

Thinking About Church Life Cycles

All Living Organisms Have a Life Cycle

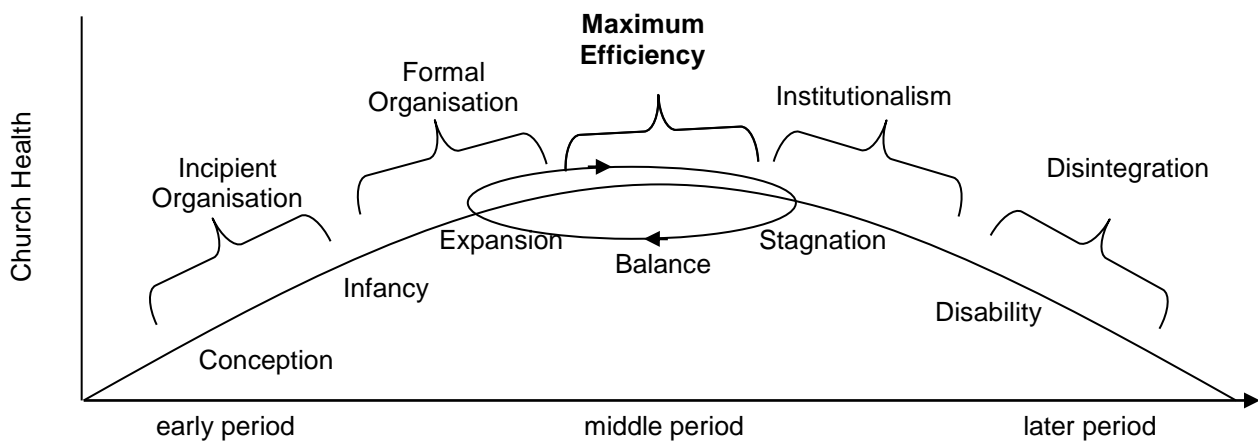
Church Is A Living Organism, Not An Institution

90% of all churches reach a plateau by their 15th birthday

90% of churches are on the right hand side of the life-cycle

Churches Can Be Renewed

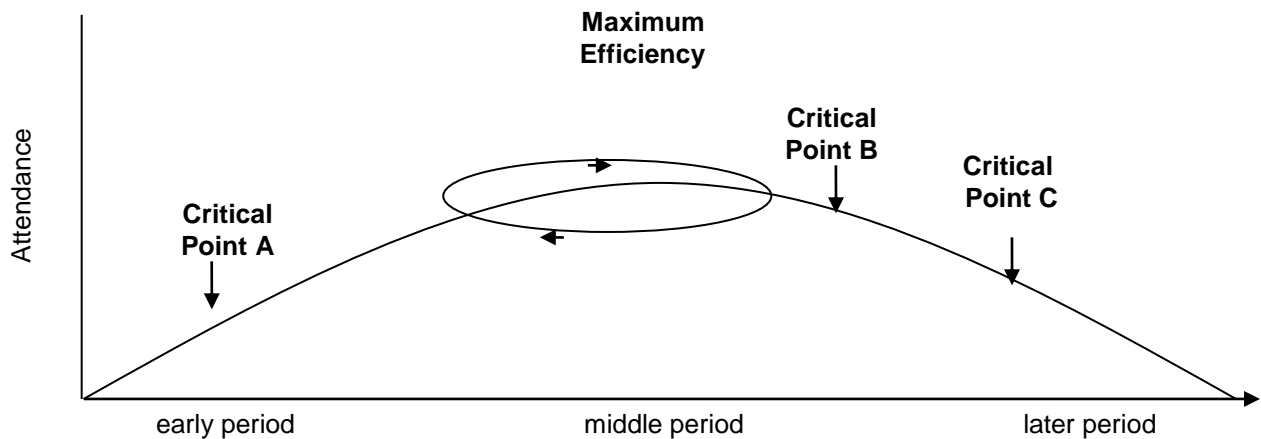
Churches Can Live At The Maximum Efficiency Point



Organizational life stages:

- 1- Conception
- 2- Infancy
- 3- Expansion
- 4- Balance
- 5- Stagnation
- 6- Disability

Critical Points



Factors That Make These The Critical Points

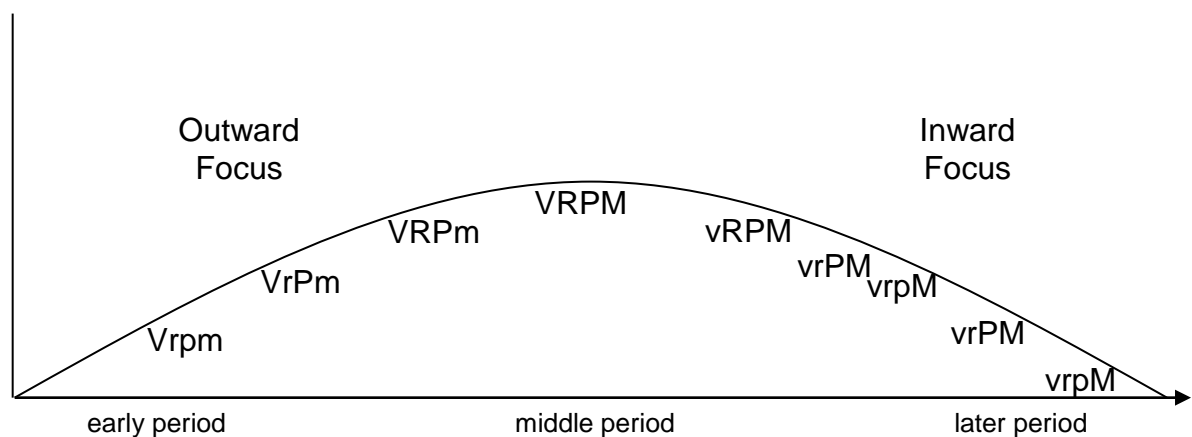
Responding To Critical Points

Avoiding Stagnation and Disability

1. Make sure a discipleship process is in place that grows people in personal spiritual disciplines.
2. Actively cast an outward focused vision.
3. Increase the pace of leadership development while in stage 3.
4. Ensure that leaders have access to ample and reliable information about the state of the ministry.
5. Leaders must help the ministry refocus and renew before hitting stagnation.

Revitalizing On The Down Side

1. **Prayer** is the most important factor in tuning churches around.
Create an environment of prayer seeking **God's leading** for the mission of the church and for one another.
2. Focus on what the church is to **Be** and **Do** with a compelling **Outward Vision**
2. Focus on **Steps** over Programmes
3. Develop A Culture of **Evaluation**
4. **Communicate** Often



V = Vision
R = Relationships
P = Programs
M = Management

God Honoring, Outward Focused Vision is crucial in turning churches around.

Background Reading – Life Cycles

While every organisation is unique, there are identifiable patterns that are observed in the nature of organisations. Robbins and Barnwell state: "Organisations are like fingerprints. Each has its own unique structure....Yet again like fingerprints, no structure is truly unique. All fingerprints have common elements that allow them to be classified around common elements."¹ Sociologist David Moberg points out that churches, like other organisations, generally follow a similar pattern in terms of organisational life cycle. Five general phases are identified: (1) incipient organisation, (2) formal organisation, (3) maximum efficiency, (4) institutionalism and (5) disintegration.²

The first fifteen to twenty years of a church's life cycle are typically its most dynamic ones. During this time, vision and understanding of the church's purpose are generally very clear. Morale is high and this helps draw people into participation. Changes are easily adopted and integrated into the church structure. Because of minimal organisation, there is spontaneity and flexibility in decision making. Structures are created in response to the needs, with the function of ministry determining the form. This phase of church is very evident in Acts and in early Adventism.

As the initial euphoria of establishing the church wears off, it generally institutes a relatively predictable series of programmes and infrastructure. The zeal that was focused on the "why" of ministry is now concentrated upon "how" ministry is done and structures are formalised.

After some years working through such issues the church reaches its mature, most efficient stage. The people, practices and policies are set in place. Change may be introduced, but the foundation has been solidified. The church now has a discernable tradition and systems that were developed to allow ministry become solidified as part of the tradition regardless of their current value to the mission. Structures that are organized for security, predictability and safety end up taking precedence over purpose. This is the institutional plateau on which many churches rest for many years.

Without realising what is taking place, a church gradually begins to find itself on a ministry decline. Current members have a poor understanding of the purpose of the church. This results in ministry being done "because we've always done it that way". The plateauing

¹ Robbins and Barnwell, 244.

² David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:Prentice-Hall, 1962), 120-121.

of a church almost always involves increased bureaucracy, emphasis on maintenance and unwillingness to change. A church with a bureaucratic structure becomes a maze of maintenance. Most of the system's energy is used in just keeping it running. Questions regarding the system's effectiveness are seldom asked.³

The structural flexibility of a church in its beginning years provides for a maximising of ministry and a minimising of maintenance. At the end of a church's life cycle, the situation is reversed and a church maximizes maintenance and minimizes ministry. In its first years the biblical functions create the forms of ministry, but in later years the forms strangle the functions.

If nothing is done to change the trend, a church eventually disintegrates into a period of stagnation and decline. Rigid structures prevent new ministries from being started and drive visionary leaders away to other churches where new ideas are accepted and implemented. Many churches enter the final phase of the life cycle unaware that they have begun a slow descent. George Barna points out that because churches are non-profit entities whose existence requires only a name and a person or two to maintain the legacy, a dead church is not necessarily an ex-church. He says that in the USA, "thousands of churches have deteriorated to the point where they are a ministry in theory only, a shell of what they had once been."⁴

William Weitzel and Ellen Jonsson studied the process of organisational decline.⁵ The stages identified were:

- (1) Blindness: There is a failure to anticipate or detect internal or external threats. Decline may set in long before it is reflected in performance statistics.
- (2) Inaction: The signs of decline are apparent but little is done about them.
- (3) Faulty Action: Differences of opinion regarding courses of action proliferate leading to an increase in power plays. Decisions often focus on indicators rather than causes of decline.
- (4) Crisis: Major re-orientation and revitalisation is necessary or the organisation will suffer certain failure. People in the organisation suffer from divisiveness and social fabric begins to break up.
- (5) Dissolution: The organisation collapses.

³ Getz, *Sharpening*, 252 identifies the advanced stages of Institutionalism.

⁴ George Barna, *Turnaround Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993), 22-23.

⁵ William Weitzel and Ellen Jonsson, "Decline in Organisations: A Literature Integration and Extension," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 34 (March 1989): 102.

The dysfunctional consequences of organisational decline include centralisation of decision-making with decreased participation and control emphasised. There is no long-term planning with crisis and short-term needs overshadowing strategic planning. Innovation is discouraged by risk-aversion and scepticism. This environment causes many leaders to leave. These factors combine to result in a resistance to change that continues the slide toward decline.⁶

However, decline is not inevitable. Organisations differ from people and plants in that their cycle isn't predictable. An organisation may go from youth to old age in a matter of years or it may last for centuries. An ongoing culture of renewal can and must become the nature of the church. Church leadership must continually assess where the church is at on the life cycle and be continually re-shaping ministry on the first half of the cycle in a way that guards against institutionalism.

⁶ Ibid.