

Life Cycles and Church Health

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Of the Congregational Transformation Team
Of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta**

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Life Cycles and Church Health

By the Rev. Dr. Tim Rogers-Martin

Introduction

As early as 1962, David Moberg, a sociologist of religion, described the birth, growth, decline and death of churches from the paradigm of the life cycle.¹ **The fundamental proposition of life cycle theory is that churches, like all living organisms, have a span of life—they don't exist indefinitely.** Typically church life cycles are depicted in the shape of a provolutionary (bell) curve with the vertical axis being worship attendance (or membership) and the horizontal axis being time. In reality, however, congregational patterns are such that the upside of a life cycle (childhood, adolescence, prime) rises more sharply, and the downside of a life cycle (declining health, old age, death) tends to flatten because the typical church amasses resources that enable it to “go on life support” and exist longer than what might be natural. Few churches face the reality of death clearly and plan for redemptive elements (legacies) to ensue.² An illustration of a life cycle is depicted below, including a dotted line, above which church reproduction can take place.³

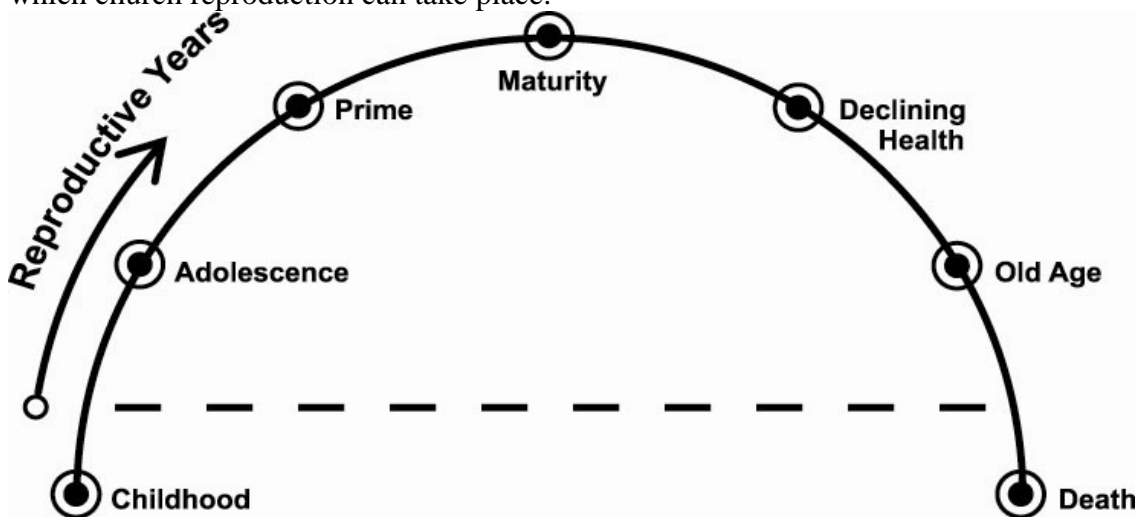


Figure 1

¹ Moberg's life cycle is stated in terms of organization development. He believes churches go through organizational stages include: 1) the incipient organization, 2) the formal organization, 3) the stage of maximum efficiency, 4) the institutional stage, and 5) disintegration. See David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 118-123.

² A key scripture used in life cycle theory is Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted” (NSRV).

³ The ability to reproduce is one sign of organizational (church) health.

An understanding of the nature of congregational life cycles is critical to congregations and regional bodies in planning for church health and growth. It is also critical because the institutional church in North America exists in precarious times. Charles Arn's research shows:

*The life cycle of a church is both normal and predictable. Like gravity, it is a law that simply exists. And like it or not, all churches—including yours—are subject to it The sobering fact is that at least 80 percent of the churches in America today are on the flat or back side of their life cycles.*⁴

The precarious place of congregational health is accentuated for the Presbyterian Church (USA). Of the 25 largest denominations in North America, the PC(USA) is the fastest declining in numbers of members lost and in the percentage of decline.⁵ As we face the reality of decline in the Presbyterian Church (USA), even in areas of demographic growth such as the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, an understanding of congregational life cycles is highly instructive for at least three reasons:

1. Assessment and planning benefit from learning the predictable nature of life cycles.
2. Unlike human organisms, many churches are able to renew or regenerate to previous stages on the life cycle through coaching, consultation or intervention events.
3. Knowledge of life cycles can improve stewardship of resources that will equip churches to be as healthy as possible.

This paper will first detail the nature of life cycles, and then it will discuss some intervention strategies and events that might lead to health, vitality and growth in congregations. It might be helpful for readers to be familiar with trends in their particular church(es) in order to place the information that follows in context. Information on the last 10 years of a church's existence may be found at www.pcusa.org/search/churches/default.jsp.

A Typical Congregational Life Cycle

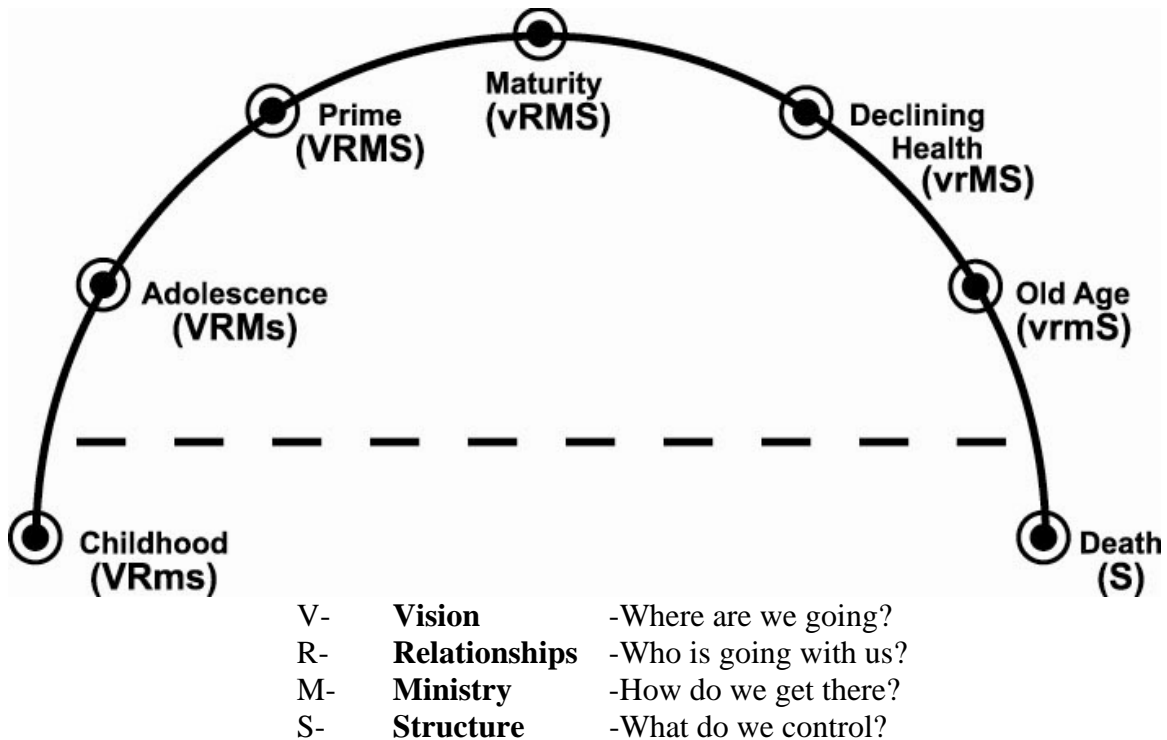
Observing Figure 1 on the preceding page, we note that there are at least seven stages of a life cycle—childhood, adolescence, prime, maturity, declining health, old age and death. Figure 2 will provide further detail by defining each stage in terms of functional categories of Vision, Relationships, Ministry and Structure.⁶ As can be seen in the figure, when a particular function is dominant, it receives an upper case letter; when it is

⁴ Charles Arn, *How to Start a Second Service: Your Church Can Reach New People* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), pp. 31-32. Boldface added.

⁵ Statistics are from the National Council of Churches as cited by Dr. Stephen Hayner in his address to the Presbyterian Global Fellowship convened at Peachtree Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, GA) in August 2006.

⁶ These categories were first developed by George Bullard and later adopted by Paul Borden. For extremely helpful resources from Paul Borden supplemental to this paper, visit eTeaching/eCollege at www.growinghealthychurches.org.

recessive, it receives a lower case letter; when nonexistent, it receives no letter at all. Following Figure 2 is a brief synopsis of each stage. Most congregations do not fit perfectly in any one category. Nevertheless, it is relatively simple for congregations to ascertain their place on a life cycle and determine the consequent issues a congregation needs to address to achieve a healthier church by applying the typology enumerated below. **Appendix A of this article summarizes the material in this section.**



Where is your Congregation on the Life Cycle?

Study the diagram above and the Overview in Appendix A

1. Pray and ask God for honesty and guidance in assessing your own situation.
2. Plot the point on the Life Cycle above with a big “X” where you believe your church to be now.
3. Read on!

Childhood (VRms)

Vision- V

- Churches begin with a vision or dream for their life together.
- Possibilities seem limitless.

- Mission focus is outward.

Relationships- R

- High commitment of founders essential to birth the dream.
- Risk is essential.
- Passion is evident.

Ministry- m

- Focus is on community outreach.
- Period of trial and error

Structure- s

- Little or no hierarchy—people are on first name basis and “pitch in.”
- Structure is informal and situational.

Needs

- Fresh infusions of finances and committed people are needed to grow.
- An outward-oriented strategy for relationship building and community outreach is essential.
- Quality ministry needs to develop to retain growth.

“A healthy church is born out of a dream. A group of persons dream of a redemptive ministry in a community. They sense and share what they feel God wants from them in their setting at that moment. Then they take ownership of their vision, band together, and organizational life begins. They clarify their beliefs by Bible study, doctrinal statements, and the hymns they sing repeatedly.”⁷

Adolescence (VRMs)

Vision (V)

- Focus on vision is needed in order to continue to flourish.
- The outward-oriented sense of mission becomes more solid through experience.
- Goals and priorities are updated to help drive the vision (and some of the original goals are displaced).

Relationships (R)

- There is conflict as behaviors need to change to fit new environment.
- Programs of assimilation are begun.
- There is excitement as church is “making it.”

Ministry (M)

- Growth is rapid if “ungainly.”

⁷ Quotes in italics in this section come from Robert Dale, *To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981). Dale’s work, though dated, is in my opinion the best on the subject. Although *To Dream Again* is out of print, some of Dale’s work is summarized and helpfully expanded upon in Gil Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Bethesda MD: Alban, 1998).

- Issues of staff, facilities, worship style, leadership development emerge.
- New ministries are established even as some ministries established in childhood develop structure.

Structure (s)

- People begin to organize and the organization is “reborn” apart from its Founder(s).
- Policies are made but there is little adherence.
- Structure lacks preciseness, order or consistency.

Needs

- Trust is needed to move on.
- Priorities need to be reestablished.
- Room is needed to be made for new people, ideas and structures while maintaining a focus on vision.
- Issues of staffing, facilities, worship style(s) and leadership development need to be addressed.
- A greater focus on quality and quantity.
- A church may choose to birth a new church at this point.

“They set goals and priorities. They develop programs, policies, procedures and institutional habits called norms. Finally, they minister out of the focused dream and the trust that has developed within the congregation.”

Prime (VRMS)

Vision (V)

- The church’s vision for the community begins to be realized.
- Mission remains outwardly focused.
- The church predictably sets and attains its goals.

Relationships (R)

- Members’ needs are met and new members are easily assimilated.
- The conflict inherent in change is mitigated by a desire to maintain interpersonal relationships.

Ministry (M)

- These are often referred to as the “golden years.”
- The zeal for outreach begins to compete with the comfort of self –sufficiency.
- A complaint of “too many meetings” arises

Structure (S)

- There is a balance of flexibility and control.
- Organizational systems are functional.

Needs

- New sense of outward-oriented vision and mission. Starting a new life cycle at this point is ideal.

- A conscious decision to give preference to those “not here yet” over maintaining relationships in the church.
- New groups and ministries for new people.
- Building in flexibility to structure.
- This is a “prime time” to start a new church or challenging new outreach to the community rather than focusing on facilities.

“If the Prime organization does not refuel this momentum, if they lose entrepreneurship, if they keep capitalizing on the momentum rather than nourishing it, they will lose the rate of growth and eventually the organizational vitality will level off.”⁸

Maturity (vrMS)

Vision (v)

- It is assumed that the leadership is driving the vision and that the membership knows the vision, yet in reality vision is becoming lost.
- There is more a focus on preservation than innovation.

Relationships (R)

- Members are content with their relationships within the church. There is little time and energy for cultivating new relationships.
- Growth tends to come from transfer of “mature” Christians rather than evangelistic outreach.

Ministry (M)

- People look with excitement to the past “Golden Age” rather than to the future.
- Complaint: there are not enough people to fill our committees.
- There is a feeling of good will, yet more passivity in the body.

Structure (S)

- The formation of programs, policies and procedures takes up staff and membership time.
- Financial conservatism and care of facilities gains the upper hand on missions and outreach.

Needs

- A plateau has been reached that will take more and more effort to maintain.
- **Renewal** is needed or the church will lose ministry health.
- Some time honored programs and policies will need to be abandoned or suspended to create room for the new.

⁸ Ichak Adizes, *Corporate Lifecycles: How and Why Corporations Grow and Die and What to Do About It* (Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 59. I owe debt to Adize’s thinking in this work—and for the ideas that behaviors that are appropriate at one stage of the life-cycle may be inappropriate at another and that transitional challenges have some predictability too. These ideas will not be fully developed here.

- The focus will need to change from honoring long tenured member needs to creating new disciples, leaders, groups and perhaps a new church.

“Then, if the congregation doesn’t take steps to open itself to renewal, a plateau occurs.”

Declining Health (vrMS)

Vision (v)

- **Vision and Relationships have become secondary to Ministry and Structure. This is the beginning of the downward slope of the life cycle. From here on out, recapturing a fresh sense of God’s vision and outward-oriented mission is necessary for any reversal of the life cycle.**
- The church becomes introverted rather than outward-oriented.
- Innovation and creativity are replaced by uniformity and predictability as values.

Relationships (r)

- Relationships tend to be longer term and less fluid.
- Worship and program attendance is in decline even as membership and giving may remain stable or grow.
- In early stages denial of decline is the norm—especially in group settings.
- In later stages nostalgia sets in and grows into questions of purpose.

Ministry (M)

- Members realize that the community around them has changed but the church has not.
- What worked in the past is no longer vital. Nevertheless, an “Avis mentality” emerges where the church “tries harder” to do the same things that worked in the past.⁹ In Reformed bodies, such efforts may even be spiritualized.

Structure (S)

- Buildings, benefits and appearance are more important than outreach.
- The past becomes memorialized.

Needs

- Conflicts begin that can be seeds for **revitalization**—especially if the pain of the present gives rise to a willingness and urgency for change. Anxiety, if unmanaged, will lead to doubt and polarization. Such a dynamic makes change efforts from within difficult.
- Often an outside consultant is needed to guide the process and lower the level of anxiety on the part of the leadership. One task is to establish an environment of creativity and responsiveness to God necessary to form a new sense of vision and mission.

⁹ Paul Borden is the originator of this metaphor.

- *Decline begins. First, people doubt the structures. “It isn’t working as well as it used to be it?,” they ask nostalgically. Next they doubt the goals. “Is this the right way to work and minister? Then, they doubt the organization’s basic beliefs and assert, “This idea is wrong.”*

Old Age (vrmS)

Vision (v)

- Vision is dim or non-existent. Survival is the issue.
- A desire for change is abandoned and creativity is squelched.
- Emphasis changes from defining problems to asking who is to blame.

Relationships (r)

- Long term members no longer invite new people.
- Those who seek change are targeted for dismissal.
- Visitors have almost insurmountable barriers to enter the fellowship.
- Older members enter despair and hope church “holds on to bury them.”
- The pastor becomes a chaplain or “hospice worker.”

Ministry (m)

- Infighting and paranoia are manifested and the more capable members and staff leave.
- Members move, leave or die at a greater rate than “people flow” into church attendance and membership.
- Established program areas such as the choir, Sunday School classes, and men’s/women’s fellowships take on inordinate power.

Structure (S)

- Church structure is unwieldy and overly managed.
- Facilities issues and costs drive the mission and keep the church inward-focused.
- The church survives on the back of endowments, grants, and usage of space—it enters a state of “artificial life support.”

Needs

- **Redevelopment** is possible only if a new “kingdom dream” or vision surfaces that is compelling enough to survive the conflict inherent in negotiating higher level change.
- Such redevelopment will be costly and will take much effort and time for results that are not guaranteed.
- Before redevelopment occurs, it is prudent to consider the value of “Redemptive death.” **Redemptive Death is when a congregation sees that their purpose for ministry is diminishing, and while still possessing membership and money, sacrifices the last years of its future to provide life for newly emerging ministries.**¹⁰ Such stewardship enables a church body to conclude its ministry with success.

¹⁰ An excellent case study in redemptive death is Central Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, TN. Seeing that the ministry area had changed and the bulk of the members were 70 and above, this body decided to

“Denial and blame, the same responses that allowed the decline to continue unabated for decades, become the enemies of a holy death.”¹¹

Death (S)

Vision (S)

- Alienation, doubt and attrition combine with loss of vision and purpose resulting in lack of a “missional pulse.”

Relationships

- Relationships are dormant.
- Bitterness or numbness is attached to that which was the source of life and love.

Ministry

- There is no results-orientation.
- Outward focus is lost.
- A sense of failure pervades even the celebration of past accomplishments

Structure

- The church may still have committees, policies and procedures but little impact.
- An orderly management of meaningless ministry heightens depression in what is left of the body.

Needs

- Closure

Finally, they become completely alienated and drop out in total disillusionment. This is absolute doubt and marks the end of the kingdom dream in these persons.

Critical Points in a Church’s Life Cycle for Transformation

The life cycle described above is how churches typically develop. The good news is that churches can break the norm! There are seeds of transformative potential in most churches—especially those whose ability to envision a future with hope is still alive.¹² It

dissolve while still having 130 members and 1.1 million dollars in assets. The membership successfully integrated with another church, the church building was sold to become a Bible college, and the church’s assets were used to sponsor multiple new church development and redevelopment projects in their ministry region.

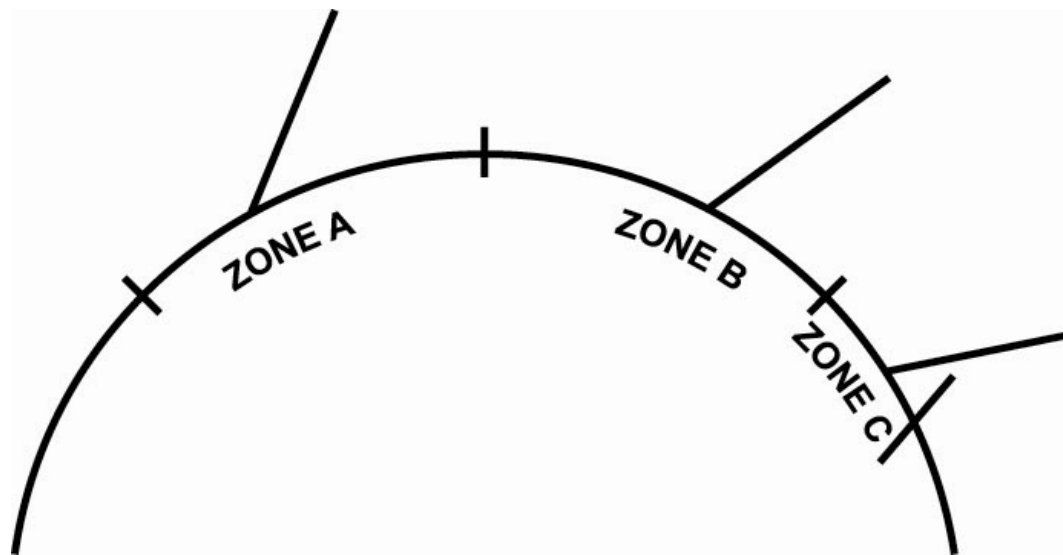
¹¹ Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), p.7.

¹² Jeremiah 29:4-14 describes a situation during the Babylonian exile that relates well to the situation of mainline churches today (often the church remains in a ministry area but is in “exile” as it has lost touch with the community surrounding it). These churches desire connection with God in a new era and

is common to look at these churches from the standpoint of congregational transformation. The Presbyterian Church (USA) defines congregational transformation as follows:

*A transformation is a redirection of a congregation's ministry in light of significant changes among its membership, in the community to be served or both. It is a planned intervention in the congregation to stimulate the dynamics needed to enable the congregation to reorient its ministry. The Dynamics include Spiritual Energy, Congregational Identity, Congregational Leadership, Re-entering the Community, Building a Ministry Plan and Developing a Financial Plan.*¹³

There are influences upon congregation that are controllable and others that are not. Within the realm of that which can be controlled, **transformation begins as a process of taking a fresh look at the motivating vision, mission, values and priorities of a church and realigning behaviors and structures accordingly.** It has already been stated that unlike human organisms, many churches are able to renew or regenerate to previous stages on the life cycle through intervention events. These intervention events are common to each stage of the life cycle. The main difference is that **the further along the life cycle toward death a church is, the less positive results a church can expect to experience from any given intervention event.** The following graph illustrates this phenomenon.¹⁴



understand the necessity of spiritually-oriented transformation. If these churches are unable or are not called to connect to the community as well, merger or some form of redemptive death is in order.

¹³ Visit www.pcusa.org/transformation for more information.

¹⁴ Graph is adapted from Arn, p. 34.

Critical Zone A: Renewal

Introducing changes at critical point A is challenging. The church is receiving positive results from what it is currently doing. While vision is relatively high, there may not be the sense of urgency necessary for change.

Renewal takes great visionary leadership, inspiration, organization to ‘move the masses’ at this point in time. Renewal also takes the willingness to risk on the part of the congregation if this “fresh look” calls for planned actions such as the addition of a worship service or planting a new church. Renewal takes the ability to embrace opportunity amidst challenges if change resulting from uncontrollable events such as a significant change in the nature of the community or the resignation or death of a key pastoral leader. As organizations rarely change apart from painful necessity, renewing churches usually a) have the idea of constant change as a core value or expectation, b) are learning communities that continually grow and vision together, and/or c) exhibit high levels of trust and love for one another which enables them to tolerate change.

Critical Zone B: Revitalization

Revitalization at Critical Point B assumes that there is vitality remaining in the congregation, even as it is declining in ministry health, and that the congregation has the abilities to be honest, trust and communicate rather than engaging in behaviors characterized by denial and conflict.

The ability to introduce changes in such circumstances are perhaps easier at Critical Point B than at Critical Point A because there is a track record of plateau and/or decline over several years. Alice Mann states: “If some way is found to look hard at the facts, avoid blame, and engage in new learning, we might call this process revitalization—a term implying there is still substantial vitality present that can be refreshed and refocused.”¹⁵ Another reason change is easier at Critical Point B is that times of health and growth are still fresh in the corporate memory—and are likely to be more accurately portrayed than “mythologized.”¹⁶

Critical Zone C: Redevelopment or Redemptive Death

Churches at Critical Point C are dangerously close to death. If an effective intervention strategy is not introduced at this time, the church will slip beyond hope. While urgency is probably present, the ability to dream may be lost.

The problem of redevelopment is that resources of faith, vision, finances, and leadership are often stretched to the limit. The opportunity of redevelopment is that the

¹⁵ Mann, p. 10.

¹⁶ The aura of “The Golden Years” tends to grow in stature (and inaccuracy of portrayal) over time.

stakes are high—change or die—that the church might respond to high level changes in ways it might not in less stressful times. The challenge at this point, as at the others, is to respond from prayerful discernment of God’s dream rather than to react to the anxiety inherent in a situation marked by noticeable decline. Such a process often requires the assistance of an outside party. It also requires the relinquishment of old ideas, attitudes, and behaviors in order to allow new possibilities to emerge. Such efforts require leadership able to embrace and endure resistance and conflict. In the end, it almost calls for a revolutionary effort to avoid death—and the fruits of that effort, as pictured in Zone C of the diagram above do not promise to be significant.

As noted above, before a redevelopment track is undertaken, it is prudent to consider the value of “Redemptive death.” **Redemptive death** is when a congregation sees that their purpose for ministry is diminished— and while still possessing membership and money— sacrifices the last years of its future to provide life for newly emerging ministries.¹⁷ For example, a declining church no longer able to reach its ministry area may choose to close and recommend its assets be used to provide funds for missions or new church development. This in itself can be a “God sized vision” or kingdom dream. Such stewardship enables a church body to conclude its ministry with success and to create new life that otherwise might not be possible.

A Healthy Church Dreams a Kingdom Dream Vision is the Common Factor

No matter where a church is on the life cycle, whether on an upward slope, a plateau or downward slope— whether in need of renewal, revitalization, or redevelopment—the common factor for health and transformation is vision. Robert Dale states:

“A healthy church lives out of a healthy dream....Unhealthy visions produce sick congregations.... No church can minister effectively until it identifies its unique ministry dream, a possible dream, and lives it out! ... Churches must constantly open themselves to revitalization. They must dream again! Re-dreaming is generally a more appropriate organizational health strategy than reprogramming or restructuring.... A planning cycle rooted firmly in the dream is an indispensable aid to organizational health. Each cycle renews and stretches the organization to new heights.”¹⁸

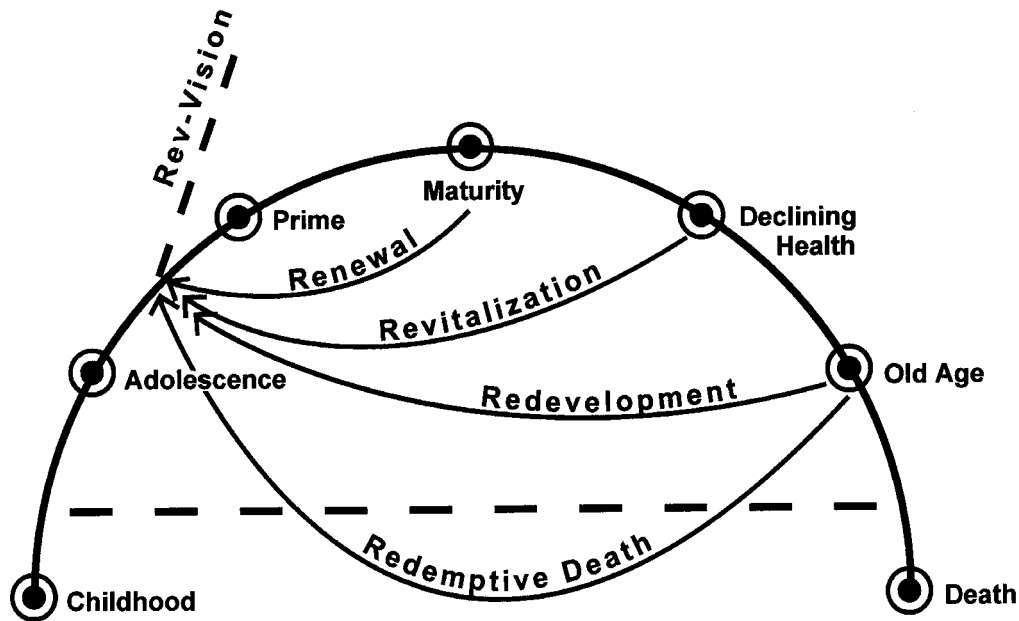
Consultant Alice Mann echoes the importance of vision (Who are we?), along with discovering a sense of purpose (What are we here for?) and knowing who it is that a church is called to reach (Who is our neighbor?).¹⁹ At various points on the life cycle, Mann points to transformation as coming from “dreaming a new dream.” Figure 4 below

¹⁷ See footnote 10 for an example of redemptive death.

¹⁸ Dale, pp. 12-18.

¹⁹ Mann, p. 9. The renewal, revitalization and redevelopment arcs on the graph are adapted from Mann.

illustrates the institution of new life cycles in Prime (through re-visioning), Maturity (through renewal), Declining Health (through revitalization) and Old Age (through Redevelopment or Redemptive Death). Note that in each stage it takes more energy to return to the upward arc of a new life cycle marked by the dotted line of Re-visioning.



Church growth expert Chip Arn takes this line of reasoning a step further and points to the pattern of church growth as being “stair step” rather than linear in fashion. As such, one can ascertain that the road to health and growth involves more steps as in congregations further down the life cycle from the Prime stage. In other words, the stairway to health and growth is progressively longer as one moves from:

The Re-visioning process in the Prime,
The Renewal process in Maturity,
The Revitalization process in the Declining Health, or
The Redevelopment or Redemptive Death process in Old Age.

Again, **all of these stages require that vision lead the way to a new life cycle.** Importantly, Paul Borden highlights three conditions for vision to start a new life cycle:

- 1) Vision must describe how the community rather than the church will be different as a result of its fulfillment,
- 2) The mission of the church must be outward oriented, and
- 3) The church must decide that it exists primarily for persons “not there yet” rather than those already inside.²⁰

²⁰ Paul Borden, notes from Presbytery Leadership Institute, February 18-22, 2007.

The bottom line? A healthy church is based upon a healthy vision. When vision ceases to be the driving force for a church’s ministry, it is susceptible to disease, decline and ultimately death. Plateaued or declining congregations can start new life cycles as a sense of Godly urgency and vision drive a process of change.²¹

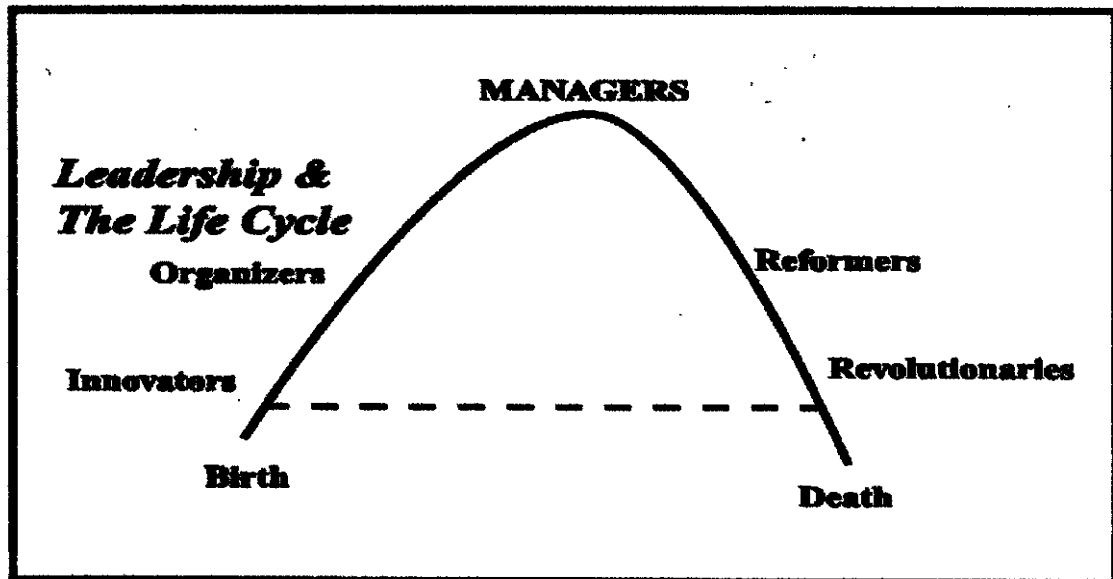
Pastoral Leadership and Church Health

Along with the formation of vision, effective leadership is essential to start a new life cycle. Pastoral leadership is vital to effective functioning: 1) at any particular phase of a life-cycle, 2) when a re-visioning effort is engaged.

Generally, the following types of pastoral leadership are called for at their corresponding phases of the life cycle for healthy functioning:²²

Childhood and Adolescence	Innovators
Prime	Organizers
Maturity	Managers
Declining Health	Reformers
Old Age	Revolutionaries

A diagram of these types of leadership is included below. More detailed information is included in Appendix B.

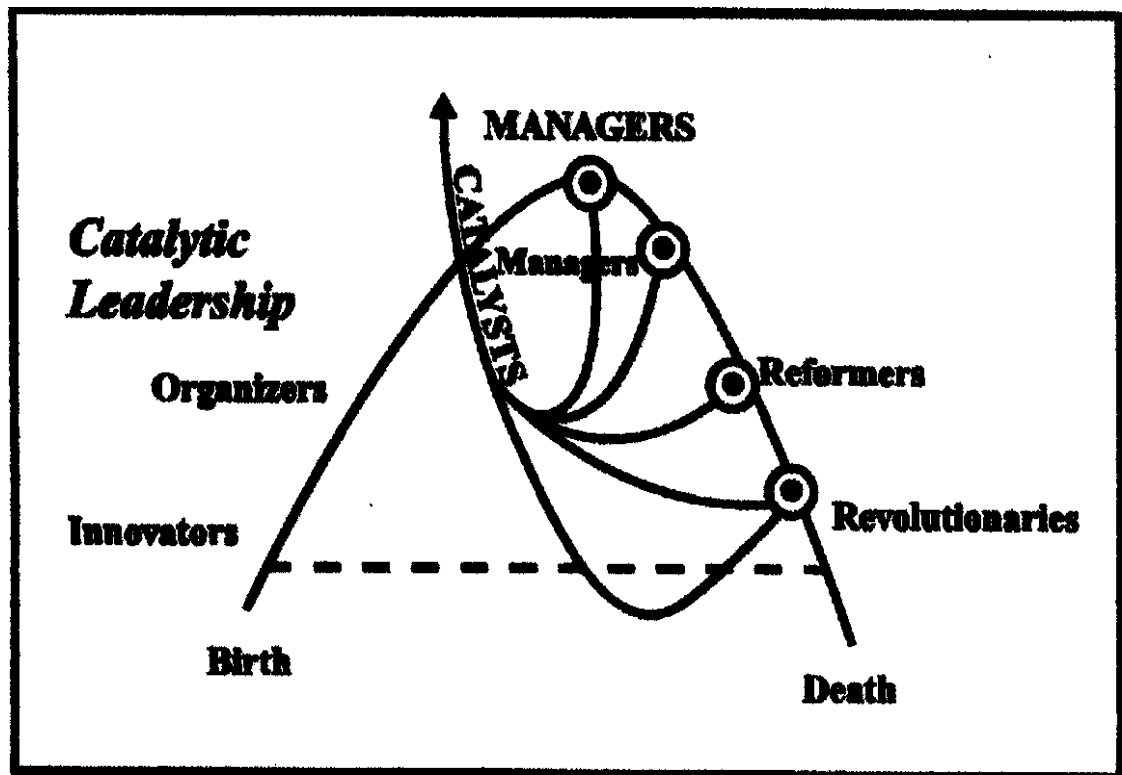


²¹ I have adapted the work of John Kotter in *Leading Change* for church and judicatory contexts in a day-long workshop, “Courage to Change.” A two day workshop, “Making Christ Known,” incorporates the change process, learnings from emerging churches, life cycle theory, and Natural Church Development. Coaching and Consultations may be available on request. Call (404) 583-8670 or email Tim Rogers-Martin at spiritedstrategy@mindspring.com for more information.

²² This typology was developed by the author in conversation with Loren Mead, founder of the Alban Institute. A follow up article is currently being written.

Catalytic Leadership and Transition

In addition to the types of pastoral leadership listed above, it takes **catalytic leadership** to lead a congregation fully through the change process from re-visioning through early implementation.²³ Such leadership is similar to the innovative leadership needed in childhood and adolescence, but requires patience and intervention techniques to work with established and often stuck systems as well.²⁴ It also may involve helping create a “new thing” from an existing organization. Note how catalytic leadership is important to the ministries of organizers, managers, reformers and revolutionaries over the life cycle. Such leadership is often brought into a system from outside for the express purposes of transition and transformation.



Simply stated, a catalytic leader is one that initiates and sustains planned change. Such a leader guides a transition that sets the context for transformation. Such a leader creates an environment where the hopes, concerns, passions, skills, spiritual gifts and

²³ The same catalytic leadership is essential for governing body transformation as well. This author recently served with a governing body in such a role as an Interim Transition Leader. Several related models of transitional leadership have developed in the last 3 years and deserve fuller research.

²⁴ The best treatment of innovative leadership in the early phases of the life cycle is found in the characterization of the “catalytic innovator” in *Extraordinary Leaders in Extraordinary Times*, edited by H. Stanley Wood. See bibliography for citation.

dreams of an organization merge with God's call for ministry in the world in such a way that there is a positive missional response. A catalytic leader seeks to bring a culture of spiritual discernment and creativity into systems, helps shape vision and goals in conjunction with organizing leadership, opens pathways for assimilation and renewal, and advocates for an outward focus to inward-oriented organizations. Pastorally, the catalytic leader creates an environment where planning may happen in the power of the Spirit. Organizationally the catalytic leader manages the transition to new structure, leadership, staff and budget in alignment with the new vision, mission and priorities formed in the planning phase. The catalytic leader also raises systemic issues and seeks to untangle relational blockages and barriers to effective communications. Finally the catalytic leader exits the system as the re-visioning process is complete and the system is gaining momentum towards a new future, or the catalytic leader re-contracts to lead the next phase of transformation.

Conclusions:

Ten Ways Understanding Church Life Cycle Research Can Benefit Congregational Health

1. Understanding the predictable nature of life cycles can aid in congregational planning and assessment.
2. the realization that all churches have a span of life—a time to be born and die—can take the sting out of death. Sometimes death is the healthiest option.
3. Currently about 80% of North American churches are on the downside of the life cycles. There needs to be frank discussion of the concept of redemptive death, where churches not reaching their ministry area close and leave legacies to promote mission and new church development.
4. Healthy churches—those on the upswing of their life cycle or recently leveling off—are the churches that are most capable of starting healthy new church developments.
5. When vision and outward relationships become secondary to internal ministry and structure, a church's life cycle will begin a downward slope. From here on out, recapturing a fresh sense of God's vision and embracing outward-oriented mission are necessary to start a new life cycle.
6. As a rule, the further down the life cycle changes are introduced, the less powerful an effect they will have on an organization that seeks to continue and grow in ministry health.

7. Churches that do start a new life cycle revitalize through the power of a fresh new vision for how the community (not the church) will be different and through capable leadership that focuses on persons “not there yet.”
8. There are certain types of leaders that are best able to lead churches at various phases in their life cycles. Such knowledge can benefit the pastoral call process as well as promote church health.
9. Sometimes it is wise to bring in leadership from outside the system to guide transition. A catalytic leader has assets to initiate change, manage transition and sustain healthy momentum into the early phases of transformation.
10. Catalytic leaders help congregations start new life cycles.

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Life Cycles and Church Health

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