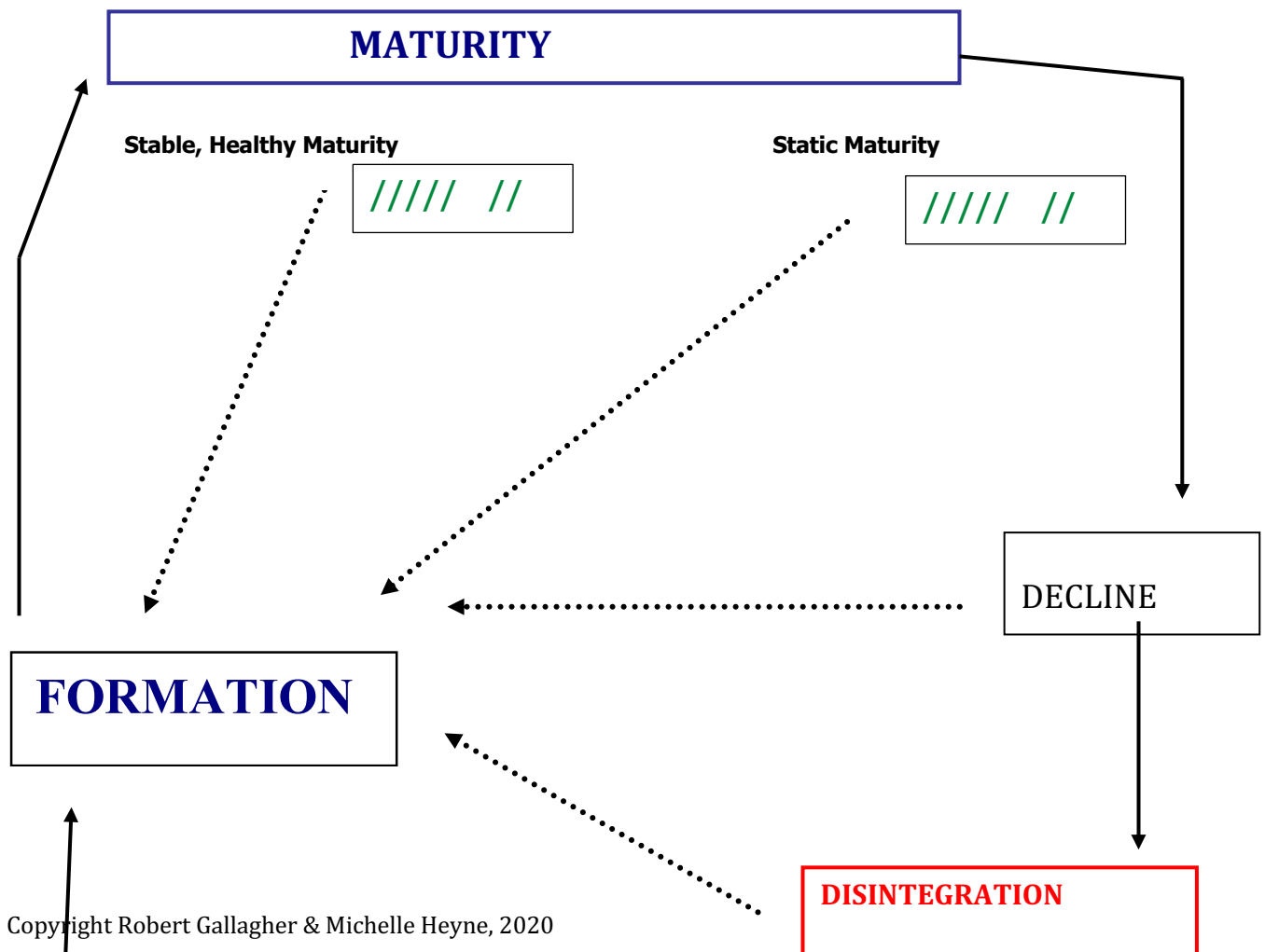
The first year the vestry did a life cycle all but two marked that the parish was in “stable, healthy maturity.” The consultant thought the rating was probably a form of defensiveness mixed in with uncertainty that they could face into some of the problems. As that weekend progressed the conversation became more direct and open. A number of serious problems were identified along with significant gifts and strengths.

A few years later the marks had moved from saying we're in “stable, healthy maturity.” To everyone agreeing that they were involved in an improvement process. They had taken responsibility for their life together and had made progress in a number of areas.

The last life cycle process was opened to the entire congregation. What became apparent was that the vestry saw the parish as engaged in an improvement process that wasn't as apparent to the whole congregation. Most members rated the parish as being in "stable, healthy maturity." There seemed to be a disconnect between the vestry's and the congregation's knowledge.

PARISH LIFE CYCLE – of St. Marks

An inner city Black Episcopal Church in the Northeast. About half were second generation from the Caribbean and half African American. This was the vestry's work.

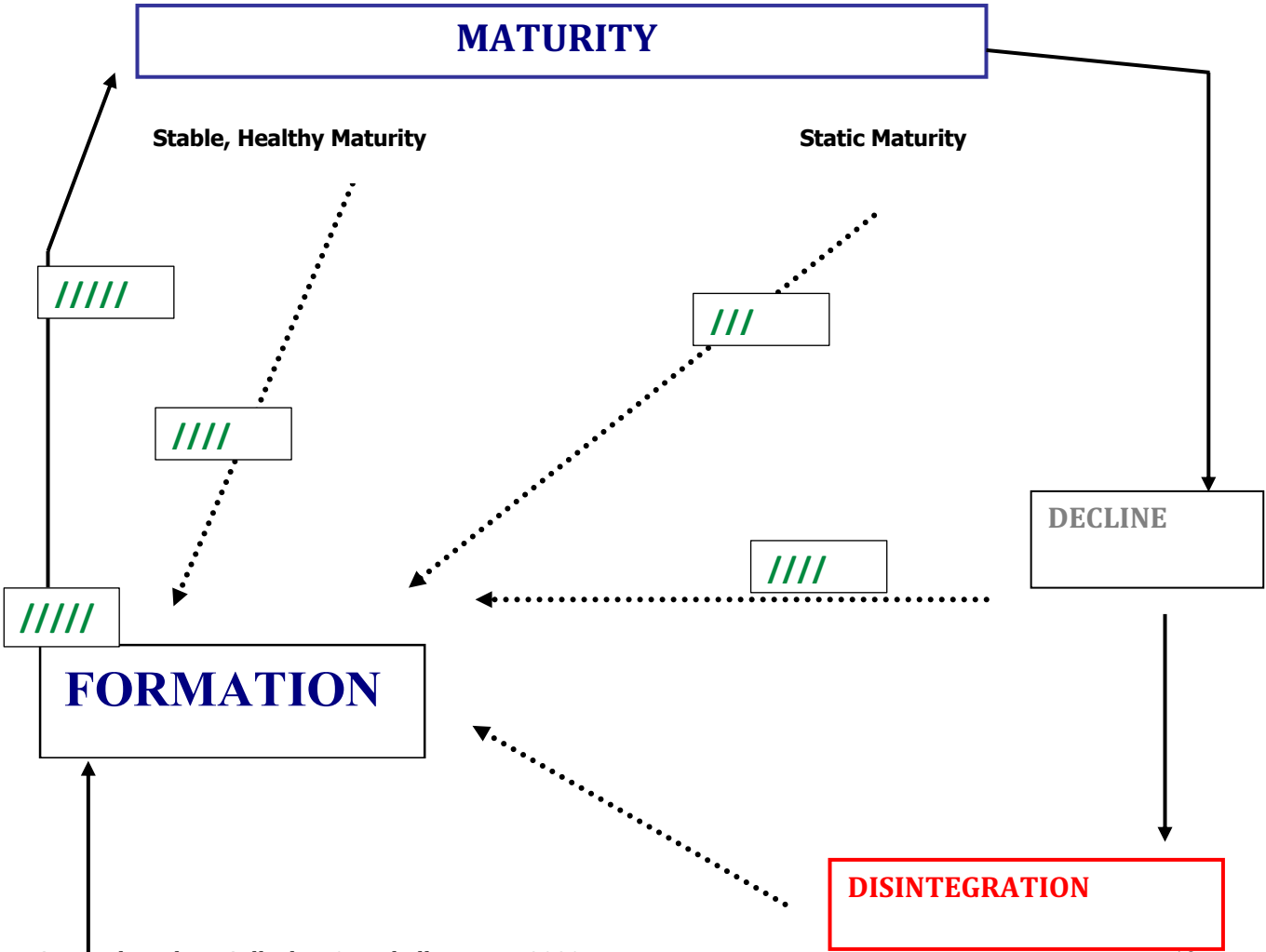


CREATION

DEATH

PARISH LIFE CYCLE – of Saint Mary’s.

A large southern parish. Almost entirely white. This was the work at a vestry retreat that included other parish leaders along with the vestry.

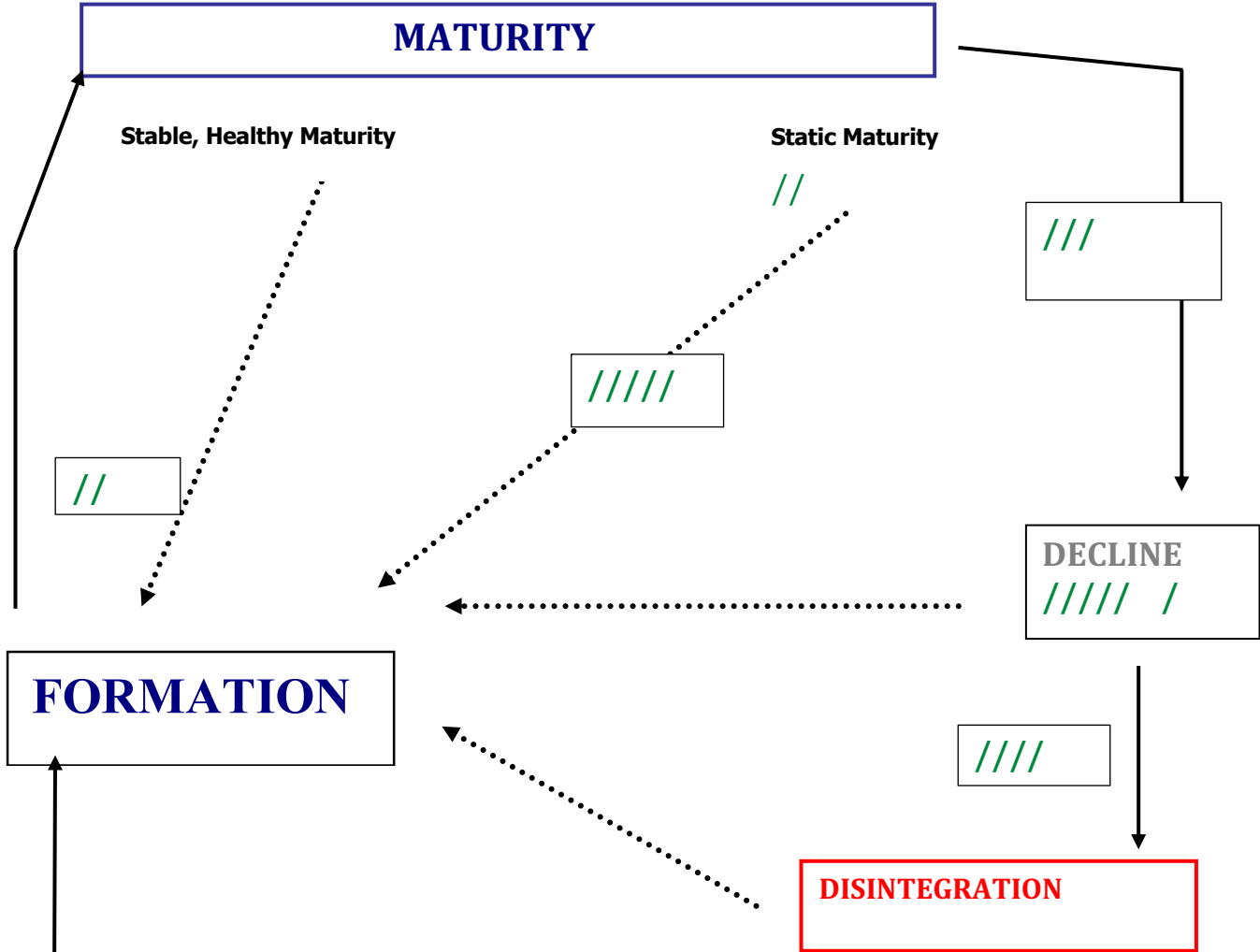


CREATION

DEATH

PARISH LIFE CYCLE – of St. Andrew’s

An African American parish on the West Coast. This was the work of the vestry’s work

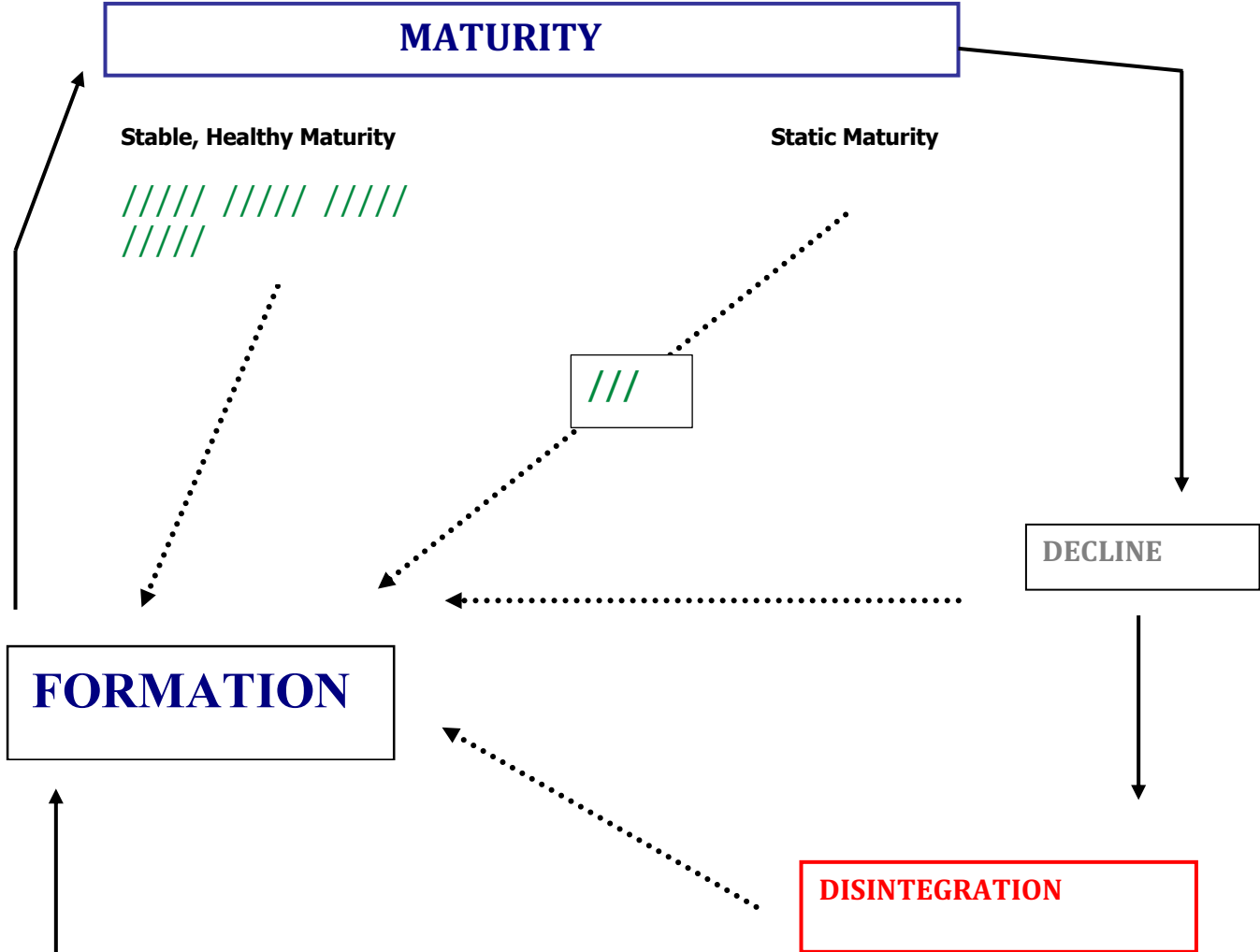


CREATION

DEATH

PARISH LIFE CYCLE – of Saint Hilda’s Year 1

A mid-sized, mostly white parish in the Northeast. The vestry on year 1 of work with consultants. The vestry.

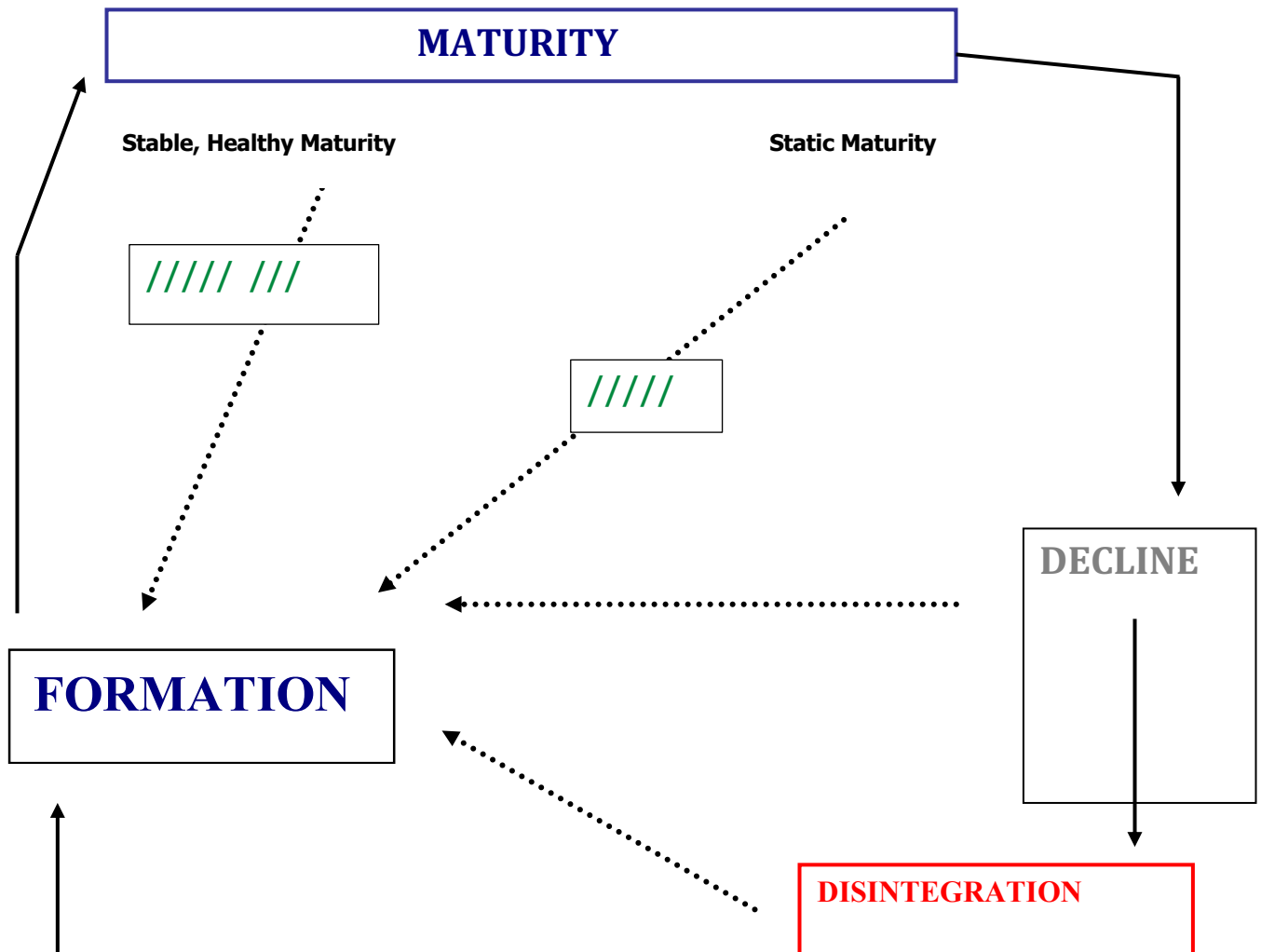


CREATION

↓
DEATH

PARISH LIFE CYCLE – of Saint Hilda’s Year 4

A mid-sized, mostly white parish in the Northeast. The vestry on year 4 of work with consultants. The vestry.

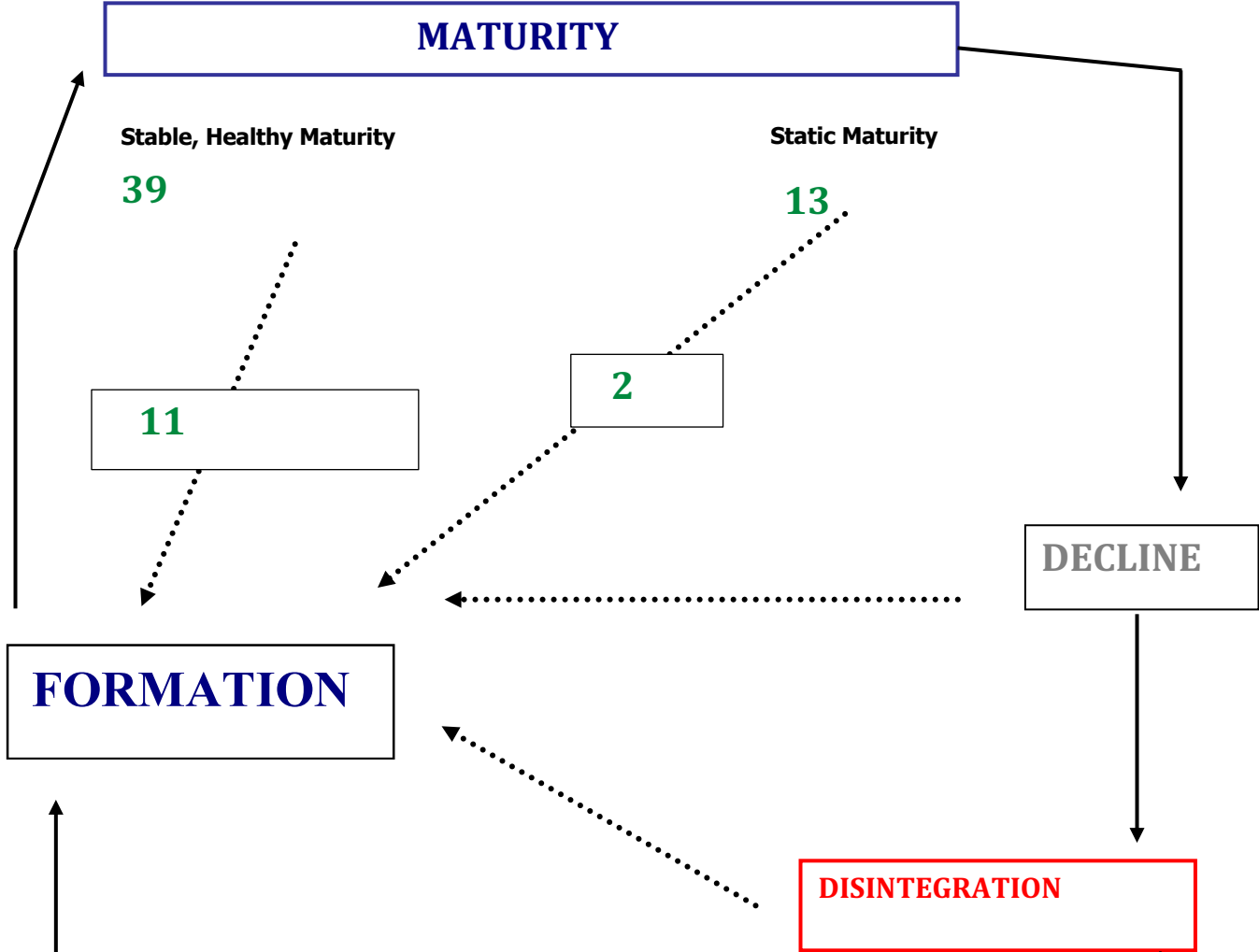


CREATION

DEATH

PARISH LIFE CYCLE – of Saint Hilda’s Year 7

A mid-sized, mostly white parish in the Northeast. Parish wide survey



CREATION

DEATH

ⁱ As the Organizational Life Cycle, it's also been used with many educational, service, volunteer and business organizations.