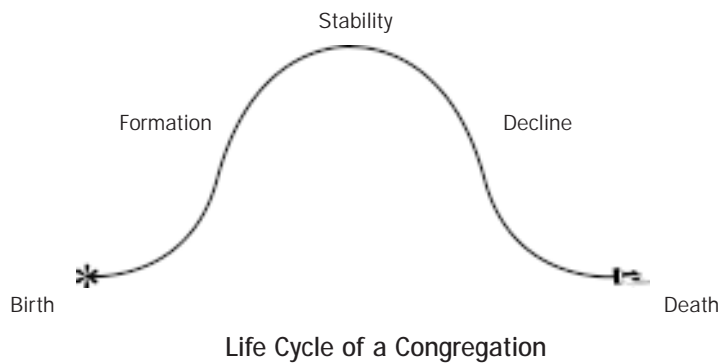

Understanding Your Congregation's Life Cycle

An adapted excerpt from chapter 1 of *Can Our Church Live?: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline*, by Alice Mann (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1999).
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Social organisms—including faith communities—differ from biological ones in that they may outlive their individual members; nevertheless, they manifest similar patterns of emergence and decline. Key stages in the life cycle of a congregation can be described initially as a developmental arc¹ as illustrated below.



Congregational Life Cycle Stages

Birth

Congregations identify their birth moments in a variety of ways: for example, the evening a group of people decided to start a church, the first worship service, or the occasion of official recognition by their denominational body. 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. I recall the rather dramatic story of a suburban church founded by members of a downtown congregation during a period of "white flight" from urban areas. Decades later, members of my own nearby congregation would comment to me that they had—on their first or second visit there—been told how awful the city was and why the church had moved to the suburbs. The fearfulness and alienation present at its moment of birth expressed itself in many other ways far into that church's

life cycle. Though a new suburban ministry might have been needed to reach shifting populations at that moment, the negative tone of this congregation's founding impulse still resounded in the ears of every newcomer decades later, beyond the life span of most of the original members.

One vital piece of genetic coding has to do with size.² Those who study the planting of new churches have noticed how the number attending the first worship service "imprints" the congregation with a certain potential for natural growth. New churches tend to reach an attendance peak at five to ten times the number present at the first service, regardless of the population or receptivity of the surrounding community. Forty years ago, mainline congregations often started out with a dozen enthusiastic souls, only to level off with too few members for vital and sustainable ministry in their particular settings. Today's "church planters" are trained to spend a year or so organizing small home groups that never come together for public worship until critical mass can be reasonably assured.

Formation

The moment of birth gives way immediately 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 a faith level)?
2. What are we here for?
3. Who is our neighbor?

In a "nation of immigrants," the religious identity of American congregations has often been shaped by cultural difference. Immigrant churches easily define "who we are," because "we" are noticeably different; our language, ethnicity, race, customs (or all of these) differ from the norm of the communities in which we have settled. "What we are here for" is also clear—to assure a transplanted people that our God is with us in this new (and perhaps inhospitable) place. Many Lutheran congregations, for example, were founded in the middle of the 19th century by German and Scandinavian populations arriving in America. Both their language and their sense of theological distinctiveness (forged in the crucible of European religious controversy) gave them a sharply defined identity within the American landscape.

Many congregations formed by past generations of immigrants can readily tell you when they stopped offering at least one service in the language and style of the "old country." Often this is a moment of identity crisis for the faith community, revolving around a painful question: "If we speak and dress and eat just like our neighbors, if our children have succeeded educationally and moved into the economic mainstream, why do we need our own congregation?" Lutheran churches founded in the colonial era were already losing

their ethnic and confessional identity by the time those new waves of immigrants arrived in the 19th century. The ensuing conflict between proponents of Americanization and defenders of European-Lutheran particularity persisted for decades and shaped the character of Lutheranism in America.³

Even without a language difference, such an identity crisis can occur. In the late 1980s, I served a Trenton congregation that had been founded at the turn of the 19th century by pottery workers from Stoke-upon-Trent, England. These immigrants, who had come to work in New Jersey's booming ceramic industry, built a small, neat church building a few blocks from one of the largest potteries. Nicknamed "cheeseheads" because of the cylindrical firing containers they carried on their heads—yellowish ceramic boxes resembling wheels of aged cheese—these workers merged successfully into the city's population and provided an education for their children. Their children's children came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, and moved out into the emerging suburban communities—a process accelerated by an outbreak of urban violence. The potteries eventually closed, along with much of the industrial base of the city; the church's neighborhood along a main route was transformed into a backwater by a highway bypass; and the remaining congregation dwindled, aged, and began to feel embattled. Their self-definition as an immigrant community at prayer had clearly run out of steam.

As congregations are born and develop, their answer to the third formative question—"Who is our neighbor?"—flows from the other two. If we understood ourselves at the beginning as an immigrant community at prayer, if our purpose was to "sing the Lord's song on foreign soil" in our own cultural idiom, then the neighbor on whom we focused our attention would be the household from our own cultural group. If, on the other hand, we started out as the "church around which the town was built" (a statement of historical identity by a Congregational church in a centuries-old community outside Boston), we would probably be accustomed to thinking of our neighbors as the whole town.

Both types of congregation may be facing a crisis today in the definition of "neighbor." The Trenton congregation, now surrounded by an extremely diverse mix of peoples, has been grappling with ways to relate itself to its fragmented environment. Could it minister to a newer immigrant group and function once again as an ethnic church? Could it develop a multicultural identity and attempt the hard work of building a place where cultures meet? Could it move five miles outside the city limits, where some of its old constituency still lives? Could it forge a clear identity around a distinctive style of worship and faith community that might draw people from a 10-mile radius? This church has chosen the last of these paths I have described, but it may have waited so long to make the transition that its resources will run out before the new reality can take root.

The congregation that helped to establish its historic Massachusetts town is also facing a crisis in its way of defining "neighbor." In the circle of communities just inside the Interstate 495 beltway, the strong identity of individual towns is giving way to a

more regional reality. This church now draws members from the new housing developments constantly emerging in surrounding communities, a population more likely to be concerned about program quality and adequate parking than about the nuances of the town's history and politics. Many members have come and stayed because this congregation occupies a specific niche on the theological and political spectrum (they call themselves "open-minded") that may distinguish them from several surrounding churches of a similar tradition. The result of these internal and external forces is a crisis in defining self and other. Are we still the one, comprehensive Congregational church for neighbors in this one town? Or are we now a regional church, drawing people from a 10- to 15-mile suburban radius with our fine programs and our relatively liberal faith stance? What will our choice imply about the civic role of the congregation—our responsibility toward neighbors who are not members of this church? Are we still, in any sense, a cornerstone institution in public life?

Stability

Ideally, the formative period in a congregation's life paves the way for a period of fruitful and sustainable ministry. Such stability has both institutional and spiritual dimensions that will, in the healthiest congregations, nourish and inform each other. 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."

Sometimes only part of that equation is present. Many churches skip over the issues of spiritual formation early in their lives, devoting all their creative energy to the work of selecting a site, constructing buildings, paying off a mortgage, calling their clergy, and gaining ecclesiastical status as a "real" church. If the demographics are favorable and leaders make some unusually good judgments early on, this church might build a coherent spiritual identity around an effective long-term pastorate early in its life.

More often, the lack of priority given to faith development in the church's first years will leave an indelible imprint on its personality. Even the most able pastors may find themselves frustrated that money, buildings, and the togetherness of the founding group always seem to take priority over matters of ministry and spiritual formation. Perhaps the men who manage the investments rarely come to church. The women who painted the hall and sewed the curtains may not want smoky AA groups spoiling the interior.

None of these devoted leaders can understand why the pastor doesn't care more about them and give them more credit for their hard-won accomplishments. Nor can they understand why clergy are turning over so frequently or getting into so many fights with a group of friendly people. A church like this may begin to grapple seriously with spiritual questions only after a major crisis provokes a soul-searching look at its own history and values.

Congregations may also come out of the formation phase with a clear faith identity but inadequate organization to live that faith effectively over time. For example, one of those churches that began with a dozen people at its first worship service may have become a spiritually vital congregation with aspirations of drawing many people from its community, but still find itself unequipped to navigate its first predictable size plateau. (Two-thirds of the American Baptist congregations planted in the 1950s, for example, hadn't broken through the 150-member mark by the 1960 denominational census.⁴) At first, the "glass ceiling" of a size plateau may provoke frustration and disappoint the outgoing spirit of the church. But if leaders can't diagnose the trouble as a common developmental crisis, the congregation will usually begin to rationalize its small size and denigrate ministries of invitation as "growth for growth's sake." At that point, an institutional crisis has damaged the congregation's soul.

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. As stagnation sets in, attendance and participation typically fall off, while membership and total giving continue to rise. Leaders commonly ignore or bury the earliest indications of decline and continue (with some strain) to focus on the positive. At this point in the life-cycle curve, congregations resemble the cartoon coyote who speeds off the edge of a cliff and keeps going straight ahead from sheer momentum—until he looks down and discovers there is nothing under his feet! Stagnation could be defined as the beginning of a decline we are not yet willing to acknowledge.

Decline

At some point, even the coyote realizes that he is falling. The congregation finds it can no longer dismiss as temporary or random the noticeable falloff in worship attendance, church-school registration, volunteer energy, pledging households, first-time visitors, new-member retention, and so on. After refusing for months, years, or even decades to "look down" at its situation, the congregation arrives at a moment of painful recognition.

Unfortunately, the most common reaction is blame. 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. While there may be at least a kernel of truth in all these accusations, a blaming response is likely to accelerate the decline. Few people wish to join, attend, or lead an angry, depressed congregation.

Because congregations often feel helpless about changes in the external context, they are likely to focus their attention on matters they feel they can control: selling more clothing in their thrift shop, pressing the pastor for monthly reports on the number of

visits made, resisting changes in worship that might upset well-established members. Little energy is devoted 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 core group of long-tenured members.

Death

If a congregation 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. Denial and blame, the same responses that allowed the decline to continue unabated for decades, become the enemies of a holy death. Just as physicians and families once avoided the word “cancer” at all costs, many severely diminished congregations do not speak openly about the prospect that they may soon have to close. If a visiting denominational official raises this possibility, the church may have a sudden surge of energy to fight the outside threat, but that kind of activity rarely makes a difference to the church’s basic viability.

This stage in the life cycle can drag on for a long time. I recently listened to the story of a 30-year-old congregation that had been founded and supported financially from the national level as part of a denominational church-planting program. After 10 years, the denomination’s mission department realized that early demographic projections had overestimated the opportunity in this location; the agency terminated the subsidy with the intention that the congregation would close. How did the church react? “They can’t close us!” The congregation vowed to use its own modest resources to keep up the mortgage payments and to employ a pastor, creating a budget that was the institutional equivalent of a starvation diet. One leader spent her time collecting drippings from the altar candles and forming the wax around new strings so that the purchase of candles could be avoided. Until they had paid off the mortgage and proved they could survive, members would not consider the possibility of closing or merging.

Sometimes a congregation dies because it has completed its task or because a changed environment is now calling forth an entirely different kind of ministry. What would constitute a holy death in such a situation? The hospice movement has helped many individuals to make their last months both dignified and emotionally rich, but this cannot happen if the person keeps waiting for a cure. When a congregation faces its impending death sooner, while there are still enough members around for a wonderful “funeral” event, the concluding days of that faith community can be spiritually powerful. Bestowing a financial legacy on some other ministry that carries forward the congregation’s values can provide an additional sense of self-esteem and continuity.

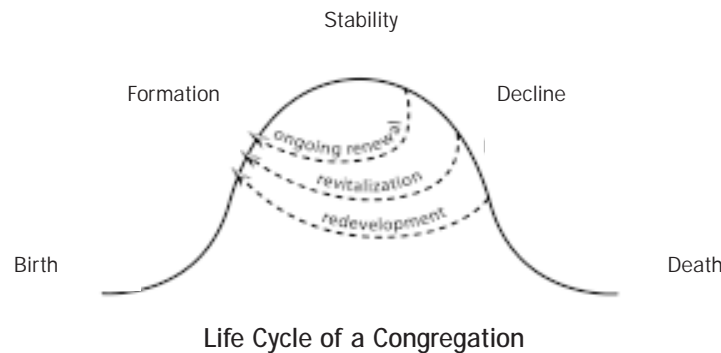
The Redevelopment Loop

Sometimes a terminally ill person will risk trying an experimental treatment—a radical and somewhat unpredictable intervention that could conceivably offer a new lease on

life. Similarly, some courageous congregations facing serious decline attempt the difficult path of redevelopment, which involves:

- Recognizing the death of the congregation's previous identity and purpose
- Reallocating the bulk of the congregation's resources to discovering and living out a new identity and purpose
- Finding and empowering leaders who can, in effect, start a new congregation on an existing site
- Caring for the remaining members of the previous congregation—sometimes by providing a separate chaplaincy ministry as long as it may be needed

The redevelopment congregation finds substantially new answers to the three formation questions: Who are we? What are we here for? Who is our neighbor? Let's return to the life-cycle chart, to see where the redevelopment loop fits in.



Ongoing Renewal

In a time when stability is drifting toward stagnation, a congregation might find a way to take a fresh look at the three formation questions. In the evangelical tradition, periodic revivals may have served this purpose to some extent, long before anyone started to study congregational development; in more catholic traditions, teams from religious orders would come to a church and conduct a preaching mission. These periods of intense proclamation, prayer, song, and study would interrupt “business as usual” and press the church back to fundamental questions of faith. Because they were systemwide interventions, they introduced common language and frameworks to which leaders could later refer as church decisions were made. Today it is common for churches to engage in strategic planning—even in times of relative stability—to refocus the congregation on fundamentals and to ask challenging questions about identity, purpose, and context. Other congregations rely on the self-study process that accompanies the selection of a new pastor to help them take stock.

Two tendencies prevent churches from revisiting the formation questions when everything seems to be working. First, the renewal event, self-study, or planning process may be rejected outright under the banner, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” The new perspective provided by a revival leader, consultant, or self-study process may seem quite unnecessary, since the congregation’s key programs are humming along successfully. Second, the congregation may undertake the process but discount any disturbing trends or hard questions that come to the surface. Some theorists argue that a system will never question its fundamental assumptions until the pain induced by present practices becomes intolerable.

Revitalization

In the early stages of decline, a congregation might gain some motivation to revisit the formation issues. If some way is found to look hard at the facts, avoid blame, and engage in new learning, we might call this process revitalization—a term implying that there is still substantial vitality present that can be refreshed and refocused. Though congregations usually expect that the call (or appointment) of a new pastor will accomplish this work automatically, a change in leadership will not, by itself, alter the curve. If the new pastor has the skills, information, and political support to raise the formation questions again effectively, a new era of vitality might ensue. More typically, the forces driving the decline—internal dysfunction, external change, or both—will be ignored until things get worse. In that case, the new pastor will experience (and often collude with) the congregation’s two most destructive illusions: the fantasy that growth can occur without change and the fantasy that change can occur without conflict.

Redevelopment

When a congregation has been declining steadily for years and even decades, when it has sustained significant losses in people, energy, flexibility, and funds, then the path back to the formation questions is far more costly. The farther you slip down the decline side of the curve, the more capital it takes—spiritually, financially, and politically—to create the possibility of a turnaround. Yet there may still be tremendous potential for spiritual growth, invitational outreach, and community ministry.

In my experience, redevelopment efforts are often “undercapitalized” in all three ways. Many are set up for:

- *Spiritual failure*: The congregation has not really faced the fact that it is dying—that most elements of an old identity and purpose must be relinquished if anything new is to occur.
- *Financial failure*: Leaders are working with an inadequate budget or overly optimistic revenue projections.

- *Political stalemate*: Leaders—at both the congregational and denominational levels—severely underestimate the amount of political resistance that redevelopment efforts can provoke.

Those are stark assertions. I have presented them not to discourage the work of redevelopment—which has occupied a great deal of my ministry—but to increase the chances that specific redevelopment efforts will succeed. Redeveloping congregations are important to the whole church for several reasons:

- Often they are located in communities where the needs for ministry are enormous.
- Since all congregations will eventually face similar issues, these churches are engaged in important learning.
- Whether or not they succeed in establishing a new era of stability, redeveloping congregations live out the mystery of death and resurrection by “losing their life to find it.”

Notes

1. Various writers have described the life cycle, including sociologists Martin Saarinen and Arlin Rothauge and consultant Robert Gallagher. While the discussion in this section draws to some extent on each of these, the diagram comes from Gallagher.
2. For an extensive discussion of size transition, see my book *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1998).
3. Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1976), 210–212.
4. George D. Younger, “Not by Might Nor by Power,” in Clifford J. Green, ed., *Churches, Cities, and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States 1945–1985* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 28.
5. Mike Regele (with Mark Shulz), *Death of the Church* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Percept Group, Inc., and Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995). This quotation is the subtitle of the book.