

THE LIFE CYCLE OF A CONGREGATION

Martin F. Saarinen



Resources for vital congregations

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The Alban Institute initiates discovery and learning to strengthen congregations in creative, faithful, and effective ministry in the world. The Alban Institute is an ecumenical and interfaith not-for-profit that strengthens congregations by conducting research on the most pressing and critical issues facing congregations; publishing resources; offering educational and training events; providing consulting services; and advocating for the role of congregations in their local communities. The Alban Institute is financed by revenues from fees for products, services, and memberships, by grants, and by contributions.

The Life Cycle of a Congregation

*“New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth.”*

—James Russell Lowell

“What makes Gladstone Church so special,” a friend of the congregation observed, “is that all of its ministries have that remarkable combination of enthusiasm and vigor, responsiveness to the church’s various contexts and sense of “here-and-nowness,” a desire to respond to the feelings and needs of people, and a clear-headed sense of identity, mission, and realism.”

Arlene Patterson, who chairs the Church Council, replied, “You have put your finger on what we are trying to bring about by the help of God, but it’s all too obvious to us that it’s something we need to keep working at. Our journey as a congregation has been marked by many “fits and starts” and right now we are trying to get some meaning out of all that.”

Every once in a while an article appears that deals with something that I am struggling with at the time and puts the pieces together in a way that really makes sense. Several years ago, I had a kind of “tower experience” in reading “Organizational Passages—Diagnosing and Treating Life Cycle Problems of Organizations” by Ichak Adizes in the Summer, 1979, issue of *Organizational Dynamics*. He acknowledged his debt to Gail Sheehy and, by implication, to Daniel Levinson for the work that they had done in describing stages in the adult life cycle. They and a host of other development psychologists have built on the foundations laid by Sigmund Freud and later developed by Erik Erikson. Those in other fields include Jean Piaget (psychology of learning), Lawrence Kohlberg (moral development) and James Fowler (faith development). Adizes’ work is more closely related to that of John Kimberly, Robert Miles, and their associates. Whereas they develop their concepts around the themes of organizational creation, transformation and decline, Adizes used the analogy of stages in human development to explain the rise and fall of organizations. These concepts developed, as have most concepts of organizational life, in the context of the profit-making corporation. There is much fertile ground to be plowed in transplanting these notions in the soil of the church organization, particularly the local congregation. In this article, I describe four basic factors involved at each stage of congregational development, the stages themselves, characteristic behaviors of congregations in each stage, some common dangers in each stage, and suggested interventions. The focus is on what is common to congregations and does not take into consideration the many contingency factors that affect congregational growth and development although some of these are implied in the cases which have been selected to illustrate each of the stages.

We must understand, at the outset, that the life cycle of a congregation has little, if anything, to do with chronological time. A calendar cannot be used to predict the onset of a particular stage in the life cycle. It has to do with the relationship and balance of certain “gene structures” common to congregational life.

EPAI: THE GENE STRUCTURES OF THE CONGREGATION

The “E” factor, named for its energizing function, predominates early in the development of the congregation, beginning with the glint in the eye of the Mission Board Chairperson or the quickened pulse of an entrepreneurial preacher reading the populational statistics and other pertinent demographic data of a particular locality. It includes such things as vision and hope, excitement and enthusiasm, and a sense of potency and potentiality. By itself, it has an undifferentiated quality like that of an excited infant whose arms and legs flail around in all directions. The congregation with a high “E” factor is like the “New Humanity,” a community in the Spirit. Change-oriented, it tends to be nurtured by the kind of imagery that is characteristic of the writings attributed to St. John. Its mode of spirituality is charismatic, i.e., strongly influenced by the charisma of a leader or, perhaps, the Charismatic Movement. Basically an internal quality, it erupts in consequent actions.

The “P” factor stands for those specific programs and services undertaken by the congregation in response to the needs of its own membership, of its environment, or the ministry mandates of the broader church that it supports. They serve certain identifiable functions such as Worship and Music, Learning, Serving, Managing, and Witnessing. Specific programs and services may be the Lenten Vesper Series, the Vacation Church School, a jail ministry, a budget building process, and a revival series, respectively. The congregation with a highly developed “P” factors corresponds to the “Body of Christ” image because of its emphasis on the concrete things that a congregation does and has. It tends to fee on the matter-of-factness exhibited in the Gospel according to St. Mark and its spirituality is oriented toward actions like giving food to hungry people, clothing the naked, providing “the cold cup of water” to the thirsty. Unlike the “E” factor, “P” is located in externals and may, incidentally, cause excitement within the congregation. A building program, for example, may provide movement from the external to the internal.

The “A” factor, developed in the rational domain of the corporate organism, spells out the conscious intentionality of the congregation in the form of mission statements, goals, objectives, budgets, and planning. It determines how the human and material resources of the congregation can be used most efficiently and effectively in the offering of programs and services, which it deems important in actualizing the vision and fulfilling its mission. It includes all those specific tasks that pertain to administering. The congregation with a strong “A” is analogous to the “People of God” image with the sense of continuity and connectedness exemplified in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Its spirituality

values prayer books, the regularity of canonical hours, and habitual practice. The “A” factor serves the functions of coordination (harmonizing the relationship of activities) and integration (relating activities to common purposes). Boundary setting, an important aspect of its work, is often expressed in questions of what is achievable given certain limitations of finances, human resources, time, facilities, and equipment.

The “I” factor is for inclusion and relates to both individuals and groups within and outside of the congregation. How are people drawn and assimilated into the membership? Do the purposes and programs of the congregation reflect the concerns of the members? Are members actively engaged in discovering and using their gifts in ministry? How are members called to serve in the congregation? Are their ministries in society recognized as an integral part of the congregation’s ministry? How are power and authority distributed and used? How is conflict handled? What is the prevailing attitude in the congregation toward the larger church and other ministering agencies? These are but a few of the questions arising from the relational concerns involved in this domain. A high “I” congregation tends to image itself as a “Fellowship of Saints” and its members tend to be drawn by the compassionate and open style of Christ’s ministry as depicted in St. Luke’s Gospel. Their spirituality is characterized by warmth and emotionalism. Theirs is an intimate God whose presence is immanent in their relational patterns, norms, policies, and precedents that open and close doors to people in the congregation and the congregation in relation to its environment.

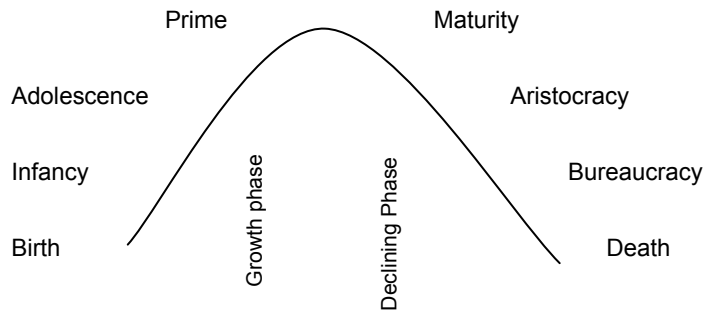
Those four factors—Energy, Program, Administration, and Inclusion—can be considered the gene structures of the congregation that combine differently in each stage of its life cycle.

Genes and Stages

Two phases characterize the life cycle of a congregation: growth and decline. In this section, we discuss some general principles concerning the life cycle and describe four stages in its growth phase and four stages in the decline phase. Figure #1 shows how each stage is related to the life cycle.

We need to give some attention to certain principles, which apply to the life cycle before proceeding with a description of each stage.

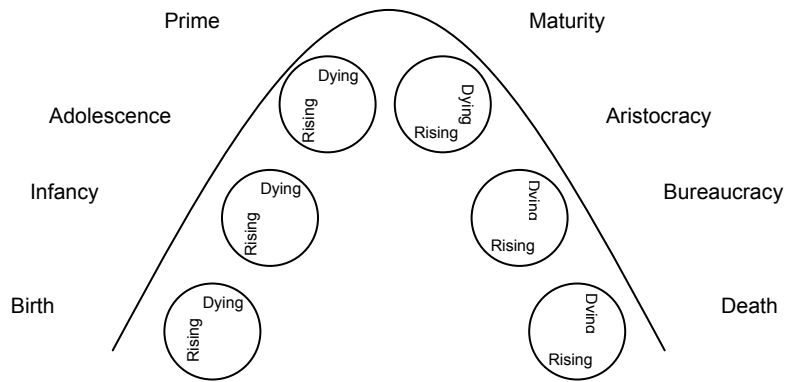
Figure 1



First, it seems to be a natural law that growth and decline progress from stage to stage. Experience has indicated that once in the growth phase, a congregation will progress from Infancy to Prime through the Adolescent stage and, similarly; once a congregation is in the decline phase, it will pass from Maturity to Bureaucracy through the Aristocratic stage.

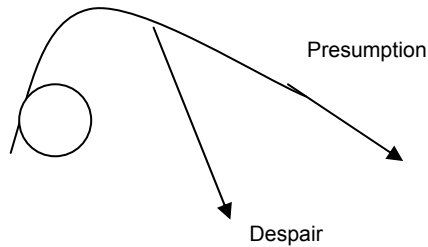
Second, development and decline do not progress uninterruptedly from stage to stage. Movement from one stage to another is marked by a cyclical process of dying and rising again, in which the “E” forces predominate in the growth phase and the “A” forces in the decline phase.

Figure 2



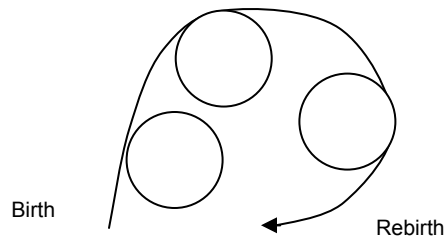
Third, growth may be aborted and decline may be arrested at any stage in their respective cybernetics. Growth may be aborted by succumbing to the seductive forces of presumption (“that couldn’t happen to us”) or despair (burnout).

Figure 3



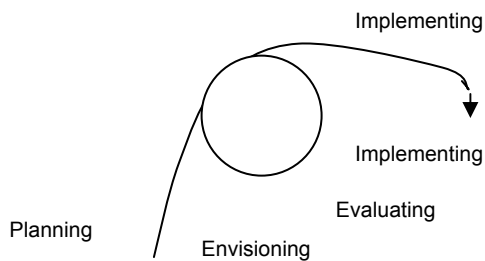
Decline may be arrested by tapping again the life sources inherent in the birth story of the congregation (i.e., how it came into being) or in discovering a new sense of mission in a changed context (i.e., extending its branches into new space and stretching out its roots in its new soil). Life threatening situations for a congregation are often the occasions for rediscovering or re-envisioning itself as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4



Fourth, the cyclical process involved in movement from stage to stage contains the tasks of implementing, evaluating, envisioning, and planning. How the congregation performs these tasks in the context of either momentum (growth) or inertia (decline) determines its movement from stage to stage.

Figure 5



Finally, it is impossible to find a perfect type—a congregation whose characteristics match those of a particular stage of development perfectly. Given the dynamic quality of congregational life, change is the only constant. Congregations, at any given point in time, are in transition from one stage to another and factors characteristic of more than one stage will be co-mingled and in tension.

We turn now to a brief description of each stage before we indicate some characteristic behaviors of a congregation in each stage. These are basic to our understanding of some of the strengths and weaknesses, potentialities and dangers of a congregation in each stage.

Birth: Epai

There may be an argument about when life begins for a congregation similar to the argument that is currently raging over when life begins for an individual. It may be pushing it a bit to claim that life began with the first glint in the founder's eye, but was it when the charter was signed or was it when a few interested people first gathered in the Johnsons' living room one blustery January evening in 1894? Some will claim that the real birth of the congregation has little, if anything, to do with those early events and that the congregation came to life when, in 1958, the frame church building, hewn by the hands and with the sweat of the founders, burned right down to the last timber. Sad as it was, it was the occasion for a birth of freedom from "the way things are" and a new sense of purpose and mission. In whatever way the birth of the congregation is held in its collective memory, it has the element of *kairos* accompanied with the remembrance of vision, hope, and enthusiasm (high E). At this point in its life, the congregation may be more in love with the thoughts and feelings of what it is like to be alive than with anything else. Its life is characterized by undifferentiated activity and a multiplicity of images; consequently its intentionality is relatively unfocused, i.e., there are low levels of program development and administrative capability. Its sense of identity and how it may be a servant to the broader community is limited by its need to develop a broad enough base of members and dollars to support a ministry. The founders are known and remembered for their charisma and ability to draw people together and fill them with enthusiasm.

A small but energetic group of people splintered off from Saybrook United Methodist Church because of what they considered to be an "encrusted status quo attitude" on the part of the congregation's lay leaders who, year after year, succeeded themselves on the Board of Administration and Council on Ministries. This group, with the pastor, broke away to form Christ's Fellowship over the adamant refusal of Saybrook's Board to consider the Pastor's recommendation to build new facilities to accommodate the growing number of people moving into the area.

At first, the fledgling group met in members' homes for worship and learning, but it was not too long before the group grew beyond the size that could be easily accommodated in any one member's home. Brad Jamieson, the congregation's pastor, secured a place for them in a bar that, because of state laws, was not open for business on Sundays.

Brad placed visiting and preaching highest on his list of priorities for ministry. Affable and gregarious, he moved among the people with ease and prided himself on dropping everything to be at the side of anyone who needed his ministrations. A number of people, members of other congregations who felt neglected by their own pastors, were attracted to Brad and his style of ministry.

The constitution of Christ's Fellowship provided a great deal of flexibility because, as the members declared, "We want to offer an alternative to the prevailing religious attitude in the area." They preferred the term "fellowship" to describe themselves as a group rather than "congregation" because they wanted members who were so inclined to have the freedom to maintain their membership in other congregations—or none for that matter. The constitution also provided for an Advisory Council rather than an Administrative Board. Whom it was to advise was not entirely clear from the document, but the Council was to make program recommendations to the committees of the congregation, which functioned somewhat autonomously. "And we wanted to have our worship services as informal as possible, because people come from so many different backgrounds," and Advisory Council member explained. "And with a lot of hugging," Brad added.

Infancy: Epal

The Infant congregation inherits a high level of enthusiasm but develops a strong need for survival. This contributes to a "y'all come" attitude (high I), which is open and inclusive. "Come," that is, "provided that you are willing to put your shoulders to the wheel, thus indicating that you have really bought into the dream." The Infant congregation has a strong norm concerning "doing your part," thus placing conditions on its inclusiveness. The strong survival need of the Infant congregation causes it to be less concerned, however, about other norms that tend to close doors to people in congregations in other stages of development. The charisma of the founder continues to be the glue that brings people together and the congregation tends to be an extension of his or her personality—enthusiastic but lacking in managerial ability.

Brad called the Advisory Council of Christ's Fellowship together in a special session and shared his sadness, hurt, and disappointment over the lack of spirit, increase in bickering, and drop in participation he had noticed over the past several months. He asked if these changes had anything to do with the congregation's having completed their building project and having no more mountains to climb.

Bill Langford picked up the ball Brad had thrown onto the court. “I was one of the few that stayed with the building project from beginning to end, and I’m ready to keep right on going. We ought to be making plans now to build a larger sanctuary out toward the road. We bought enough land and I think we ought to forge right ahead before costs go sky high on us.”

“Hold on, Bill,” interrupted Joe, “you may be full of fire and vinegar but I don’t mind admitting that I’m burned out.” He went on to explain that he was as faithful as the next person but that he needed a breathing spell. “Let me say one more thing,” he continued, “if we don’t get some leadership around here, things are going to fall around our ears.”

Wanda Earhardt, the newest member of the Council, wedged herself into the conversation after trying several times and suggested that maybe it was hard for new people to come into the fellowship because they might feel overwhelmed. Several members moved to the edges of their chairs to ask in unison, “What do you mean by that?” She went on to explain hesitatingly, “Well, I’m kind of a shy person and when people come up to me—like in worship—and hug me—people that I’ve never seen before or just acquaintances, I get real embarrassed. Maybe other people would wonder what they’re up to. Yeah, and another thing. Look, I’ve been here only a couple of Sundays and already I am on the Advisory Council. At first I wanted to say ‘no,’ but then I thought I’d come to this meeting first. I don’t think some people like to be pounced on like that.”

Adolescence: Epai

The development of specific programs and services for the members and for the broader community signals the onset of Adolescence. The strengthened “P” may take the form of an age graded church school, a youth caravan group, and a congregational committee structure, modeled after denominational requirements, programs developed on the precedents of “successful” congregations. Later Adolescence may be marked by the proliferation of programs and services in response to opportunities presented to the congregation with neither sufficient regard for the limitations of human and other resources in the congregation nor enough attention to their development. The intentionality of the congregation tends to become more focused on the requirements of programs and services at the expense of people needs; hence the diminished “I.” The weakening of the inclusion factor may occur almost imperceptibly to the leaders of the congregation due to the mesmerizing effect of the high “EP” combination.

Salem’s members smile as they recall the first few years of their life as a congregation. It was an exciting time because the number of people worshipping and joining the congregation seemed to swell with each passing Sunday. There was the cordiality of new friendships being made—the freedom from binding traditions—the sense of building a new community. These years were followed by what one member described as “the digging in as they experienced together the ups and downs (mostly) on the teeter totter of a subsistence budget. Edgeville’s

development dropped short of expectations and became a sleepy semi-rural bedroom community. Salem became similarly afflicted. Financial support and leadership for the congregation rested mostly on a faithful few. Many who were initially active didn't show up as much any more, and over 70 percent of the budget was provided for in the pledges of members whom you could count on your fingers—minus thumbs. The pastor and lay leaders did what they could to ignite some enthusiasm for and commitment to their mission, but the bulk of the congregation seemed to sag under the weight of a building debt that to many seemed out of sight in light of their own financial commitments.

The coming of a new pastor was accompanied by other changes, too. Edgeville became a very desirable place to live. It was now one of the points on what was known as the “Golden Triangle.” The influx of new people and work opportunities brought with it an expanded base of support for the congregation's ministry and a broader spectrum of ministry needs presented by individuals and families caught up in the corporate swirl. The building debt became manageable and Salem's energies became focused elsewhere. The Sunday School needed more teachers, Young Adults and Single Again groups were formed, and the youth busied themselves in a variety of recreational, social, and service projects. Pastor John was the kind of person who seemed to be energized rather than depleted by constant demands on his time to meet with this committee and present a talk to that group. And in Church Council meetings members talked more than casually about “new building plans.” In the surrounding community Salem became known as a “pace setter” congregation and many folks held Pastor John in unveiled admiration for his leadership in developing local drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs.

Prime: EPAI

The congregation in Prime is marked by a balance between and an optimization of both human and programmatic concerns mediated by the strengthened managerial capability of the heightened “A.” The congregation in Prime displays an optimum of energy, openness to others, and responsiveness to members. On the other hand, it has optimized its ability to integrate and coordinate its activities around a clearly articulated sense of mission within the limitations of its resources while it continually seeks to extend its boundaries by broadening its resource base. It is a congregation that has learned creative use of the inherent conflicts between the visionary and the pragmatic, the emotional and the rational. It is characterized by a redemptive and creative oscillation between people concerns and program concerns, with a strong sense of mission as the fulcrum.

Located in the near midtown area of a growing metropolis, First Church had gained the reputation of having opened itself to its surrounding community with a caring attitude and responsible action. Wilma Dancey, one of the congregation's storytellers, explained it this way:

We weren't always like this. Some years ago the community changed color, and many members moved away. Later on, homes were torn down and office buildings took their place. A different kind of people oozed into the neighborhood. For years, the congregation held its own with its "Sunday morning invaders"—members who had moved away but came to worship on Sundays. It was still "their church." As time went on more and more of them joined or attended churches closer to them. With all the drifters in the neighborhood and fewer and fewer members we didn't know whether we should sell out, fold up, just what.

Our pastor asked us to pray privately and together that the Lord would reveal his way to us. I'll tell you, we took that to heart—we were desperate! He reminded us that we were the people of "the Book" so we gathered each Thursday for Bible study, prayer, and personal sharing. We relived the wandering of the children of Israel in the desert of our own indecision. And then, we were struck by the words, "to give hospitality to the strangers." Instinctively we knew the answer to that haunting question, "Why are we here?" In view of those words, we saw the drifters outside our door in a different light. They became our key to understanding the scriptures, ourselves, worship, the church, and its ministry in a way that made sense.

To make a long story short, there isn't a member in our congregation that isn't involved in a least one ministry to the members and one to the neighborhood. Take a look at Mrs. McClaughlin over there—those big swollen legs with bandages on them are always like that—but she's here every Monday to lick stamps or rock the babies.

Maturity: ePAI

The Mature congregation is "settled" in its policies, programs, and procedures, receiving new ideas with little enthusiasm or criticism (diminished E). By this time, the congregation has developed its own way of doing things and it relies on the momentum from the past to carry it into the future. It has a high regard for what is "tried and true." The congregation prides itself on its stability and its ability to be unaffected by spurious changes or fads (high A). Its sense of mission is shaped less by the challenges of the future with their implied changes for the congregation and more by a desire to retain traditional patterns and values. A great deal of time and energy is spent in maintaining the programs and services that have proven themselves in the past (high P), but members seem to be spending more time with each other than on the work of the congregation (high I). More attention is given to membership retention than to new member acquisition and development.

Trinity, in the eyes of the congregation itself and the people of Statesborough, was without question the leading religious institution in the city. There wasn't a day in the week that almost every available meeting area in this community building didn't have one or more groups meeting there. Its parish building

teemed with youngsters in its day school program and in the evenings its rooms resounded with the business of congregational committees and other groups.

It was known throughout the Presbytery and the city as the church where great preaching was heard, and its previous pastor resigned to take a homiletics post at a renowned Divinity School. The pastor who followed was challenged by the situation, but had some uneasy feelings about what he called the congregation's "thick culture."

The prestige of the congregation was enhanced by the fact that a number of its leading lay members were among the "movers and shakers" in the community as well. There was a kind of ubiquitousness to their presence whether or not they were in the body at Session or City Council meetings. It was not uncommon for someone to say when a motion was proposed in the Session, at least, "we ought to find out what Joe thinks about this." One had the feeling that this had already been done with proposals that came before the City Council.

Aristocracy: epAI

It is a short step from the Mature stage to the Aristocratic stage congregation. The unenergetic but busy climate of the Mature congregation has become stale. The momentum of past program development has begun to wane and its effects are seen in a reduced number of programs and services offered and a fewer number of people availing themselves of worship, church school, etc. (diminished P). Relationships in the congregation, which up to this point were relatively open and inclusive, have now become more closed and exclusive. There is a great deal of concern about who is "in" and who is "out" as membership and participation levels fall (high I). The congregation at this stage takes on the characteristics of a good ol' boys club. Power and authority are jealously guarded by the centers of influence and are vested only in those who represent their interest—that is, preserving the status quo. The leaders pride themselves on their ability to maintain the congregation using efficient business practices (high A), but are nostalgic over "the good ol' days" when the church was full of people, and they bemoan the growing number of lapsed members.

St. Michael's Church is located in a restored residential section of an elegant city, which prides itself on being one of the oldest municipalities in the United States. St. Michael's grew up with the city and became a part of regional and national history.

Mr. Clory, the congregation's archivist, was quick to point out that St. Michael's was one of the few churches in the denomination that included African Americans in its membership prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. Asked if there were African-American members in the congregation now, he replied, "Well, yes and no. Ol' Ben there is our sexton. He's been around here a long time. He's not on the rolls as such but he's our 'boy.'"

The conversation turned to the preparation being made for an upcoming congregational festival service, which included a lengthy procession of representatives from various prestigious community groups. “Why these?” Mr. Langhauer, the festival chairman, was asked. “Every member of our Administrative Board and Deacons’ Council is a member of one or more of these community groups. Having them officially represented will give us visibility in the city,” he replied.

Bureaucracy: epAi

An attitude of trust in only “thee and we” which characterized the leaders in the Aristocratic stage has, in the Bureaucratic stage, degenerated into a distrust of “thee” (diminished I). The major concern in the Bureaucratic congregation is maintaining one’s own turf and prerogatives. Boundaries are marked by fences and any encroachment is met with hostility or defensiveness. Blaming individuals for the ills of the congregation is common (diminished I). Any sense of shared ministry has been lost, and little attention is given to the work of the congregation. All that remains are the all-important structures, rules and policies (high A). Communications among people in leadership have been reduced to a few hurriedly written memos and staff meetings had been written off sometime ago as “ineffective.” Each one does his or her own thing. If someone needs to know something, they can ask.

Everyone was disgruntled and frustrated that nothing got done at Gethsemane Church. It had become common practice that proposals agreed upon in Council received little or no support when they came to be voted on in congregational meetings. Some members on Council complained that others who participated in drafting a proposal to fill a staff vacancy actually spoke against it in the congregational meeting when it came up for a vote.

Edythe Calloway, one of the irate Council members, asked Bill Starr why he spoke against the proposal when it seemed to her that he was for it. “Well,” he said, “after Council meeting I dropped in to see ol’ Mrs. Rasmussen (the former pastor’s wife) and she didn’t think the Lord wanted us to do that. She thought we ought to be spending our money on spiritual things instead and I guess she’s right.”

Asked why the former staff member left the congregation, the staff secretary volunteered, “He said that he was through with trying to work with a pastor whose idea of relating with staff was to ‘put it in writing’ and to check things out with Mrs. Rasmussen or one of her friends (whom he jokingly called the ‘fifth column’) to see what the ‘fallout’ would be.”

Death

The skeleton of the congregation, i.e., its administrative structures and procedures, resists decay longer than any other part of the organism’s anatomy.

The congregation had long since developed amnesia about the forces that breathed life into it, but remembered to its dying day the administrative vessel which, at one time, carried them.

PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES: WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

Congregations in each phase of the life cycle contain certain similarities, which produce common dangers and opportunities. We mentioned previously that the common agent in each stage of the Growth phase is the high E factor. Drawn to excess, it produces a kind of self-emulation that deifies the people or things in which the congregation is invested and from which it derives its energy, enthusiasm, vision, and hope. Essentially, the factors that contribute toward the growth of the congregation contain within them the seeds which can destroy the congregation in each stage of the Growth phase.

Conversely, the common aspects of the stages of the congregation in the Decline phase of the life cycle are the diminished “E” and the high “A.” The congregation that had been energized in its search of the “holy grail”—however that may have been perceived in the corporate vision or sense of mission—has lost its ability to become energized by new opportunities. It has lost the romance of being on the way, on the move, pioneering; instead, the need for something sure and certain emerges and becomes a kind of fetish. Venerating its structures, the congregation generates a kind of canonical mentality in which the pursuit of what should be displaces the pursuit of what could be.

Signaling the final stages of the Decline phase, the prevailing attitude or mood in the congregation is “what you see (i.e., the organizational structure) is what you get, no more, no less”—a kind of parody of the congregation in hot pursuit of some vision or hope. Time and circumstances often combined to render hope a disillusionment; but now, in these stages, despair makes its home in the fatal awareness that the structures that remain are unreal in the sense that they lack both relevance and significance.

The countervailing forces of growth and decline struggle against one another in each phase and stage of development. Congregations in Growth stages face the necessity of recognizing the forces of decline which are endemic to the Growth phase as a whole and to each stage in particular. Similarly, congregations in the Decline phase confront the need to recognize what energizing forces are embedded in their birth stories and in their changed circumstances.

The level of crisis in the congregation will give some hints concerning those things from the past on which the congregation can build and from which it must divorce itself in order to be faithful in its servant hood. The dialectic of life and death that marks the whole life cycle of the congregation produces what may be called “voices of protest” at each stage of development. At times verbal, at other times non-verbal, they signal the clash of the old order and new realities.

Taken together, the stages in the life cycle are not unrelated to one another and growth, in part, is served by a conservative function. In this view, the most important task of conservatism is to propagate in the congregation from stage to stage and age to age the sense of vision, excitement, and mission that originally called the congregation into being. This kind of conservation may welcome new realities and protest against the calcification of the old order. There is another voice of protest, however, which emanates from idolatrizing the past or, put in another way, when historicizing and historicism are one and the same. Still another voice of protest emerges from the realization that the congregation, in order to be faithful to and serve the forces of life, which called it into being, must modify or change its methods of operation and, perhaps, its statement of mission. Lacking a sense of continuity with congregational origins, still another voice of protest issues out of the sense of relevance and significance that has its roots only in the vicissitudes of changing conditions. The voice that prevails in the crisis of each stage of development announces the succeeding stage into which the congregation will move.

The primary danger facing the congregation in each stage of the Growth phase is that it can spin out into the Decline phase unless some specific interventions occur which will enable its continued growth toward Prime.

The Infant congregation may experience the problems of spurious enthusiasm, countervailing and/or unfulfilled expectations, and the lack of adequate programs and facilities. These problems are illustrated by a family which may have been drawn by the openness and vigor that characterize the fledgling congregation but eventually joins the more established congregation several miles away because, unlike the Infant congregation, it has an age-graded Sunday Church School and a Youth Ministry program to serve the children. When this happens, the Infant congregation wonders, "What's wrong with me?" and after several such occurrences its enthusiasm begins to wane. The natural tendency for the Infant congregation, in that situation, is to consider the ways in which it can regain its appeal. More often than not, whatever it does to try to regain its lost potency only deepens the crisis at this stage.

The factors that are strengthened in the next Growth Stage indicate the tasks which the Infant congregation faces in order to deal adequately with its particular crisis. It faces the tasks of building a sense of community among its members, a consensus on mission, and an outline of functions, goals and programs. In short, its primary task is to build a conscious intentionality out of the undifferentiated energy of the congregation.

The proliferation of programs characteristic of the Adolescent congregation renders it susceptible to a number of dangers unique to this stage of development. The hype of the Infant congregation is displaced by a need to discover its own identity. This search is similar to the way a person may try out clothing—putting this one on only to discard it to put something else on to see if it

fits. The trial and error method of program development is often motivated by a desire to have what works someplace else or to do what “successful” congregations do. Swayed by prevailing attitudes to do the “in thing” or to catch the eye of denominational executives, the Adolescent congregation is attuned to receive the latest program offerings and innovations. It resonates strongly with suggestions that it might be part of a “pilot project.”

These tendencies to proliferate and perform invest the energies of the congregation more in starting up programs and services than in following them through. Reminiscent of the Parable of the Soils, the Adolescent congregation may be characterized as the rocky ground in which the soil had not sedimented sufficiently to provide nutrients to the seed and to provide a bed for its roots. This situation produces an “out syndrome”—burnout, dropout, and left out.

The proliferation of programs often occurs without a sufficient base of support such as finances, training, recruitment, leadership, expertise, and personnel. In time, those entrusted with program development responsibilities tend to feel unsupported and unappreciated and, consequently, are susceptible to burning out or dropping out. Drawn by the need to perform well and to “make it” like a corporate Horatio Alger, the Adolescent congregation attends to its performance at the expense of some human concerns in the congregation. Time spent with people in the hospital about to undergo surgery (which seemed so important in the Infant stage) is now re-evaluated in light of the time demands required by program planning with various congregational committees. The transition from Infant to Adolescent congregation causes some who had previously felt included to feel left out.

A phenomenon unique to the Adolescent congregation is the “founder’s dilemma.” Most commonly focused on the organizing pastor, it originates in the cult of personality, which is nourished by the pastor’s charisma, gregariousness, and energy. Formed in the Infant stage, the cult of personality is inherited by the congregation in its Adolescent stage. The aura of the pastor’s presence surrounds all that the congregation is and does. The stresses placed on the pastor by the unwritten expectation to be ubiquitously present at all congregational functions, to maintain close personal contact with all members of the congregation, to provide the planning expertise and program leadership, to be the “executive secretary” of the Board of Administration and the committees cause him or her to be pulled in many different directions, feeling more and more “out of control.” Add to this the voices of protest, which in one way or another, demand that the pastor and the patriarchs and matriarchs be divested of their exclusive rights to power and authority in the congregation and that other persons be vested with authority as well as responsibility. These stresses tend to take the fun out of pastoral ministry. She or he worries a lot more, and the feeling of “not measuring up” creeps into personal and family relationships as well as into relationships with the congregation. The question for the founding pastor at this stage is whether (s)he will remain and make the necessary changes in life style, leadership style, and mode of ministry required by the changing situation or

“jump ship” and pass that task on to the next pastor, who may not have all that cultic freight to handle. Then, too, it is not always clear whether the difficulties and strains of the situation outweigh the appreciation, affection, and esteem with which one is held. At any rate, the founding pastor is led to ask, “What are the signs that one is supposed to know when it is time to move on?” The question contributes another dimension to the out syndrome already manifest in the congregation.

The tasks of the Adolescent congregation are signaled by the strengthened A and I of the congregation in Prime. There is a need to displace the congregation’s latent (or active) narcissism with a more inclusive appreciation of ministry as belonging to the whole people of God and embracing all of society, not just the church. The strengthened A-I combination radicalizes the understanding and practice of ministry by emphasizing in word and deed that God, in his love for the world, is still giving his Son (the Church, the Body of Christ) for it. The sense of servant hood impels the congregation to be aware of the many forms of ministry in which its members participate in church and society, to assess the gifts given by the Spirit to the congregation for ministry, and to account for their use. Implicit in this approach is a distinction between administering the affairs of the congregation and managing the ministries. It calls for a studied attempt to discover how the congregation can empower and equip its members for their varied forms of ministry and how the congregation as a whole may act responsively and responsibly as priest, prophet, evangelist, and pastor in its own situation. Obviously this is a creative act unique to each congregation that is, at the same time, self-actualizing and self-transcending.

The dangers to the congregation in Prime are legion. These dangers have their basis, for the most part, in the bipolarities of E (generative) and P (practical) and, similarly, of A (rational) and I (relational). The tension caused by their bipolarity produces the condition in which creative conflict occurs, i.e., an oscillation between the visionary and the practical and between the rational and the relational, but it also presents the congregation in Prime with some unique dangers. First, in our social situation, inclusion is equated with plurality. Differences in lifestyle, sexual preference, socioeconomic status, and skin color, may produce a kind of shock wave in the congregation that it cannot handle. The question at this point is not the challenge that plurality presents to the congregation’s heritage of faith, but rather, the threat that it presents to its own indigenous culture and religion. The particular challenge to the congregation is to cultivate an attitude of openness in the midst of social forces that teach people to be closed, defensive, and paranoid. Second, the bipolar tension that characterizes the congregation in Prime requires unusual skill in utilizing conflict. The task of handling conflict in the preceding stages is to maintain it at a manageable level—defusing it as much as possible—so that the congregation may get on with the development tasks which the transition from one stage to another presents to it. In Prime, the congregation welcomes conflict for the creative potential it contains. It occurs in a context of relationships in which the people not only respect one another, but love one another, and consequently are able to remain

with the birth pains of conflicted relationships until the new resolution is born. The congregation in Prime recognizes its need of a midwife in the form of a consultant to assist in the process from time to time as a normal part of its life and work together. Conflict, however, presents the dangers of vulnerability and the appearance of weakness in a macho-oriented society. Care giving institutions in general and churches in particular have a lot of difficulty in appreciating tension and conflict as endemic to healthy organizations.

There is a point, however, when the tension on a rubber band causes it to break, and this occurs similarly with congregations. The break may be dramatic, catapulting the congregation into one or another stage in the Decline phase. More often than not, however, the congregation in Prime experiences the break in the subtle forms of the diminished E. The enthusiasm for new and different ideas and the capacity for critical reflection have waned, often imperceptibly. The desire to encounter the situation fully is covertly displaced by an interest in doing it “the way we did last year” when leaders gather to plan the congregational programs in ministry.

Inertia, caused by the diminished E, are characteristic of each stage in the Decline phase. Infecting the leadership of the congregation, it has ripple effect throughout the whole organism affecting its processes and structures in a progressively crippling manner from stage to stage. The dangers of this creeping disease are all too apparent in the withering effect it has on program development in the Aristocratic stage and, additionally, on the Inclusion factor—most noticeably in the Bureaucratic stage.

The common difficulty of congregations in the Decline phase is a state of forgetfulness. Their worship and other festivals have lost the dynamism of celebration and have been reduced to mere ritual observance. Members have difficulty in recalling more than the bare details of memorable events and critical incidents that had a formative effect on the congregation. The only story of the congregation may be what was written for the 50th anniversary brochure. Gone is the happy playfulness in re-telling the silly incidents which occurred on congregational picnics. Gone, also, is the sense of pathos and subsequent rebirth following the burning of the first church building. In short, the congregation has developed amnesia concerning the forces that had previously breathed life into the organism.

There is a redemptive dimension to the Decline phase that the congregation may also have forgotten. The potency for renewal is positively related to the level of crisis in the congregation—the deeper the level of crisis, the greater the potential for renewal. Church mergers have a way of reminding us that the death of a congregation can be experienced as its giving itself over to the birth of a new reality.

Renewal in the early phases of decline is marked by incremental changes and in the latter phases by more revolutionary changes. The difficulty experienced by

many congregations in the Decline phase is that the members tend to discount the amount of conflict in the congregation. There seems to be a connection between loss of memory and loss of perception. The particular danger in this situation is that an operational solution is offered for a more profound problem which, in the final analysis, serves only to deepen the crisis in the congregation. A weak analogy is applying a Band-Aid when radical surgery is required.

The primary intervention for a congregation in Decline is two-fold. First, the congregation needs to reconstruct its corporate memory concerning those people, places, times, and events which stand out as being significant (for whatever reason), to recapture the dynamisms of agony and ecstasy, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain which they contained, to see the hold over effect of those events, and to sense the story being lived out in its historical narrative. Second, the congregation needs to touch base again with its setting. What mandates for ministry are inherent in the demographic and other changes in the congregation and community—whether anticipated or already occurring? Together, a re-awakened sense of those forces that had previously breathed life into the congregation and an adequate perception of the possibilities for ministry in the congregation and community may combine to produce the condition whereby the congregation can continue to participate in the representation of Christ in that place in some new way.

SUMMARY

A congregation in the early stages of the Growth phase can be attuned to the developmental tasks it confronts by being aware of the factors, which are strengthened in the succeeding stage. Resisting presumption and aware of the pitfalls unique to its stage of development, the congregation can take responsibility for its own growth and, at the same time, be responsive to the formative work of the Holy Spirit in moving it toward wholeness. A congregation in the Decline phase can become sensitized to the forces of life, which are inherent in its history, heritage and place. Displacing the sense of despair by the recovery of memory and hope, the congregation can experience a birth to a new sense of mission and purpose.

SOME FURTHER READING

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Congregational Life Cycle Chart Description of Stages

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Culture type</i>	<i>Major characteristics</i>	<i>Major strengths</i>	<i>Major weaknesses</i>	<i>Dangers</i>	<i>Developmental intervention</i>
Birth Epai	Star culture	Integrated around vision & charisma of founder	High levels of energy & enthusiasm	Insufficient membership base to support ministries	Spurious enthusiasm	Broaden & maintain personal contacts
Infancy Epal	Process culture	Quality of relationships correlate w/levels of energy & enthusiasm	Open & unrestricted inclusiveness, contagious enthusiasm	Undeveloped programs, conditional inclusiveness	Disillusionment. Erosion of membership & potential	Generate sense of community & mission, develop specific ministries
Adolescence Epai	Busy Bee culture	High energy level focused on development of programs & services	Program development, adaptiveness, doingness	Unrealistic idealism, leader burnout, program proliferation.	Conflict over purposes & mission, founder's dilemma.	Broaden member assimilation & participation in leadership; develop integrated approach to variety of ministries.
Prime EPAl	Wisdom culture	Interaction between inner/outer, intentionality/inclusion, programmatic/visionary	Creative conflict. Pastoral & corporate responsibility	Lack of "solutions," vulnerability	Dominance of one or another polarity. Loss of sense of nearness.	Develop conflict utilization skills among members, maintain flow between intra- & extra-dependency
Maturity ePAI	Status quo culture	Well established fellowship structures, administrative procedures, staff, programs & support	Stability, sense of self-worth, continuity	Energetic but unenthusiastic	Unresponsiveness to new opportunities and changed conditions.	Analyze congregation's history & current context. Restate its mission.
Aristocracy epAl	Plantation culture	Good ol' boys club. Busy but unenergetic	Efficiency. Strong fellowship among insiders	Guardedness. Status consciousness. Exclusiveness	Dwindling base of support. Loss of mission	Restore sense of God's presence in congregation's history and generate awareness of congregation's vocation
Bureaucracy epAi	Disillusioned macho culture	The Golden Age no longer sought. Maintaining one's turf personally & corporately	Strong sense of boundaries	Rigidity. Muteness. Defensiveness. Hostility. Suspicion	Unregenerative-ness. Ultimacy of institutional structures. Personalizing systemic problems	Generate a new identity. Empower the powerless.
Death	Artifact culture	Complete disintegration	Absorption into another ecclesiastical entity	Despair. Anomic. Complete loss of memory, identity, hope	No new life beyond. Ultimate power given to death	Construct a completely new ecclesial fellowship.