

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Leading A Church Through Its Life Cycle

There are numerous reasons why churches are prone to decline after the initial years of growth, but the principal one is the loss of vision for the future. Consider for a moment what takes place in terms of vision during a congregation's move through its life cycle.

Most new churches are started by pastors who are in their youthful years of ministry, mostly their twenties or thirties. The young pastor dreams of establishing a new work for God to reach a new generation and eagerly shares ideas, hopes, and dreams with

potential team members. Over the next fifteen to twenty-five years, the initial hopes and dreams propel the church forward as pieces of the dream begin to fall into place.

Somewhere between the fifteenth and twenty-fifth year the original pastor and members begin to realize that God has faithfully brought their dream to fruition. By this time the young pastor is in his forties or fifties, along with most members of the original team. After two decades of struggle, they rejoice in the completion of the vision and settle in to reap the benefits of a mature ministry.

Depending on the power and extent of the original vision, the energy provided by it can generally last upwards of twenty to forty years. What the leaders do not realize at the time is that the energy provided by the original vision is beginning to wind down. In fact they may not notice the loss of energy for another couple of decades until the church is forty to sixty years old.

Eventually, the energy dissipates and the church begins to decline, which is exactly what the congregational life cycle depicts.

Think of a large cruise ship traveling at top speed. What would happen to such a ship if it suddenly shut off its engines while in the middle of an ocean? Would it come to an immediate stop? No! The momentum established would keep the ship going. The passengers would not notice the slowdown at first, and would likely keep enjoying the various activities on deck.

Yet very slowly, almost totally unrecognized, the ship would begin to slow down. The friction of the water and waves working against the hull of the ship, while at first hardly perceptible, would create drag, slowing the ship down. Winds blowing against the upper decks, again going unnoticed would push against the ship, adding to the overall resistance. Eventually the ship would come to a stop, drifting aimlessly on the waves and currents.

**"Leader-you
have to be
looking out the
windshield,
not the rear
view mirror, to
go forward."**

-James Taylor

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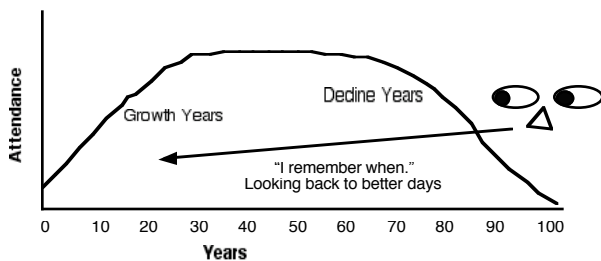
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“I remember when”

Churches face numerous “choice points.”

This is a perfect picture of what takes place in most churches, especially those that have experienced great success. Ministry is going so well that no one notices the loss of momentum from the fulfillment of the initial vision. The momentum from the first decades of ministry continues to provide energy for several more years, but at an ever-decreasing rate. The momentum that is created in the emerging stage is realized in the growing stage and institutionalized in the consolidating stage. Church leaders generally discern a problem only when the church enters the declining stage. One of the first signs people are aware of the slowdown is observed when they say, “I remember when...” By looking back to a former pastor, days of more dynamic programs, or memories of working together when times were challenging, the people signal the lack of a powerful vision. In effect they look back in an effort to get their corporate self-esteem from the vision of the past (see figure).

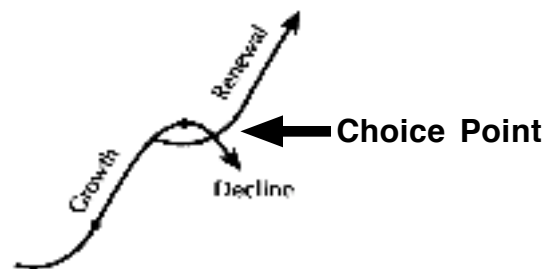


Fortunately, a church is not condemned to travel a predictable life cycle, and leaders may, and a few do, interrupt the cycle to create new cycles of growth **before** decline sets in. The difficulty, of course, is that leaders must introduce a new vision, new priorities, new ministries, new procedures, and a new direction for the church while everything is going well. The fact that the ministry is at its peak makes it difficult to introduce change exactly because things are going so well.

If church leaders wish to avoid the normal pattern of plateau and decline, they must develop a new vision and direction for ministry while the church is doing well. By waiting too long, the seeds of destruction set in making it

increasingly difficult to restore lost momentum.

Each point of transition between stages in the lifecycle is an opportune time where the church decides to move forward to birth a new cycle of life and vitality or to stay on the pathway to plateau and eventual decline and death. These transitional points are “choice points,” that is...points where the church makes choices about its future.



Leaders that make strategic choices to renew the ministry tend to see continuous renewal; those that do not move strategically usually see a downturn in the ministry.

Is your church facing a “choice point?”

What strategic choices must you make to see your church renewed for the future?



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