

# REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF CHURCH LIFE CYCLES

## INTRODUCTORY IDEAS

1. George Bullard has broken the life cycle of a congregation into ten distinct periods. Those periods are:

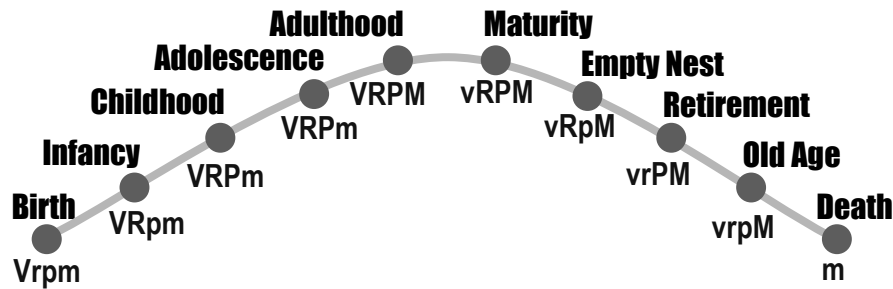
### Upside of Life Cycle

Birth  
 Infancy  
 Childhood  
 Adolescence  
 Adulthood

### Downside of Life Cycle

Maturity  
 Empty Nest  
 Retirement  
 Old Age  
 Death

## LIFECYCLE OF A CHURCH



<p><b>V = Vision . . . . . Where should we go?</b>  <b>R = Relationship . . . Whom should we bring?</b>  <b>P = Program . . . . . How will we get there?</b>  <b>M = Management . . . What should we avoid?</b></p>
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2. Most congregations do not fit Bullard's categories perfectly. However, one category usually predominates which enables a congregation to determine its current life cycle status.

3. Congregations on the upward side of their life cycle can reach their peak and start down in seven years or less. This rapid movement, unlike the past, now occurs due to living in a culture where change has become the norm.

4. Highly dysfunctional congregations (those that have been on the downside of their life cycle for a long time) usually need time to prepare to create a new life cycle. This preparation time can take from one to five years. However, once it begins the congregation probably has no more than two years to make the systemic changes required to start a new life cycle. It may take

another three years to solidify the systemic changes that have been introduced. The preparation for change and the change process can be accelerated with outside help from either a denomination or the establishment of a mentoring relationship with either another congregation or consultant.

5. Congregations reaching the peak of their life cycle (adulthood) can not stay there for more than three to five years without beginning to decline. Such congregations need to create a new life cycle while they are at their peak.

### Preparing congregations for major change

1. Pastors need to create a great sense of urgency while at the same time casting a compelling vision. The purpose of creating urgency is to make the status quo unacceptable while the purpose of casting vision is to paint a preferable future. These two concepts are the negative and positive foundation for fundamental change. Failure to cast vision while creating urgency makes it nearly impossible to prepare a highly dysfunctional congregation to be open to change.

2. The pastor needs to be creating and discipling three groups while creating urgency and casting vision. The first group is those who will pray for the congregation to become outward focused willing to take responsibility for changing a community. The second group is the initiators who will help plan the change process. The third group is the leaders who will help the pastor lead the change when it comes.

3. The pastor while creating urgency, casting vision, developing the three groups also works concurrently at developing a coalition of people who will be open to following the pastor's leadership when the change begins to happen.

4. Once these things are in place the congregation is ready to begin the change process to create a new life cycle for the congregation. It is at this juncture that it is best to enlist outside assistance to facilitate and accelerate the change process.

### Creating a new life cycle

1. Bullard states that there are four key issues that determine a life cycle. Those issues are **vision, relationships, programs, and management**. When **vision** and **relationships** are driving a congregation's agenda the church will be experiencing the upward side of the life cycle. However, when **management** and **programs** are controlling the agenda the church will be on the downward side of the life cycle. When all four of these issues are at their peak the congregation is at its peak in terms of the life cycle. Therefore it is important to understand what is involved in each one of the four issues.

2. **Vision**: There are three major elements that relate to Bullard's use of the term vision. Those three elements are *mission, vision, and values*.

**MISSION**: Mission is the bottom-line reason why a congregation exists. The mission is either to minister primarily to those within the body, minister primarily to those not yet within the

body, or to do both. If the last option is chosen, then the congregation must put those outside the body as the group that will receive priority status when it comes to the overall ministry of the congregation. This then focuses the congregation outward. **CONGREGATIONS ON A DOWNWARD LIFE CYCLE DO NOT CHANGE THEIR LIFE CYCLE UNTIL THEY BECOME FOCUSED OUTWARD !**

VISION: Vision describes the results when the mission is successfully implemented. The vision must always be bigger than the congregation describing how the congregation will change the community in which it exists. Vision produces passion for ministry. **A COMPELLING VISION OFTEN MOTIVATES A CONGREGATION TO MAKE THE CHANGES NEEDED TO MOVE FROM A DOWNWARD LIFE CYCLE TO AN UPWARD ONE REFLECTING NEW HEALTH.**

VALUES: Values are the boundaries that guide the mission and form the parameters for the vision. All congregations have values. The question is whether the values reflect an outward or inward focus. **NEW MISSION AND VISION INITIATIVES ARE NOT ACCOMPLISHED WITHOUT THE ADOPTION OF NEW VALUES CONSISTENT WITH THOSE INITIATIVES.**

3. **Relationships**: The ability for people to develop relationships with other people is crucial for changing the life cycle of a congregation. We must remember that people are not looking for friendly congregations. Rather they are looking for a congregation where they can make friends. If people cannot develop meaningful and sustained relationships quickly they will not stay or be attracted to congregations. Small congregations are only friendly to those who are already a part of the congregation. Large congregations grow large because people can make friends easily on their terms. There are at least five key concepts that are crucial to relationships as this term is used in regards to life cycles.

SATURATED AND UNSATURATED RELATIONSHIPS: People are like “LEGOS” in that they only have so many pegs to connect with other people. Therefore, they can only have a limited number of meaningful relationships. That is why new people must constantly be being connected with people who are relatively new to the congregation.

THIRD PLACES: Everyone needs a place where they are accepted or valued as a person for who they are, not what they do.

GROUP DYNAMICS: Different size groups meet for different purposes. These purposes cannot be interchanged.

Large groups – Unity for worship and mission  
Mid-size groups – Fellowship and teaching  
Small groups – Intimacy and accountability

TRANSITIONS: People do not resist change, which is what occurs in organizations when they move from a downward life cycle to an upward one. People resist the loss of what was comfortable, provided status and influence, and made them feel significant.

Understanding transitions enables change agents to identify that loss, develop plans to deal with the loss, and validate the grief that goes with the loss. Transition plans often enable change to occur with a minimum of resistance.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR NICHE: Local congregations do not minister to all the variety of groups of people in the community. That is why God has placed a number of congregations in one community. His Body is comprised of numerous bodies to reach a variety of people. Therefore, each congregation must understand the (gifts, talents, abilities, backgrounds, etc.) mix that God has provided to reach different kinds of people. It also means that each congregation must study the people groups God has prepared it to reach in order to maximize its effectiveness. Growing congregations think like missionaries. Healthy congregations are always removing cultural barriers and building cultural bridges to people in order to reach them.

4. **Programs:** The purpose of programs in a congregation is to help disciples mature and to aid disciples in the making of more disciples. Therefore, programs must meet needs people have and contribute to the growth and health of both individuals and the entire congregation. In missional congregations programs that do not grow must either be changed or eliminated. Therefore, there are two major questions that constantly need to be asked of all programs in a congregation, those questions are:

*How does this program contribute to an outward focused mission?*

Does it attract new unchurched people?  
Do the people leading this program understand its strategic significance  
and are they intentionally designing it to reach people?  
Is this program growing?

*What is the strategy that underlies all of what we do with our programs?*

Do our programs reflect missionary thinking?  
Are we willing to start with people where they are to move them to where they  
should be?  
Are our programs growing?

## **ONE MODEL FOR PROGRAMS**

Why? Convert consumers into committed disciples of Jesus Christ  
Which ones? Meet culturally determined ministry expectations

Worship and Music  
Relationships/Groups/Friends

Care: Newcomer care/Member care  
Meet family needs: Infants, children, youth, adults  
Education: Training and personal development  
Preaching  
Well-kept facilities  
Financial stability

(A program not assumed culturally but demanded for health and growth is  
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT) !!!!

How? These programs meet the expectations of people (missionary thinking).  
These programs must occur since they are culturally determined.  
These programs are staff led (staff may be volunteer, pt, or full-time).

5. **Management**: Management is like a skeleton in a body. If the skeleton can be seen, then the body is in trouble, yet without a skeleton the body will collapse. Also, in healthy bodies, skeletons grow and develop so the body can grow. For any congregational management system to be effective three major things must happen.

The leader must be growing and developing as a leader while developing more leaders.

The growth of any organization is in proportion to the leaders being developed within the organization.

The pastor usually works with three groups in developing leaders; the staff, the board, and key people in the congregation.

Without intentional leadership development the congregation will experience sustained healthy growth.

Leadership always marries three terms that reflect how work gets done, and those terms are: responsibility, authority, and accountability.

Responsibility means that there is agreement among the leaders on **What** the mission of the congregation is and **Who** is charged with specific tasks to see that the mission is implemented.

Authority means that there is agreement about **Where** the boundaries lie that create freedom of movement to perform the tasks.

Accountability means that is agreement as to what will happen to whom **When** tasks are accomplished or not accomplished.

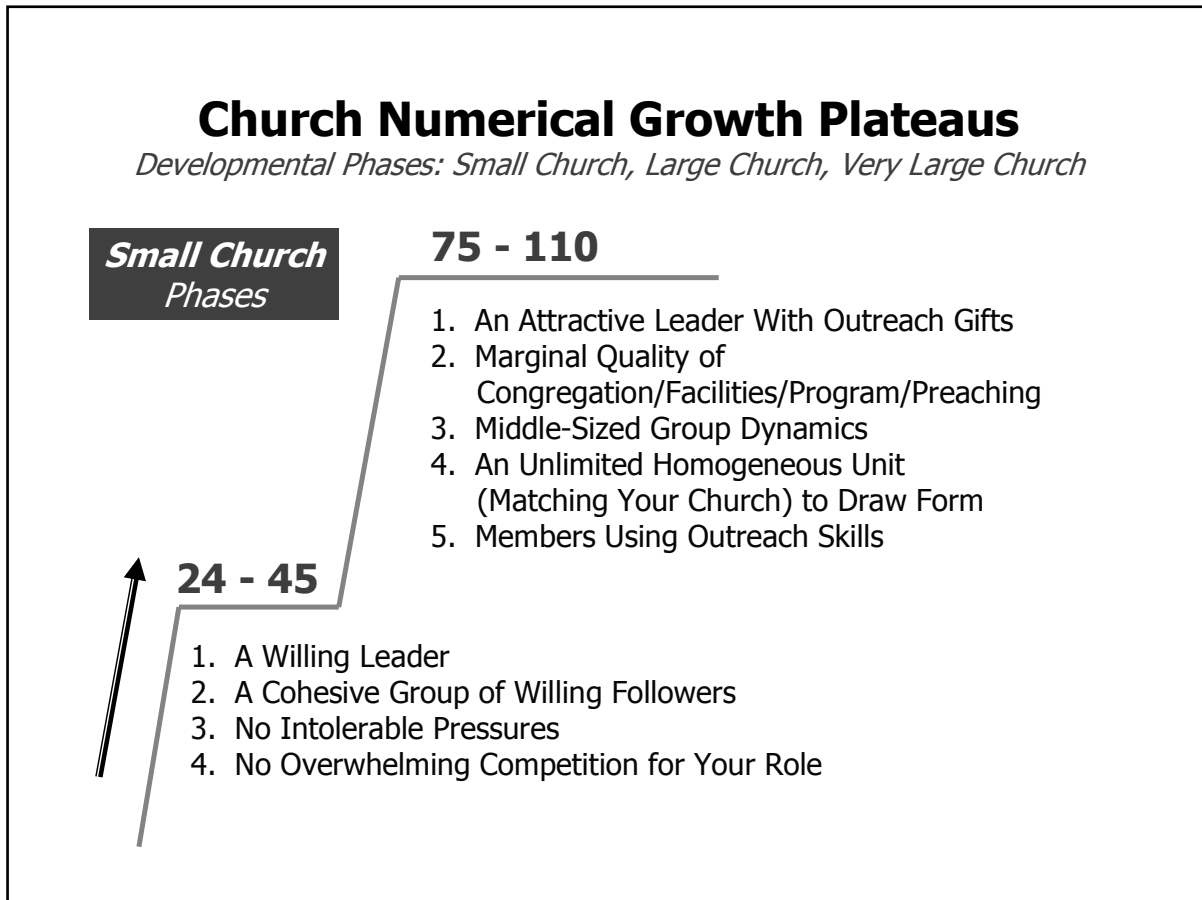
(**NOTE**: Groups do not lead and groups cannot be held accountable, therefore the focus is always on individuals to lead and to be held accountable).

The pastor/leader must turn the ministry of the congregation over to the laity (equip the saints to perform it) and the laity must turn the leadership of the congregation over to the pastor/leader.

The pastor leads the congregation to implement the mission and accomplish the vision.

Staff members lead their ministries and manage the programs to produce healthy growing disciples and in turn a healthy growing congregation.

The board governs through policies and therefore does not lead or manage the ministries of the congregation. Rather it holds the leader accountable for the accomplishment of the mission.



## Church Numerical Growth Plateaus – cont.



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- Different developmental phases require different activities.
- Plateaus on Levels = **Quantitative Issues.**
- Elements between Plateaus on Levels = **Qualitative Issues.**
- Elements beneath each level hold that level up.
- Elements above each level are barriers to growth if they do not have them.

BULLARD LIFE CYCLE – Adapted by Paul Borden

	Vision	Relationships	Programs	Management	Emotion	Behaviors	Issues	Needs
<b>Birth Vrpm</b>	Dominant	Happens Unintentionally	Only what's necessary	Informal	Passion	- Est. Long term vision - Evangelism & growth philosophy est. - Est. leadership style	- Can founding pastor stay? - Will lay leadership style change?	Make relationships intentional
<b>Infancy VRpm</b>	Dominant	Begin strategic implementation	Only what's necessary	Informal	Passion	Developing patterns of inclusion	- Clear values - Worship style - Lay mobilization	Quality programming
<b>Childhood VRpm</b>	Dominant	Happens though not the focus it was	High energy in implementation	Based on leaders' personalities	Excitement for the long run	Focus on Development - Staff - Programs - Funding	- Future Staff - Focus – child under 18 - Facility needs	- Quality & Quantity needs - Management est.
<b>Adolescence VRpm</b>	Dominant	Refocus on mtg needs qualitatively & quantitatively	Refinement and further development	Lacks: - Preciseness - Order - Consistency	Excitement for quality & quantity	- Staff Development - Facility needs - Develop mgmt systems	- Competition for future agenda - VR vs. PM	- Management systems - Leadership development
<b>Adulthood VRPM</b>	Dominant	Produces: - growth - commitment	- High quality & quantity - Commutnity known	- Formal system in place - Functions well	- High morale - Sense of vision/mission	- Integrated Systems - Facilities complete - Great Worship	- Few realize at peak - As good as it gets	- Change (new vision)
<b>Maturity vRPM</b>	Assumed & Becoming lost	- Less new people - Disciple-making strong	- High quality & quantity - Commutnity known	- In charge - Conserving the great tradition	- Feel good - But congregation passive	- Finances high but over-budgeted - Worship great - Membership tenure high	- Lack of Focus - Less new people - Congregation aging	- Reinvision - Diminish Mgmt - Re-engineer
<b>Empty Nest vRPM</b>	- Lost/missing - Loss affects most systems	Happening but not keeping up	- Begin disintegration - We try harder	- In charge - Focus of the organization	- Denial - Nostalgia - Turning to anger	- Blaming - Issue is more commitment - Lack confidence with leaders	- System functions - Severe conflict	- Reinvision - Develop new programs - Diminish mgmt
<b>Retirement vrPM</b>	Lost completely	Long-term members no longer invite people	Try new ones to fill the church	Overly managed	- Despair Disappointment	- Program changes - Want new workers - Won't confront	- Change may cause split - Change to create past - Want church to bury me	- New vision - Diminish mgmt - New relational form - New programs
<b>Old Age vrPM</b>	Gone	Dormant	Failed	Total control	- Fear - Perhaps bitterness	- Mgmt focuses on - Chaplain ministry - Member gifts crucial	- Focus on member anniversary/funerals - Mgmt produces any creativity - Congregation at rest	- Diminish mgmt - Create new programs - Reinvision
<b>Death M</b>	Gone	Lost	Failed	Orchestrate an orderly transition	- Numb - No positive emotions	- Closure - Transition - Celebrate the past and close	- Complete closure - Resurrection in another form - Resource new ministry	- Transition for a new ministry

