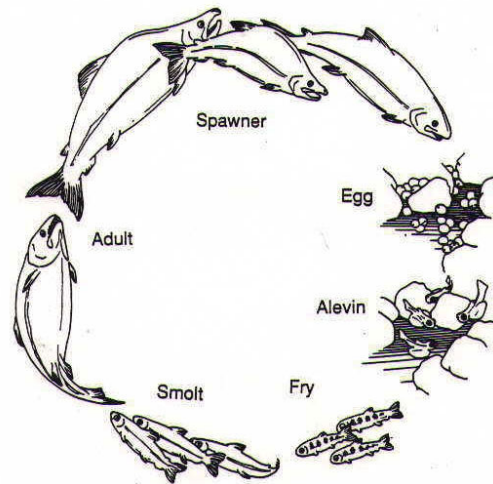


Life Cycles and Your Local Church

Rob Stewart, LPD
January, 2015

All of us who have studied biology, even in elementary school, have learned about life cycles. In our local schools, perhaps appropriately, we study the life cycle of salmon – from egg to adult to spawner to death.



When I consider the life cycle of the salmon, I admit to some mixed feelings. I am glad that the species continues through the heroic efforts of spawning adult salmon, but I am also sad that the story always ends with the death of the parents.

It has also been observed that churches have life cycles. Fortunately however, for a church to reproduce, the death of the parent is neither inevitable nor usually necessary. Left unchecked however, there is a tendency for every local church to progress through a life cycle, from birth through growth, through middle and old age, and ultimately to death.

Though the concept of organizational lifecycles was introduced through the study of corporations by Dr. Ichak Adizes, (*Managing Corporate Lifecycles*, 2004), churches seem to reflect the same tendencies. While church lifecycles cannot be said to be a biblical concept, illustrations of the cycle of the local church are evident. Paul writes corrective epistles to churches that were planted only a few years earlier, and John, in the Book of Revelation, addresses churches that were in decline after about forty years of age, for reasons ranging from heresy to complacency.

The life cycles of churches have been described in a variety of ways and by a number of writers. Church consultant, George Bullard graphs the life cycle of a congregation into ten distinct phases. This life cycle includes five steps to the upside and five to the downside.

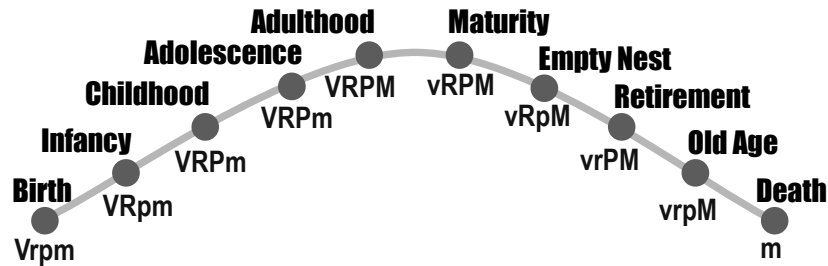
UPSIDE OF LIFE CYCLE

Birth
Infancy
Childhood
Adolescence
Adulthood

DOWNSIDE OF LIFE CYCLE

Maturity
Empty Nest
Retirement
Old Age
Death

LIFECYCLE OF A CHURCH



<p>V = Vision Where should we go? R = Relationship . . . Whom should we bring? P = Program How will we get there? M = Management . . . What should we avoid?</p>

In short, when a church is planted or birthed, the focus is typically all about vision and mission. People gather to reach out to those who are not yet a part of the church, and they are prepared to serve and even sacrifice to this end.

Over time, as the church grows, it will tend to develop programs, structures and policies, and will respond to the needs of those who belong to the church (i.e. Compare Acts 2 and Acts 6). Typically, the church planter has become or has been succeeded by a pastor/shepherd, and the increasing focus on the “inward” can inevitably lead towards the stagnation, decline and death of the local church.

Again, for churches, unlike the salmon, the life cycle need not end in death. A congregation that is alert and prayerfully attentive to their calling and vision can make adjustments, corrections and intentional refocusing that will enable the church to remain productive and healthy for many years. Sadly, however, many congregations will find comfort in decline and will not seek to correct their lifecycle until their vitality is gone and there might not be the capacity to change the inevitable trajectory of decline and death.

While most congregations will not fit Bullard’s categories perfectly, upon reflection, one phase of the lifecycle will be identified as predominant. I would suggest that even a short discussion with church leadership will make this clear.

Here are five questions to consider as a leadership team:

1. What drives your church – or who is in the driver’s seat?

In a healthy church, this is vision. In a declining church, it will be management. What drives your church? What is on the agenda of your leadership meetings? Congregational meetings? On what do you invest your time and budget at the church?

In a declining church, policy, structures and management will provide predictability, but also curb creativity and mission.

2. What stories do we have of God's work among us? Are they stories of new believers or bunions? OK, yes, bunions matter. But, is there new life and new birth in our church? Are our stories current or are they from the archives?
3. What draws people to our church? Is it mission, service and collective passion for Christ? Is it the services offered to people as consumers? Is it loyalty and devotion to the church? What is our collective passion and reason to be here?
4. Are we hopeful when we consider the future? Given how and where things seem to be going, where on the life cycle continuum do we believe our church will be in three years? How about ten years?
5. If you were to be looking for a church today, would you choose to attend your church? Would you invite a friend? Why or why not?

The above questions, though not exhaustive, provide a context for determining where your church is on the church life cycle.

Following is a brief survey to assist in identifying where you personally sense your church to be on the church life cycle continuum. It would be of great assistance to us in preparing for our district conference, if you could complete the survey and return it to us, either electronically or by mail.

We will keep your answers confidential, and will not identify either you or your church in sharing our findings.

Thanks so much!

We look forward to seeing you at our district conference on March 6, 7!

Rob Stewart
district superintendent