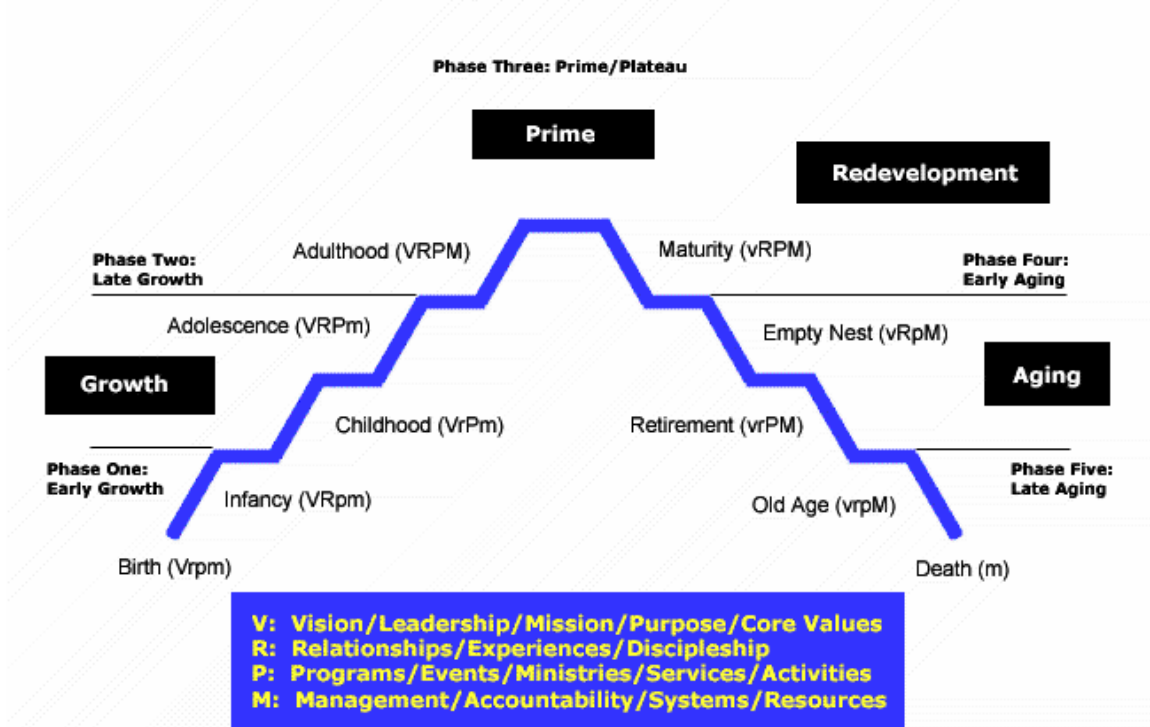


# **The Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development**

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## The Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development



## The Birth of a Congregation

### Overview

This article explores the ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase One: Early Growth, involves the first five to seven years of the life of a congregation. It includes the stages of Birth and Infancy.

To appropriately understand the Birth stage, it is necessary to look at the period of gestation, explore how the organizing principles of vision, relationships, programs, and management impact the Birth stage, review the characteristics of the Birth stage, and determine how a congregation makes the passage to the Infancy stage.

### Gestation

Gestation is a period of a couple of months to a couple of years before the Birth of a congregation when the idea of a new congregation is being developed through prayer, planning, and preparation.

Prayer involves seeking spiritual guidance about where and when new congregations ought to start to reach lost, unchurched, dechurched, or hurting people. Starting new congregations is a spiritual journey, not the franchising of a business. Therefore, to be successful it must embrace a God-led spiritual movement for the expansion and extension of His Kingdom through local New Testament faith communities.

Planning addresses the development of strategies for the starting of new congregations. These strategies can be denominational, parachurch, congregational, or individual. Traditionally denominations have taken the lead in developing strategies for new congregations. Increasingly parachurch organizations, congregations, and individuals who feel called to church starting are developing strategies in the vacuum left by denominational inactivity.

Preparation relates to specific steps to start a particular congregation. Usually a new congregation starts when a well-developed vision for a congregation emerges over a period. Seldom, except in the case of a split or separation group, does a congregation start without some preparation period.

Preparation must consider several factors. **First**, what is the vision that God has for this new congregation? **Second**, what will be the core ideology of this congregation, including its mission, purpose, and tentative core values? **Third**, what target group of people will this new congregation be uniquely situated to reach? **Fourth**, what are the logistics of the actual birth of this congregation, timing, location, and Birth methodology?

**Fifth**, what are the characteristics needed in the pastor of the congregation? **Sixth**, how will parenthood be handled as to sponsorship or mentoring by another congregation? **Seventh**, is this an intentional new congregation, or a split or separation group from another congregation?

### What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Birth Stage?

Birth is that period when vision is dominant, but relationships, programs, and management are not. Congregations at Birth are living out the mission, purpose, core values, and vision that God has given them for a new congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people. Vision is the fuel or energy that drives a new congregation forward.

Leadership is expressed through the vision, and assists in fueling the forward progress of the congregation. This leadership is God's leadership that empowers congregational leaders to seize the day. The period of Birth only lasts about six months to two years.

Vision should include a description of the audience to be reached, the methodology, the style of ministry, the outline of the belief system, and must be motivational. Vision must be sufficiently empowering to fuel a congregation forward for a generation.

New congregations engage in relationships activities, but generally not out of an intentional plan. Necessary programs are established, but few congregations take a long-term look at their program plans. Management is accomplished informally, and is generally put together as the congregation goes along.

### **What are the Characteristics of the Birth Stage?**

The Birth stage of a congregation tends to last six months to two years. It is characterized by a passion to fulfill the spiritual strategic vision of the congregation.

During this time the congregation seeks to establish healthy patterns of worship, evangelism and growth, discipleship, and ministry and missions. These healthy patterns flow from the passion to fulfill the strategic spiritual vision, and do not yet represent the formal development of the relationships, programs, or management factors.

While Birth begins once the congregation is launched, the status of the congregation in some denominational traditions may be that of mission rather than formal church. At some time the congregation may actually constitute or formally organize and incorporate as an entity separate from its parenthood. Usually this should not occur until the Infancy stage.

During the Birth stage congregations must deal with various issues. **First**, is our vision generational? Is it intended to provide leadership and focus for us for the first twenty or more years of the congregation? **Second**, what evangelism and congregational growth philosophy are we following? What methods do we need to use to bring the people to whom God has called us into a faith journey and community?

**Third**, how can we be missionary from the first day, while being the product of missions? How do we develop a servant mentality within the congregation while simultaneously being served by our sponsorship or parenthood?

**Fourth**, what leadership and ministry styles are lay and pastoral leaders expressing? Will they be able to make the shift to different leadership styles as the congregation develops through the growing stages of the life cycle?

**Fifth**, will the founding pastor have to leave to allow a pastor with a different set of gifts and skills to take us to the next stage? Will the congregation be stunted in its growth and development because the pastor does not adapt his gifts and skills, and does not move on in favor of a pastor who does have the necessary gifts and skills? **Sixth**, will the lay leadership make same or similar adjustments as the pastor, or will they also need to turnover? How will this leadership style crisis affect the congregation's ability to grow and develop in a healthy manner? How will it impact the congregation's ability to successfully navigate the passage to the Infancy stage?

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Infancy?**

The idea is for congregations that have been started to continue healthy development through the stages of the life cycle. The stage that follows Birth is Infancy. Dominant vision and relationships characterize this second stage, while programs and management have not been fully developed.

The relationships factor is the new dominant factor that joins vision. To successfully navigate the passage from Birth to Infancy, a congregation needs to begin acting like a congregation in Infancy. When it can do so comfortably, then it has probably navigated the passage.

## **The Infancy of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the second of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Infancy.

To appropriately understand the Infancy stage it is necessary to look at the transition from the Birth stage, understand the place of the organizing principles in the Infancy stage, review the characteristics of this stage, and determine how a congregation makes the passage to the Childhood stage.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage from Birth to Infancy?**

Congregations at Birth are living out the mission, purpose, core values, and vision that God has given them for a new congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people. Birth is that period when vision is dominant, but relationships, programs, and management are not. Vision is the fuel or energy that drives a new congregation forward.

Leadership is expressed through the vision, and assists in fueling the forward progress of the congregation. This leadership is God's leadership that empowers congregational leaders to seize the day. The period of Birth only lasts about six months to two years.

Ideally, congregations continue healthy development throughout the stages of the life cycle. Congregations should move naturally from the Birth stage to Infancy. Both vision and relationships are dominant in this second stage, while programs and management have not been fully developed.

The relationships factor is the new dominant factor that joins vision. To successfully navigate the passage from Birth to Infancy a congregation needs to begin acting like a congregation in Infancy. When it can do so comfortably, then it has probably navigated the passage.

### **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Infancy Stage?**

Infancy is that period when vision and relationships are dominant, but programs, and management are not. The period of Infancy lasts three to five years.

Congregations in Infancy are continuing to live out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people. Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle.

Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Discipleship patterns are expressed through the relationships factor, and assist in flavoring the congregation. These patterns hard wire the congregation's qualitative and quantitative growth patterns.

Infancy congregations engage in relationships activities that may represent an intentional plan. Necessary programs are continued, and some congregations begin to take a long-term look at their process and program plans. Management is accomplished informally, and is generally put together as the congregation goes along.

## **What are the Characteristics of the Infancy Stage?**

The Infancy stage of a congregation is characterized by a passion to fulfill the strategic spiritual vision of the congregation. In Infancy a congregation is flavored; that is, is establishing more clearly its identity. The congregation asks itself such questions as, Who are we?, What are our beliefs?, and What are our values?

During this time the congregation seeks to establish healthy patterns of evangelism, growth, discipleship, leadership development, and ministry and missions. These healthy patterns flow from the desire to establish ongoing relationships processes to fulfill the strategic spiritual vision. They do not yet represent the formal development of the programs, or management factors.

If the status of the congregation in their denominational tradition is still that of mission rather than formal church, they will probably constitute or formally organize and incorporate as an entity separate from its parenthood.

The five phases of relationships that the Infancy stage must address are, evangelism and outreach; entry and initial assimilation; fellowship, care ministry, and full assimilation; spiritual growth and leadership development; and, kingdom involvement and missional life style.

During the Infancy stage congregations must deal with various issues. **First**, are our relationships intentional? What evangelism and congregational growth philosophy are we following? Do we know whom we, as a faith community, are gifted to reach for membership, and to make a focus of our outreach and missions efforts? Do we have regular, organized patterns of relationships?

**Second**, do we have a clear understanding of our values and belief systems, or our spiritual identity? Have we adequately grounded our members, regular attenders, and prospects in the doctrines and disciplines of our congregation, and-as appropriate-our denominational family?

The effort to clarify identity at times causes some people who have been a part of the congregation to seek another congregation because they do not agree with the emerging belief system, or the identity of the congregation as it was being clarified.

**Third**, do we actively work to assimilate people into the fellowship and care ministry life of the congregation? Do we go beyond being friendly to helping new people to develop lasting friendships within the congregational family?

Offering a definition is important at this juncture. Assimilation is the intentional process by which believers become identified with a congregation, and are included in meaningful fellowship, care, spiritual growth, and leadership developing activities.

**Fourth**, what is our style of worship? Do we use a traditional pattern, a contemporary pattern, or a blended style of worship? What is the place of preaching and teaching in worship? What is the place of music and liturgy?

**Fifth**, what are our tactics for lay mobilization? How do we involve people in ministry and missions activities? Do we help people become fully devoted followers of Christ?

## **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Childhood?**

When a congregation is about five to six years old it then begins to face a new set of issues. Many of these revolve around better organization for the congregation. At first this organizational energy is focused on the need to better structure the program life of the congregation.

## **The Childhood of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the third of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Childhood. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Two: Late Growth, involves ten to twelve years of the life of a congregation that carries it from about five to six years old to seventeen to eighteen years old. It includes the stages of Childhood and Adolescence.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage from Infancy to Childhood?**

When a congregation is about five to six years old it then begins to face a new set of issues. Many of these revolve around better organization for the congregation. At first this organizational energy is focused on the need to better structure the program, ministries, and activities life of the congregation.

The stage that follows Infancy is Childhood. Dominant vision and programs characterize this third stage. Relationships diminish as programs becomes the new dominant factor that joins with vision to fuel the next several years of a congregation. The energy and resources that were going into relationships now go into programs.

To successfully navigate the passage from Infancy to Childhood, a congregation needs to begin acting like a congregation in Childhood. When it can do so without thinking about it, then it has probably navigated the passage. It has now left Phase One: Early Growth, and the numerical growth rate may slow down until potential strong surges some years later.

### **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Childhood Stage?**

Childhood is that period when vision and programs are dominant, but relationships and management are not. The period of Childhood lasts five to six years.

Congregations in Childhood are continuing to live out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people. Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people related to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

Childhood congregations engage in programs, ministries, and activities that may represent an intentional developmental plan. Necessary relationships are continued, but this factor does not have the same emphasis or excitement about it.

Many congregations by Phase Two: Late Growth, have lost the natural, informal, relational appeal that characterized the founding years of Phase One: Early Growth. Relationships came natural during Birth and Infancy, and very little effort was necessary to get people involved in new member recruitment and intentional spiritual discipleship. That early close fellowship period that seemed like the early church characterized in Acts chapter 2 is diminished, perhaps forever.

Management continues to be accomplished informally, unless the size and complexity of the congregation requires formalized management systems. Where this is the case, management is still done based on the personality of the managers, and not according to many formal, written systems. Something about structured management systems does not feel right, so they are avoided.

## **What are the Characteristics of the Childhood Stage?**

The Childhood stage of a congregation is characterized by an urgency to build programs, ministries, and activities similar to a full service congregation. Energy and resources that were dedicated to an intentional discipling system during Infancy are now dedicated to program development.

It appears that the congregation has decided that it is going to be around for a long time. Therefore, it feels that it needs a more visible program, ministries, and activities structure. At first these are simply to give form to the informal discipling activities of Infancy. Later success of these programs, ministries, and activities may become the desired end results for the congregation.

During the Childhood stage significant emphasis is given to broadening the scale, and deepening the scope of the programs, ministries, and activities for the chosen high priority target groups. In a family/household-oriented congregation, this can result in major emphasis on programs, ministries, and activities for children under eighteen years of age.

It is interesting to note that in many family/household-oriented congregations during these crucial program development years little, if any, emphasis is given to single adults, marriage enrichment for young and median age adults, and programs for senior adults. Some congregations who have thought deeply about the needs of their congregational members may be an exception in one or two of these areas.

An implication is that later when an emphasis on these stated groups is overdue, the development of adequate programming may come out of some crisis or conflict when a specific program is demanded by the members and regular attenders.

Several resource issues arise during Childhood. **First** is, what programs, ministries, and activities do we have budget and special gifts dollars to support? What can we fund through undesignated gifts, what will require designated gifts, and for what will we have to charge a fee?

**Second**, how should we focus our staff resources? Many congregations at this juncture have a pastor, secretary, and music director. Some will also have added a youth director. Several of these may not be full-time, if any are. A key question will be what staff responsibilities to add next.

**Third**, facilities will be an issue. Few congregations can accurately predict exactly what type of facilities they will need for future programming. Facilities may need to be renovated, programs groups moved around within the facilities, new facilities added, and new parking added. A key change and transition in the life of the congregation will be that more new members and regular attenders will indicate that it was the programs, ministries, and activities of the congregation that attracted them, rather than other elements.

## **The Adolescence of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the fourth of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Adolescence. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Two: Late Growth involves ten to twelve years of the life of a congregation. It includes the stages of Childhood and Adolescence.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Adolescence?**

When a congregation is about ten to twelve years old it then begins to move forward with new power potentially created by the success of its programs, ministries, and activities established during



Childhood. For the past five to six years it has struggled to provide the programming that fits its image of the potential of the congregation.

Now its hard work is beginning to pay off, and it shows signs of qualitative and quantitative success. Some of the sense of fellowship, identity and informality of Infancy begins to join the high task orientation of Childhood to create a new sense of energy about the future of the congregation.

The stage that follows Childhood is Adolescence. Dominant vision, relationships, and programs characterize this fourth stage. To navigate the passage from Childhood to Adolescence successfully, a congregation needs to begin acting like a congregation in Adolescence. When it can do so without thinking about it, then it has probably navigated the passage.

### **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Adolescence Stage?**

Adolescence is that period when vision, relationships and programs are dominant, but management is not. The period of Adolescence lasts six to eight years.

Congregations in Adolescence are continuing to live out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people. Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle.

Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

### **What are the Characteristics of the Adolescence Stage?**

The Adolescence stage of a congregation is characterized by a passion to fulfill the strategic spiritual vision of the congregation. Because fulfillment of this vision may be in sight, the congregation presses for a higher quality and quantity of ministry. Adolescence congregations engage in relationships and program activities focused on fulfilling their sense of their God-given vision.

Agendas addressed during Adolescence may include the following:

1. Staff and leadership
2. Buildings and equipment
3. Formalizing management systems
4. Dealing with competing priorities expressed by laity
5. Congregational emotions and awkwardness
6. Raising the quality of programs
7. Deepening personal spirituality and community relationships
8. Consideration of jumping the curve to a second life cycle rather than continuing into Adulthood in this life cycle
9. Doing significant and meaningful missions work and ministry projects
10. Working harder on assimilating new people who connect with the congregation.

Congregations in Adolescence truly act in an adolescent fashion. They have emotional extremes, and they are awkward in some of their actions and they are striving to be adults. Emotional extremes at times relate to attempts to over achieve as a congregation to meet self-imposed goals based on personal perceptions about what the congregation ought to look like by the time it reaches Adulthood.

Awkwardness occurs as the congregation seeks to deal with an infusion of new people and resources without an adequate management plan to handle these. The congregation may still be primarily operating on the management systems of Phase One: Early Growth. The current size and rate of growth that may be occurring causes inefficient and ineffective management practices based on this old style of management.

Competition is evident in the congregation. Two visions of the future seem to be dominant in the congregation. People who affiliated with the congregation during Birth or Infancy hold one vision. This is a vision of a strong worshiping community with intimate fellowship and care, and meaningful, corporate spirituality.

People who affiliated with the congregation during Childhood and Adolescence hold the other vision. The programs, ministries, and activities of the congregation that met specific needs of the family or household attracted them. Their vision is one of a full service, family-focused congregation with opportunities for meaningful, individual spirituality.

The competition shows up in various decisions the congregation faces. One relevant type of decision is what should be the responsibilities of the next staff person. Those who affiliated during Birth and Infancy would like for the next person to focus on enhancement of worship, pastoral care, and running the management of the church in a correct manner. Those who affiliated during Childhood and Adolescence would like age group ministers, and a focus on family life and marriage enrichment.

The competition also shows up in what function the congregation wants in their next building. Those who affiliated during Birth and Infancy are looking forward to the worship center or formal fellowship space, about which they have been dreaming. Those who affiliated during Childhood and Adolescence want more first quality, age-graded program space or recreational space.

At times this competition can result in unhealthy conflict situations. Usually these situations can be dealt with effectively during Adolescence because the greater good of the approaching Adulthood stage keeps the congregation focused on moving forward together. Occasionally these situations result in the congregation separating into two or more congregations in response to conflicting visions of the future.

## **The Adulthood of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the fifth of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Adulthood. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Three: Prime/Plateau involves seven to nine years of the life of a congregation. It includes the stages of Adulthood and Maturity.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Adulthood?**

When a congregation is about eighteen to twenty-two years old, it begins to move forward with increased certainty and ease. If the formalizing of the management systems has occurred in an empowering and non-disruptive manner, then the congregation is operating with increased efficiency and effectiveness.

During Adolescence the congregation worked hard to deal with the ambiguity or fuzziness caused by the competition among high priority concerns. Its people and financial resource base, which was a struggle during Adolescence, begins to expand and lower the stress felt by leadership individuals.

With greater efficiency and effectiveness, and a broader resource base, the congregation's self-esteem increases, and it begins to show pride in the success of its ministry.

The stage that follows Adolescence is Adulthood. All four organizing principles are dominant during this fifth stage. To navigate the passage from Adolescence to Adulthood successfully, a congregation needs to begin acting like a congregation in Adulthood. When it can do so without thinking about it, then it has probably navigated the passage.

### **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Adulthood Stage?**

Adulthood is that period when vision, relationships, programs, and management are all four dominant. The period of Adulthood lasts three to five years.

Congregations in Adulthood are continuing to live out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people.

Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle. Vision is the current understanding of God's spiritual strategic direction for a congregation that is cast by leadership and owned by membership.

Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

The primary role of management is to provide the systems and structures that work in an integrative pattern to undergird the fulfillment of vision, and the implementation of relationships and programs.

### **What are the Characteristics of the Adulthood Stage?**

Adulthood is characterized by a congregation that is in its prime. It is relaxed. It is successful. It has a positive spirit. It is focused. It is clear about its vision, and its vision shares broad ownership in the congregation. It is positive about its future. It feels that it can accomplish anything to which it sets its mind, as long as it matches the will of God for the congregation.

People are becoming connected and joining the membership of the congregation. An increasing number of people are involved in intentional discipling processes. Spiritual growth is occurring in the congregation.

The worship services, particularly the music, are considered excellent. The congregation may have multiple worship services, each of which appeals to a different target group of people. Attendance at worship services is as large or larger than it has ever been.

The programs, ministries and activities of the congregation are successful qualitatively and quantitatively. The congregation has several programs for which it is well known in community, metropolitan area, or county. It has quality, age-graded programs, and may have one or more age-graded programs that are considered the best in the area.

Its formal management systems are working well. Many of the management systems have been recently reengineered to match the size, complexity, and stage of the congregation.

The congregation has facilities of which they are proud. They have built most of the buildings they had planned to build, with the possible exception of a specialty building such as a leisure center, or an ultimate worship center or sanctuary.

The demographic characteristics of the congregation are more diverse than ever in the history of the congregation. Overall the congregation is beginning to age in terms of the mean and median age of members, and those otherwise connected with the congregation.

Until this point the congregations that have not had a significant senior adult population find that this group is growing fast. The congregation is having to respond to more senior adult-oriented ministry needs than ever before.

A crucial characteristic is that the congregation may not be aware that this may be as good as it gets. It may not know that this is Adulthood. Having never been there, if this is the first life cycle of the congregation, they do not recognize Adulthood.

Often the high morale of the congregation parallels the strong sense of mission, purpose, core values, and vision. The congregation feels that it is contributing significantly to the work of the Kingdom. High levels of satisfaction are expressed related to the role and function of the staff.

Now that some stresses related to finances have begun to ease, the congregation is beginning to plan what new programs, staff positions, missions project, and facilities it will fund during the coming decade. Adulthood tends to last around four to six years. Then the congregation is ready to move forward to the next stage.

## **The Maturity of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the sixth of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Maturity. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Three: Prime/Plateau involves seven to nine years of the life of a congregation. It includes the stages of Adulthood and Maturity.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Maturity?**

When a congregation is approximately a generation old—twenty-two to twenty-seven years old—it then moves to the second part of Phase Three, which is Plateau. Unlike some previous passages, it is not necessary for much intentional action to occur for the movement from Adulthood to Maturity to occur.

The congregation makes the passage from Adulthood to Maturity simply by relaxing and taking a breath as an organism following a generation of hard work. It takes its success and its vision for granted, and assumes that it will always be present and dominant.

After a generation of life, a congregation loses its sense of vision. This happens in several different ways for various reasons. **First**, after a generation the congregation may have achieved or fulfilled its founding vision.

**Second**, the congregation may have grown weary of seeking to achieve or fulfill its founding vision, and thus allowed the vision to drop from dominance. **Third**, the people who helped cast the founding vision might not be related to the congregation anymore, and there are insufficient carriers of the vision.

**Fourth**, the vision may no longer be relevant to the context or situation of the congregation so it has been cast aside. **Fifth**, so many new people may have joined the congregation who do not understand the founding vision, and it has not been adequately shared with them, that there is no longer a critical mass of people pursuing that vision.

For whatever reason, when vision is no longer dominant then the congregation quietly, without notice to many people, slips to the stage of Maturity.

## **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Maturity Stage?**

Maturity is that period when relationships, programs, and management are dominant. Vision is no longer dominant. Management is controlling the direction of the congregation.

Congregations in Maturity are no longer living out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people. Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Relationships are still happening in the life of the congregation, but the focus has turned to the output of Kingdom involvement, and not the input of introducing persons to a spiritual and congregational journey.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

Programs may rise to their greatest qualitative height during Maturity. The momentum created during Adulthood propels many programs, ministries and activities forward to operational excellence. The financial and other resources are greater than they have ever been.

The primary role of management is to provide the systems and structures that work in an integrative pattern to undergird the fulfillment of vision, and the implementation of relationships and programs.

During Maturity the management factor moves into the driver's seat as the primary initiator of action in the congregation.

## **What are the Characteristics of the Maturity Stage?**

A congregation that is past its prime characterizes maturity. It is more passive than active. It is still successful in many areas. For the most part it has a positive spirit.

However, it is no longer focused. It is no longer clear about its vision. The success culture of the congregation keeps it moving forward. It is blind to the fact that it no longer has an empowering vision that is fueling it forward.

The quality of intentional discipling processes is high. Spiritual growth is occurring in the congregation. Not as many new people are being added to the membership, or becoming connected as were added or connected during Adulthood.

The worship services, particularly the music, are still considered excellent. The congregation has several programs for which it is well known in its community, metropolitan area, or county. It has quality, age-graded programs, and may have one or more age-graded programs considered the best in the area.

Its formal management systems, while working well, are now in control of any movement of the congregation forward or backward. In their meetings, the agenda items of management groups focus around how to sustain and institutionalize the gains of the congregation, rather than taking new initiatives that involve risk.

The feeling is that what the congregation is currently doing is working. There is no felt need to change. Besides, the finances of the congregation have never been better. In fact the congregation has probably oversubscribed its budget for the past several years.

Because finances are so good, and there are few other challenges for the congregation, they decide to construct the building they had always wanted to have, but could not afford. At times this building is a new sanctuary or worship center. Other times it is a family life or leisure center.

The demographic characteristics of the congregation are diverse. The congregation is continuing to age in terms of the mean and median age of members and those otherwise connected with the congregation.

The fastest growing demographic group is senior adults. Children and youth under age eighteen are plateaued or declining in number. The average tenure of attenders, or length of membership may be greater than ever in the history of the congregation.

In selected portions of the congregation the morale of the members and average attendee is beginning to decline. At the same time the congregation feels that it is contributing significantly to the work of the Kingdom.

Some of its missions and ministries projects are experiencing greater success than ever before. More people are volunteering for missions and ministries projects than at any previous time.

## **The Empty Nest of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the seventh of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Empty Nest. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Four: Early Aging involves an indefinable number of years in the life of a congregation. It includes the stages of Empty Nest and Retirement.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Empty Nest?**

When a congregation is twenty-five to thirty-five years old, it then moves to Phase Four, which is Early Aging. This occurs when the lack of an empowering vision begins to have visible impact on the quality and quantity of programs, ministries, and activities.

It is not intentional effort that moves a congregation from Maturity to Empty Nest, but the lack of it. When a congregation does not respond to the incipient qualitative and quantitative changes of Maturity, it allows the need to hold on to past gains to give more control and authority to its management systems.

Congregational members and regular attendees begin to forget that it was an empowering vision that helped them to realize their greatest potential during Adulthood. A few people who realize what is happening begin to press the leaders of the congregation to respond with greater zeal to the opportunities and challenges the congregation faces.

### **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Empty Nest Stage?**

Empty Nest is that period when relationships and management are dominant. Vision and programs are no longer dominant. Management is controlling the direction of the congregation.

Congregations in Empty Nest are no longer living out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people.

Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle. Vision is the current understanding of God's spiritual strategic direction for a congregation that is cast by leadership and owned by membership.

Programs, which had just finished rising to their greatest qualitative height during Maturity, now are in quantitative decline. Soon they will experience qualitative decline. However, congregations notice the loss of numbers first. It notices that worship attendance is decreasing, as well as the attendance in various programs, ministries and activities.

The quality drops as the same level of gifted and skilled people are not present to carry out the programs. As congregational members and attendees comment and act on the loss of quantity and quality, the loss intensifies.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

Relationships are still happening in the life of the congregation, but not at the rate that is sufficient to replace either the active people who are not longer attending, or the inactive people joining other congregations.

Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Management, which moved into the driver's seat during Maturity, is now well established in its new lead role. Any hope of a quick return of vision as the driving force is gone, and congregational members and regular attendees begin to realize this situation.

The primary role of management is to provide the systems and structures that work in an integrative pattern to under gird the fulfillment of vision, and the implementation of relationships and programs.

### **What are the Characteristics of the Empty Nest Stage?**

Empty Nest is that stage of a congregation's life cycle when it is at first nostalgic, and later angry about the loss of the past. Ultimately the congregation will look for something or someone to blame for the situation in which they find themselves.

During Empty Nest the programs begin to disintegrate. This is the Avis Rent-A-Car period of the life of the congregation. The congregational motto is, we try harder, but we're still number two.

Congregations redouble efforts because attendance is down, money growth has stopped as compared to increases in the Consumer Price Index, usually outstanding programs are second best compared to what they used to be, and confidence in the ability of the pastor to lead the congregation has diminished.

Some people are convinced that it is a matter of commitment. If everyone were just more committed to the congregation, then things would be better. Harder work is requested from the pastors, staff, and lay leaders. More sacrificial offerings are insisted on. More regular attendance at events other than the primary worship services is held up as a sign of peoples' commitment.

Empty Nest starts with a spirit of nostalgia. The hope exists that tomorrow will bring a return of yesterday. The stories told by long-term members of the glory years are not recognizable to newcomers as identifying the same congregation. People talk specifically about the way things used to be. Most of the dreams are of events of the past instead of visions of the future.

The longer a congregation remains in Empty Nest, the more likely the nostalgia will turn to anger. When this happens, the barriers may not just be ones of aging, but also ones of dysfunction.

Blaming becomes a popular topic of congregational fellowships. A layperson, a lay group, a staff person, or the pastor may become the focus of blaming. The rhetoric becomes pagan as people want to symbolically sacrifice someone to the gods of success.

The thoughts are to get back, not move forward, to the way we used to be. Whatever is not functioning to past standards must be the object of increased efforts to make it work better.

The congregation in Empty Nest may telegraph its time focus by the age group it wants to target with the most efforts. Congregations who want to target teenagers want to focus on yesterday. Those who want to target senior adults want to focus on today. Finally, congregations who want to target adults ages 25 to 45 and their children want to focus on tomorrow.

Empty Nest congregations tend to have the most severe conflict of any stage of development. Second are Retirement congregations; third are Adolescent congregations; and fourth are Infancy congregations. In Empty Nest the conflict comes about as angry people clash, but do not necessarily leave the congregation in large numbers.

## **The Retirement of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the eighth of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Retirement. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Four: Early Aging involves an indefinable number of years in the life of a congregation. It includes the stages of Empty Nest and Retirement.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Retirement?**

Time has broken down at this point in the life cycle. Knowing how long a congregation may remain in Empty Nest is difficult. It appears that a congregation can go through multiple rounds of Empty Nest before either redeveloping or moving farther down the Aging side of the life cycle.

The key factor that sets in when a congregation is getting ready to move from Empty Nest to Retirement is private despair. Part of the despair may be weariness from the struggles of Empty Nest.

Long-term members begin to feel that their congregation is no longer a good place to invite new people to come for worship, spiritual growth, and fellowship. As a result they become hesitant in their ministry to lost, unchurched, dechurched, and hurting people.

Retirement begins to emerge when these same people begin to express excitement about making another major effort to turn around the congregation. They look forward to revitalized and new programs that a newer, younger pastor, and the new members that he can attract, can start.

### **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Retirement Stage?**

Retirement is that period when programs and management are dominant. Vision and relationships are no longer dominant. Management is controlling the direction of the congregation.



Congregations in Retirement are no longer living out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people.

Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle. Vision is the current understanding of God's spiritual strategic direction for a congregation that is cast by leadership and owned by membership.

Programs, which were diminished in Empty Nest, revitalize and are again dominant. This is because permission is given and resources are provided for new program emphases.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

Relationships are now diminished. The natural fellowship of the congregation is wounded. Few core leaders and long-term members invite people to become a part of the congregation.

Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Management, which moved into the driver's seat during Maturity, is now in firm control of the congregation. Any hope of a return of vision as the driving force is gone, and congregational members and regular attendees begin to realize this, and feel they must empower new programmatic efforts.

The primary role of management is to provide the systems and structures that work in an integrative pattern to under gird the fulfillment of vision, and the implementation of relationships and programs.

### **What are the Characteristics of the Retirement Stage?**

Many long-term members and attendees decided at the end of Empty Nest that this is no longer a good place to invite people to come and be members and attendees. Simultaneously they want the congregation to be alive and vital long enough to help them with various life passages, including their own death.

Existing members and attendees may feel that new people will be disappointed in the congregation. Or, new people may want to change the congregation, and if it does not work, then the congregation may be weaker than it is already.

However, existing members would love it if some effort were successful at again filling the sanctuary with worshipers, and restoring the congregation to past glory. Therefore, the stakeholders in the congregation who have been members or regular attendees for 20 years or more, have been professing Christians for 40 years or more, and are 60 years of age or more give permission for the newer, younger members and attendees to try new programmatic directions.

At times this takes the form of an appeal made to a prospective pastor. The pastor search committee urges the new pastor to come lead them into a new era of transformation. Change, transitions, and new ideas are said to be welcomed and supported.

The stakeholders really do not realize what they have asked for. They want the congregation to experience qualitative and quantitative growth that is congruent with the patterns of the past. They do not realize that the necessary changes will probably result in forms and styles very different from the past.

Simultaneously, the new pastor, and the newer, younger members and attendees hear what they want to hear. They seek to move forward in new programmatic directions claiming that it is the new way of doing congregational ministry for the third millennium.

The stakeholders cannot usually articulate well the changes that are acceptable. They will affirm change, but they do not want to have to accept too many personal transitions, or create a congregation that is not held in high esteem in the denomination or the community.

The ideal new member or regular attendee household for the stakeholders to accept would be a family with the parents in the age range 25 to 45, the father only works full-time outside the home, the wife is available during the week for volunteer activities, they have two or three children, they are hard workers who volunteer for preschool, children and/or youth leadership responsibilities, they tithe their income through the congregation, and they do not aspire to top congregational elected leadership positions.

About 18 to 24 months into the changes initiated by newer, younger leaders the stakeholders may realize that things are not working the way they thought they would. If so, they seek to stop the change efforts, and—if necessary—get rid of or discourage the leaders of the changes.

Retirement congregations may actually split when this happens. Whether the stakeholders leave or the newer, younger leaders leave depends on how successful the changes have been, and for how long the change efforts have taken place.

## **The Old Age of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the ninth of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Old Age. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Five: Late Aging involves an indefinable number of years in the life of a congregation. It includes the Old Age and Death stages.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage from Retirement to Old Age?**

Congregations in Retirement may repeat this stage several times before redeveloping, or moving on to the next stage, Old Age. How many times the congregation aborts attempts at redevelopment does not have a consistent pattern. It will vary from congregation to congregation.

A congregation in Retirement is like a truck without four-wheel drive stuck in mud to its axles, and it cannot get out without help. At some point the congregation gives up hope, or runs out of resources to mount a change and transition effort.

Rather than give permission for a new round of programmatic efforts to redevelop the congregation, they give up. When this happens the congregation slips quietly into Old Age.

This may occur following a split, or following the leaving of a pastor they felt would be able to lead them forward, but instead he gave up.

Old Age comes when the congregation is at rest. The congregation becomes a preaching station or chaplaincy ministry.

### **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Old Age Stage?**

Old Age is that period when management is the only one of the four organizing principles which is dominant. Vision, relationships, and programs are no longer dominant. Management is the only thing left to control the direction of the congregation.

Congregations in Old Age are no longer living out the vision that God has given them for a congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or target group of people.

Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle. Vision is the current understanding of God's spiritual strategic direction for a congregation that is cast by leadership and owned by membership.

The last efforts from inside the congregation to be revitalized or renewed by programs have failed. During Retirement several valiant efforts were made to renew the congregation, but they were not sustained long enough to bring about true transformational change.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

Relationships are no longer happening in the congregation. This factor was wounded during Retirement, and is now dormant. Relationships extend primarily to the people who have been members of the congregation for many years, plus their extended family members or long-term friends.

Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Management, which includes the formal and informal culture of the congregation, is the only thing bringing ongoing life to the congregation. Management may find itself struggling with issues of the congregational resources. These include the facilities, the finances, and the pastor and any remaining staff.

The primary role of management is to provide the systems and structures that work in an integrative pattern to under gird the fulfillment of vision, and the implementation of relationships and programs.

### **What are the Characteristics of the Old Age Stage?**

Old Age is that stage of a congregation's life cycle when it is functioning on fumes rather than being fueled by vision. The habit or pattern of gathering for worship and fellowship is the primary factor keeping the congregation going.

The congregation is now at subsistence level. It is a preaching station, or a chaplaincy ministry. Death is not necessarily nearby, but proactive meaningful congregation life that is generating new energy is gone.

Worship life is full of precious memories. Homecomings and anniversaries still play an important part in the life of the congregation. Memorial gifts to the congregation almost become the object of worship rather than instruments or enhancements of worship.

The Jonah Syndrome controls fellowship life in the congregation. This is a fear of being swallowed up. So the congregation is afraid to take any risks that might diminish the precious few resources it has left.

The most significant numbers counted in Old Age congregations are the number of funerals, and the number of people who are homebound or in the nursing section of senior adult housing.

If the congregation moved to Old Age following a conflict, which may have included a split in the fellowship, then it carries a lot of bitterness into this stage. This bitterness is actually energy that can be used to help the congregation do some significant Kingdom work during this stage.

Any positive, proactive ministry of the congregation will probably come from its management resources. For example, if its facilities are in relatively good shape, then they may become an incubation center for new congregations [particularly non-English language/culture], a community center for neighborhood organizations, or a source of income for a merger or relocation.

If the congregation now has low expectation of internal ministry, and is not burdened by salaries and facilities expenses, then it may be providing significant dollars to missions work, or community ministry projects.

If the demands on the full-time pastor are not high, then he may become meaningfully engaged in community or denominational ministries. It is also possible that this type of congregation will provide meaningful on-the-job training for persons new to pastoral or staff ministry. Many of these latter people will be bi-vocational.

## **The Death of a Congregation**

### **Overview**

This article explores the tenth of ten stages of development in the life cycle and stages of congregational development: Death. The ten stages are grouped into five phases. Phase Five: Late Aging involves an indefinable number of years in the life of a congregation. It includes the Old Age and Death stages.

### **How Does a Congregation Make the Passage to Death?**

Death is not necessarily imminent or inevitable for Old Age congregations. It is not imminent in that Old Age congregations generally have the ability and resources to survive long past any viable, proactive ministry life.

Particularly congregations in town and country areas where the context is not changing much can survive for generations at a subsistence level.

Death is not inevitable in that a radical turnaround process in a context with potential is possible anytime. To give up on Old Age congregations is to suggest a limit to God's ability.

However, when the resources of the congregation cannot sustain the life of the congregation, it may die. When the people who are the core group of the congregation no longer wish to continue the congregation, it will probably die.

When community change and transition eliminate the residential community around the facilities, or when the facilities are taken for community development projects, then the congregation will die-at least in this setting. It may live in another form in another setting.

In some cases, when a denomination with the authority to do so chooses to close down the congregation, then it dies. Yet death is not necessarily the end.

## **What is the Place of the Organizing Principles in the Death Stage?**

Death is that period when none of the four organizing principles is dominant. Vision, relationships, and programs are no longer even present. Management is the only organizing principle left, and its role is brief and confined.

The purpose of management at death is to handle an orderly transition of the resources of the congregation. Resources at this juncture may include, but not be limited to, facilities, equipment, materials, remaining financial reserves, the membership rolls of the congregation, and historical items.

For review, here is the general function of the four organizing principles.

Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle. Vision is the current understanding of God's spiritual strategic direction for a congregation that is cast by leadership and owned by membership.

Relationships are the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.

Programs are the functional attempts to provide projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

The primary role of management is to provide the systems and structures that work in an integrative pattern to under gird the fulfillment of vision, and the implementation of relationships and programs.

## **What are the Characteristics of the Death Stage?**

At Death a congregation ceases to exist as a community of worship, discipleship, and fellowship. The desire is gone to meet regularly to worship God, to engage in spiritual growth activities, and to actively organize for fellowship and mutual support.

Probably all three of these need to exist in some regular form for congregational life to be viable. What dies when these three are not present is the congregational movement.

Separate, in a sense, from the congregational movement may still be a corporation or institution in existence with which someone must deal. It is like the difference between a person dying, or life being gone, and the need to address the issues of a remaining temporal body.

Just as a funeral would typically be held for a person, with their body being the center of human focus, so it is appropriate to engage in a ceremony that commemorates the rites of passage related to a congregational body.

Many spiritual rites of passages have occurred within that congregational body. It is appropriate to celebrate these, and to help people deal with their grief. Just as dealing with the loss of a friend or family member is hard, dealing with the loss of a congregation and its facilities is hard.

During the latter stages of congregational life many members and regular attendees probably deepened their inability to divide their faith in Christ from the cultural practices of a specific congregation in a specific location.

Death is not inevitable for any congregation. The life cycle and stages of development are not deterministic; that is, if a congregation has a Birth, it is not inevitable that it will have a Death.

Congregations can and do redevelop and move forward to a new partial life cycle that may last a minimum of seven to nine years. Congregations at Death can have a Resurrection.

Having said that Death is not inevitable, congregations who are aging, are dysfunctional, and who wait until Phase Five: Late Aging to seek a turnaround are unlikely to experience a positive, successful future. They may not avoid Death.

Early intervention in the life of congregations is needed. Often when congregations die, it is because they did not cherish life enough.

### **When is Death Not Necessarily Recorded as Death?**

The death of a congregation is not always recorded as death. At times actions are taken during Retirement or Old Age that help a congregation to escape death, but without this rescue the congregation would have died.

Rescues include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. A dying congregation merges with one or more congregations.
2. A dying congregation relocates into a growing area in hopes that people will join their congregation, but does so out of weakness rather than from an intentional, passionate vision for the future.
3. A dying congregation is adopted by another congregation and absorbed into their fellowship.
4. A dying congregation reverts to mission status, is managed by its denomination.

### **What Happens After the Death Stage? Is Death the End?**

Death is the end for this particular congregation. However, a congregation that has experienced Death can live on in a resurrected form. Resurrection is one of the Redevelopment strategies that will be discussed in future editions of Congregational Passages.

As a preview, here is a list of some ways congregations who experience Death can live through a Resurrection:

1. Another congregation can purchase the facilities and provide Christian ministry to the community targeted by the former congregation.
2. The resources of the former congregation can be used to give life to other congregations.
3. A remnant from the former congregation can be part of the Birth of a new congregation.
4. Their denomination can use the financial asset of the former congregation to start new congregations.

Humanly we would call many of these an organ donation. In a spiritual sense they are in the spirit of a Resurrection.