

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Stage Four: The Declining Church

The fourth stage of the congregational life cycle is one of decline. The purpose of the church has been forgotten or out lived, and the major focus of leaders is on keeping the current ministries going. Mission and vision are cloudy, if they exist at all.

The few newcomers that come do not know the vision or mission of the church. Third generation members seem to have forgotten why their grandparents founded the church. Older members try to restore the former vision of the church to avert decline.

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—Gary L. McIntosh

Newcomers find it extremely difficult to get involved in serving. Older members say they have done their part. People assume others will do the work, but no one will.

Morale polarizes among different groups in the congregation. Some groups are discouraged, while others continue to see some hope for the future. Together the church members have little to no sense of a corporate identity.

Church buildings are beginning to show their age, and deferred maintenance is becoming a problem. There is definitely more space than needed at this time in the church's life cycle. Many feel that the answer to filling the facilities once again is to just work harder, thus they demand more of the pastor, staff, and lay leaders.

Everything is well organized and structured, but it is difficult finding people to serve on the numerous boards and committees. The present forms of ministry determines their function, and it is nearly impossible to close an existing ministry.

Programs that no longer serve their original purposes are allowed to eat up resources simply because

they have always been there. Gradually the quality of ministry becomes lower and disintegrates.

Few changes are proposed, and no changes are considered which depart from the *status quo*, which someone jokingly notes means, “The mess we are in.”

The pastor is satisfied with past achievements and primarily focuses on the management of the existing program. While overseeing a declining staff, the pastor hopes that the church will experience a quick turnaround involving little pain, but knows such a thing rarely if ever happens in real life.

Worship attendance is declining. The question on everyone's mind is *How do we stop the decline?*

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Controlling the blame game is crucial.

Problems, resources, and people decline.

Churches in the declining stage find that problems mount, resources dwindle, ministries decline, and people begin blaming each other for the sad state of affairs. At least five specific challenges must be faced.

A major challenge is keeping hope alive and morale up. Corporate discouragement will lead the church into further decline, thus a way must be found to lift up the congregational spirit. The pastor and other church leaders must work overtime encouraging people to trust the Lord, as well as refocusing attention on the mission of the church.

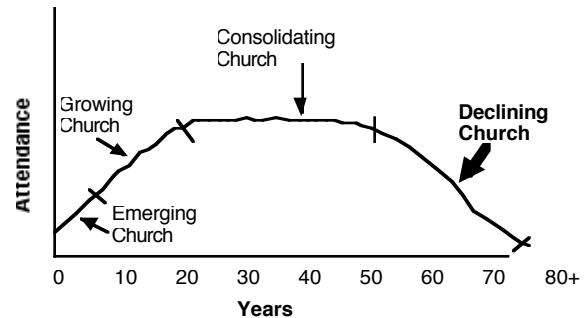
Realigning limited resources is another important task. Closing ministries that no longer make an impact for the good of the church is a difficult step that must be done. Resources of money and volunteers must be aligned with programs that serve a purpose rather than a tradition. People who serve in nonproductive areas must be reassigned to places of service that produce results. Out of necessity the budget must be trimmed, and money must be carefully and strategically spent on facilities, materials, and programming that will benefit the growth of the church.

Controlling the blame game, as well as the conflict that potentially can arise, is another key challenge for leaders. Leaders must be available and open to talk with any and all members. Good communication regarding the actual state of affairs is a must if leaders are to maintain a level of trust among everyone. Encouraging people to pray is another key element on which to focus. Instead of blaming others, people must be encouraged to look at the church with realistic eyes and make the hard decisions that will help turn the church around.

Helping people be honest about the current state of affairs and the future is another important step. Often those who are in the midst of a decline overlook the reality of their situation. The job of leaders is to assist the congregation to see reality.

Restoring a sense of mission and vision for the future is a crucial challenge that must be accomplished if the church has any chance of survival. Calling the congregation back to the mission of the church and developing a new vision of the future must be done.

To some extent the future of a declining church depends on leaders being willing to create change in the church's vision, direction, and ministry.



Is your church in stage four of the congregational life cycle?

Which characteristics do you see in your church?

Which challenges are you facing?



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