

The Congregational Life Cycle

A Spiritual Strategic Journey Playbook Resource

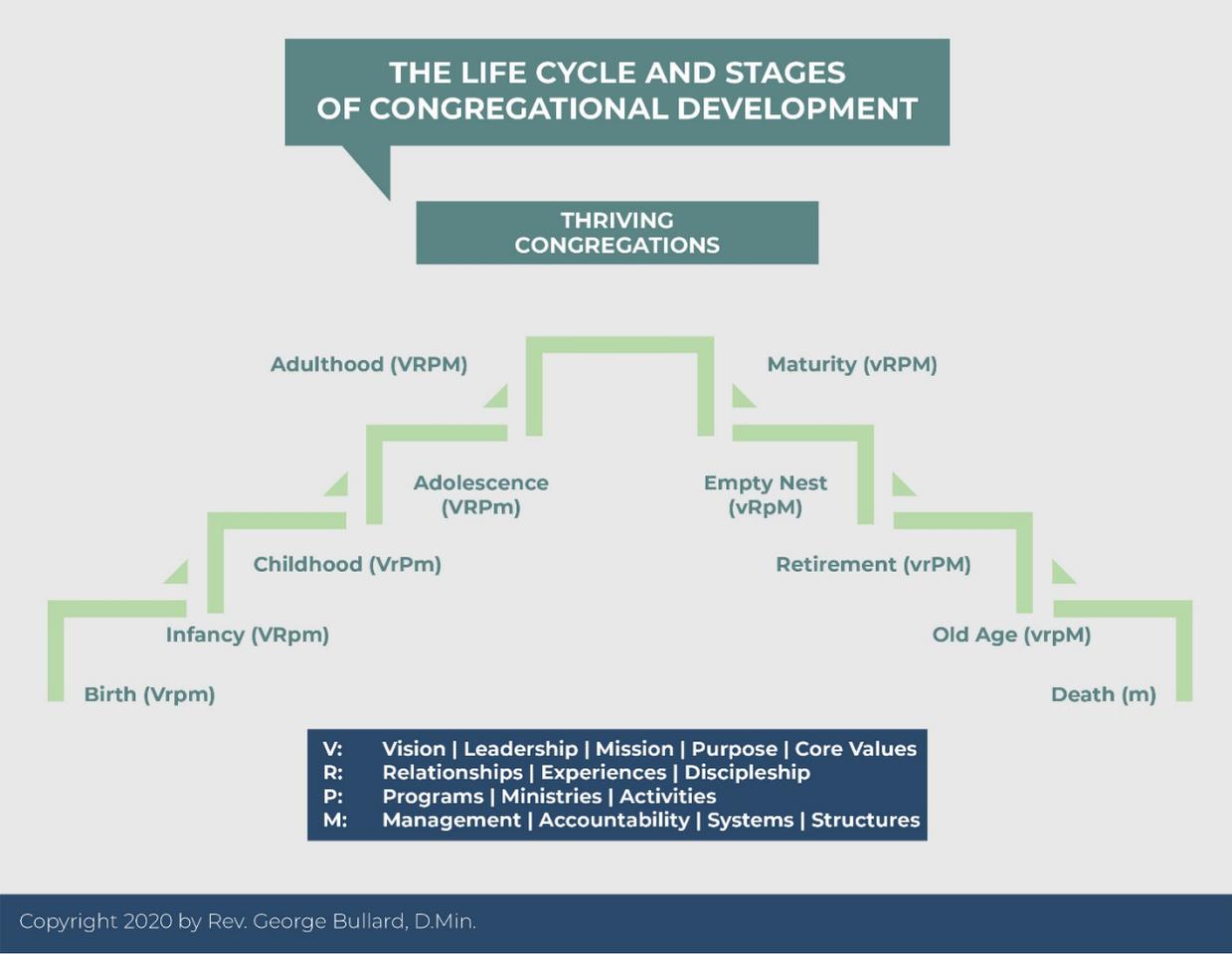
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Read This First

Every congregation has a birth, followed by stages and seasons of seeking to become Thriving Congregations. Then they experience stages and seasons of decline and eventual death, or at some point they redevelop as a congregation and spiral forward to a new, partial life cycle where they may once again thrive. Congregations can redevelopment and spiral forward multiple times during their life.

Some exceptions occur when congregations experience God’s *Triple-D* involving *direct, dramatic, divine* intervention, and soar with a pattern not applicable to the typical congregational life cycle. Yet, it happens not nearly as often as some people think.

Another exception is congregations who experience a major dysfunctional event or series of events and never become Thriving Congregations, nor complete a typical life cycle journey. One of the times this happens is during the first ten years of congregations if they never had a deeply held spiritual and strategic vision from God and their journey is aborted and moves to a maintenance status.

Too few congregations and their leaders understand the movement of congregations through various stages and seasons of their life. Even fewer who find themselves on the decline or aging side of the life cycle are willing to make the transitions and changes to transform and

spiral forward to a new set of stages and seasons to serve as Thriving Congregations once more.

Extremely few congregations are always Thriving Congregations. They are a unique set of congregations and likely represent – in terms of percentage of congregations – way less than ten percent. Therefore, understanding and responding to the stages and seasons of the congregational life cycle is a task for all congregations – even those who thrive, and they do not realize why they are thriving, or worse, they may not realize when they stop thriving.

Over the past five decades I have presented the congregational life cycle thousands of times to congregational leaders and planning groups. It is a joy to see people light up when they realize where they are on the life cycle because it gives them clarity as to their starting point and hope for their next steps in ministry.

It is a generally held organizational principle advocated by many prognosticators that if you do not know where you are today, you may not know the next steps needed tomorrow to become Thriving Congregations.

The principles that make up the life cycle are reproducible in multiple settings. I have presented the life cycle throughout North America, and some in Europe. Often people respond that I have described their congregation clearly and wonder how I can do that since I have never been in their congregation. I even had one European leader at a meeting in Prague insist that I had been in his church in Bulgaria even though I told him I had never been on the mainland of Europe before.

I love to tell the story of the life cycle and let leaders say where they believe their congregation is on the life cycle. Usually they are right. Always it is empowering for them to figure out where they are and what could be next, around the corner, or over the hill.

I resist multiple requests to come up with some type of scientific instrument that clearly determines where a congregation is from a review of their membership, attendance, and a few other factors over a ten to twenty-year period. Or there have been requests for a questionnaire that characterizes various factors and stages that provides a clear result that prescribes the stage of the congregation.

As an accommodation to these requests, many years ago, the organization where I was on staff hired a statistical researcher to figure out a formula using congregational statistics to determine the stage of development for a congregation. She figured it out, and it worked. But we never used it.

What we discovered is that the stage the formula figured out was the same stage the congregational leadership told us after a narrative presentation of the life cycle. We decided that if congregations could figure out their stage following a narrative presentation, this was a more desirable situation than us handing them a printout that told them their stage.

The reason is that the goal of sharing the life cycle is never to show a congregation how smart we are. It is to empower them to action based on a deep ownership of where they are. This is more likely to happen if congregational leaders discover, declare, and decide for themselves where they are on the life cycle.

At times, a majority of people who hear the life cycle presentation will pick out their life cycle stage. Other times there will be a cluster of three stages in a row that are chosen, with the middle one having 40 to 45 percent of the responses and emerging as the most likely candidate for the life cycle stage of the congregation.

In a few cases, there is a debate as to the stage of the congregation. The most interesting of these occur when the pastor and staff see the congregation at a different stage than do their lay leaders.

Where is your congregation in the life cycle? Read this manuscript to gain an in-depth background for the life cycle and stages of congregational development. Then request a mentoring conversation with George Bullard at BullardJournal@gmail.com.

To understand the value of the life cycle tool, the overall value of the other concepts and tools presented here, and what impacts where your congregation currently finds itself on the life cycle, it is important to discover how these tools weave through the various stages and seasons of the life cycle. The elements of the tools include four organizing principles, ten stages, seven-year seasons, and other insights.

The Four Organizing Principles of the Congregational Life Cycle

What are the categories you use to describe your congregation? What frameworks or assessment tools do you use? Is the best category size, age, location, growth status, worship style, denominational affiliation, facilities, discipling processes, pastoral leadership, programs for children, ethnicity, status in the community, or the primary age groups of the attendees?

Try the fuel and flavor of the organizing principles of congregations and the stages and seasons of development of congregations in a life cycle analysis. For numerous years, the concept of congregations as spiritual organisms with life cycles has existed. Life cycles are one of many assessments that may illuminate many of the categories mentioned above.

Over the years, I have found the life cycle to be one of the best learning tools for congregational leaders. Properly understood, the life cycle provides an excellent assessment for a congregation and allows it to know its starting point and the issues it must address to be able to spiral forward to the next cycle in its spiritual strategic journey. To think strategically and act effectively outside the box and beyond the box, it is important to know your starting point.

While a great deal of scientific theory and application lies behind the life cycle, I prefer to present it to congregational leaders as a story of congregations that must be experienced. I have been amazed over the years how often the perception of congregational leaders as to their location on the life cycle mirrors the statistics and scientific assessment as to their location.

A major element in understanding the life cycle of a congregation is to understand the pattern of the four organizing principles that make up the various stages of congregational life.

Visionary Leadership: This is the current understanding of God's spiritual and strategic direction for a congregation that is cast by the leadership and owned by the membership. It is a movement of God that is memorable rather than a statement of humankind that is memorized.

- Think about your congregation as you read this statement about Visionary Leadership: Our congregation has a captivating and passionate sense of our identity involving the eternal mission of God, and the everlasting purpose of our congregation (*who we are*), our enduring core values (*what we believe or highly value*), our empowering vision (*where we are headed*), and our spiritual and strategic journey as a congregation (*how we are getting there*). Our leadership is clearly captivated by God's vision for the future of our congregation.

Relationship Experiences: This is the relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ; become connected to a local New Testament church; are assimilated into the fellowship, life, and care ministry of the church; have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development and utilize their gifts and skills through missional engagement. In simple terms, it is the discipling process.

- Think about your congregation as you read this statement about Relationship Experiences: *Our congregation is doing well at inviting people to a Christ-centered, faith-based journey, and at helping people who are connecting with our congregation to be on an intentional and maturing discipleship journey. Among the characteristics of the discipleship journey of our people is that through our congregation they are experiencing spiritual formation, the development of Christian leadership practices, active involvement in congregational ministry roles, and missional engagement beyond the congregation.*

Programmatic Emphases: This is the functional attempt to provide programs, projects, ministries, services, activities, and training for people connected to the congregation by membership, attendance, fellowship, or through relationship processes.

- Think about your congregation as you read this statement about Programmatic Emphases: *Our congregation has high-quality programs, ministries, and activities that meet the real needs of real people in real-time. We are well known throughout our congregation, and our geographic community, or among the target or affinity groups we serve, for our outstanding programmatic emphases. Our programs, ministries, and activities are growing in numerical vitality. Our programs meet the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of people.*

Accountable Management: This is the administration of the resources of the congregation, the decision-making structure of the congregation, the formal and informal culture of the congregation, and the openness of the congregation to transition, change, and transformation.

- Think about your congregation as you read this statement about Accountable Management: *Our congregation has excellent, flexible management systems. The practices for addressing the need for called/appointed and employed personnel, plus elected and volunteer leadership are healthy and creative. Generosity and stewardship efforts are inspiring, and the accounting for financial resources is trustworthy. Our governance and decision-making systems are effective, plus open and response to congregational input. Our facilities and grounds are suitable for our needs and kept in good repair.*

Consider these four organizing principles one approach to the assessment of a congregation. To empower your observation, reference 2 Corinthians 5:7, which admonishes us to walk by faith rather than by sight.

Congregations that focus more passion on Vision and Relationships are growing younger and more proactive every day in terms of the quality of their body life. Younger does not mean the age demographics of the congregation are growing younger, yet that may be a by-product. It means that, as a representation of the body of Christ, they appear younger and more vital. They are proactive in their actions and regularly seize the opportunities God is placing before them. They walk by faith.

Congregations that focus more passion on Programs and Management are growing older and more passive every day. As a representation of the body of Christ, they daily appear older and less vital. They are passive in their actions and regularly seek to maintain past gains, which is

an effort that leads to less satisfying results. They become controlled by their past and not empowered by their future. They walk by sight.

My intuition and experience tell me that upwards of 80 percent of the thousands of congregations I have encountered place more emphasis on Programs and Management than they do on Vision and Relationships. The 20 percent who focus more on Vision and Relationships probably account for the vast majority of Kingdom growth throughout North America. What character and direction does your congregation express through Vision, Relationships, Programs, and Management?

Imagine a Sports Utility Vehicle as a Metaphor for the Journey of Congregations

Congregational Sports Utility Vehicle *Preferred Seating Pattern*



Imagine a sports utility vehicle as a metaphor for congregations. Place Vision, Relationships, Programs, and Management in this vehicle in the seat best suited for each to symbolize a faithful, effective, and innovative journey for congregations.

Who would drive? Vision, of course. Vision would be driving and fueling the forward progress of the vehicle. Who would navigate? Relationships would navigate and flavor the quality of the journey.

Who would be in the back seat behind Relationships? Programs would sit behind Relationships in a supporting role. It would provide the programs, ministries, and activities through which the best possible relationships could happen with God, with one another, and with the context the congregation serves.

Where there is no Vision, Management drives! Vision moves into the back seat and figuratively takes a nap as it needs a respite. Management celebrates this move because it always thought it ought to be the one driving. At first, Management does an excellent job of driving. The longer Management drives and the longer Vision sleeps, the more likely the congregation will engage in activities that cause it to age and become more passive and less vital.

In fact, a secondary shift takes place the longer Management is driving. Relationships – representing the discipling processes of the congregation – and Management are too often not compatible. Management wants something that provides clear short-term visible results. Management encourages Relationships and Programs to switch seats. Relationships feel the pressure and may even ask Management to pull the sports utility vehicle over to the side of the road so Programs can take the navigation role and Relationships can take a nap.

Congregational Sports Utility Vehicle
Stuck Seating Pattern



The short-term result of this pattern is that the congregation gets stuck in loose mud and cannot get traction to spiral forward to a new, partial life cycle. The long-term result of this pattern is near death, or subsistence level survival, if transition and change that brings transformation and a spiraling forward to a new partial life cycle does not take place within the next several seasons of about seven years each. And it can be slow and painful if Management does not allow Vision to drive following its nap or period of respite.

Because of the view I have presented on Programs and Management, would it not be better to just leave them home and not take them on the journey? No. Programs and Management are an essential part of the journey. Alignment and synergy are the keys. Each organizing principle must play out its appropriate role in its best seat in the vehicle for the journey to be excellent, transformational, and to approach the full Kingdom potential of the congregation.

Sabbatical and Jubilee in the Congregational Life Cycle

The 25th chapter of the Old Testament book of Leviticus presents the concept of a sabbatical year and a year of jubilee. Without going into deep biblical interpretation, let me simply overview the concept. For six years the land is farmed. During the seventh year, it is not. It is a year of sabbatical. For seven sets of seven years, the land is farmed, and a sabbatical taken. The 50th year is a year of jubilee which is both a celebration and a starting over. This is the basic concept. Biblical scholars and theologians can educate and entertain us with a much more in-depth understanding of what Leviticus 25 says.

My purpose here is to draw from this brief overview what I believe is an excellent comparison to the pattern of the life cycle of congregations. Congregations need to understand and follow this pattern. They need to do so from the time they are born or launched. They do not need to wait until the end of their first generation when their founding dream or vision has waned. If they will hardwire into their culture that they rethink their everlasting purpose, enduring core values, and empowering vision every sabbatical, they may never find themselves in the freefall experienced by congregations who seek to hold on to their past.

Imagining and thinking anew becomes their normal pattern from the beginning of their life as a congregation. The results of adopting this season approach and correlating them with the stage of the congregational life cycle can be empowering of great Kingdom progress. It is amazing that it is close to an ideal pattern for congregations. It provides for us a concept of seasons that fit the stages of the congregational life cycle.

This does not mean congregations should fail to adjust their strategies and tactics annually. It is just that congregations should intentionally engage in a year of rethinking every seven years, and nothing remains sacred except the eternal mission of God.

The number seven suggests something is complete, perfect, or finished. Thus, a stage or stages of congregational life is nearing completion about every seven years. The seventh year should be a time of sabbatical to pause for a fresh discernment about the leadership of God for the next season of a congregation's life. Congregations should follow this pattern for seven seasons of their life.

Every 50th year, congregations should start over. They should relaunch for a new half-century. They should aggressively jettison the cultural baggage that weighs them down so they can honor the heritage that enriches their life. They should discern what their life and ministry might be for at least the next season of six years followed by a sabbatical year.

The concepts of sabbatical and jubilee can characterize the seasons of the congregational life cycle. Many seasons, or a spiral through a season, are approximately seven years. There are some exceptions, but this is a reliable pattern.

This does not mean a season is exactly seven years. It can be more or less. It does not mean that after seven years, congregations automatically move on to the next season. It is more complicated than that. It is just a good beginning point for assessment and dialogue.

If congregations ignore the sabbatical and jubilee years through which they pass, they will eventually die. Death is the end for many congregations. For some congregations, following Death there can be a resurrection.

As you think long-term about your congregation, consider hardwiring into your pattern of life appropriate sabbatical and jubilee years. Your congregation will be more vital and vibrant throughout its life if you do so.

The Stages, Seasons, and Sabbatical Pattern of the Congregational Life Cycle

Understanding the stage and seasons of the congregational life cycle involves:

- four organizing principles of Vision, Relationships, Programs, and Management,
- ten stages,
- nine seasons, and
- seven-year patterns that reflect sabbatical and jubilee as recorded in Leviticus 25:1-12.

The following tool provides an illustration of the integration of these factors.

Stages and Seasons Reflecting a Sabbatical and Jubilee Pattern

Birth	Infancy	Child-hood	Adoles-cence	Adult-hood	Maturity	Empty Nest	Retire-ment	Old Age	Death
Vrpm	VRpm	VrPm	VRPm	VRPM	vRPM	vRpM	vrPM	vrpM	M - Vrpm
Season One		Season Two	Season Three	Season Four	Season Five	Season X	Season Y	Season Z	Season A
@Years 0-7		@Years 8-14	@Years 15-21	@Years 21-28	@Years 29-35	@7 years (repeats)	@7 years (repeats)	@7 years (repeats)	-----

Every congregation has a life cycle into which the four organizing principles fit. Looking at congregations according to their life cycle assists in developing the ability to see, understand, and pursue opportunities and choices available to a congregation at a particular stage of development. This life cycle begins with Birth, followed by a period of growth, the achievement of Adulthood and Maturity, a period of aging, and then Death or Redevelopment. It can also involve spiraling forward to a new partial life cycle. That is the ideal. It does not happen as often as it ought.

At best, congregations go through the life cycle multiple times. They develop following Birth, until one day they have slipped past the season where they served as Thriving Congregations and are on the aging side of the life cycle. At this point they have the opportunity to spiral forward to a new, partial life cycle. No matter how old a congregation is, an obvious place exists on the life cycle that the congregation as an organism can identify as their current development stage location.

The oldest congregations I have shared the life cycle pattern with were more than 300 years old. They easily identified themselves on the life cycle. I remember in one congregation, the leadership group laughed and said that it was probably cycle number 40 or 41 for them. They got it. It does not matter how old your congregation may be. You are serving in some stage of your life cycle.

Stages, Seasons, Sabbaticals, and Years of Jubilee

Before assessing where your congregation currently is on the congregational life cycle, let's explain the stages and seasons, and how sabbaticals and jubilee fit into the life and ministry of your congregation.

The life cycle includes ten stages of development: Birth, Infancy, Childhood, Adolescence, Adulthood, Maturity, Empty Nest, Retirement, Old Age, and Death. These ten stages relate to the seasons in the life of the congregation. The organizing principles are present and expressed in different intensities during each stage. Notice on the illustration of the congregational stages and seasons, the letters that represent the four organizing principles are indicated. One or more letters are capitalized for each stage or season.

- **Birth** is the stage when Vision is dominant, and Relationships, Programs, and Management are not. Vision is the fuel or energy that drives a new congregation forward. The formula for this stage is **Vrpm**. Vision is fully and passionately expressed and drives the launch of the new congregational expression. Relationships, Programs, and Management are present, and things are happening congruent with their presence, but they have not yet developed capacity and sustainability.

Congregations at Birth are living out the mission, purpose, core values, and vision that God has given them for a new congregation that ought to be present in a certain place or among a specific target group of people. Leadership is expressed through Vision and assists in fueling the forward progress of the congregation. This leadership is God's leadership, which empowers congregational leaders to seize the day. The period of Birth only lasts about six months to two years. It is characterized by a passion to fulfill the spiritual and strategic vision of the congregation.

During the Birth stage, congregations must deal with various issues.

First, is our Vision generational? Is it intended to provide leadership and focus for us for the first twenty or more years of the congregation?

Second, what evangelism, discipling, and missional engagement philosophy and strategy are we following? What methods do we need to use to bring into a Christ-centered, faith-based journey the community context or affinity groups of people to whom God has called us and by whom we desire to be received?

Third, how can we be missionary from the first day while being the product of missions? How do we develop a servant mentality within the congregation while simultaneously served by our sponsors, parenthood, or partnership?

Fourth, what leadership and ministry styles are lay and pastoral leaders expressing? Will they be able to make the shift to different leadership styles as the congregation develops through the growing stages of the life cycle?

Fifth, will the founding pastor have to leave to allow a pastor with a different set of gifts and skills to take us to the next stage? Will the congregation be stunted in its growth and development because the pastor does not adapt spiritual gifts and life skills and does not move on in favor of a pastor who does have the necessary gifts and skills?

Sixth, will the lay leadership make the same or similar adjustments as the pastor, or will they also need to turnover? How will this leadership style crisis affect the congregation's ability to grow and develop in a healthy manner? How will it impact the congregation's ability to successfully navigate the passage to the Infancy stage?

- **Infancy:** Infancy is the stage when Vision and Relationships are dominant, but Programs and Management are not yet dominant. The formula for this stage is **VRpm**. Relationships join Vision and is the navigator of the congregational journey. Relationships deal with relating to God, one another as a congregation, and to the community context or affinity groups by which the congregation is seeking to be received through Christian ministry.

The period of Infancy lasts three to five years. Congregations in Infancy are continuing to live out the Vision that God has given them for a congregation. Vision is the fuel or energy that will drive the congregation forward throughout the growth side of the life cycle.

Disciplemaking patterns are expressed through the Relationships factor and assists in flavoring the congregation. These patterns hardwire the congregation's qualitative and quantitative growth patterns.

During the Infancy stage, congregations must deal with various issues. First, are our Relationships intentional? What evangelism, disciplemaking, and missional engagement philosophy and strategy are we following? Do we know whom we, as a faith community, are gifted to reach for membership and to focus on with our attractional, disciplemaking, and missional efforts? Do we have regular, organized patterns of Relationships?

Second, do we have a clear understanding of our values and belief systems and our spiritual identity? Have we adequately grounded our members, regular attendees, and prospects in the doctrines and disciplines of our congregation and, as appropriate, our denominational family? The effort to clarify identity at times causes some people who have been a part of the congregation to seek another congregation because they do not agree with the emerging belief system or the identity of the congregation as it was clarified.

Third, do we actively work to assimilate people into the fellowship and care ministry of the congregation? Do we go beyond being friendly to helping new people develop deep, lasting friendships within the congregational family?

Fourth, what is our style of worship? Do we use a traditional pattern, a contemporary pattern, an emergent pattern, or a blended style of worship? What is the place of preaching and teaching in worship? What is the place of music and liturgy?

Fifth, what are our tactics for lay mobilization? How do we involve people in ministry and missions activities? Do we help people become fully devoted followers of Christ?

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Birth and Infancy typically lasts for six to seven years. The last year, as these two stages are completed, is the first time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical.
- **Childhood:** Childhood is the stage when Vision and Programs are dominant, but Relationships and Management are not. The formula for Childhood is **VrPm**. The passion and energy that had focused on Relationships shifts to a focus on developing capacities needed by the programs, ministries, and activities that will sustain the vitality and vibrancy of the congregation. In Childhood, this dominant presence of Programs is good. Later in life, it can be a drag on the congregation.

The period of Childhood lasts up to seven years. It is characterized by an urgency to build programs, ministries, and activities similar to those of a full-service congregation.

During the Childhood stage, significant emphasis is given to broadening the scale and deepening the scope of the programs, ministries, and activities for the chosen priority target groups. In a family/household-oriented congregation, this can result in a major emphasis on programs, ministries, and activities for children less than eighteen years of age.

Several resource issues arise during Childhood. First, what programs, ministries, and activities do we have budget and special gift dollars to support? What can we fund through undesignated gifts? What will require designated gifts? And for what will we have to charge a fee?

Second, how should we focus our staff and laity resources? Many congregations at this juncture have a pastor, secretary, and music director. Some will also have added a youth director. Several of these may not be full-time, if any are. Many may be lay volunteers. A key question will be what staff responsibilities to add next.

Third, facilities will be an issue. Few congregations can accurately predict exactly what type of facilities they will need for future programming. Facilities may need to be renovated, program groups moved around within the facilities, new facilities added, and new parking added.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Childhood typically lasts for six to seven years. The last year, as this stage is completed, is the second time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical.
- **Adolescence:** Adolescence is the stage when Vision, Relationships, and Programs are dominant, but Management is not. The formula for Adolescence is **VRPm**. After the years of overachieving during Childhood, where Programs dominated Relationships, the congregation focuses again on the meaning of fulfilling their mission and vision, relaxes, and Relationship joins Vision and Programs as dominant forces in the congregation.

This is good. And this is bad. Just like an adolescent person, these stronger Relationships bring with them a set of emotions that can turn healthy conflict into unhealthy conflict.

The period of Adolescence lasts up to seven years. The Adolescence stage of a congregation is characterized by a passion to fulfill the strategic spiritual vision of the congregation. Because fulfillment of this Vision may be in sight, the congregation presses for a higher quality and quantity of ministry growth.

Agendas addressed during Adolescence may include the following: 1. Staff and leadership. 2. Buildings and equipment. 3. Formalizing management systems. 4. Dealing with competing priorities expressed by the laity. 5. Congregational emotions and awkwardness. 6. Raising the quality of programs. 7. Deepening personal spirituality and community relationships. 8. Consideration of jumping the curve to a second life cycle rather than continuing into Adulthood in this life cycle. 9. Doing significant and meaningful missional engagement. 10. Working harder on assimilating new people who connect with the congregation.

Competition is evident in the Adolescence congregation. At least two visions of the future seem to be dominant in the congregation. People who affiliated with the congregation during Birth or Infancy hold one Vision. This is a Vision of a strong worshipping community with intimate fellowship and care, and meaningful, corporate spirituality.

People who affiliate with the congregation during Childhood and Adolescence may have a different Vision. The programs, ministries, and activities of the congregation that met specific needs of the family or household attracted them. Their Vision is one of a full service, family-focused congregation with opportunities for meaningful, individual spirituality. The division over Vision can produce open conflict that at times moves from a healthy intensity to an unhealthy intensity.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Adolescence typically lasts for six to seven years. The last year, as this stage is completed, is the third time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical.
- **Adulthood:** Adulthood is the stage when Vision, Relationships, Programs, and Management share dominance. There is synergy. The formula for Adulthood is **VRPM**. All four organizing principles are being fully expressed in the life and ministry of the congregation. It is the first of two seasons where congregations can be considered Thriving Congregations – with Maturity being the other season.

The period of Adulthood lasts up to seven years. Adulthood is characterized by a congregation that is thriving. It is relaxed. It is successful and is striving for significance. It has a positive spirit. It is focused. It is clear about its Vision, and its Vision shares broad ownership within the congregation. It is positive about its future. It feels that it can accomplish anything to which it sets its mind, as long as it matches the will of God for the congregation.

A crucial secondary characteristic is that the congregation may not be aware that this is as good as it gets. It may not know that this is Adulthood. Having never been there, if this is the first life cycle of the congregation, they do not recognize Adulthood. When asked if this is Adulthood, they say, “Not yet.”

Often the high morale of the congregation parallels the strong sense of eternal mission, everlasting purpose, enduring core values, and empowering Vision. The congregation feels that it is contributing significantly to the work of the Kingdom. High levels of satisfaction are expressed related to the role and function of the staff. Simultaneously they are blind to what is getting ready to happen during Maturity.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Adulthood typically lasts for six to seven years. The last year, as this stage is completed, is the fourth time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical.
- **Maturity:** Maturity is the stage when Relationships, Programs, and Management are dominant. Vision is no longer dominant. Management is controlling the direction of the congregation. The formula for Maturity is **vRPM**. For the first time in the life of a congregation going through their initial life cycle, Vision is no longer dominant and driving the sports utility vehicle. Management has moved into the driver’s seat.

A congregation is still characterized as thriving during Maturity – but not for long. It is becoming more passive than active. It is still successful in many areas. Its focus on significance is still ascending. For the most part, it has a positive spirit. The quality of what happens in Maturity is the highest of any stage in the life cycle. In fact, a crescendo of quality programs, ministries, and activities occur during this stage.

It is no longer focused. It is no longer clear about its Vision. The success culture of the congregation keeps it moving forward. It is blind to the fact that it no longer has an empowering Vision that is fueling it forward. The feeling is that what the congregation is currently doing is working. There is no felt need to change. Besides, the finances of the congregation have never been better. In selected portions of the congregation, the

morale of the members and regular attendees is beginning to decline. At the same time, the congregation feels that it is contributing significantly to the work of God's Kingdom.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Maturity typically will last for six to seven years. The last year, as this stage is completed, is the fifth time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical.

The Key Warning Sign Your Church is Dying

The key warning sign your church is dying is that you are becoming an *overly churched culture congregation*. Is this fatal? Is there anything you can do about it? It is not initially fatal. You can effectively address this situation.

Consider this. You have been away from home for a few days. When you return you see that your favorite plant, which requires regular watering, is in serious need of water and other attention. You water it. You provide it with a dose of plant food. You breathe on it. And you move it closer to a light source. Soon it is green and healthy again.

On a subsequent trip, you are gone several days too long. When you return this time, your plant is dead. Nothing will revive it. You have to start over again. But you do not decide this the first day back. You water it. You provide it with a dose of plant food. You breathe on it. And you move it closer to a light source. Nothing helps. It's dead.

The same thing happens with congregations. They need nurturing, attention, and to stay close to the eternal source of light. Like your favorite plant, sometimes they need to be turned around or moved to a different place because they are leaning over and not standing up straight. As they grow – while simultaneously getting root bound – they need to be repotted.

What is an *Overly Churched Culture Congregation*?

A Christ-centered, faith-based congregation becomes an *overly churched culture congregation* when the internal or gathered cultural patterns of the congregation – the way a congregation does things – become more important than the external or scattered patterns of the congregation. When the traditions of the congregation outweigh the transformation of the spiritual lives of people in its context, then it is an *overly churched culture congregation*.

Congregations do not become overly churched overnight. It sneaks up on them. They often do not realize it is happening until it is a major trait of the congregation. Congregations do not intentionally plan to become overly churched. It comes about naturally as the stability and safety of reliable traditions overtake the missional movement of the congregation.

In their book, *Future Church: Seven Laws of Real Church Growth* (Baker Books, 2020), Will Mancini and Cory Hartman would say it is when a congregation moves from the Upper Room to the Lower Room. In my own work I would say it is when Accountable Management is driving the journey of the congregation, Programmatic Emphases are navigating the journey, and Visionary Leadership and Relationship Experiences are asleep in the back seat.

Statistically, it is when half or more of the active attendance in a congregation are *60-40-20 People*. They are at least 60 years old, they have attended a church, or churches, for at least 40 years, and they have attended their current church for at least 20 years.

When Does a Congregation Begin to Become an *Overly Churched Culture Congregation*?

Typically – unless there is an external intervention or internal crisis – a new congregation can grow and develop with reasonable health for 18 to 21 or more years. After that time, the founding vision of the congregation wanes and the congregation becomes too comfortable with established churched cultural patterns. The wisest and most insightful congregations realize this and engage in a process to spiral forward to the next stage of life toward which God is pulling it.

However, the vast majority of congregations – some would say upwards of 80 percent – do not realize their church culture is taking over as the main motive and movement of their congregation. Without intervention, these congregations will go through the following five phases. It may take a while – perhaps decades – but they will never be what they once were without intervention.

- Maturity – Phase One is where the very early signs of being an *overly church culture congregation* are hardly noticeable to all by the most astute observers. The majority of the congregation is in denial.
- Empty Nest – Phase Two is where very early signs are noticeable, but people react to their situation with nostalgia, then disappointment, and finally anger.
- Retirement – Phase Three is where major signs of an *overly church culture congregation* are evident, and people panic about the need for short-term fixes but seldom find a long-term solution. At this stage is when a congregation is fully an *overly church culture congregation*.
- Old Age – Phase Four is where despair sets in because there is no fix or magical solution. They now realize they do not have the resources to turnaround their situation.
- Death – Phase Five is where the congregation accepts death rather than accepting an outside solution offered to them.

- **Empty Nest:** Empty Nest is the stage when Relationships and Management are dominant. Vision and Programs are no longer dominant. Management is controlling the direction of the congregation. The formula for Empty Nest is **VRpM**. Not only is Vision no longer driving, but Programs begin to diminish in quality, decrease in participation, and can become dysfunctional as leaders press harder to make them work well.

While Relationships are strong during Empty Nest, they are also turning inward. The congregation relates better to people they know rather than new people who attend and connect with the congregation. The congregation expects new people to fit into the culture, traditions, and practices of the congregation. The need for new people to fit in continues for the remaining stages.

Empty Nest has three phases: Nostalgia, Disappointment, and Anger. The Nostalgia phase is when a congregation hopes that tomorrow will bring a return of yesterday. Most of the stories told in the congregation are stories of remembrance. The Disappointment phase is when the congregation realizes that neither the quality nor the quantity of what the congregation is doing is what it once was. The result is that in the Disappointment phase, some congregational leaders push the commitment button and urge other people to be more committed to the work of the congregation.

The next phase is when a congregation seeks to focus blame on the things and persons who are keeping them from being what they once were and what they desire to be. The Anger phase can end up being a time of great conflict in the life of many congregations. The stress on pastors, staff, and lay leadership can be tremendous. The congregation in Empty Nest may telegraph its time focus to the age group it wants to target with the most efforts.

Congregations who want to target teenagers want to focus on yesterday. Those who want to target senior adults want to focus on today. Congregations who want to target adults ages twenty-five to forty-five and their children want to focus on tomorrow.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Beginning with Empty Nest, the timing of stages is less reliable. Therefore it is called *Season X*. Typically this implies its length can be more

than seven years, or that its length is not as predictable as in former stages. In either case, every seven years is the time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical.

- **Retirement:** Retirement is the stage when Programs and Management are dominant. Vision and Relationships are no longer dominant. Management is even more deeply controlling the direction of the congregation. The formula for Retirement is **vrPM**. This is where Management has moved Relationships to the back seat for a nap and Programs to the front seat. Thus, Management is driving, Programs are navigating, and the two factors that move a congregation forward – Vision and Relationship – are asleep in the back seat.

Many long-term members and attendees decided at the end of Empty Nest that this is no longer a good place to invite people to come and be attendees and members. Existing attendees and members may feel that new people will be disappointed in the congregation. Or new people may want to change the congregation, and if it does not work, then the congregation may be weaker than it is already. Simultaneously they want the congregation to be alive and vital long enough to help them with various life passages, including their own deaths.

The stakeholders in the congregation who are sixty years of age or more have been professing Christians for forty years or more and have been members for twenty years or more. They give permission for the newer, younger members and attendees to try new programmatic directions. At times this takes the form of an appeal made to a prospective pastor. The pastor search committee urges the new pastor to come lead them into a new era of transformation, not realizing they are not prepared to accept the impact of transformation.

Transitions, changes, and transformation are said to be welcomed and supported. About 18 to 24 months into the transitions and changes initiated by a pastor or newer, younger lay leaders, the stakeholders realize things are not working the way they thought they would. They may seek to stop the transition and change efforts, and – if necessary – get rid of or discourage the leaders of the transitions and changes. This is even true if it is the pastor who needs to go.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Retirement is known as *Season Y*. Typically, this implies that its length can be more than seven years or that its length is not as predictable as in former stages. In either case, every seven years is the time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical. Congregations often get stuck in Retirement and cycle through this stage multiple times without getting traction to spiral forward. Without transformation, they will eventually become an Old Age congregation.
- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** It is also likely that in Retirement – if not before – a congregation will reach its first 50th year. If so, then a complete year of Jubilee is mandatory to get the congregation unstuck.
- **Old Age:** Old Age is the stage when Management is the only one of the four organizing principles that are dominant. Vision, Relationships, and Programs are no longer dominant. Management is the only thing left to control the direction of the congregation. The formula for Old Age is **vrpM** since only management is awoken along the journey.

The traditions and habits of the congregation keep them functioning, but there is a time coming when the congregation may no longer exist. However, this may not be as soon as many people think. These congregations fight death even though they are often a cultural enclave and not a Christ-centered, faith-based spiritual community.

Old Age is that stage of a congregation's life cycle when it is functioning on fumes rather than Vision providing the fuel. The habit or pattern of gathering for worship and fellowship is the primary factor keeping the congregation going. Ministry is focused on remaining 60-40-20 people who, in some cases, have become 70-50-30 people.

The congregation is now at subsistence level. It is a preaching station or a chaplaincy ministry. Proactive meaningful congregation life that is generating new energy is gone. Death is not necessarily imminent or inevitable for Old Age congregations. It is not imminent, as Old Age congregations generally have the ability and resources to survive long past any viable, proactive ministry life.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Old Age is known as *Season Z*. Typically this implies that its length can be more than seven years, or that its length is not as predictable as in former stages. In either case, every seven years is the time for a Leviticus 25 sabbatical. However, once a congregation reaches Old Age they are so frozen as an *overly church culture congregation* that engaging in a sabbatical is beyond their capacity. Not impossible, but also not likely without a major new revelation or God's *Triple D* of *direct, dramatic, divine* intervention within the fellowship.
- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Some Old Age congregations when they reach the 50th year since their last jubilee – or some other hinge point that causes them to totally rethink their congregation – may engage in radical action, become willing to be adopted by another congregation, or allow a new leadership group from outside the congregation to lead them in a replanting process.
- **Death:** Death is the stage when none of the four organizing principles is dominant. Vision, Relationships, and Programs are no longer even present. Management is the only organizing principle left, and its role is brief and confined. At Death, a congregation ceases to exist as a community of worship, discipleship, and fellowship. Its formula is **M** with the possibility of **Vrpm**, because at death, there can be a resurrection.

The desire is gone to meet regularly to worship God, to engage in spiritual growth activities, to actively organize for fellowship and mutual support, and to be involved in missional engagement. All of these need to exist in some regular form for congregational life to be viable. What dies when these four are not present is the congregational movement. During the latter stages of congregational life, many members and regular attendees probably deepened their inability to divide their faith in Christ from the cultural practices of their specific congregation in a specific location.

Death is not inevitable for any congregation. The life cycle and stages of development are not deterministic. That is, if a congregation has a Birth, it is not inevitable that it will have a Death. Congregations who are aging, are dysfunctional, and who wait until Late Aging to seek a turnaround are unlikely to experience a positive, successful future. They may not avoid Death.

- ✓ **Sabbatical/Jubilee Insight:** Death is known as *Season A*. That is because of the possibility of a resurrection. Without a resurrection, their life has ended.

A Life Cycle Assessment for Your Congregation

The best way to get an initial assessment of where your congregation is on the life cycle is to print the life cycle chart and share it with your key leaders. Then, sign up for a coaching video

conference call with George Bullard. George will take 30 minutes to walk through the life cycle chart with your leaders. Then for 20 minutes the conversation will focus on where your congregation is in its life cycle, what that means, and what the next steps could be for the congregation. The call will be recorded for your exclusive and private use as a reference.

Using the Life Cycle as an Intervention Tool

The intervention question is, “Now that I know where my congregation is on the life cycle, how do I provide positive, spiritually based transformational leadership? Can I go back to the growth side of the life cycle?”

Oh no! Wait! Please don't use that four-letter word! Do you know what it was? It was the word “back.” Please never talk to a congregation about going back. To do so invites people to talk about going back to the way things were. We must talk about going forward to the new thing God is doing in our midst and the new journey toward which God is pulling us.

Any effort focused on going back to the way things were will be driven by Management rather than Vision. The opportunity to be captivated by the new vision God has for your congregation is a terrible open door to waste. Please treat this opportunity with great care, wonderful joy, and spiritual passion.

At what stage is your congregation? What is your stage on the life cycle teaching you? Based on this, what do you need to do next? What assistance do you need from outside your congregation to take the next steps?

About George Bullard

George has served as a consultant, coach, mentor, teacher, speaker, writer, editor, and leader of processes to help congregations reach their full Kingdom potential since the mid-1970s. During this time, he has served as pastor, denominational staff minister, adjunct professor in a half-dozen seminaries, a writer of thousands of articles and five books, and a consultant or strategic leadership coach with congregations, denominations, leaders, and leadership teams.

George's life-long ministry has four foci: starting new congregations, transforming congregations, transforming denominations, and coaching and mentoring leaders. He has worked with thousands of congregations plus their pastors and staff ministers over the past five decades. He has also trained hundreds of people in consulting, coaching, mentoring, planning that is spiritual and strategic in nature, and also provided training in conflict mediation.

George worked with congregations and leaders in more than 50 denominations in the USA, Canada, and some in Europe. He networked with leaders on five continents through his 18 years of ministry with the Baptist World Alliance.

Books written by George are ***Shaping a Future for the Church in the Changing Community*** [with Jere Allen], ***Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation, Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict, FaithSoaring Churches***, and ***Captured By Vision***.

George married Betty in 1972, and they have two adult children and four grandchildren. He has lived in Columbia, SC for much of his adult life but grew up in Baltimore and Philadelphia.

Contact George at www.BullardJournal.org or at BullardJournal@gmail.com. You may even come visit with George in his home in Columbia, SC. Simply request an invitation.

Read This Last

I began using a congregational life cycle assessment in the mid-1970s. My recollection of the first significant voyage into the congregational life cycle was when I read an article by Carl Dudley, then at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, that looked at the aging side of a congregational life cycle. Part of my recollection is that it was his article that compared the aging side of the life cycle to the stages of death and dying popularized by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. It was a great start to a helpful piece of assessment and learning. It was a starting place for the continued development of congregations as well as the launching of a transformation journey on the aging side of the life cycle.

My colleague in ministry, Jere Allen, and I worked for several years on developing and refining a full life cycle from birth to death. Ultimately it was published in 1981 in a manual by our denomination entitled ***Shaping a Future for the Church in the Changing Community***.

That same year a full book of the congregational life cycle was released by our denominational publisher, written by Robert Dale entitled ***To Dream Again***. Bob, Jere, and I did not know each other were working on many of the same concepts. Yet very soon, we were in dialogue to collaborate and enhance our concepts.

Throughout the decade of the 1980s, several encounters and publications impacted our thinking on the congregational life cycle. One was a booklet published by The Alban Institute in 1986 by Martin Saarinen, a Lutheran seminary professor, simply called *The Life Cycle of a Congregation*. I was excited when I saw it, and elated when I discovered he lived and taught in the same city where I was living – Columbia, SC. I contacted him immediately and started a dialogue. It is Saarinen who inspired the concept of four factors as organizing principles that form the DNA of the life cycle.

Over the past four decades, I have found the life cycle to be a great starting point for helping congregations know the next steps they need to take, and the order in which they need to take the next steps. It is not only a great assessment piece and it is not only a great intervention vehicle, but it is a great launching pad for the potential *FaithSoaring* of congregations.

Ultimately the factors Vision, Relationships, Programs, and Management that I developed from the foundation and inspiration of Martin Saarinen have been among the most powerful concepts in the life cycle. They have many implications beyond the life cycle assessment. I promote the idea that when congregations get the appropriate alignment or synergy of Vision, Relationships, Programs, and Management that they are able to accelerate a movement toward becoming a *FaithSoaring* congregation traveling in the direction of their full Kingdom potential.