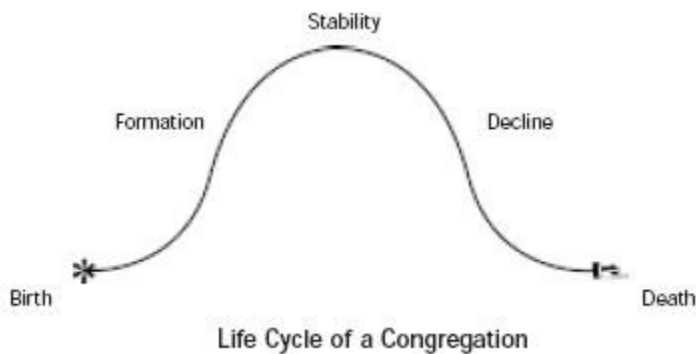


Jim's Tool Box

Where Is Your Church on the Congregational Life Cycle?

Last month I shared some historical attendance data about the congregations of the Capitol Area South District. You can find that article [HERE](#) if you missed it.

In my article last month I wrote that while the district has experienced an increase in worship attendance from 1995 through 2008, sixty per cent of the congregations in the district reported a decline in worship attendance over that time period. So the facts and figures that I reported in that article caused me to think about the implications for the stages of a congregation's life. This life cycle occurs in most organizations and our congregations are no different in experiencing these stages as well. Here is a chart that shows the life cycle of a congregation:



When the life cycle is displayed in this way, we become aware of how organizational/church life can become part of the “circle of life” in the life and death of congregations.

Since most of the congregations in the Capitol Area South District are over one hundred years old, many of these churches have been through stages of “formation” “stability” and “decline.”

Where do you see your congregation on the diagram above? In this article, I'm going to describe briefly these stages and also show what is needed so that a congregation doesn't end up on the “death” end of this life cycle. I am drawing on an article by Senior Alban Institute Consultant Alice Mann for some of my content for these descriptions. I am referencing an article that is excerpted from her book [Can Our Church Live?: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline](#) (Alban Institute, 1999).

Birth

Mann says that congregations identify their birth moments in a variety of ways: the evening a group of people decided to start a church, the first worship service, or the occasion of the official recognition by their denominational body. According to Mann, “These earliest moments in the congregation's story contain powerful bits of genetic information that will express themselves in the rest of the life cycle.” Of course most of the congregations in our district are over 100 years old. A few churches have been founded in the past twenty-five years, but in most cases, no one is around any longer to know firsthand the events that led to the congregation's founding. I have heard the stories of the beginning of older congregations rehearsed through the “oral tradition” of members who carry that history with them.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to witness one of these birth moments when the New Life Community congregation near Hebron was chartered as an official United Methodist Church (see the

article elsewhere in this edition of the newsletter). It was an exciting event, and it was one that I am sure that many present will remember for a long time. The chartering service will become another part of their DNA.

Formation

Mann continues by saying that the moment of birth gives way to a period of formation, when the congregation's basic identity is established. During this time, the congregation develops its own tacit answers to three powerful questions:

1. Who are we (especially at the faith level)?
2. What are we here for?
3. Who is our neighbor?

Stability

According to Alice Mann, "... the formative period in a congregation's life paves the way for a period of fruitful and sustainable ministry." She declares that when a congregation has forged a clear faith identity, and has organized its life to express that faith effectively and persistently within its community context, we might call that state "stability."

Mann says that if a congregation does attain both spiritual and institutional stability, it will always arrive at a moment when it is tempted to rest on its laurels, feeling that it has nothing more to learn except techniques for fine-tuning what already exists. When stagnation sets in, attendance and participation typically fall off, while membership and total giving continue to rise. Leaders often ignore these early signs of decline by trying to focus on the positive.

Decline

Here is the way that Alice Mann describes this phase of a congregation's life:

At some point... (t)he congregation finds it can no longer dismiss as temporary or random the noticeable fall off in worship attendance, church school registration, volunteer energy, pledging households, first-time visitors, new member retention, and so on. Also refusing for months, years, or even decades to (look) at its situation, the congregation arrives at a moment of painful recognition.

The result of this recognition is the blame game. As Mann says, "The board blames the pastor for letting fine old members drift or stomp away. The pastor blames the board for not leading the congregation in evangelism or tithing. Members blame their leaders, or the denomination, or the visitors who didn't return. Everyone blames the surrounding community and the wider culture for changing in ways that have threatened the congregation's survival."

Alice Mann describes how the reaction is for the congregation to resist changes in worship that might upset well-established members. The congregation devotes little energy to fresh learning about the surrounding community, where fewer and fewer members may actually live as time goes by. Decisions are made by a shrinking group of long-tenured members.

As a District Superintendent and in my current position, I have seen too many congregations in some stage of the decline phase of their life. I have seen the squabbling, the blaming, and the “circling the wagon” mentality that leads to further decline and moves the congregation closer to death.

Death

Alice Mann writes that a congregation that never replaces the blame response with a learning stance or waits too long to try something new, death is the likely result. But death does not come easily. This stage of the life cycle can drag on for a long time.

Where is your congregation on the life cycle journey? Here’s a suggestion: take this article to a church board meeting or to a pastor/staff parish relations committee and ask the question, “Where do you see our congregation in this life cycle?” It would probably make for an interesting and perhaps useful conversation.

My fear is that many of our congregations are on the decline side of their life cycle. Several are approaching death or they are in the throes of the death phase.

While some congregations may have reached the stage where death is inevitable, there is hope (there is always hope in the gospel!). All is not necessarily lost. There is the possibility for new life. Next month I will share how the cycle of decline can be turned around. Stay tuned!