

Where is Your Church in Its Missional Lifecycle?

Gravity exists. And, there's not much we can do about it. As we grow up, we learn this by dropping things on our feet, falling out of trees, and slipping on icy sidewalks. So, the best thing to do is to learn to live with it, and... even make it our ally. We fill balloons with helium and rise above the earth. We build airfoil wings and propellers to fly with the birds.

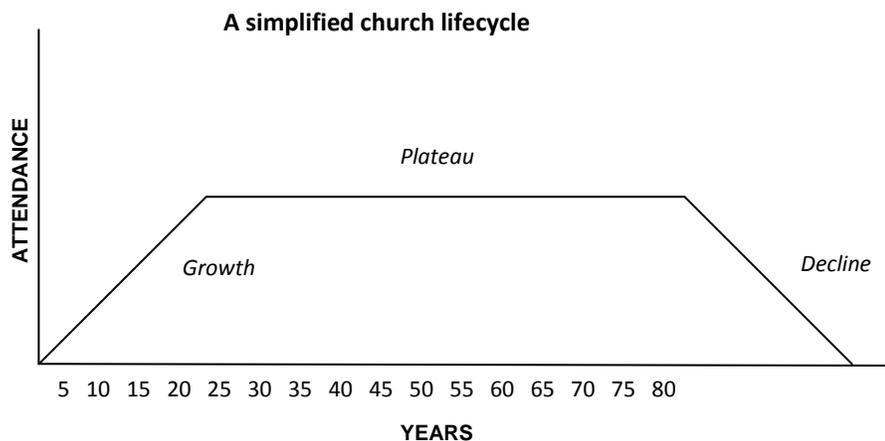
Lifecycles also exist. And, there is not much we can do about that, either. Every living thing has them: plants ... animals ... people ... churches. Lifecycles simply are. Life begins ... it flourishes ... then it ends. So, the best thing to do is to learn to live with it, and...even make it our ally.

To begin, it is important to realize that there is one amazing difference between the lifecycle of churches, and the lifecycle of all other living things. On the following pages I hope to help us 1) better understand church lifecycles, and then 2) consider how church's lifecycle can work for us (rather than against us) in accomplishing the mission of Christ's church.

What is a Church Lifecycle?

First, it is important to realize that every church has a lifecycle. And every church—including yours—is somewhere on its lifecycle. The lifecycle describes a local church's progression from infancy...to maturity...to death. Where you are on the lifecycle has a great deal to do with your church's ability to reach new people for Christ and assimilate them into your church family. *Churches well into their lifecycle find it increasingly difficult to mobilize people and programs in pursuit of their mission.*

The easiest way to determine where you are on the lifecycle is to graph the worship attendance since your church's birth. Your pattern will not be as simplified as the graph below. But this basic trend in attendance (and, to a lesser degree, membership) can be observed in most churches when averaged out over a period of years. The sobering fact is that at least 80% of churches in America today are on the flat or back-side of their lifecycles.



In the early stages of a church's life there is a high sense of mission among all involved. The church is purpose-driven. Charter members, and often a bi-vocational pastor, volunteer their time to help the church reach people and grow. Buildings are less important; structure is less important. The motivation is mission. And the result is growth.

As the formative years give way to time, the church reaches a comfortable size and attendance begins to level off. Where this plateau occurs depends on the church's growth in the first stage. Congregations typically plateau near 35, 75, 100, 250, 400, 750 or 1,000 in attendance. People who affiliate with the church in this stage come predominantly via *transfer* growth, while fewer and fewer people are added by

conversion growth. An emerging pattern of “institutionalization” is reflected by the increase in committees, and the decrease in accomplishment.

The final stage of a church’s lifecycle—decline—often begins after a church’s 50th birthday. Few, if any, members reflect the mission priority of the founders. The community has usually changed, while the church has not. Decline in worship attendance during this stage may be gradual or abrupt. Few in the church, including the staff, believe the church’s best days are still ahead.

Here is the critical insight that has grown from the study of church lifecycles: *The longer a church exists, the more concerned the leaders and members become with self-service, and the less concerned with the church’s original mission and reason for being.*

Robert Orr has enlarged the three stages of growth, plateau, decline into a more detailed description of the changes that occur as a church moves from “initial structuring” toward “disintegration.”¹

Five Stages in the Lifecycle of Churches					
	Initial Structuring	Formal Organization	Maximum Efficiency	Institutionalization	Disintegration
Commitment to Mission & Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive, supportive attitude - Uncertainty of the future, demand for visionary leader with high commitment level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong sense of mission and purpose among every member - High level of goal ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High visibility and understanding of the mission - Common purpose throughout the ministries of the church 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lowering of members’ understanding of purpose - New members do not sense church’s purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purpose is lost - Mission is not understood
Involvement of Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mutual dependency requires everyone to be involved, or leave - All members willing to work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High percentage of individuals’ time and identity committed to the church - Volunteers easily found 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New members quickly find a place to become involved - High level of enthusiasm among membership for participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members assume there are enough others to do the job - More paid staff to enhance ministries - Original members: “we’ve done our part” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programs eliminated for lack of participation - Difficult to find volunteers - 10% of members do 90% of the work
Programs, Structures & Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minimal organization - Spontaneity in decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Function of ministry determines form - Structure created in response to needs - Traditions begin to form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New programs created to respond to new needs - Delegation begins - New roles and responsibilities created 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few, if any, new programs added - Forms of ministries begin to determine function - Institution creates needs rather than responds to needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programs deleted for lack of funds - Primary goal is preservation and survival
Attitude Toward Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members are receptive - Things quickly accomplished - Ownership is nearly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changes easily adopted and integrated - Suggested from all levels of membership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New proposals given serious consideration - Church leaders responsible for initiating and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few changes proposed - No changes considered that radically depart from status quo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “We’ve never done it that way before” - Rationalizations often made for why it can’t be done

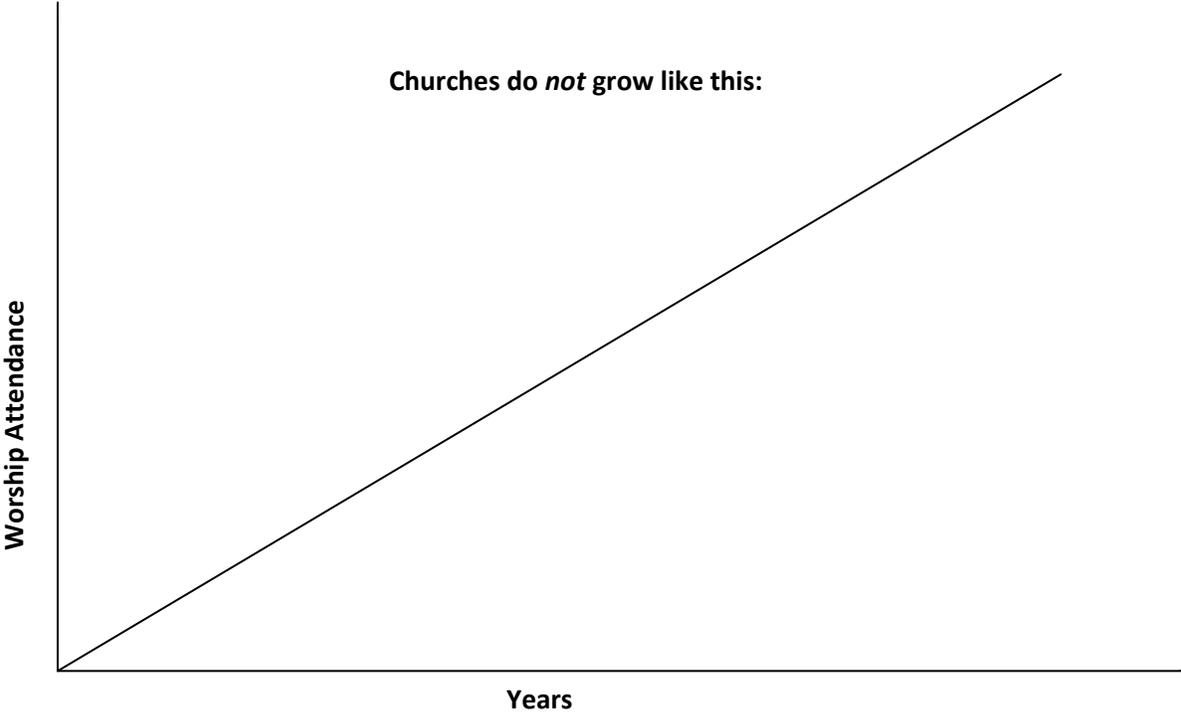
¹ Robert Orr, “Is Your Church in a Mid-Life Crisis?” in *The Growth Report*, No. 4, Institute for American Church Growth, Pasadena, California.

	unanimous		implementing		
Morale and Self-Esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Morale is high - Congregational self-esteem is in the process of being formulated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Morale is higher - Self-esteem easily affected by circumstances and short-term successes or failures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Morale is highest - Self-esteem at its highest level - Confidence is contagious that goals can be reached 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Morale polarizes into groups of high and lows - Self-esteem develops uncertainties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few have high morale - Frustration and/or despair by leaders in not knowing how to stop decline - Self-esteem is low

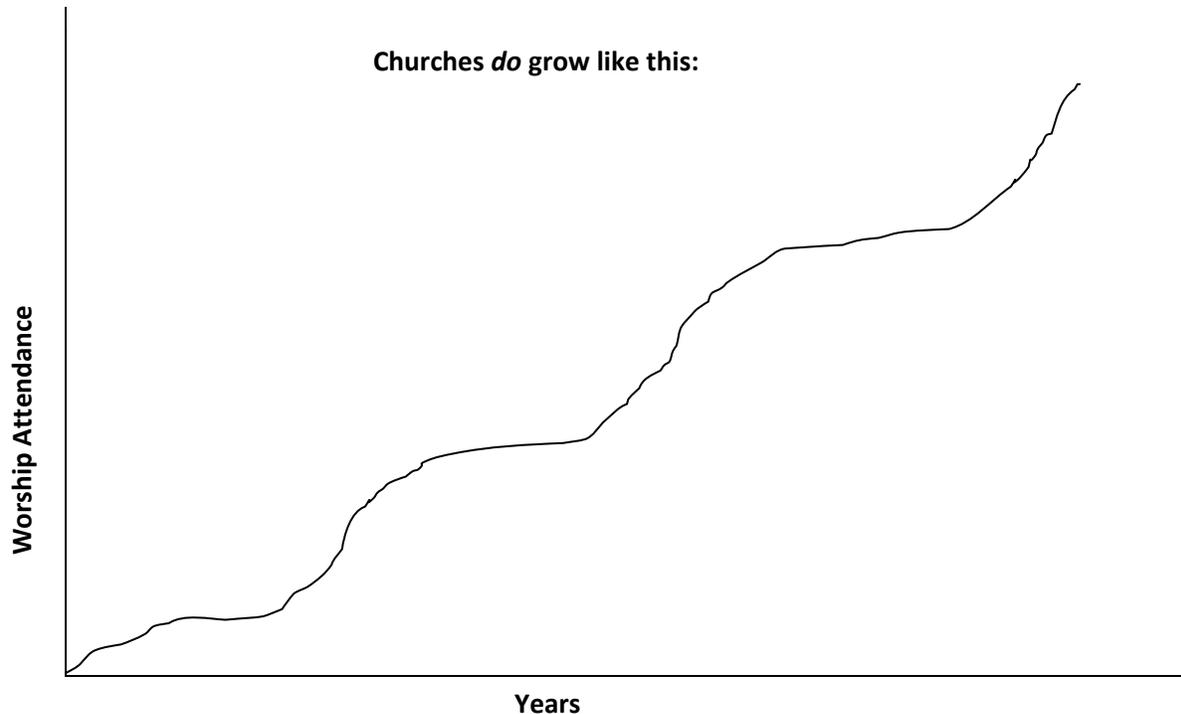
But didn't we just say that churches can begin new lifecycles? Indeed they can. In fact, the study of church growth (to which I have devoted much of my professional life) is actually the study of how churches can break out of the gravitational pull toward attendance plateau or decline, and actually re-discover the visionary excitement and missional focus that occurs at the beginning of a new lifecycle.

And what about those churches that do not seem to be affected by this lifecycle pattern? The ones that are growing beyond the first 15 - 20 years. How do they do it?

First, here is a graph of what does *not* occur in growing churches:



Rather than a linear pattern of growth, churches that are growing when they shouldn't be (based on lifecycle projections) show a "stair-step" pattern of growth, as illustrated below...



Here's an important insight: Most churches that are growing at a time when they should be plateaued or declining have begun new lifecycles! Something has interrupted the church's normal pattern—I call it an "intervention event"—and a new lifecycle has begun before the old lifecycle has pulled them into decline or death.

Beginning a New Lifecycle

The secret to beginning a new lifecycle is just that... beginning something new. An intervention event is an interruption in the status quo. These interruptions are sometimes "controllable," sometimes not. Hopefully they are perceived as "good," but sometimes the interruptions seem "bad." Whatever their nature, intervention events "change the rules." And, with a change in rules comes an opportunity to reconnect with the passion—the mission—which was the source of growth in the early stage of the church's lifecycle.

Here are some intervention events I have seen ignite new enthusiasm and mission in a church that was on the flat or backside of its lifecycle:

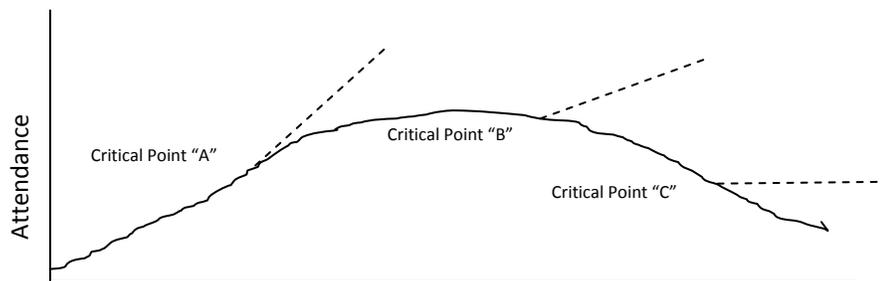
1. A change of pastors
2. A crisis
3. Planting a church
4. Closing, then re-opening the church
5. Renewal of the pastor
6. Renewal of the laity
7. Denominational intervention
8. An outside consultant
9. Relocation of the church facilities

10. Beginning a new (style) worship service

There is no guarantee that an event which disrupts a church's status quo will automatically begin a new lifecycle. An intervention event is simply a moment in a church's life when "the time is right" for change. Intervention events provide open "doors of opportunity," but not every church is either aware of this fateful moment, or chooses to walk through those open doors and begin a new lifecycle. (By the way, of all the "controlled" interventions I have seen, adding a new style worship service is consistently the most successful in beginning a new lifecycle.²)

There are three places in a church's lifecycle where the intervention event might occur—the growth stage, the plateau stage, or the decline stage. The results of the intervention in a church will vary depending on where it is in the lifecycle:

Critical Points in a Church's Lifecycle



Critical Point "A"

Introducing an intervention strategy at this point in a church's lifecycle is reasonably difficult. But it is ideally the best time and place to do so. The difficulty comes as lay leaders look at the present church attendance—higher each year than the year before—and wonder whether the benefit of significant change is worth the risk. Things seem to be going reasonably well in the church. Why fix it if it isn't broken?

Despite the challenge of introducing significant change at this point, church leaders that successfully do so will add at least ten years of growth to the church's present lifecycle. For such churches, the "new rules" serve as a booster to maintain the momentum of growth. Beginning a new lifecycle while the church is still growing continues the outreach priority before the gravity of the old lifecycle can pull the church out of its growth and missional mindset.

Critical Point B

If your church's worship attendance has been plateaued for the past ten to fifteen years (no more than a $\pm 5\%$ change), a successful intervention strategy will help to avoid the attendance decline that is soon to follow. Critical Point "B" is actually the easiest time to gain congregational support for a new way of doing things. An assessment of church attendance will confirm non-growth. But because these churches have experienced growth in the relatively recent past, and generally want to see an increase in attendance, a well-conceived intervention strategy is likely to receive a positive endorsement. The exception is when the following three ingredients come together: the church is able to easily meet its financial obligations (perhaps through an endowment), the sanctuary is at least 50% full on an average Sunday, and the congregation has little taste for involvement in outward-focused activities.

² Because of this, I researched the process of starting a new service, and reported it in the book *How to Start a New Service* (Baker, 1997).

Critical Point “C”

If an intervention strategy is not introduced at this point, the church will slip into a coma beyond resuscitation. It is difficult to know exactly when a church reaches this point in its lifecycle. In reality, it is the point of no return. One of the intervention events noted earlier can be most successful at this point—closing the church, then beginning the process of planting a new church which opens the following year.

Most churches beyond Point C in the lifecycle do not have the energy, vision, or resources to live through a major change. The situation is not unlike a dying person so weak that further surgery would hasten the end rather than prolong it. However, if there is still an adamant desire for life in a church at this point, it is usually easy to get a “survival vote” supporting the intervention. Even then, however, more people are willing to vote for the change than to actively participate in its pursuit.

Conclusion

Time and space do not allow for a detailed discussion of every phase in a church’s lifecycle.³ Indeed, re-missionalizing a church’s priorities involves many activities. Accounting for the lifecycle effect is just one of those concerns. But it is an important one, because an increased understanding of lifecycles will help you plan more strategically for how to recapture your church’s missional priorities.

To consider the lifecycle factor in your church, and how to make it your ally, I suggest that you ...

- graph the attendance of your church since its inception, and discuss whether you can see the lifecycle pattern(s) in your history;
- discuss what events occurred that might have precipitated any new lifecycles that occurred in your church’s history;
- duplicate the chart on page 3 and ask church leaders to identify where they believe the church presently is on each item;
- ask whether your present location on the lifecycle has an influence in your ability to identify and pursue your church’s mission;
- discuss whether your church needs to consider an intervention strategy to begin a new lifecycle. And if so, what are the next steps.

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³ Gary McIntosh has written an excellent new book (not yet published as of this writing) entitled *Church Lifecycles*. I strongly recommend his work for a much more comprehensive exploration of this important dynamic of church lifecycles.