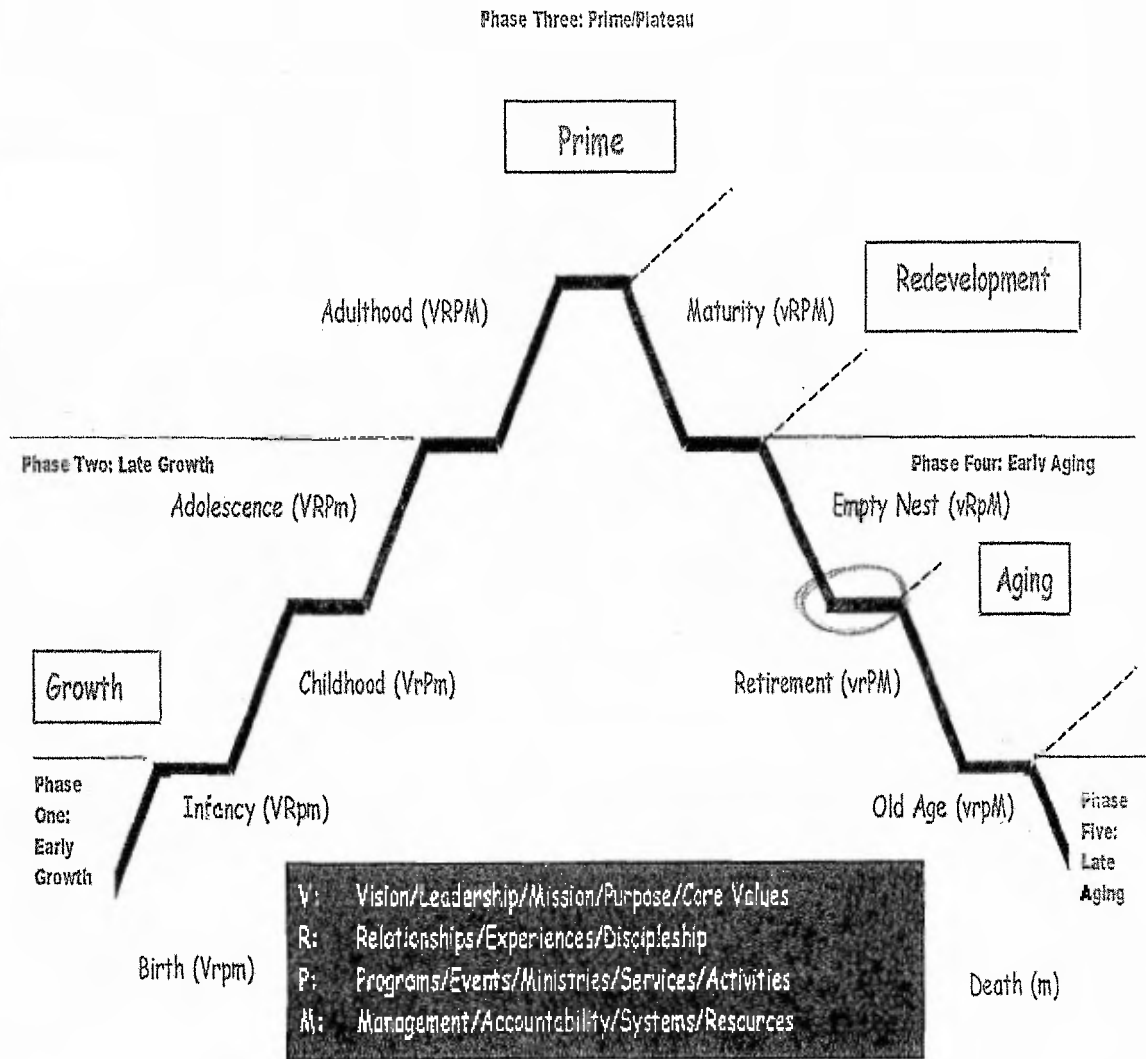


The Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development



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Life Cycles in a Congregation¹

There are several models which describe the life cycles of any congregation. Each identifies a combination of factors which define the DNA of an organization. These factors wax and wane at different phases of a congregation's life, and their strength and combination at any given time will define the congregation's stage of life.

Alice Mann of the Alban Institute in Washington, DC described "gene structures" which combine differently in each stage of the congregational life cycle: "E" for energy, vision and hope; "P" for programs which respond to congregational needs and context, "A" for administration (mission statements, goals, objectives, budgets, planning) and "I" for inclusion of individuals and groups within and outside the congregation. Mann graphed each of these in varying stages of emphasis and strength onto a spectrum of growth and decline.

George W. Bullard, Jr. of Lake Hickory Leadership Communities in North Carolina discerned four organizing principles: Vision, Relationships, Program and Management.

- Vision provides the understanding of spiritual and strategic direction for a local congregation, cast by the leadership and owned by the membership.
- Relationships bring people to faith, connect them to a local faith community, allow them to assimilate into that faith community's life and ministry, and provide opportunities for spiritual growth and service.
- Programs are the functions which support relationships: worship services, educational opportunities, fellowship, ministries of service, connections to the wider religious community and society.
- Management is the administration of resources and decision-making structure through which programs are made possible and the congregation can change and grow.

Bullard then suggested a visual metaphor for a congregation: a car. Vision would drive. Relationships would navigate. Program would support Relationships, and Management would sit behind Vision. Bullard wisely observed that when Vision got tired, Management would climb into the driver's seat – and the longer Management would drive, the more passive and aged a congregation would act.

¹ From Bullard, Jr. George W., Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation, Chapter 5, (Danvers, MA: Lake Hickory Resources), 2005.

It is logical that Vision is the first principle to develop, and that its loss leads to decline. What is so helpful about Bullard's model is to understand that Relationships exist to support Vision, to incarnate it, to make it reality; that Programs exist only to support the Relationships which bring Vision to life; and that Management provides the structures and resources to create and support Programs which encourage the Relationships that incarnate Vision. At various stages, some principles are more dominant than others. In the prime of a congregation's life, all four principles are working well together.

But Vision can be lost and Management become the guiding principle. When this happens, congregations lose direction and do things "because we've always done them that way." When Programs become ends unto themselves, Relationships may get lost. When Relationships are more important than Vision, a social club rather than a faith community is what an outsider (or even an insider!) will experience.

In Bullard's model, the life stages of a congregation correspond to those of any living organism: Birth, Infancy, Childhood, Adolescence, Adulthood, Prime, Maturity, Empty Nest, Retirement, Old Age and Death.