

TAKING YOUR CHURCH TO THE NEXT LEVEL

What Got You Here
Won't Get You There

Gary L. McIntosh



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Contents

1. What Got You Here Won't Get You There 9

Part One Congregational Life Cycles

2. St. John's Syndrome 21
3. The Emerging Church 35
4. The Growing Church 46
5. The Consolidating Church 54
6. The Declining Church 65
7. The Dying Church 74
8. Leading through the Stages 87
9. Growing through the Stages 102

Part Two Church Size Stages

10. Step Up to the Next Level 115
11. The Relational Church: 15 to 200
Worshippers 134
12. The Managerial Church: 200 to 400
Worshippers 145

Contents

- 13. The Organizational Church: 400 to 800
Worshippers 153
- 14. The Centralized Church: 800 to 1,500
Worshippers 160
- 15. The Decentralized Church: 1,500-Plus
Worshippers 168

Part Three Choice Points

- 16. Growth and Decline: Size Matters 181
- 17. Reaching Your Growth Point 195

Notes 207

Further Reading: Worth a Look 213

What Got You Here Won't Get You There

The significant problems we face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.

Albert Einstein

“I’m glad we could all get together this weekend,” Mike greeted Wes and Phil as they settled into three overstuffed chairs at the Holy Grounds, a local coffee shop. “Mary and I are leaving for vacation in a week, and I want to get some input from you two concerning my future at New Hope Church before we leave town.”

“Wow! Slow down a bit,” Wes said. “The last time we talked everything was going well with your ministry. Has something changed?”

“No, nothing that is worth talking about,” Mike replied. “I’m just feeling a bit . . . well . . . it’s hard to put into words, but I guess I’m feeling somewhat frustrated with the church’s progress.”

“What do you mean by the church’s progress?” asked Phil. “I’m as puzzled as Wes. Last year you were thinking you’d be at New Hope the rest of your life. What’s happened?”

“Nothing’s happened exactly,” Mike continued. “We’re running about 1,150 in worship attendance, and there are no major conflicts. I really should be happy, but ministry just seems . . . so . . . stale. When I started New Hope twenty years ago, I seemed to know what the church needed. The initiatives my start-up team put in place back then took hold, and we doubled and tripled our attendance at worship services in the first few years. Things are still going well, but the last three years we’ve been on a plateau. We go up a little and then down a little—can’t seem to make any solid gains. I’ve grown more frustrated every year. I just can’t figure how to get to the next level, whatever it is.”

“Are others feeling the same way?” Phil quizzed. “I mean, does your staff and board sense the same frustration?”

“Yes, everyone feels about the same, but we can’t agree on what to do about it,” Mike replied, gazing at his coffee cup. “That’s bothering me a bit too. When I started the church, there were three members on my planting team, and we were all on the same page. Today I have twelve people on my board, and we never agree on what direction the church ought to go.”

“I know what that’s like,” Phil acknowledged, nodding. “My board is currently trying to decide whether to add a Saturday night worship service or not. We’ve been going around and around the issue for nearly a year now. I’m about ready to give up on the idea.”

Mike smiled as he caught Phil’s eye. “We faced a similar situation. Our board presented an initiative to the church to build a new auditorium four years ago, but they voted it down. Since then we can’t seem to get a handle on what to do.”

“I read somewhere,” Wes said, “that churches face predictable barriers at certain sizes. Maybe you’ve reached one of those barriers.”

“It could be, but if our church is stuck at a growth barrier, I certainly don’t know what the next steps are to break through it. In fact I’m not even sure there are growth barriers in a church. Remember our speaker at last year’s pastors’ conference? He said there was no such thing as a numerical barrier. He said all the talk about growth barriers was just a myth.”

“Yes, I remember that comment,” Phil said, “but the speaker also talked a lot about the effect that a church’s age has on its growth.”

“Sure, I remember that,” Mike said. “I’ve thought that could be part of our problem too. We celebrated the twentieth anniversary of New Hope’s founding this year. As I remember, that is a critical point in the life of any congregation.”

“Perhaps New Hope is simply getting old,” suggested Phil.

“Well, if that’s the case and things don’t change,” Mike declared, “I’m outta here. I don’t see myself pastoring a static church.”

This conversation illustrates three aspects of church ministry that challenge all leaders. First, local churches experience a predictable life cycle of growth and decline. Undoubtedly times of growth are more exciting than times of decline, yet anyone who has worked in a church for very long has experienced both ups and downs. Second, the size of a church impacts its health and vitality. Larger churches are not just bigger versions of smaller ones but entirely different types of organisms. As churches grow bigger, they become more complex with multiple ministries, staff, and services. You cannot lead a large church in the same way you would a smaller one. Third, what got your church to where it is will not get it to where you want it to be! As a church ages and changes size, it demands new approaches to leadership, change, programming, training, and presents a host of new challenges that must be faced. Other than its basic beliefs and values,

the two major forces that impact a church's growth are its age and its size.

Life Cycle of a Church

Ministry goes through cycles of ups and downs, victory and defeat, joy and sorrow. Success in any worthwhile endeavor is never an ending but just a point in a cycle of winning and losing that continues year after year. Up-and-down cycles are an ongoing part of life and ministry, as the preacher of Ecclesiastes makes clear:

There is a time for every event under heaven—a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance. A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to shun embracing. A time to search and a time to give up as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; a time to be silent and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

A trusted mentor once said to me, “Gary, you’ve got to make hay while the sun shines.” It was his way of telling me that I needed to be aware of the cycles of ministry and to work with the natural cycles rather than against them. For example, one cycle that is evident among churches in the United States is that worship attendance rises gradually from September through Easter and then declines from Easter through August. This predictable cycle is often called the “summer slump” and is a reality found in most communities throughout the country. Church planters work with the cycle by starting churches any time between September and Easter Sunday, but rarely

do they start a new church between Easter and August. Local church leaders are wise to begin new ministries in the fall or winter, not starting something new in the summer (unless it is a summer ministry, of course).

However, while there are numerous life cycles that influence the growth of a church, such as the cycle of worship attendance just noted, a local church's own life cycle has the greatest impact on its health and vitality. One of the first people to identify and highlight the life cycle of the church was David O. Moberg.¹ He wrote, "Study of many churches reveals a typical pattern through which they pass as they emerge, grow, decline, and ultimately die. Each recurrent growth cycle of stability, experimentation, and integration may be described as involving five stages."² His five stages are incipient organization, formal organization, maximum efficiency, institutional stage, and disintegration. Unfortunately, even though Moberg's study of the life cycle of the church offered many insights helpful to church leaders, his book was not widely read among local church pastors and leaders. The person who popularized the life cycle concept among church leaders was Robert D. Dale in his book *To Dream Again*. Dale modeled his church life cycle on that of the cycle of human development. He discovered nine stages of church life.³ In order, his stages are dream, beliefs, goals, structure, ministry, nostalgia, questioning, polarization, and dropout.

Moberg, Dale, and, as we will discover in a later chapter, others point out that all organizations and organisms move through predictable stages of birth, growth, maturity, and decline. Chapter 2 introduces and illustrates this classic life cycle model, while chapters 3 through 7 explain the particular patterns and challenges that a church faces at each stage of

Success in any worthwhile endeavor is never an ending but just a point in a cycle of winning and losing that continues year after year.

development in eight different categories: commitment to mission, involvement of laypersons, congregational morale, facilities, programs and organizational structure, attitude toward change, pastor and staff, and worship and attendance. Following chapter 7 is a profile to help you decide where your church is in the congregational life cycle.

Size of a Church

The impact of size on organizations and organisms is recognized in several disciplines. Various researchers in such diverse fields as economics, business management, sociology, biology, and church growth have all acknowledged the impact of size on organizational development. For example, studies in biology speak of “power scaling relationships,” which are mathematical determinations of how characteristics change with size in different species. Geoffrey B. West writes:

... metabolic rate increases as the $\frac{3}{4}$ power of mass. Put simply, the scaling law says that if an organism’s mass increases by a factor of 10,000 (four orders of magnitude), its metabolic rate will increase by a factor of only 1,000 (three orders of magnitude). This represents an enormous economy of scale: the bigger the creature, the less energy per pound it requires to stay alive. This increase of efficiency with size—manifested by the scaling exponent $\frac{3}{4}$, which we say is “sublinear” because it’s less than one—permeates biology.⁴

Research in modern management theory also reflects on the significance of size in managing a business. Larry Greiner, professor of management and organization at the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business, notes, “A company’s problems and solutions tend to change markedly as the number of employees and its sales volume increase. Problems of coordination and communication magnify, new functions emerge, levels in the management hierarchy mul-

tively, and jobs become interrelated.”⁵ Anyone who has been involved in small and large organizations can resonate with Greiner. Communicating with five people is very different from trying to communicate with fifty or five hundred people. Clearly, small is different from large. Size does matter.

No one in the church growth field has addressed the issues related to congregational size as widely as Lyle E. Schaller. In *The Pastor and the People* Schaller differentiated his advice on the basis of small, medium, and large church categories. In 2000, writing in *The Very Large Church: New Rules for Leaders*, Schaller declares, “Size is the most revealing and useful frame of reference for examining the differences among congregations in American Protestantism.”⁶

A number of myths (fallacies) have grown around the subject of church size. For example, one popular perspective speaks of size “barriers”; however, there is little research data to confirm the existence of size barriers. There are some truths (certainties) that have been demonstrated regarding the impact of church size on congregational development. Chapter 10 will review such fallacies and certainties. Chapters 11 through 15 are devoted to a complete overview of how a church’s size influences its growth and decline. Each chapter outlines the challenges faced at one of five common church sizes.

Taking It to the Next Level

Continual learning is crucial for any person who wants to get ahead in today’s information-rich environment. Recently I saw a sign on the wall of a human resource department that highlighted this truth. It read: “What got you to where you are won’t get you to where you want to be.” People in almost any field of work see this truth played out annually. They know that what got them their job five years ago is not sufficient to get them their next promotion. If they hope to get ahead, they must take classes to update skills, attend

**Long-term
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seminars to network with new clients, or sign up for training to raise their level of expertise.

The same holds true in the sports realm. Every successful sports team learns that the worst part of victory is that it is never final. The strategy that succeeded one year will fail the next. Sports dynasties develop only when members of the team are inspired to improve in a new

way year after year. It is what happens in the time off between seasons that makes winners during the season.

It is equally valid that what brought a church to its current level of ministry fruitfulness will not get it to the next level of growth and vitality. Leaders learn quickly that as a church grows and ages, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep it healthy and vibrant. Over time, people change, conflicts build, and programs peak in effectiveness. Long-term excellence is always the result of continual improvements over time.

Cycles of Fruitfulness

This is a book about the cycles of fruitfulness and the importance of continual improvement to diminish destructive forces that keep a congregation from focusing attention on its mission. *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* explains the impact of age and size on churches and outlines the improvements that must be made at each point if a church is to remain fruitful and faithful to its mission over many years.

I have written this book primarily for church leaders, pastors, students (future leaders and pastors), and those who coach church leaders, such as denominational executives and church consultants. It is intended, however, for anyone who cares about the church and desires to see it experience biblical growth. If you have read this far, I have written the book for you . . . and your church.

Use this book as your personal resource manual. Seek out the ideas that fit your current situation and begin using them right away. As you launch into your reading, feel free to jump in at any chapter, particularly if you know your church is at the specific age or size being described. For example, if your church is plateaued between 400 and 800 worshipers, read chapter 13 on the organizational church. If your church is on a downward trend, read chapter 6 that speaks to issues in a declining congregation. Or if your church is five to ten years old, read chapter 3 on the emerging congregation. A quick glance at the table of contents will point you in the right direction. To get the best overall perspective, however, I recommend that you read the book straight through as written. Approaching the book as it is presented offers you a comprehensive understanding of how age and size impact any church.

At the beginning of each chapter, you will find a brief case study—a continuing dialogue among three pastors, Mike, Phil, and Wes. Some readers find this helpful, as it serves to illustrate the concepts presented in the chapter. Other readers may want to move past the dialogue directly into the material. If you don't find the narrative helpful, feel free to skip it and dive right into the rest of the chapter.

Now if you are going to jump around and read different chapters, have fun exploring. But if you are going to read chapter by chapter, move on to chapter 2 to learn about what some church leaders call St. John's Syndrome, or the predictable life cycle that all organizations and organisms experience.

PART ONE

CONGREGATIONAL
LIFE CYCLES

St. John's Syndrome

A team can be great for twenty years or more if the leaders can control the destructive forces and refocus the players on their mission.

Pat Riley

“Don’t make any rash decisions about leaving your church, Mike.” Wes seemed genuinely concerned as he raised his voice slightly above the background music. “Let’s talk this through some more.”

“No problem,” Mike laughed. “I’ve got all morning to spend with two of my three best friends.”

“Oh, really?” Phil seemed a bit perturbed. “Who is your other best friend?”

“I’ll never tell,” Mike responded with a sense of glee that he had caught Phil off guard.

“Seriously,” Wes pressed on. “I think there’s something to the fact that New Hope just celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Over the last year, I’ve been reading about the predictable

life cycle that churches tend to travel, and some researchers find the twentieth year of a church is often the beginning of a long-term plateau.”

“Sounds like my church,” Mike agreed.

“It certainly does,” Wes continued. “In fact several things you’ve mentioned fit right into the typical life cycle model.”

“Like what?” Mike probed as he moved to the edge of his chair.

“Well, the fact that New Hope seems to have lost its vision for the future. You said that you and your board have lost a sense of direction. From what I’ve read, this is a typical problem that first gets noticed around the twentieth year of a church’s existence.”

“Why is that?” Mike asked.

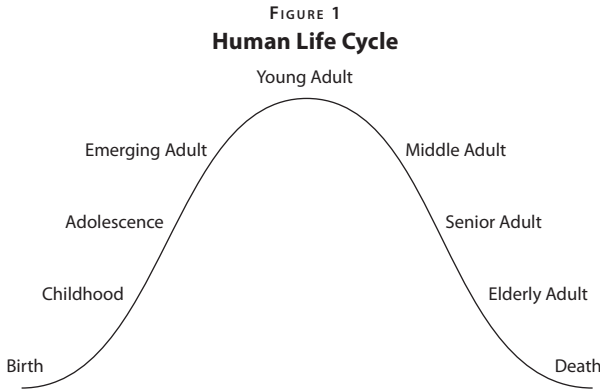
“Pastors usually come to a church with a vision of what needs to be accomplished. This is particularly true of new church plants, like New Hope twenty years ago. I’ll bet if you look back, you’ll remember that you and your team had a very clear vision or sense of direction. Right?”

“You’re right,” Mike agreed. “We all had a strong commitment to building a work for God in our community. We knew our audience and designed plans and strategies to reach them. And even though we knew the exact timing of our growth was in God’s hands, we also set goals and had a timetable to accomplish them.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Wes said. “Now what appears to happen, according to the life cycle model, is that by the twentieth year a church’s original vision and goals have been reached. While this is positive, the leaders of a church begin to experience a sense of loss. Basically, the leaders no longer have a clear sense of direction—they no longer have a vision for the future.”

“That sounds like what we’re facing at New Hope,” Mike acknowledged. “Maybe there really is a predictable life cycle to church ministry.”

Yes, Mike is correct. Research has confirmed that there truly is a predictable life cycle that congregations tend to go through. Not just churches but any organization or living organism faces a predictable life cycle. That of all humans can be illustrated using a bell curve.



The human life cycle is so predictable that we can attach age categories to each of the designations in the cycle. Childhood is defined as being from a few months to twelve years old. Adolescence comprises the years thirteen to seventeen. Emerging adulthood begins about age eighteen up to thirty, and young adulthood is from thirty-one to fifty years old. What is now being called middle adulthood is between fifty-one and seventy years old, while senior adults are those seventy-one to eighty years old. Elderly adults are people over eighty-one.

The years attached to each life stage designation are somewhat arbitrary. Each person may experience life stages earlier or later than others, or indeed not experience some stages at all due to abnormalities or an early death. Variable factors include a person's family background (genes), lifestyle (for example, smoker or nonsmoker), work (dangerous or safe), and a number of other risk factors that may have an impact on an individual's health and life span. Even though such variables exist, for most of the world's population, the life

cycle follows a normal bell curve. We can exercise, eat right, take safety precautions, or practice a number of other preventative measures but we will still go through the life cycle, unless Christ returns during our lifetime.

Job understood the impact of the human life cycle when he declared, “Man, who is born of woman, is short-lived and full of turmoil. Like a flower he comes forth and withers. He also flees like a shadow and does not remain” (Job 14:1–2). The preacher of Ecclesiastes summarizes the human life cycle rather abruptly: “There is a time for every event under heaven—a time to give birth and a time to die” (Eccles. 3:1–2). King David expressed it more graciously, adding a touch of hope when he wrote, “As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. When the wind has passed over it, it is no more, and its place acknowledges it no longer. But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him” (Ps. 103:15–17).

Life Cycle of an Organization

Identifying the existence of a human life cycle leads quite naturally to the recognition that life cycles exist in other spheres of life. The most influential and complex study of the life cycle of an organization has come from Ichak Adizes, who developed a diagnostic theory to describe organizational and cultural change in corporations. His theory was first published as an article in 1979,¹ but most people became aware of his research only after he published *Corporate Lifecycles: How and Why Corporations Grow and Die and What to Do about It* in 1988.² In the introduction to his book, Adizes explains: “Organizations have lifecycles just as living organisms do; they go through the normal struggles and difficulties accompanying each stage of the Organizational Lifecycle and are faced with the transitional problems of moving to the next phase of development.”³

Adizes sees four stages in an organization's growth and four stages in its decline, very much like the human life cycle noted above. He labels the four growth stages courtship, infant, go-go, and adolescence, and the four decline stages he calls aristocracy, early bureaucracy, bureaucracy, and death. In addition to these eight, he adds a ninth stage, called prime, which he feels is ideal. Adizes describes prime as the following:

In Prime, the organization knows what to do and what not to do. They know when to pass up an opportunity and why to pass on it. The organization has both talent and discipline. It has vision and self-control. It is oriented toward quantity and quality. Both the form and the function are balanced, and they are functional. The organization can grow profitably.⁴

The major challenges of any organization, according to Adizes, are, first, to get to prime, and, second, to stay at or return to prime. It's interesting that in the Adizes model, prime is not the zenith of the bell curve. He calls the top of the curve stable (another stage, making ten stages in all). Prime comes just before stable. Stable, when the life cycle begins to plateau, is actually the beginning of decline when the organization begins to say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Vision, creativity, and innovation are lost during stable, and the organization begins to decline.⁵

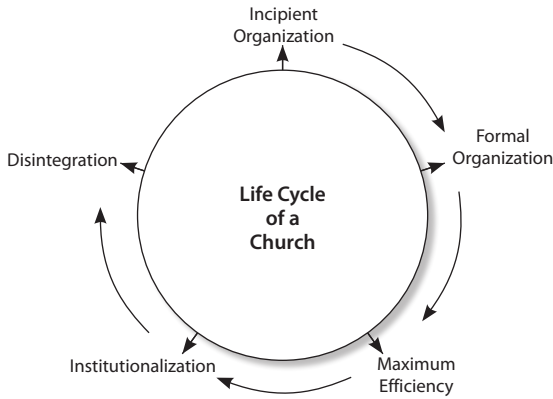
One major difference exists between the human life cycle and that of an organization. In the human life cycle, decline is inevitable. No matter how much we exercise, eat healthy food, and visit our doctor, physical decline eventually sets in, leading to death. Paul even acknowledged to Timothy that "Bodily discipline ["exercise" in the KJV] is only of little profit" (1 Tim. 4:8). In the organizational life cycle, decline is not inevitable—only probable. The natural cycle of rise and fall can be reversed, which is good news for those leading any organization in the stage of plateau or decline. Organizations

of any kind have the potential for renewed growth and vitality. While the corporate life cycle model speaks primarily to business organizations, it does inform our understanding of a church's life cycle. Fortunately other researchers have applied life cycle thinking directly to local congregations.

The first person to popularize life cycle thinking for churches was David O. Moberg.⁶ In *The Church as a Social Institution*, Moberg writes, "As an institution develops, it creates an informal and a formal structure; a set of traditions, values, goals, and objectives; policies and rules; a division of labor; expectations and hopes; collective feelings (*esprit de corps*) and morale among members."⁷ According to Moberg, as an organization grows, it moves through phases toward increased institutionalization characterized by increasing bureaucracy, eventually becoming less effective and collapsing under its own weight. "The process by which an institution develops may be called its natural history. Study of many churches reveals a typical pattern through which they pass as they emerge, grow, decline, and ultimately die. Each recurrent growth cycle of stability, experimentation, and integration may be described as involving five stages."⁸ Moberg's life cycle model actually focused on how church sects, or new denominations, developed.⁹ The five stages he identified were incipient organization, formal organization, maximum efficiency, institutional stage, and disintegration.¹⁰

Though Moberg was illustrating how larger bodies of churches emerge, grow, and decline, his model was easily adapted to local churches. In 1985 Win Arn, then president of the Institute for American Church Growth, adapted Moberg's life cycle model for local churches in an article, "Is Your Church in a Mid-life Crisis?"¹¹ Arn kept Moberg's terms for the final four stages but changed the first term to *initial structuring*. Other than that one simple change, the remainder of Moberg's concepts stayed the same, as Arn applied them to local congregations.

FIGURE 2
Moberg's Life Cycle Model



Using the human life cycle as his primary model, Robert Dale developed an organizational life cycle for churches, which was published in *To Dream Again*.¹² He suggested that there are nine total stages of growth and decline for a congregation: four growth stages, four decline stages, and one plateau stage. Dale called each stage in order from beginning to end: dream, beliefs, goals, structure, ministry, nostalgia, questioning, polarization, and dropout. A glance at his life cycle model shows clearly that it has been adapted from the human life cycle model, and he illustrated it as a bell curve.

Working with the Adizes corporate life cycle model, Martin Saarinen and George W. Bullard Jr. have developed life cycle models that inform congregational growth and decline. In 1986 Saarinen wrote a paper, "The Life Cycle of a Congregation," based on the research of Adizes. First, he presented it at a staff development retreat for a church in North Carolina and later published it as a book with the

Study of many churches reveals a typical pattern through which they pass as they emerge, grow, decline, and ultimately die.

Alban Institute.¹³ Saarinen takes Adizes's model, weaves it with the human life cycle model, and introduces what he calls the "Gene Structures of the Congregation." He points out the risk factors for congregations at each stage while creatively adapting Adizes to local churches. George Bullard also builds on the seminal work of Adizes by adding aspects of the human life cycle. He labels the five major phases of a congregation as early growth, late growth, plateau, early aging, and late aging. He changes Adizes's language into that which sounds more appropriate for congregations, using the terms *vision*, *relationship*, *program*, and *management*. Both Saarinen and Bullard borrow largely from Adizes. Each presents fresh ideas, while staying fairly close to Adizes's perspectives.

From Adizes to Saarinen's and Bullard's reworking of Adizes's corporate life cycle model, almost all the work on congregational life cycles has been extrapolated from business models. Some models, such as that of Dale, have been based on the human life cycle, while others, that of Moberg and Arn, are based on sociological studies of denominations and local churches. So the question must be asked, Is there any biblical evidence that a congregational life cycle exists? Clear biblical evidence can be seen for physical life cycles, but what about a congregational life cycle?

The Bible does not address the concept of organizational life cycles directly, but there is at least one illustration of the reality of life cycle movement in local congregations. In Christ's revelation to the church, as found in the biblical book of Revelation, there is a fascinating description of seven churches wrestling with the realities of their life cycle. Each of the seven churches was started slightly before or during Paul's second missionary journey in what is today Turkey, just across the Aegean Sea from Greece. Since Paul's second missionary journey is generally accepted to have occurred between AD 49 and 52, these seven churches were founded either during or slightly earlier than that time. Most likely John wrote the book of Revelation sometime in the early

AD 90s, making the seven churches of the Revelation between forty to fifty years old by the time Christ Jesus addressed them in Revelation 2–3. Given what we know about the life cycle of a congregation, this would put the seven churches toward the end of a long plateau, just before they might be expected to begin a severe decline in ministry effectiveness. This is just what we find.

Christ praises five of the churches for their good qualities (perhaps aspects of their early life cycle) but then he criticizes them for failings (perhaps aspects of their later life cycle). The church in Ephesus had already left its first love (Rev. 2:4). The church of Pergamum was harboring false teachers (v. 14). The church of Thyatira was allowing a wicked and morally dangerous prophetess to influence the believers (v. 20). The church of Sardis looked good on the outside (it had made a name for itself) but was spiritually dead on the inside (3:1). The church of Laodicea was complacent (vv. 15–16). Though Christ did not directly criticize the other two churches, he warned Smyrna to hold firm under persecution (2:10) and encouraged Philadelphia to take advantage of an open door (3:8). The point is that each of the seven churches was beginning to show evidence of decline, and they were only about forty to fifty years old.

Life Cycle of a Congregation

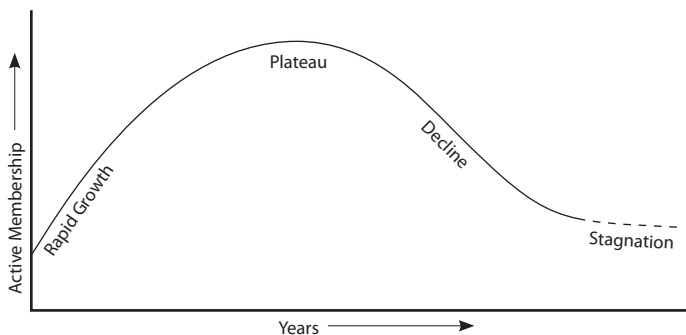
The seven churches of Revelation demonstrate that a natural congregational life cycle existed during the first century. It is not just a modern or postmodern phenomenon but an actuality that has an impact on churches simply because churches are organisms with lives of their own. The life cycle that has been identified in the seven churches of Revelation is sometimes called St. John's Syndrome. A syndrome is a condition that affects organizations or organisms widely enough to be viewed as a normal occurrence. To be labeled a syndrome,

a condition must have patterns and characteristics that are identifiable, as well as ones that show up on a predictable schedule or time frame. Such patterns and characteristics are identifiable in local churches, and they will be outlined in detail in chapters 3 through 7. At this point, however, it will be helpful to take a larger view of the normal life cycle of a congregation.

**Congregations
tend to traverse
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Congregations tend to traverse a predictable life cycle that is similar to a bell curve. A church is prone to rapid growth in the first fifteen to twenty years of its existence, followed by a leveling off of growth onto a plateau for another twenty to forty years. Then follows a slower decline over the next thirty to forty years until the church either closes its doors (dies) or eases into an unhealthy period of stagnation (see figure below).

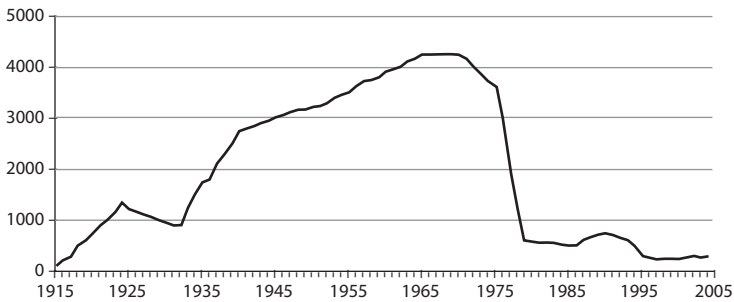
FIGURE 3



I have seen this picture endless times when working as a consultant with churches. A classic bell curve life cycle is apparent in church A below (a real church but not identified to protect the church's privacy). It was started in the early 1900s and grew rapidly to become one of North America's

first megachurches, peaking with a high attendance of 4,250 between 1965 and 1970. During the first twenty years of the church's life, it experienced rapid growth of 318.3 percent each decade (DGR = decadal growth rate), or 15 percent growth each year (AAGR = average annual growth rate). The growth rate occurred even with a slight decline during the second ten-year period. Growth continued but slowed during the next twenty years to 41.4 percent DGR and only 4 percent AAGR (still respectable growth but clearly slowing down). Once the church was past its fortieth birthday, it began to plateau with a very low 1.4% DGR and essentially zero AAGR between its fortieth and sixtieth years. Then, as the graph demonstrates, during the twenty years between the church's sixtieth and eightieth years of existence, it suffered severe decline of -71.1 percent DGR and -12 percent AAGR. As the church nears its one-hundredth birthday, it continues to minister, but its future vitality is uncertain. No church will exactly fit the classic church life cycle, but one can easily see evidence of the bell curve in this church (see figure below).

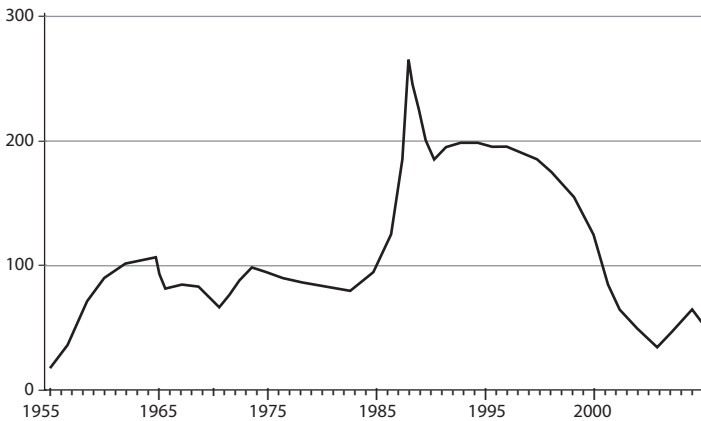
FIGURE 4
CHURCH A



Of course smaller churches go through life cycles also, as is illustrated in church B below. The church was started in 1955 with 16 members and grew rapidly during its first four years to 94, which is a fantastic DGR of 8,266 percent and 54 percent AAGR. Unfortunately, like numerous church plants,

church B was unable to sustain its rapid growth momentum and settled into what became a twenty-five-year plateau from 1960 to 1985. During that period the DGR was -3.2 percent with a zero AAGR. Then new life surged into the congregation, propelling it upward again between 1986 and 1988 when it reached a peak attendance of about 265 and then quickly settled down to a second plateau of about 200 people before eventually declining to a low of 55 worshippers by 2008. During the thirty-eighth year of the church's existence, it experienced its greatest growth of 38.6 percent DGR and 3 percent AAGR. Yet in the years since, it has sunk into the natural pattern, declining at a rate of -72.6 percent DGR and -12 percent AAGR. Once again it is clear that churches do not fit the bell curve exactly. All churches demonstrate distinct differences, but one can see the bell curve in the life of church B.

FIGURE 5
CHURCH B



What We Know about the Life Cycle of a Church

Studies of denominations and local congregations have revealed several natural principles that seem to govern a church's progress along the life cycle.

1. All churches are inclined to follow a basic pattern of growth, plateau, and decline. Some travel along the life cycle faster or slower. Others defy the classic pattern for a time, but eventually all churches follow the basic pattern.
2. A church usually grows or declines from stage to stage; that is, it is rare for a church to skip a phase. Thus when a church is in a growth phase, it will tend to go through the stages of growth in their natural order. And when a church is in a decline, it will tend to go through the stages of decline in their normal order.
3. A church's growth and decline do not progress steadily from stage to stage. Movement from one phase to another is often interrupted, with the church plateaued for a period of time before it continues on.
4. The longer a church is plateaued at one stage of growth, the more difficult it becomes to move to the next stage. Growth can be aborted at any stage and decline set in.
5. In some extremely dynamic situations, it is possible for a church to grow so rapidly that the stages are compressed to the point that the church blows right by them, sort of like a jet airplane flying over a crowd at a parade. By the time you see the jet, it is already gone.
6. Normally, churches that remain vital for long periods of time experience not one single life cycle but several life cycles of growth, plateau, and decline.
7. Churches can experience renewal at any point in their life cycle. However, the older a church becomes and the later in the life cycle renewal is attempted, the more difficult it is to see true resurgence of growth and vitality.

So what makes a church durable over the long haul? Why do some churches seem to keep going while others fall into decline? In short, a church's durability comes, first, from the values that guide the creation of its program and ministry;

second, from the development of processes designed to encourage the behavior that reflects those values; and third, from leaders who function as architects of the entire process. The following chapters investigate specific details for each of five stages in the life cycle of a church. I call these stages emerging, growing, consolidating, declining, and dying.

What's Happening?

1. In what ways have you seen life cycles at work in your life, your career, and your church?
2. Can you think of any biblical examples of life cycles?
3. Where would you place your church on the life cycle chart found on page 30? Why would you put it there?