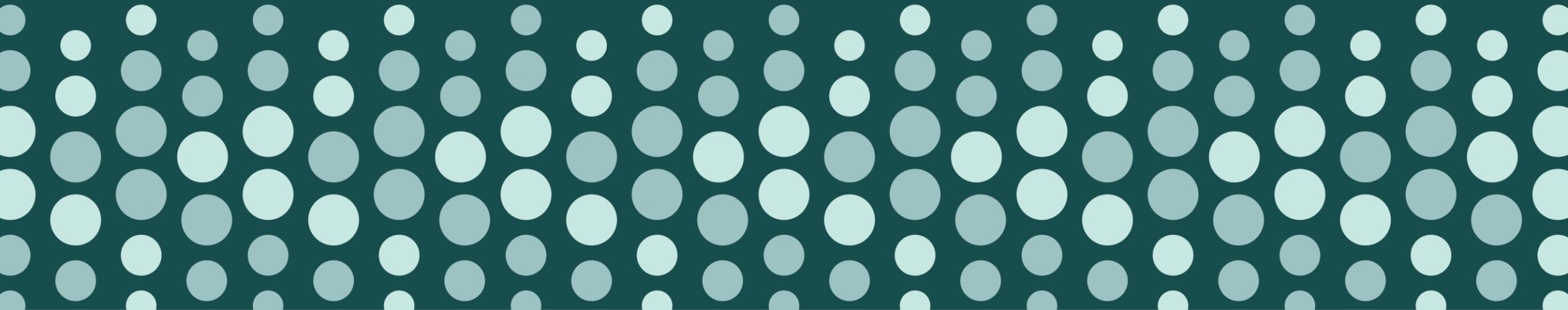


Church Pruning Guidebook

Help Your Church Foster Organizational Health & Sustainability



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To learn more about us, visit stepstonestrategies.com

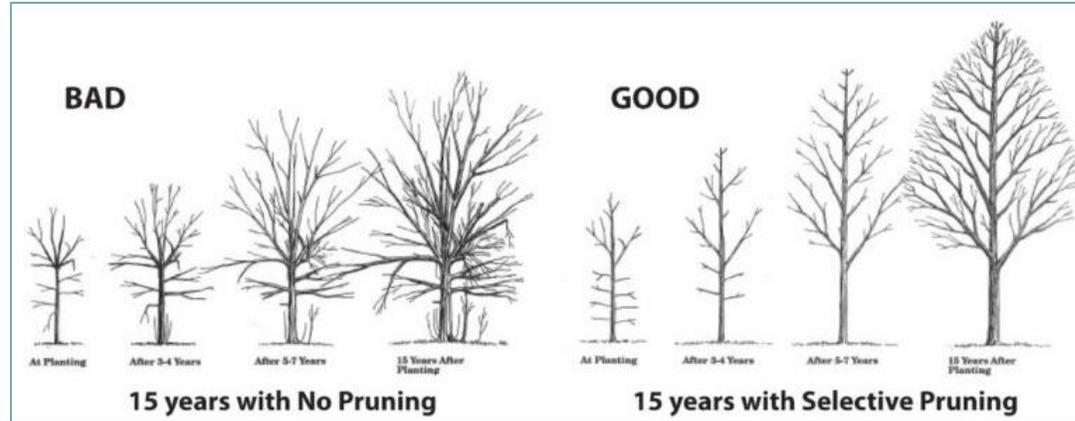
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1

Introduction

Importance of Pruning



What happens if a tree is not regularly pruned? It becomes wild with tangled branches, its leaves and blooms diminish, its shape becomes lopsided, and its energy may be misplaced on dead or dying branches instead of on new growth. While it is still a tree, it is no longer thriving.

A church can get like that, too.

Over the years, many factors have influenced the health and vitality of American churches. For instance, the recent COVID pandemic contributed to an overall reduction in in-person attendance and thus impacted congregants' support of their institutions along with their ministries and financial operations. It has even impacted how people engage with their churches. Economic instability and increased philanthropic giving to outside sources have also contributed to changes—even declines—in budget sizes. These are only some of the factors that have created a need for churches to reshape and reorganize themselves.

When a church, as an organization, is not tended to regularly, ministries pile up over time, programs lose their momentum, and staff positions hang on out of habit. Pruning may help maintain institutional health and act as a path to renewal.

How Do You Know When It's Time to Prune?

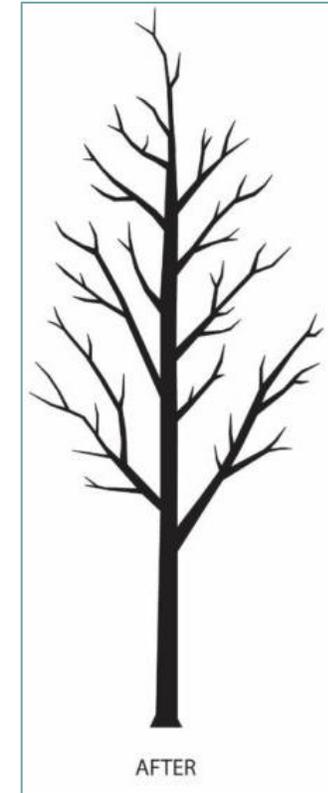
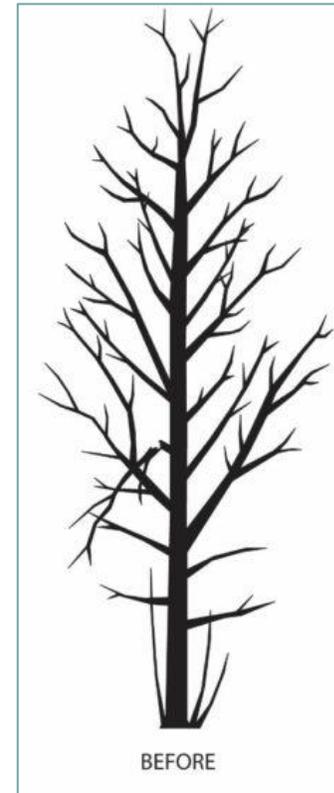
While declining church budgets and lower worship attendance are the two main indicators for a need to prune, it does not take a budget crisis to let a congregation know something is off. Other signs can show up before budgets get tighter.

Such indicators may include:

- Leaders stretched too thin and burned out
- Low volunteer engagement across too many ministries
- Programs continuing out of loyalty, rather than effectiveness
- Staff roles that feel unclear, bloated, or unnecessary
- Conversation around the number and kinds of worship services
- Inadequate supervision of staff and volunteers

If your church feels like it is unable to support current programming and structures, it is likely time to prune.

Right-sizing is not just about cutting; it is about reimagining and renewal. It means balancing your church's leadership structures, being better stewards of your resources, and preparing your church for the kind of growth that matters.



What is the Process? How Do You Actually Prune?

There are three phases...



We suggest you tackle pruning as a team of clergy and key lay leaders. When done well, and depending on how extensive you want to be, this whole process may take several months or up to 1-2 years to complete. A careful re-shaping is a time commitment.

Pruning is tender work, and it must be done thoughtfully and prayerfully. Aligning as a leadership team to tackle this kind of pruning can be challenging. Many congregations have found it helpful to work with an outside consultant who can bring an unbiased perspective when facilitating conversations around the nuances of church leadership and changing organizational needs—all of which are necessary to drive important decision-making.

2

Understanding the Context: Why Size Matters

Importance of Congregational Size



Before diving into re-aligning your church, it helps to understand church size dynamics. If your church has grown smaller or is less vital than it used to be, you will have different needs from clergy leadership, staff design, laity roles, board and governance functions, and strategy. For example, clergy in larger churches are often more specialized because there are more of them in the church. In smaller churches, clergy act more as generalists.

If you are leading a church that used to have 450 weekly worship attendees but now has 230, you may have programs and roles leftover from a different time period. When leadership systems no longer match current reality, burdens become too heavy for people to bear. Staff and lay leaders alike may feel overwhelmed, thus caught between old expectations and current capacity.

Faithful pruning acknowledges who you are now as a church rather than who you used to be. This honesty offers a form of pastoral care both to leaders and the congregation as a whole.

On the next page, you will find a congregation sizing chart. Read through the chart and determine which size description feels closest to yours.

Note: You may feel that your church does not fit neatly into one category. It is okay to feel like the challenges in multiple categories match your lived experience. Overall, the chart is meant to give you a general sense of how to optimize your leadership structures.

Size Category	Extra Small	Small	Medium	Large	Very Large
Average Weekend Attendance	50-150	150-200	200-400	400-800	800-1200
Annual Operating Budget	\$85k-\$200k (avg 180k)	\$150k-\$650k (avg 375k)	\$500k-\$1.5 million (avg 680k)	\$1-\$2 million (avg 1.1 million)	\$2-\$4 million (avg 2.4 million)
Growth Challenges	<p>Managing multiple conflicting expectations. As the church grows, the senior minister will be stretched between caregiving, equipping, supervision, coordination, and connecting with the mission field. Members may be wary of sharing their relational time with the senior minister.</p>	<p>Creating "emotional space" for multiple ministries to thrive simultaneously. No longer will every member want (or need) to attend every church function. Ministry scheduling will create time and facility conflicts.</p>	<p>Examining assumptions about growth. The congregation must come to terms with how it understands and defines growth, whether it desires growth, and whether the culture will accommodate growth. Leaders must claim a strategic identity and define growth accordingly.</p>	<p>Building capacity for growth on the staff team. Ideas to generate growth abound but are limited by the capacity of the staff team and limitations in the facility. The church's capacity for growth is largely a function of the size of its budget.</p>	<p>Assuming growth and plan for it. Lack of growth will lead to stagnation and ultimately to decline. Growth is an ongoing management issue. The nature and direction of growth has to be continually negotiated and planned.</p>
Clergy Challenges	<p>Serving as the hub of a wheel or relational web. The senior minister serves as coordinator, chief, and master of ceremonies. Laity experience having their spiritual needs met through a personal relationship with the appointed clergy person. Clergy with strong interpersonal skills fare well in this size church, but the time demands can become burdensome.</p>	<p>Building a vision of congregational and community care in which the clergy is a leader, but not the only provider of pastoral care. The senior minister will need to communicate a caring presence to the congregation while reducing the level of one-on-one care provided to members.</p>	<p>Adopting a visionary leadership style. The senior minister must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discern and articulate an energizing vision for the congregation and translate vision into specific goals to be accomplished Clearly describe who the congregation is and is not as well as what its mission is and is not 	<p>Adopting a managerial leadership style. The senior minister must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Let go of a purely relational style of leadership and engage the congregation from a managerial perspective Shift the care focus from the congregation at large to the staff team and key lay leaders Manage the collective performance of the staff team 	<p>Adopting a strategic leadership style. The senior minister must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on the right things, say no to the wrong things, and spend time on the important things Let go of day-to-day management decisions, find ways to pull back and see the big picture and learn to lead through the projection of a public persona Crystallize the vision of the church into clear sound bites that keep the staff team and board in alignment
Staff Team Challenges	<p>Managing a complicated mix of paid and unpaid staff. Paid staff is usually part-time and perform limited but essential functions, such as administrative secretary or musician. As needs grow, the number of paid and unpaid staff require supervision that will lead to less time for one-to-one pastoral care, causing friction.</p>	<p>Strategically staffing for growth. The senior minister will need to be a leader for a staff team and create a staffing vision. As the congregation is closer to the 200-mark, program staff will need to be added beyond the senior minister and a few part time administrative or program specialists. Focus should be connecting members' gifts to ministry.</p>	<p>Embracing a team identity. The team must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add specialized program staff to grow the church when the budget may not be fully ready to support staff additions Learn to balance the work of the generalist alongside the work of the specialist 	<p>Professionalizing the ministry. The team must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume tasks previously accomplished by volunteers Find new ways to engage volunteers Move away from a generalist orientation to distinct areas of specialization Accept supervision from someone other than the senior clergy leader 	<p>Aligning work of multiple sub-teams. The staff team must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid a silo mentality Maintain a relational focus in program roles as the administrative components of roles increase Grow the admin team to accommodate additional growth in the church Learn to work under the direction of an executive leadership team
Board Challenges	<p>Governing with a complex leadership mix that is difficult to define and categorize. Board operates as a mix of elected leadership and chosen (or self-selected) ministry coordinators and decision-makers, some of whom are short term task-doers. As unpaid staff, ministry coordinators are more permanent leaders and task-doers who value a close working relationship with the senior minister.</p>	<p>Moving away from day-to-day management and into a governing role. Board should focus on overarching goals policy, and oversight. Utilize board training periodic retreats, and consultants to strengthen the board's governing role.</p>	<p>Organizing work around mission/vision. Board leaders must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate the work of a variety of committees and groups Learn to say "yes" to ideas and activities that support the mission and "no" to ideas that distract from the mission Develop new lay leadership 	<p>Creating management systems. Board leaders must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create policies and establish a staff team performance management system Relinquish the daily management of the church to the staff team 	<p>Reducing size of governing board. The board must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a strong support and accountability system for the head of staff Operate with a strategic mindset, letting go of representational thinking Create an executive team (if board size is larger than 7 people) <p>Other leaders must learn to trust the decision-making lead of a smaller group.</p>
Member Engagement Challenges	<p>Connecting visitors to the community of faith. The senior minister usually does visitor follow-up, but the larger congregation must follow-up as well with personal invitations to ministry groups and programs.</p>	<p>Creating a team and process to ensure that new people find a suitable place within the life of the church, led by a chosen layperson with training. The congregation must embrace the community in new ways to expand reach beyond current membership.</p>	<p>Expanding points of entry. The congregation must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add new worship venues, small groups ministries, etc. Meet emerging standards of excellence that people expect from a larger congregation 	<p>Watching the back door. The congregation must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address the anonymity that occurs in the large church Find new ways to keep track of members and to get members engaged Let the staff team take the lead in identifying and developing new leaders 	<p>Creating a seamless system of membership. The congregation must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Link membership, discipleship, gift discovery, and stewardship through a fully formed network of classes or small groups Add a staff member who focuses on membership and volunteer management Empower newcomers to find their own way into participation and membership

MAJOR CHANGE OF CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY

MAJOR CHANGE OF CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY

Adapted from *Arkansas Conference of UMC's compilation* of Susan Beaumont's *Inside the Large Congregation*, Alice Mann's *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral to Program Size Transition*, and Beth Ann Gaede's (ed.) *Size Transitions in Congregations*



“Congregations are living, breathing organisms. They grow, change, and evolve under our feet as we walk. Even the most insightful and well-intentioned congregations rarely operate with perfectly aligned leadership structures. However, the congregation that actively tends to the rightsizing of its leadership systems generally finds that it has more energy to devote to mission, discipleship, and service.”

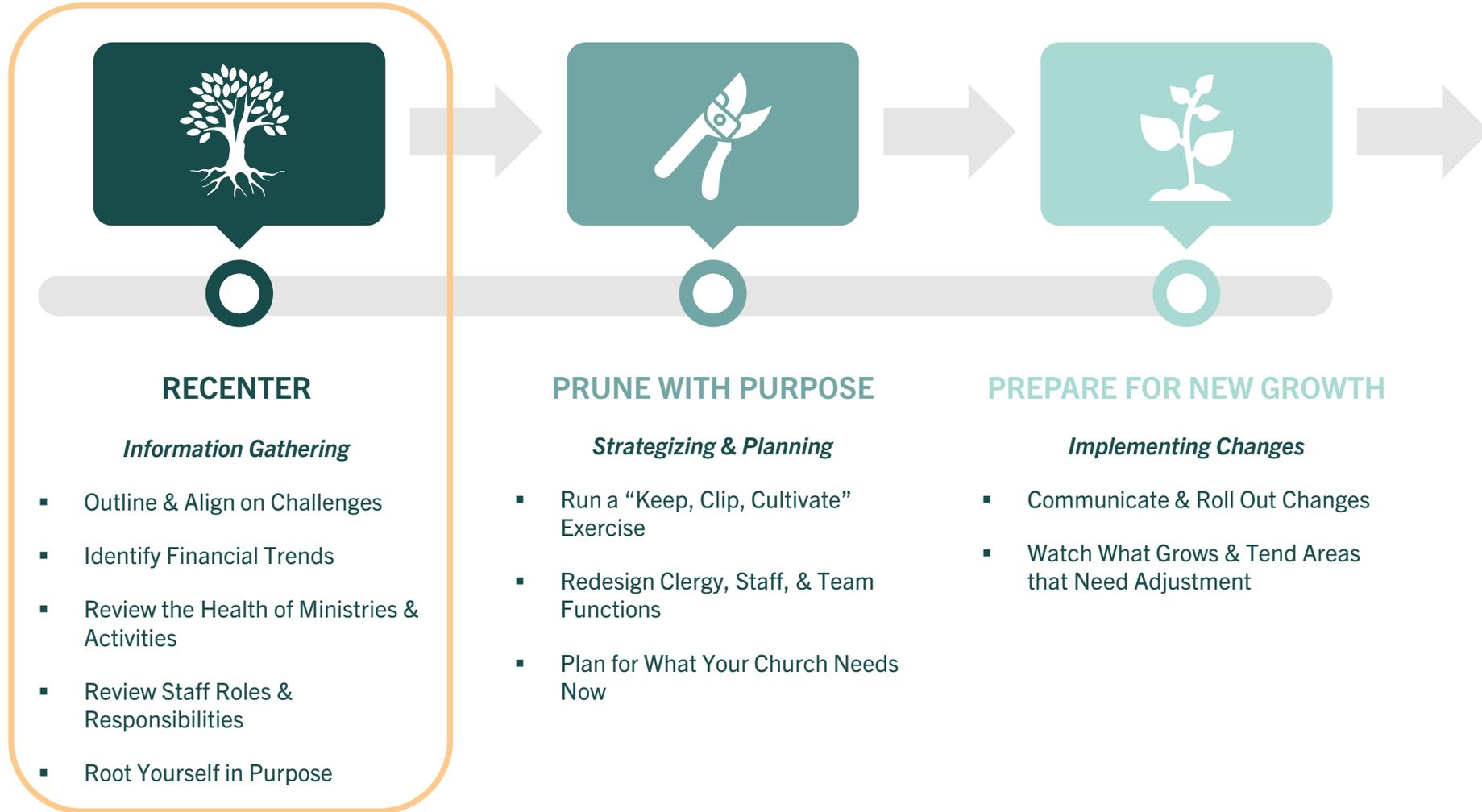
-Susan Beaumont, *Inside the Large Congregation*



3

The Pruning for Growth Journey Step 1: Recenter

The Pruning for Growth Journey



Step 1 Focus: Information Gathering



RECENTER

Information Gathering

- Outline & Align on Challenges
- Identify Financial Trends
- Review the Health of Ministries & Activities
- Review Staff Roles & Responsibilities
- Root Yourself in Purpose

At this point in the process, your goal is to simply gather information.

This is a key step in the process, because it's helpful to understand the full picture— challenges, financial trends, programming health, and staff roles and activities.

Resist the urge to start making decisions or plans. Gathering information before decision-making is crucial. It minimizes risk, fosters objectivity, and leads to better, more realistic outcomes. This information can help replace assumptions with facts, uncover hidden factors, and consider diverse perspectives, which ultimately aligns choices with goals and improves successful outcomes. It provides clarity and enables proactive, prayerful choices rather than reactive ones.

Importantly, take the time with your team that is needed to agree on the trends and things you are seeing within your church's organization. This early alignment will help pave the way to harder conversations and discernment on changes that may need to be made in the future.

Note: Compiling information can be *sensitive and potentially cause unanticipated harm*. For example, you may have a clergy person whose skills no longer fit the needs of the church or there may be a favorite program of 50 years that could hurt people if it closed. Changes may have unexpected repercussions.

Be careful what you document. Gather information in a way that is respectful, especially with staff. The team that gathers information should make a covenant to keep findings confidential, be sensitive to others, and focus on gathering information (not making any decisions until the next phase).

Outline & Align on Challenges

While smaller budgets and lower worship attendance / membership are likely the key contributing factors to your congregation's need to prune, it is important for your team to understand and gain alignment on the challenges you are facing and the opportunities at hand.

We often forget that others may have a different idea or view of what the church's current state looks like. Take the time to share different points of view and agree on challenges before discussing solutions. Be sure to include clergy in this exercise; they often have the widest view on the current life of the church.

To do this, conduct a SWOT analysis that outlines Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. During this activity, you will brainstorm:

- **Strengths (Internal)** – What do we, as a church, do well? What unique resources do we have? (e.g., skilled staff, well-kept building)
- **Weaknesses (Internal)** – Where can we improve? What do we lack? (e.g., no online ministry, small budget)
- **Opportunities (External)** – What community or demographic changes can we leverage? Are there emerging trends (like online ministry) we should embrace?
- **Threats (External)** – What external factors (secularism, skepticism) challenge us? How might new technologies or societal shifts impact us?

The output of this activity will help you develop pruning strategies during the following phase.

ACTION:

1. Gather a diverse group of stakeholders for broad perspectives and plan for this to take 60-90 mins.
2. Create a quadrant (as shown below) on a large surface.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

3. On sticky notes, get the group to spend 5-10 minutes and write down all current congregational Strengths.
4. Collect the sticky notes for Strengths and have a facilitator sort them for themes while the group begins brainstorming on the next section: Weaknesses.
5. Continue like this until all sections have been completed.
6. Discuss the results, linking them to your church's purpose, and prioritize the most critical items in each quadrant.

Identify Financial Trends

When a church is facing financial constraints, a disciplined review of financial trends can help leaders make thoughtful, mission-aligned choices rather than reactive cuts. Data will show you where money comes and goes.

Depending on financial expertise available to your congregation, you may want a consultant to help review financial trends.

As your review your finances, consider the following:

- **Revenue & Giving Trends** – What is happening to income, and why? How much non-pledged income do you have? How does that impact your budget?
- **Expense Trends** – Where is money going? Is spending aligned with purpose?
- **Program Economics & Impact Alignment** – Which ministries provide the greatest impact per dollar?
- **Liquidity, Reserves, & Financial Health** – Can the congregation weather shocks and continue operations?
- **Risk Exposure** – What could destabilize finances further?
- **External Benchmarking** – How does financial reality compare to similar churches?

Be mindful of who your biggest donors are and the programming that is dearest to them. You do not need to cater to their every desire (and you do not want to be captive to their interests) but be aware of how decisions could affect them. For example, if you feel the church's music should be more contemporary and your biggest donors are partial to traditional music, there is a risk that they may leave the church.

ACTION:

Analyze your church's financial trends by focusing on the categories and questions listed on the left.

You can also reference detailed financial considerations in [Appendix A](#).

Review the Health of Ministries & Activities

Reviewing the health of ministries and activities is just as important as reviewing finances and staffing because ministries are where the church's purpose touches people. Budgets and organizational charts only make sense when you understand what is really happening on the ground.

Reviewing the health of your programs is important because...

- **You want to protect what is spiritually vital to the church.** Some ministries may be small, quiet, or low-cost, yet deeply aligned with the church's calling (e.g., pastoral care, prayer, youth discipleship). Others may be large and expensive but no longer a priority. Without a health review, cuts risk being made based on visibility or emotion rather than faithfulness and impact.
- **Churches can be very busy while being less effective.** A ministry can meet regularly, have a passionate leader, and/or carry a long history, but no longer be forming disciples, serving neighbors, or advancing the church's purpose in a meaningful way.
- **Ministries represent volunteer energy, spiritual gifts, and years of faithful service.** No matter what ends up being changed, you want to honor the gifts that each activity gives and receives.

ACTION:

1. Start by creating an inventory of all ministries and activities, including worship services, groups and classes, outreach and mission, care ministries, youth and children, programs, events, and special initiatives.
2. For each activity or program, capture meaningful indicators:
 - a. Number of people actively engaging and participation trends (growing, steady, declining)
 - b. Number of people impacted (inside and outside the church)
 - c. Frequency and consistency of meeting
 - d. Volunteer engagement and leadership health
 - e. Financial cost (staff time, budget, facilities)
 - f. What is working and not working
 - g. What is missing
 - h. What is possible
 - i. Goals and ability to meet them

Reminder: you are currently gathering information, not yet making decisions.

Review Staff Roles & Responsibilities

Reviewing staff roles and responsibilities is one of the most important—and most sensitive—activities. Reviewing staff roles can be a very sensitive process because it directly impacts employees' livelihoods, self-worth, sense of calling, and security. It can trigger anxiety and defensiveness within the staff and congregation members, so it is crucial to handle these discussions with empathy and respect.

Staff salaries and benefits are typically the largest and least flexible budget item. In most churches and nonprofits, staffing represents 46-60%+ of expenses. You cannot make sustainable financial changes without understanding:

- What roles exist (vs. what's on paper)
- What work is essential vs. additive
- Where capacity is misaligned with current realities

Roles tend to drift over time as people gravitate more towards the parts of their job they like the most, responsibilities get added as needs emerge, and temporary solutions become permanent. Often, roles become shaped around a staff person's strengths and not what the organization truly needs.

Reviewing staff roles and responsibilities is crucial for aligning individual work with church goals, preventing redundancy, identifying skill gaps, improving communication, and increasing job satisfaction by clarifying expectations and fostering growth.

ACTION:

After you have reviewed the health of ministries / activities and decided what work is mission-critical, you can begin reviewing the staff roles.

1. Gather all staff job descriptions. If there are any that are outdated, take the time to update them.
2. Gather staff performance reviews, if you have them.
3. You likely have unpaid volunteers, or lay leaders, carrying out important responsibilities. Note the activities conducted by lay leaders. If appropriate, draft a light job description for these roles.

Reminder: you are still gathering information and not yet making decisions. Do NOT discuss the people currently in the roles at this time. That will come later.

Root Yourself in Purpose

After you have taken the time to gather information and review trends, it is important to take a moment to recenter and root yourselves in your church's purpose.

When we think about “roots,” we often think of our history and the past. However, roots constantly grow, branch, and die back as part of a plant's life cycle that is ultimately strengthening for the plant.

The intention for this activity is reflection. Consider your church's past, where your church is now, and where you might feel called to go. Your church may have some historical strategic documents that you would like to review. Sometimes there is a need to create or update these strategy documents and sometimes there is no need to update them. Pruning is a strategic process.

- **Purpose is what guides the church, and it provides the “true north” for tough decisions.** Churches serve a purpose. Centering yourselves in purpose ensures decisions reflect what God has called this congregation to be and do—not simply what is affordable or popular. It reframes the exercise from “budget cutting” to faithful stewardship and missional discernment.
- **Historical strategy materials remind you of the church's prayerful discernment.** Church strategies, vision statements, and past priorities were likely formed through prayer, pastoral leadership, congregational conversation, and Spirit-led discernment. Revisiting them honors that prior spiritual work and helps ensure today's decisions are consistent with where the church has believed God is leading. It prevents purely reactive decision-making.

These reflections will ultimately help facilitate decision-making.

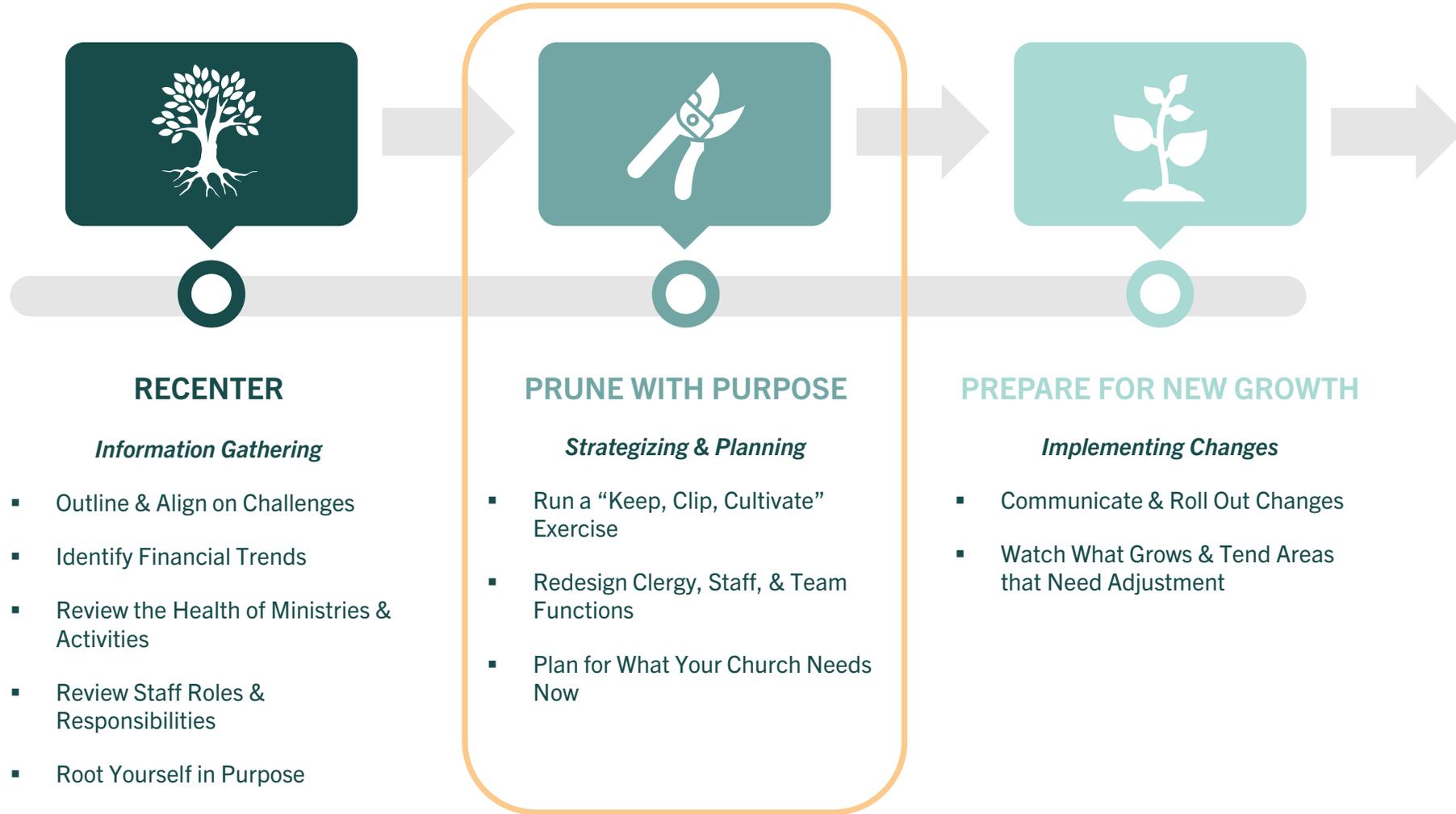
ACTION:

1. Take time to reflect on the purpose of your church. This can be an individual and/or group activity.
2. Review any relevant historical strategic documentation.
3. Think through and discuss the following questions.
 - a. *Why does our church exist? What is our unique purpose as God's people in this place?*
 - b. *What is our unique contribution?*
 - c. *Who are we called to serve?*
 - d. *What are our non-negotiable values?*
 - e. *In what direction is God leading us?*

4

The Pruning for Growth Journey Step 2: Prune with Purpose

The Pruning for Growth Journey



Step 2 Focus: Strategizing and Planning



PRUNE WITH PURPOSE

Strategizing & Planning

- Run a “Keep, Clip, Cultivate” Exercise
- Redesign Clergy, Staff, & Team Functions
- Plan for What Your Church Needs Now

At this point in the process, your goal is to begin making decisions and planning for a new way forward.

It is important to discern as a group. Discernment requires combining individual spiritual preparation (prayer, reflection) with a structured communal process of gathering reliable information, sharing perspectives with mutual respect, and listening deeply for consensus or guiding insights. Be willing to let go of personal preferences for the group's common good as the Body of Christ, because it is ultimately the Holy Spirit moving through you for the sake of your community and the world. Use respectful conversation and debate, as well as silence, to move toward a peaceful, shared decision.

You began this process knowing that pruning would require change and a new way of working. Allow yourself and your team to *reimagine* what your church could look like and how it can serve. God may be inviting you to cut away things that have been fruitful in the past in order to make way for a new life.

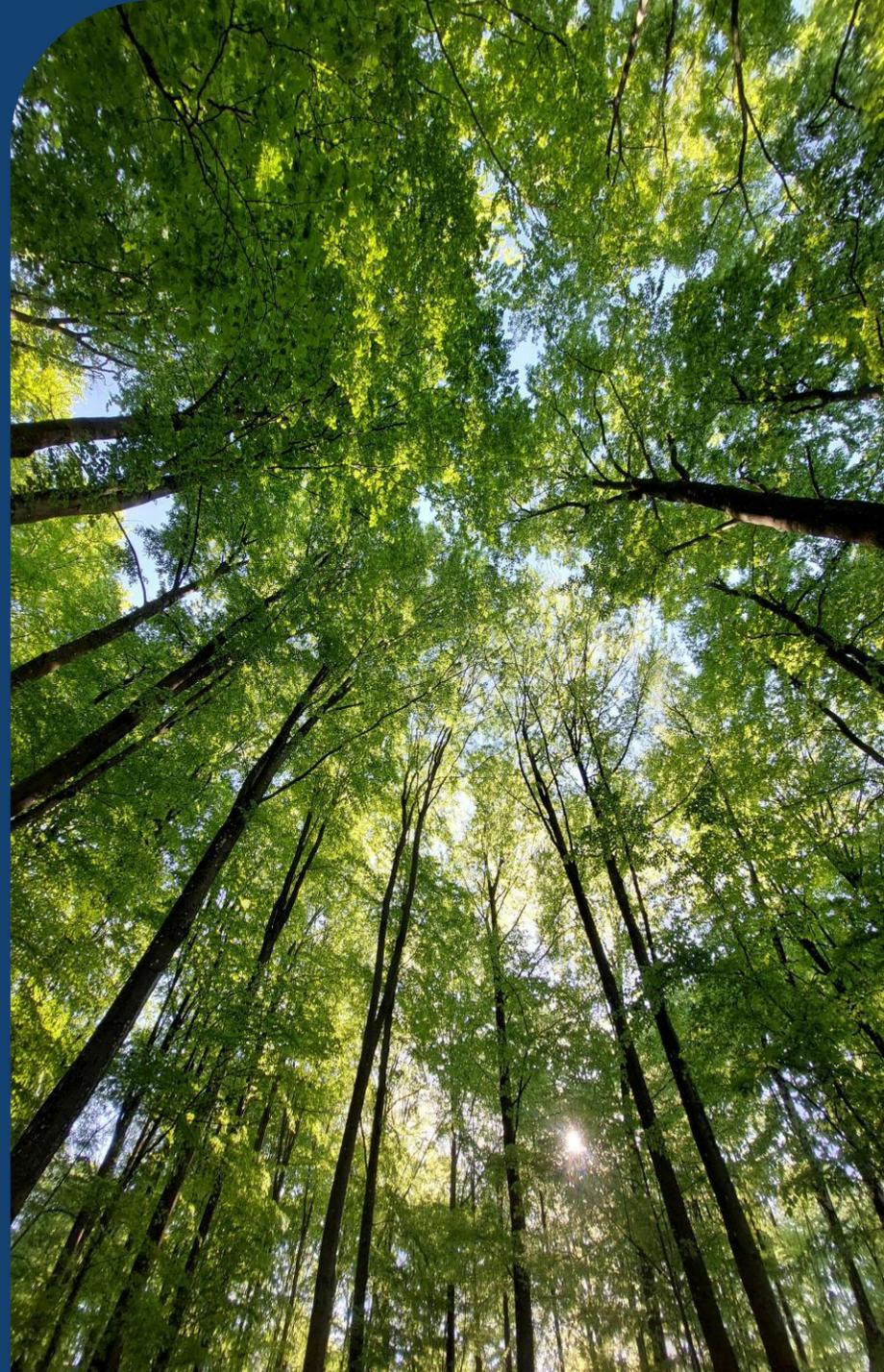
Managing Resistance to Change

As you go through this process, you will undoubtedly encounter someone who is resistant to change. Pruning feels like loss before it feels like new life. Be sure to actively listen to their concerns, try to understand where their concern is coming from, acknowledge emotions, reiterate why pruning the organization is needed and the benefits it can bring, and involve this person in decision-making / planning (if possible). You may not be able to win over everyone, but do your best.

Resistance to change is ultimately an obstacle for growth. Remember that we are called to become a flourishing community of God's people, and the ways in which we have answered this call may be heard differently by different generations. Encourage everyone to have an open mind.

“We need to reimagine church... As a resurrection people—one pointing toward a Jesus we cannot see and hoping to build a world that is not and perhaps has never been—our ability to imagine and reimagine is a critical part of our faith. It is how we respond to the harsh and undesirable things of life.”

-Julian DeShazier, *Reimagining How We Reimagine Church*



Run a “Keep, Clip, Cultivate” Exercise

It is time for the rubber to meet the road and make decisions about how to prune and care for your congregation. With your compiled information from phase 1, run a “Keep, Clip, Cultivate” exercise across programs and activities. During this activity, you’ll brainstorm:

- **Keep** – What do we need to continue doing?
- **Clip** – What do we need to stop doing?
- **Cultivate** – What do we need to start doing?

Consider what to Keep, Clip, and Cultivate across the following categories: **worship services; building and facilities; groups and classes; outreach and mission; care ministries; youth and children; programs, events, and special initiatives.**

You want your ministry programs to serve the maximum number of congregants going forward, so make sure decisions are informed by the number of people impacted in each of the areas listed above. However, be mindful of programs where the biggest givers are active. By cutting programs and services that are dear to those who give the most financially, they may look elsewhere to share their resources.

As you conduct this exercise, identify ways to trim the budget and grow revenue. Brainstorm areas where you can generate funds and remember that your church is the people—not the building.

ACTION:

1. Gather your team and plan for this to take 60-90 mins. Share the list of ministries and activities that you collected earlier.
2. Create a chart (as shown below) on a large surface.

Keep	Clip	Cultivate

3. On sticky notes, get the group to spend 5-10 minutes and write down what you would like to Keep.
4. Collect the sticky notes for Keep and have a facilitator sort them for themes while the group begins brainstorming on the next section: Clip.
5. Continue like this until all sections have been completed.
6. Discuss the results, linking them to your church’s purpose. Agree and prioritize on the most critical items in each area.
7. After the exercise is completed, keep the outcomes confidential for now. You will plan how to implement changes in the next section.

Redesign Clergy, Staff, & Team Functions

Redesigning clergy, staff, and team roles is one of the most impactful steps you can take, especially in seasons of pruning. This work goes beyond organizational charts and job descriptions; it reshapes how ministry happens. Done well, it protects the mission, honors people's callings, and creates a structure that can be sustained with integrity.

It is best practice to focus on roles first and then align current staff to your organizational needs. **Do not get distracted by current team member strengths and weaknesses.** This is difficult to do and a very common challenge. Remember, you are designing for the health of the church organization, not for an individual person(s).

For most churches, the biggest budget item is typically staff compensation. For mid-to-large sized churches, 45%-55% of the budget spent on staff salary is healthy (note: this may vary slightly based on geographic location). Start with this reference point in mind to adjust staff design, if needed.

If your church has become less vital, your staffing model may need to shift. This may mean consolidating roles, moving some positions from paid to volunteer, or letting certain positions go entirely.

Depending on the size of the church, heads of staff and assistant clergy need different leadership skills. The larger the church, the more managerial and strategic skills are needed and the more specialized the associate functions can become to best empower lay leaders and volunteers. A smaller church with a limited budget, may need to reimagine what their church could look like with part-time clergy or lay leadership at the helm of the congregation.

Remember that **this is extremely sensitive work** and can greatly impact both staff and congregation members. This is not an opportunity for lay people to unload about staff or clergy. Be sensitive and keep this work confidential until changes are announced.

ACTION:

1. Gather the updated job descriptions for paid and volunteer staff that you collected earlier.
2. Reference [the church sizing chart](#) and look at the Staff and Clergy Challenges at the size that best represents your church.
3. Answer the following questions:
 - a. *What essential functions must be carried out regardless of structure (e.g., worship leadership, pastoral care, teaching and discipleship, administration)?*
 - b. *How will the work be divided up? What roles do we need? What can volunteers and lay leaders do vs. what paid clergy and staff do?*
 - c. *If we are a medium or large-sized church, how will we communicate, collaborate, and coordinate the work (e.g., weekly staff or team meetings)?*
 - d. *How will decisions be made? At what level of the organization?*
 - e. *What organizational structure best fits the roles we need?*
4. After answering these questions, map the capabilities and strengths of current staff to the roles needed. Identify where you can fill roles and where there are gaps.
 - a. If a role(s) needs to be eliminated, consult with your church's legal counsel and document any performance issues.
5. After the exercise is completed, keep the outcomes confidential for now. You will plan how to implement changes in the next section.

Plan for What Your Church Needs Now

Now that you have thought through programming and staffing, it is time to consider how you might engage members and lay leaders. Engaging people and new members into the life of the church is not just a matter of long-term sustainability—it is core to the church’s mission, health, and faithfulness.

Engaging Lay Leaders

The church is meant to have lay leaders, because it deepens discipleship through responsibility. If there are shifts and reduction in staff, you will need lay leaders to step up and fill resulting gaps. Consider how to develop lay leaders and how they can best support your church at this time.

If you are in a medium or large-sized church, you may be shifting from a “staff-run ministry with volunteer help” to a “lay-led ministry with staff coaching and support.” Using this reframing language with lay leaders will help them understand their new responsibility to their church community.

Remember, the ministry of the church is always a ministry of lay leaders. While clergy and staff often provide specialized leadership, organization, and sacramental roles, the laity constitutes the primary, everyday body of ministry.

Engaging People

COVID and the proliferation of online worship services have changed what it means to be a member for a church. Many attenders now rotate between churches or may only visit online. These more casual attenders do not know how to belong or where they can engage. Consider what it means to be a member of your church and how you might engage people more deeply.

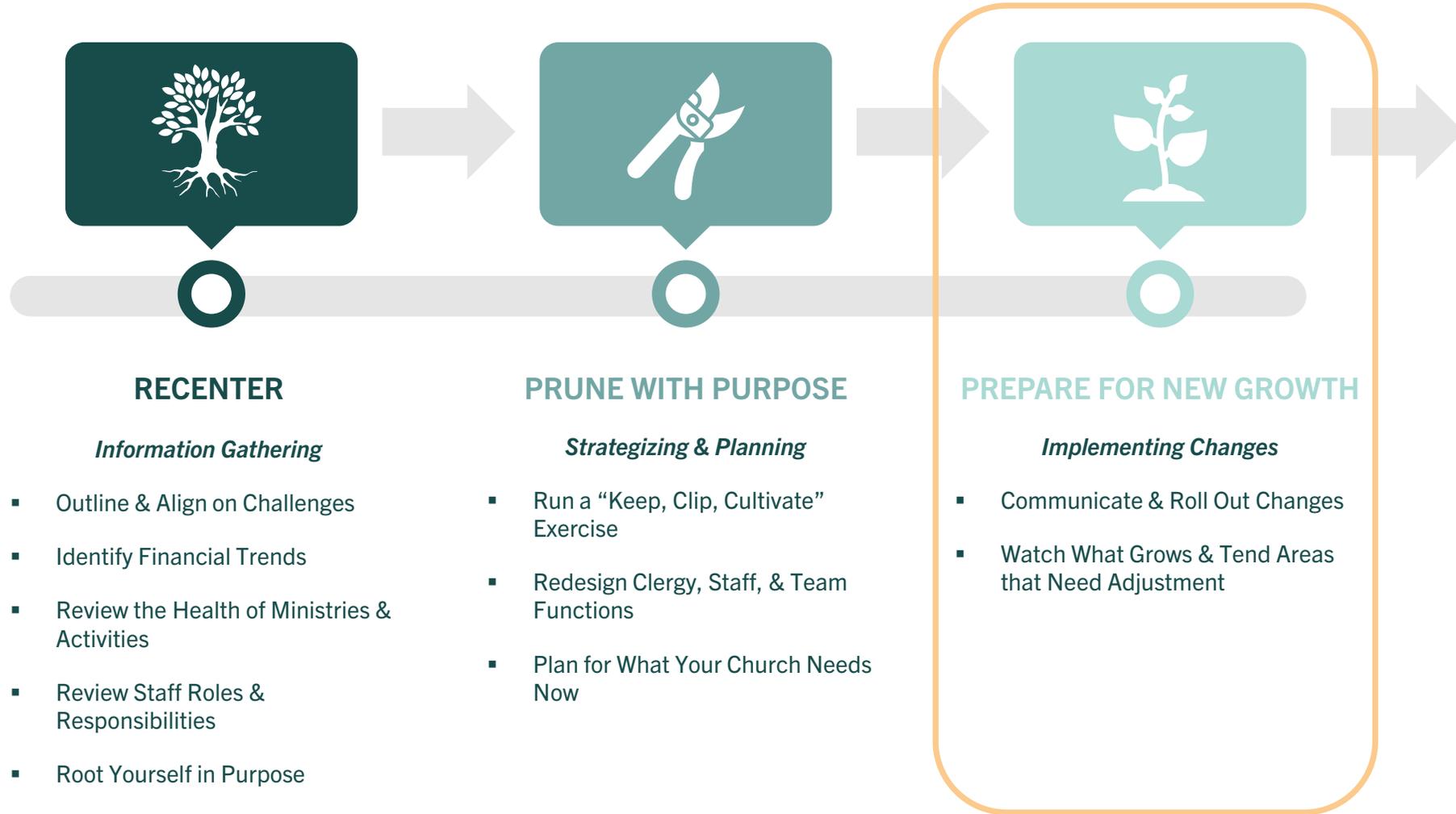
ACTION:

1. Review your decisions from the Keep, Clip, Cultivate exercise. For the activities you want to Keep and Cultivate, define:
 - a. *What staff will equip and oversee?*
 - b. *What lay leaders will lead and own?*
 - c. *What aspects of this activity can be simplified or stopped?*
2. Consider and discuss the following questions:
 - a. *How are we caring for and equipping those in lay leadership? How can we engage and develop new lay leaders?*
 - b. *Are we utilizing volunteers the way we should? In what areas are they needed?*
 - c. *What does it mean to be a member of your church? What does that look like?*
 - d. *What are the points of entry into the life of your congregation, beyond worship services? How can lay leaders actively engage new people into community and service?*
3. Hold on to these ideas for now. You will plan how to implement changes in the next section.

5

The Pruning for Growth Journey Step 3: Prepare For New Growth

The Pruning for Growth Journey



Step 3 Focus: Implementing Changes



PREPARE FOR NEW GROWTH

Implementing Changes

- Communicate & Roll Out Changes
- Watch What Grows & Tend Areas that Need Adjustment

Now that you have made decisions, it is time to implement them.

Implementing decisions, especially those involving program changes and staffing redesign, is where trust is either strengthened or broken. How decisions are carried out is as important as what decisions are made.

These decisions will impact people spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. Be ready to...

- Acknowledge grief, loss, and anxiety openly
- Treat staff, leaders, volunteers, and members with dignity and compassion
- Avoid language that sounds purely corporate or transactional
- Provide space for lament, prayer, and honest conversation
- Aim for everyone to hear about changes firsthand and avoid learning about changes secondhand

Managing Resistance to Change

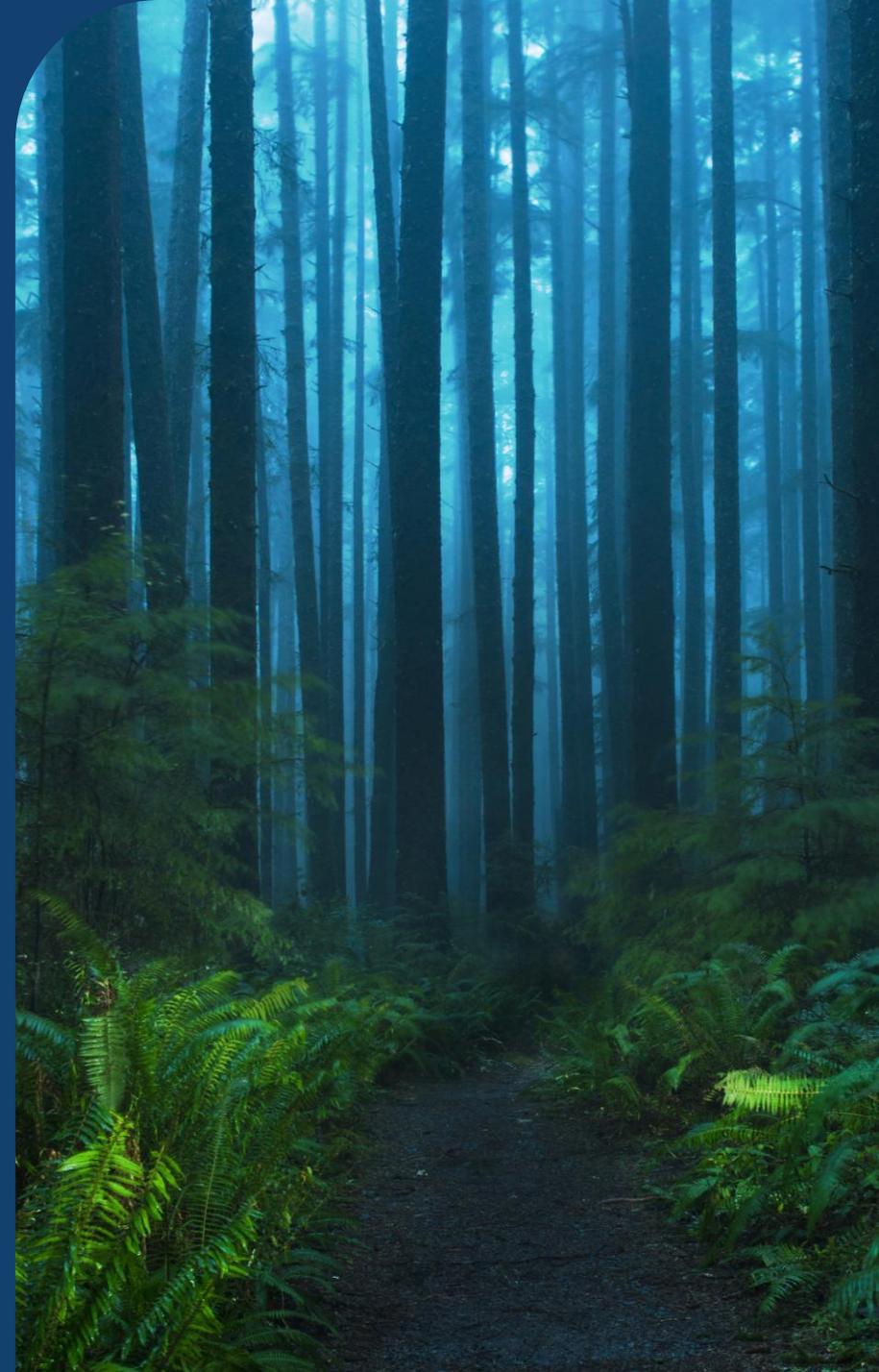
Again, you will undoubtedly encounter someone who is upset by changes. Be sure to actively listen to their concerns, try to understand where their concern is coming from, and acknowledge emotions. Acknowledge that pruning feels like loss before it feels like new life. If appropriate, remind them of how plants have branches and roots that naturally die to make way for new life. John 15:2 says, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."* Reiterate why pruning the organization is needed and the benefits it can bring.

Some people may discern that it is time for them to leave your church. Others may be inspired by the changes and want to lean in further to support the church. This is natural and should be expected. Trust in your team's discernment and do your best to honor everyone's responses.

“When a church is changing sizes, it has to dismantle one way of doing things, and construct a new way...that's called transition, and it is always uncomfortable.

It can be stimulating and life giving, but it is always uncomfortable.”

-Alice Mann, *Navigating Size Transitions in the Midsize Congregation*



Communicate & Roll Out Changes

Since pruning can be a lengthy process, implementing changes will likely not occur all at one time. You will need to provide updates to the governance board and tailored, appropriate updates to the congregation as needed.

Communicate with courage and care while implementing changes. Be open and transparent. People do not need polished messaging; they need clarity, honesty, and a sense that leaders are not hiding. Start with the why, explain the process, and allow space for questions. People can handle hard news if they feel respected, included, and heard.

When delivering staff reduction or role change news, the head of staff and a member of the pruning team (preferably from the Personnel Committee) should deliver the news in a private, face-to-face setting. The second person acts as a witness to protect the organization from potential wrongful termination lawsuits or allegations of misconduct. Be direct, honest, and empathetic when delivering the news. After every one-on-one conversation is complete, hold separate, transparent meetings with remaining staff to discuss the future and allow time for questions.

Consider how are you helping people interpret this season faithfully. You want to encourage your congregation throughout the pruning process. For example, one church found inspiration in Isaiah 43:19 and wanted to help their congregation see the NEW thing God was doing in their midst. They discerned 3 focus areas for their congregation during their chapter of transition and reiterated them consistently.



ACTION:

1. Before sharing the changes...

- a. **Define the "Why":** Clearly articulate why we need to prune, objectives, and expected benefits, as well as potential risks
- b. **Develop a Focus:** Encourage your congregation with a theme for this season of pruning and transition
- c. **Align Leadership:** Share your plans and be sure that your lead clergy and governance board agree to proceed
- d. **Plan Communication:** Decide who announces, when, and how, ensuring honesty and detail; consider sequencing to reduce potential chaos and harm

2. While implementing the changes...

- a. **Communicate Regularly:** Make it a two-way conversation with forums for feedback (e.g., meetings, surveys).
- b. **Be Transparent:** Address the unknowns, be clear about what is negotiable, and respond to concerns publicly (as appropriate)
- c. **Listen Well:** Take the time to make sure everyone feels heard, because this will help individuals manage difficult changes.
- d. **Focus on People:** The team making decisions should provide support to those directly impacted by providing a listening ear and pastoral care

Watch What Grows & Tend Areas that Need Adjustment

After organizational changes are announced, the work is not “done.” In many ways, it is just beginning. You have to live out the changes and begin to work in different ways. Just as with gardening—after a plant is pruned, it needs proper hydration, adequate light, fertilizer, and protection from extreme conditions. This post-implementation season is where a church either stabilizes and regains trust or slowly unravels under fatigue, ambiguity, and unresolved grief.

Consider forming a new implementation team that will help the congregation adopt new behaviors, engage lay leaders, and get comfortable with this new way of operating. There may be some people from the pruning planning team that want to continue on but use this as an opportunity to engage new people. Make a timeline for this team to work (perhaps 6 months or a year), so they can stay focused. Significant organizational changes are not made overnight; it will take time for everyone to adapt.

As you implement changes and time goes on, watch what grows and watch for areas that may need adjustment or additional support going forward. When you prune, new life shows up in unexpected places. Take the time to identify and celebrate new growth. The goal is not to return to “what was,” but to grow into “what is becoming.”

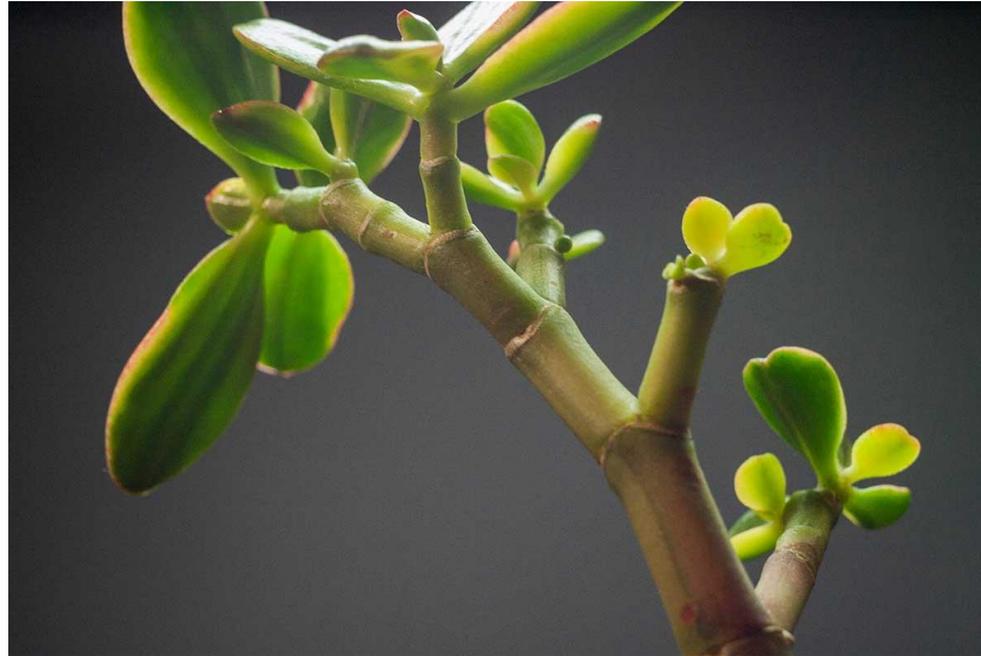
ACTION:

1. Embed rhythms of review and renewal by regularly discussing:
 - a. *Is the church functioning reliably day to day?*
 - b. *How are people experiencing pruning? What can we continue to adjust and improve?*
 - c. *How are we serving our church’s purpose now?*
 - d. *Are staff and lay leaders equipped to lead in the new way of working?*
 - e. *Who is being invited into ownership?*
 - f. *Is the church on firmer ground financially?*
 - g. *What is God inviting us into next?*
2. Create touchpoints with key groups to continue gathering feedback on an ongoing basis.
3. Take time to look for and acknowledge new areas of growth to encourage and uplift the leadership, governance board, staff, and congregation.

6

Closing Thoughts

Closing Thoughts



When you prune carefully and prayerfully, you are trusting that God knows how to bring resurrection from what feels like loss. You are trusting that letting go is not the same as giving up—and that smaller, slower, and simpler may sometimes be exactly the soil in which new life will take root.

Remember that growth is not always measured in numbers. It is also seen in spiritual depth and renewed energy that may be devoted to mission, discipleship, and service.

Faithful pruning clears the way for holy growth.

7

Appendix

Appendix A: Financial Trend Considerations

As you review your church's finances, consider the following questions.

Revenue & Giving Trends

What is happening to income, and why?

- **Total revenue trend (3–5 years):** Growing, stable, or declining?
- **Giving composition:** Individual giving, pledges, tithes, grants, earned revenue, fundraising events
- **Donor concentration:** What percent of giving comes from top donors? Concentration risk?
- **Restricted vs. unrestricted revenue:** How much is truly flexible to support operations?
- **Recurring vs. one-time giving:** Are we depending on unstable funding?
- **Donor retention and acquisition:** Are we losing long-time supporters without replacing them?
- **Seasonality of giving / cash inflow timing:** Predictability matters for cash flow stability

Expense Trends

Where is money going? Is spending aligned with purpose?

- **Total expense trend over time:** Has spending grown faster than revenue?
- **Program vs. administrative vs. fundraising costs:** Directionally shifting?
- **Staffing costs:**
 - Staffing as percent of total expenses
 - Changes in headcount and compensation
 - Reliance on contractors vs. staff
- **Fixed vs. variable costs:** How flexible is the cost structure?
- **Facilities and operations:** Utilities, maintenance, leases, deferred maintenance risks
- **Technology and systems costs:** Are investments reducing or increasing long-term burden?

Program Economics & Impact Alignment

Which ministries provide the greatest impact per dollar?

- **Cost per program or ministry area:** What does each program truly cost?
- **Participation and usage trends:** Declining? Growing? Plateaued?
- **Cost per participant / per outcome:** Are we investing where we make the most difference?
- **Missional relevance:** Does spending reflect priorities or historical inertia?

Liquidity, Reserves, & Financial Health

Can the congregation weather shocks and sustain operations?

- **Operating reserves:** Months of cash on hand?
- **Liquidity ratios:** Ability to cover short-term obligations
- **Cash flow trends:** Is cash timing increasingly tight?
- **Debt & liabilities:** Interest burden, loan covenants, risks
- **Endowment or quasi-endowment policies:** How constrained are funds?
- **Capital expenditures and backlog:** Facilities and asset replacement needs that may hit soon

Risk Exposure

What could destabilize finances further?

- **Reliance on a few funders or large givers**
- **Grant expiration timelines**
- **Economic/environmental changes affecting donors**
- **Regulatory or compliance risks**
- **Insurance coverage adequacy & cost exposure**

External Benchmarking

How does financial reality compare to similar churches?

- Review trends with your denomination or other third-party research groups to see:**
- Comparable churches / nonprofits in size and context
 - Staffing ratios
 - Program cost norms
 - Giving patterns in the regional or faith community context