

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Stage Three: The Consolidating Church

Churches that enter the third stage of the congregational life cycle are usually quite healthy. The first twenty years of ministry sparks growth that brings in new believers, as well as those who wish for more energy in their spiritual lives.

Over time, however, people become tired of the continual challenges growth brings and begin to desire a stabilized ministry. Leaders sense it is time to leave the youthful stage of the church and move on to consolidate the ministry program.

“The mission remains strong as a church enters the third stage of its life cycle, but changes are in the air. Second generation members and newcomers are less aware of the mission of the church and not quite as passionate about their own spirituality.”

—Gary L. McIntosh

The mission and purpose remain strong as a church enters the third stage of its life cycle, but changes are in the air. Those who were part of the church at the beginning are now entering their mid life years. Second generation members and newcomers are less aware of the mission of the church and not quite as passionate about their own spirituality.

A complete lay-mobilization system is now in place, and everything is done with a measure of excellence. Enthusiasm is beginning to wane, but it is not obvious to most leaders.

Morale is high, and attendees are confident they can do about anything they wish, due to the years of past success. The word around town says this church is the one to attend, particularly if you want a church that knows where it is going in the future.

Church facilities are complete and up-to-date. However, the property is maxed out, and leaders are beginning to wonder what to do about it.

Essential programs are now formalized, but it is more difficult to start anything new. Leaders are beginning to be more concerned for efficiency

than for fruitfulness. Resistance to closing or starting new ministries begins to build.

Worship services are full, and the church may be using multiple sites or venues to allow for increased attendance. However, newcomers are being overlooked due to the crowded conditions. The list of inactives increases, but most are not missed.

People are genuinely proud of what the church has become and overjoyed at finally reaching what some consider a full service church. Finances are at an all time high, and most everyone feels satisfied with the church ministry.

Ministry is so healthy no one notices that the church is slowly losing its sense of mission and vision, but church leaders begin to ask *Where do we go from here?*

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Raising the bar for leaders is good and bad.

New ministry must be started to reach new people.

The third stage of the congregational life cycle can be very short, perhaps ten to twenty years in length, or it can extend to as many as thirty or forty years. The length of the plateau depends on the ability of leaders to sustain the momentum from the first two decades of ministry, as well as the community and economic conditions surrounding the church.

The first major challenge facing churches in the consolidation stage is to renew their mission and vision. The difficulty, of course, is that the entire church ministry is going so well that no one senses a need to change anything. An “if-it-isn't-broke-don't-fix-it” mentality permeates every aspect of church ministry.

Related directly to this first challenge is the increasing need to educate newcomers and second generation members regarding the mission, vision, and values of the church. Studies show that second generation believers are not as passionate about their faith or church as first generation members.

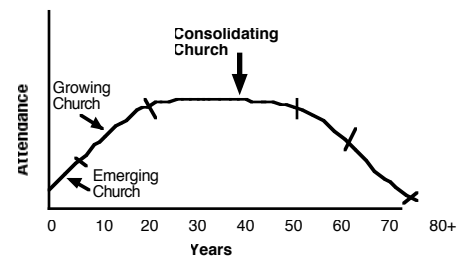
A third challenge is to keep starting new programs and ministries. Once a church enters the consolidation stage, there is a desire to do just that—consolidate ministry. By the third decade, many are ready to rejoice and enjoy the full program that the church has in place. Leaders forget that it will take new ministries to keep bringing new people.

New churches use anyone who desires to work. Over the following decades, expectations for leaders rise. This is a good news-bad news situation. It is good to have leaders with better credentials; it is bad in that more and more people are unable to find a place of service in the church. Slowly the ranks of inactive people grow as the church puts in place stricter qualifications for those who would be leaders and workers.

Another challenge facing churches in the consolidation stage is to establish mundane processes for assimilating newcomers, developing leaders, recruiting workers, and

teaching disciples. This is particularly true for larger churches. Without well-designed ways to assimilate, recruit, and involve newcomers, many will simply be lost to years of inactivity.

Relocating or enlarging the current facility may be another challenge at this stage of development. One of the leading causes of plateauing is related to the size of the church's facility, parking, and property. Decisions made regarding property usage are critical at this stage of the life cycle if the church is to continue growing into the later half of the consolidation stage.



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

Which characteristics do you see in your church?

Which challenges are you facing?



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For information about training workshops, seminars, and church consultations call 951-506-3086.

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