

## **Life-Cycle of a Congregation**

None of the churches mentioned in the New Testament survive! Even those founded and tended by the great Apostle Paul have gone the way of all things. Like individuals, congregations proceed through various life-cycles. They are born, usually through the midwifery of a “mission pastor” or small group of enthusiastic church founders. They proceed through other life stages, and in the way of all things, eventually they die. Assessing where a congregation may be in its life cycle can be a critical component of analysis as one begins a ministry or seeks to lead a planning process.

Just as individuals proceed through various life stages at their own pace, and sometimes regress to earlier developmental phases, so congregations do not proceed in a neat linear fashion through their life stages. We can all probably point to faith communities that were moribund and suddenly “looped back” to earlier stages of vitality and experienced a measure of revival if not resurrection. In fact, early assessment of being “over the hill” can enable leaders to re-circulate to vital and exciting ministry.

The following description of stages in congregational life cycles are based in some measure upon the work of Martin Saarinen in *The Life Cycle of a Congregation* (Alban Institute 1986), as expanded and adapted by Michael Cooper-White for a course in Church Administration, Leadership & Polity at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary.

### **Birth**

Time of high excitement, enthusiasm; being part of something new; the founding pastor may take on “larger than life” aura in the minds of some. Free of heavy programmatic responsibilities, the founding leader can spend large amounts of time in visitation, one-to-one contacts etc. Normally, at least in ELCA missions, a “steering committee” has advisory function; decisions made by pastor/developer and mission director. Occasionally a difficult delivery can so damage the newborn that it never recovers. Sometimes a premature birth leads to a difficult struggle, early death or slow development.

### **Infancy**

Continuing excitement, growth, but also anxiety, growing frustration if birth process prolonged: It gets old setting up chairs, carting hymnals etc. every Sunday in a school auditorium or other mission development site. High survival needs: outreach usually gregarious, but scares some away by its very desperate nature. While still small, the congregations needs all hands and all who aspire can be involved. People put up with limited resources, mediocre music (portable organ etc.), knowing that they will keep growing and soon look, sound and feel like a big church.

### **Adolescence**

Not usually as rebellious as a real teenager! But testing limits on itself, often with judicatory (synod): Why do we have to adopt that model constitution? Programs expand

as members and prospects increasingly expect the congregation to act like a real church in offering Sunday School, fellowship activities, expanding number of small groups. If a building project occurs at this stage things can get really tricky. Now the young thing has a building to manage and a mortgage to pay! With expanded numbers of people and programs, the founding pastor's visitation and personal contacts begin to be reduced, often prompting a response of "she/he doesn't love me any more." Sometimes the pastor will even accept a new call at this stage, leaving the adolescent congregation feeling rejected and/or abandoned. Occasionally, the adolescent develops "wandering eyes" and thinks a better preacher will get them off the plateau and growing again. Responsibilities for self-support grow as the mission support subsidy declines.

### **Prime**

"Marked by a balance between and an optimization of both human and programmatic concerns mediated by the strengthened managerial capability." (Saarinen, p. 11)

Now fully grown (not necessarily in size) and mature, the congregation is a moving mission machine hitting on all cylinders. "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 programs concerns, with a strong sense of mission as the fulcrum."

(Saarinen p. 12) Depending upon size, the congregation may now have a multiple clergy staff, full- or part-time program staff in several areas; an ample facility for its multi-faceted ministries; additional building project on the drawing board. It gives a generous portion of its budget to benevolence, both synodical/churchwide and local. If same pastor has moved with congregation into its prime, she/he has made the transition from being shepherd to being rancher. (Lyle Schaller)

### **Maturity**

Still exhibiting many of the traits of its prime, the mature congregation has a decidedly "settled" personality. "I am who I am; we are who we are" reflects both comfort with self, but perhaps also a growing resistance to change and incorporate new ideas.

Retaining traditions and established patterns begins to take precedence over discerning new possibilities. Charter members become fewer and they may begin to withdraw from active leadership and reflect nostalgically on the good old days when the church and they were younger. If the neighborhood changes, the congregation may fail to reflect it and become more a commuting congregation or regional church.

### **Aristocracy**

Things are becoming stale; still busy but diminishing enthusiasm and growing tiredness. Newcomers, including pastors and other staff, expected to conform to the values of the gentry. There may be high fellowship, but more and more groups are closed; oriented more to past than future; to maintenance than mission. Unless heavily endowed, which poses its own challenges, funding issues may become pressing. Often at this stage a congregation seeks tenants/renters who will generate income to help meet the budget. There is much longing for the way things used to be; recalling (often inflated) when the

pews were full, the Sunday School rooms bursting at the seams, and when pastors were powerful preachers who brought in the masses!

### **Bureaucracy**

Attempts to defend the past and avoid further decline are often seen from the outside as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Survival-oriented attitude often channels scarcer resources into protective measures (covering the stained glass with plexiglass; putting up chain link fences in urban neighborhoods etc.) Blaming is frequent: If the synod only supported us as they should . . . If the seminary would just make pastors like they used to . . . There is frequently great resistance to creative problem-solving, to exploring partnerships, strategic alliances, mergers etc. that might enable creative mission outreach to occur again. Staff members often stop communicating well, or do so by written MEMOs or emails.

### **Death**

None of the congregations to which St. Paul wrote his epistles survives. Like all living things, congregations some day must die. In some cases there can be death and resurrection in the same location. Some dying churches have made courageous moves to turn their buildings over to new missions (often of another denomination) or convert the assets into mission movements. Many dwindle away; the assets are dissipated; frantic survival efforts (just a few more bake sales will do it!) offer a pathetic witness to and may be parasitic in a community. There is probably no more important time for the synod to provide care (hospice); to help remaining individuals and last pastor avoid self-blaming; to understand the multiple dynamics leading to the congregation's demise (a great time for a systems perspective!)