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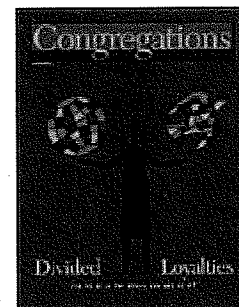
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# CONGREGATIONS

Fall 2003

## From Birth to Death

EXPLORING THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE CHURCH



As a young, 52-year-old, middle-aged person (I intend to live to be 104), I am becoming increasingly (and sometimes agonizingly) aware of the natural life cycle of human beings. I remember when misery was a bee sting, not back pain; when fatigue was what my feet felt after a series of 10-mile days on the Appalachian Trail, not breathlessness from climbing the stairs to my office. As biological beings, we are born; we mature and grow through adolescence; we become somewhat sedentary adults; we decline in old age; and we die. We all know the routine. A number of scholars have noticed how congregations often mimic the life cycle of biological organisms.<sup>1</sup>

Each year, I work as a consultant with dozens of churches, and through years of accumulated experience in ministry as a pastor and in congregational development, I have found the effects of this life cycle on congregations to be readily apparent. Demonstrating this life cycle and helping a church find itself in the progressive route between life and death has become an important tool for helping church leaders find their way out of stability and decline to vital ecclesial health.

### Stage One: Birth

The birth stage of the life cycle is brief, almost momentary, in the scale of time usually associated with the full life of a congregation. (It must be noted that in almost no other way is a particular scale of time important to an understanding of a church's life cycle. The duration of each stage is so variable from one church to the next that it is impossible to characterize each stage by assigning a stated length of time to it.) No period in the life of a church is more responsible than the birth stage, despite its brevity, for defining the congregation's mission and self-identity. No person is more responsible for shaping this first definition of the church than the founding pastor. In a lasting way, the character of the first pastor's leadership and role in shaping the values and practices of a fledgling congregation is imprinted on the church. First, or charter, members, a core group of supporters who join with the pastor in giving birth to the church, also contribute to defining its character. The process of founding a church, discerning its first mission, and putting in place the infrastructure necessary to make ministry happen, is often a life-transforming experience for the pastor and the first members. They do not give up easily on their first vision of the church, and their collective imprint is likely to remain on the church for a very long time. The values of the church are often set at this time. Saying you are a "charter member" carries value for those who were in the core group, and often this value is respected by many second-tier members.

Many benefits for effective ministry are associated with this potent defining period in the life of a church. Mostly, the church begins with a clean page, figuratively speaking, without prior traditions or practices dictating what will be done in and by this new church. Every new member has chosen to be part of the founding of the congregation; this experience is frequently a spiritually life-transforming event. The values of the congregation are freshly chosen, usually as the result of prayerful study of the community context, of Scripture, and of the historic tenets of the church and its sponsoring denomination, if it has one. The unparalleled clarity in this stage about the church's values and purpose, goals and objectives, may rarely be so evident again. This clarity of purpose results in intentional outreach, growth, and effectiveness that generate interest in the church, attract new members, and create support

from many sources. For this reason, it is not at all unusual for a new church, meeting in temporary quarters, with limited financial and leadership resources, to grow quickly to become two, five, or even ten times larger in average worship attendance and membership than many nearby older churches serving in the same demographic setting.

### **Stage Two: Vitality**

In the second, or vitality stage of the life cycle, the church often enjoys an extended period of growth—in membership, activity, and funding. This is a time for renovating or building additions to its church facilities, and for moving toward fulfillment of the congregation's stated mission. This vitality stage is usually built upon the foundation laid at the birth of the church, a footing rarely abandoned. The emerging congregation begins to shape and define its values. Is the church multicultural in makeup? Is worship offered in more than one language or more than one style? What is expected of members of this church? How are the traditional holy seasons observed and celebrated? In short, what traditions will we adopt that are compatible with our chosen values?

I was once assigned as a pastor to lead a newly created congregation that had been operating for 18 months before my arrival. The founding pastor had led the church to increase its average worship attendance to 80, with about 50 members. Personal concerns led the pastor to make an early exit from the congregation to pursue an advanced theological degree. Upon my arrival, about 20 of the adult charter members remained in place. One of these made a quick departure after my first Sunday at worship, charging that I had been sent by my bishop to change everything the members and their first pastor had set out to do. (That was not the case.)

The church had taken the name Saint Francis United Methodist. It is a bit unusual for a non-apostolic saint's name to be used by churches of the denomination. In addition, the pastor had decided—in consultation, I am sure, with the core group—that Holy Communion would be celebrated at every worship service. Although our Anglican founder, John Wesley, would no doubt be pleased with this practice, this too was extraordinary for United Methodist congregations at the time (and continues to be today). Communion was served by intinction—with worshipers dipping the wafer into the common cup rather than drinking from it. (Intinction is still such a "new" practice for many Methodists that, when it is used, celebrants usually have to explain it before worshipers come to the table.) In another break with Methodist tradition, "real" wine was used (United Methodist folklore says that despite the concern for recovering, active, and potential alcoholics often cited to justify the use of grape juice in communion services, the truth is related to the fact that a certain Mr. Welch, a manufacturer of grape juice, was a staunch Methodist with no little degree of influence in the church.)

Notwithstanding my one skeptical, vocal core member's doubts and objections, I was cautious about changing the church's practices willy-nilly before trying to understand why such customs had been chosen to define its identity as a new church.

As it turned out, the name Saint Francis was selected by the core members while meeting in the "Upper Room," an upstairs garage office, to study the life of Saint Francis of Assisi on the 500th anniversary of his birth. The church was being formed in an affluent new community, and Francis' choice to deny his own legitimate claim to wealth, and to serve the poor, struck a chord with the founding members. As a result, the church became extraordinarily involved in outreach and service ministries in communities affected by poverty. Worshipers found that communion by intinction created a meaningful connection between those serving the bread and wine (the pastor and lay servers) and those coming close to the table to receive the elements. (Typically, American Methodists, in a very private posture, kneel at a rail in front of, or surrounding, the communion table, and receive individual cups of juice and a small portion of bread or a wafer.) As for the wine—historical precedents abound, but perhaps its use made the members of St. Francis feel less guilty about sipping wine at home!

Surprisingly, these somewhat unusual choices (for United Methodists in the 1980s) became valuable tools for attracting new members. The church began to attract significant numbers of young couples, one partner a Roman Catholic and the other a Protestant (often not Methodist). We became their "comfortable solution," bridging their formative faith experiences and bringing them into relationship with a church that seemed to honor many of the

beliefs and practices important to them before their marriage.

I relished the practice of serving the communion elements by intinction. Wearing name tags was a requisite practice at Saint Francis. As each person came to the table, I could see the name tag, and I used the communicant's name when presenting the bread or wine. By then, the sermon was over and out of my mind, if not my heart, and I could consciously pray for each person coming to the table. These were my best moments of worship each Sunday. Usually, because of the name tags and my use of worshipers' names during communion, I could remember at least the first names of new visitors as I greeted them at the door after the service. More than once, people told me that they came back to Saint Francis for a second visit because I noted their presence and remembered their names. You see, the values of this new church were being fleshed out in its first practices and traditions, and the benefits were readily evident.

C. Kirk Hadaway, a researcher for the United Church [of Christ] Board for Homeland Ministries, and formerly a church-growth specialist with the Southern Baptist Convention, suggests that young churches have a "window of opportunity" for significant growth that may last for 10 or 15 years.<sup>2</sup> Why do new churches tend to grow more rapidly than older churches? It could be, Hadaway notes, that new churches are more flexible and open to change; growth-producing ideas can be put into practice; leaders are able to lead; rapid adjustments can still be made to changing circumstances; and friendship networks have not yet solidified, allowing for easy acceptance of new members.<sup>3</sup> Research conducted by Hadaway on Southern Baptist churches shows clearly how the age of a church affects its growth pattern. Only one in four Southern Baptist churches in his study organized prior to 1927 had growth in excess of 10 percent from 1981 to 1986, whereas nearly 68 percent of churches founded between 1972 and 1981 experienced this kind of growth.<sup>4</sup>

An old congregation's longtime members sometimes look back to the early stage of development as the "golden age" when the church was at its best. If the church is in decline, it is often to this idealized experience of church that members wish to return—a hope that can seldom be fulfilled. They remember the large youth group; the grand choral cantatas; the numerous births and baptisms; the weddings of first members' maturing children; the excitement of moving into the first church building; the young minister who knew everyone by name and who made regular home visits; and the perennially victorious men's softball team.

### **Stage 3: Equilibrium**

After as little as a few years or as long as a human generation, stage 3 in the life cycle of a congregation usually begins. This is a leveling-out stage. Growth slows. New ideas are introduced less frequently. Traditions and practices become more routine and predictable. I call this stage equilibrium. It is a time when much of the congregational system's energy becomes focused on maintaining the status quo. The church has found its center. Although the church is not growing significantly during this stage of equilibrium, neither is it declining. Each year, enough new members join to replace those who leave or die. Enough money is contributed to meet the annual budget, including modest increases required to maintain ongoing programs. Facilities are more or less adequate for the needs of the church, and debt, if any, is low. Members are generally satisfied with the way things are, and they don't see the need to change much about the church's programs. Conflict tends to be low. Ministers come and go, but the church survives each transition, so long as the new pastor doesn't try to rock the boat by introducing too many new ideas.

It may not be readily apparent, but a congregation is at high risk during the equilibrium stage of the life cycle. This stage is not a seemingly boundless prairie. It is more like a mesa. Its top may be wide and smooth, but every edge of the mesa drops off precipitously to a plain or a rugged canyon floor. Living in equilibrium can have a slow-release narcotic effect on a church. Periodic highs mask the increasing sluggishness and dullness that mark the character of the church. These negative qualities are more readily apparent to newcomers than to longtime members. Robert Browning's oft-quoted poem "Pippa Passes" posits that "God's in his heaven—All's right with the world" (a notion that I find inane). This "hunky-dory" attitude too often characterizes equilibrium-stage churches: God's in control in some distant place, and nothing needs to change around here.

The older a denominational body, the more its congregations are likely to be found on the mesa of equilibrium, and consequently at high risk of shifting into decline (in size, as well as influence and effectiveness). These churches find their own techniques for maintaining their preferred identity, while at the same time suppressing growth.

The equilibrium phase of the congregational life cycle can be explained by a process that sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) calls routinization of charisma.<sup>5</sup> Often, a young movement's traits are fundamentally shaped by its founding charismatic leader. A nascent movement, such as a young denomination or a new congregation, may initially operate with few rules and little hierarchical structure. The people gathered into the movement are captivated by the tutelage of the movement's founding leader, the movement's defining philosophy (or theology or ecclesiology), and the energies derived from their own, firsthand, life-influencing, if not life-transforming, experience of participating in the birth of the movement. But, as we will see, these effects are seldom sustained.

The early church described in the Acts of the Apostles exhibits many of the characteristics of a young, unbound movement. The apostles, energized by their recent firsthand experience of both the living Jesus and the resurrected Christ, preached the good news with great vigor, and many who heard their words "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Many signs and wonders were performed by the apostles, and the people who saw them were awed. And "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:44-47). These passages describe a group of people choosing to depart from the accepted behaviors of the day. They hear firsthand a life-converting message; they believe; they act in faith on their belief.

A new sect, like the Methodism of the late 18th century, was fundamentally shaped by its founder, John Wesley; and much of its early influence, growth, and success was derived from its unfettered capacity to carry an old gospel message into a rough-and-tumble frontier American setting where, along with other young Protestant movements, it would inspire an unprecedented religious revival.

A new Methodist church, like Chestnut Ridge, founded in 1832, was fundamentally shaped by rugged circuit-riding preachers, like James Christie, who came into the wilderness of central North Carolina, preaching from a tree-stump pulpit sheltered by a brush arbor and illuminated by pine-knot torches and campfires.

A new church-cum-movement, like Willow Creek Church, near Chicago in South Barrington, Illinois, is being fundamentally shaped by its founder, Bill Hybels, who is introducing new paradigms for church, such as seeker-sensitive worship, that break many of the canons that have defined the church for decades.

Yet, Max Weber points out that as a movement ages and its founder dies, routinization begins. It becomes the task of the movement's followers to continue the work of the founder. New converts become more distantly separated from the primal experience known by the movement's first followers. Structure and ritual serve to perpetuate former experiences. Germinal experiences become recalled experiences. Bureaucracy, characterized by an expanding hierarchical leadership structure, increasingly replaces grassroots leadership and decision-making. Routine sets in, and a period of equilibrium begins.

#### **Stage 4: Decline**

Following a period of equilibrium in the congregational life cycle, a church can move into stage 4, decline. No longer capable of balancing losses of membership, participation, giving, or influence with the counterweight of growth, the church slowly, or even rapidly, diminishes in strength. Decline becomes evident when the membership includes only one or two aging generational groups; budgets shrink or are not met; needed building maintenance is deferred; worship or Sunday school attendance declines; few professions of faith and baptisms take place; pastors' salaries are cut (or pastoral service is reduced from full-time to part-time); the same laity continue to serve as church leaders

because no new leaders can be found; denominational mission funds are not fully supported; and long-standing programs are discontinued for lack of support. Such evidence of decline is often accompanied by congregational conflict, malaise, depression, blaming, scapegoating, anger, and withdrawal.

Initially, a church's active members may not realize that the church is in decline. Routine in a declining church can be a deceptive partner. Busyness often hides ineffectiveness. An outside observer, such as a newcomer to the community who visits worship for the first time, or a visiting denominational staff member, may readily see the signs of decline go routinely unnoticed by congregation members. As in the process of grieving, denial becomes a mechanism for members to cope with the increasingly obvious decline in their church.

A weakening tree branch can resist the forces of gravity for only so long. Likewise, a declining church eventually breaks from the pressures of its losses and its incapacity to sustain its former level of activity. This point marks the realized decline phase. Often characterized by a posture of crisis, this is a time of desperation for a church when it begins to acknowledge openly its inability to sustain itself. In denominational systems, a church in crisis often expects its parent organization to come to the rescue. Many denominational staff members know that they can expect to hear a statement like this from a declining church's pastor or the alpha leader: "For many years we have loyally supported the denomination's cooperative mission fund. Does your office have funds you can send to help us repair our leaking roof, replace our clogged plumbing, and pay our pastor?" For several decades, numerous aging denominations whose churches, in increasing numbers, are aging into decline have attempted to prop up and revitalize declining churches by sending funds to pay bills the churches are unable to satisfy. In spite of these gallant, though essentially misdirected efforts, many of these denominations have continued to decline in size and influence.

Despite the devastating effects of decline, churches are notoriously tenacious and do not succumb easily. Many will whittle away at expense-generating programs, facility needs, and personnel requirements to keep the church doors open. Members of nearly defunct churches do not handle thoughts of closure well. Once, the attorney son of one of eight remaining elderly members of a rural congregation came to the office of the area bishop and said in very direct language, "If you close my mother's church before she dies, I will sue you, this denomination, and anyone else I can find to hold liable for her unhappiness." The church was not closed by the denomination.

### Stage 5: Death

Inevitably, some churches, once strong and vital in their ministries and influence, do die. Certainly, this is an unhappy occasion for the last members of the church and for those who have supported it in its years of decline. But, when viewed in terms of the lifelong benefits afforded by the church to its members and its community, its end does not have to be an altogether sad event. A good life's natural end is death. The same can be true of an organization or movement. God's genius is exhibited in the fact that both life and death are natural and necessary for the successful perpetuation of creation. We do well to remember the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who said: "For everything there is a season . . . a time to be born, and a time to die . . . a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up . . . a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together . . . a time to keep, and a time to throw away" (Eccles. 3:1a; 2; 3b; 5a; 6b).

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### NOTES

1. For various interpretations of the congregational life cycle, see Martin F. Saarinen, *The Life Cycle of a Congregation* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1986); Arlin J. Rothauge, *The Life Cycle in Congregations: A Process of Natural Creation and an Opportunity for New Creation*; Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live?: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1999).
  2. C. Kirk Hadaway, "The Impact of New Church Development on Southern Baptist Growth," *Review of Religious Research* 31, no. 4 (June 1990): 372.
  3. Hadaway, "Impact," 377-78.
  4. Hadaway, "Impact," 371.
  5. For a brief synopsis of Weber's views on routinization of charisma, see Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 25-26.
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