

RESOURCE P

Congregational Life Cycle

My introduction to the life cycle of a congregation came from the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in studies with the Rev. Dr. Martin Saarinen, the director of the doctoral studies program. He has done extensive studies in the life of congregations and was well informed in organizational development. Others in the church have also written about life cycles, notably George Bullard and Arlin Routhage. This overview is based on Dr. Saarinen's work.

Looking at congregations there are discernible stages through which they pass. In each stage there will be found characteristic behaviors, common dangers, and possible interventions. Since the focus is on that which is common to congregations, there will be factors that are unique in particular churches. There are four factors that participate in each stage, none of which have anything to do with chronological time.

EPAI: The Gene Structure of a Congregation

The "E" factor represents energy. It predominates in the early development of a congregation. It is made of vision and hope and is the source of enthusiasm and excitement. It also has an undifferentiated quality about it and can flail about in all directions.

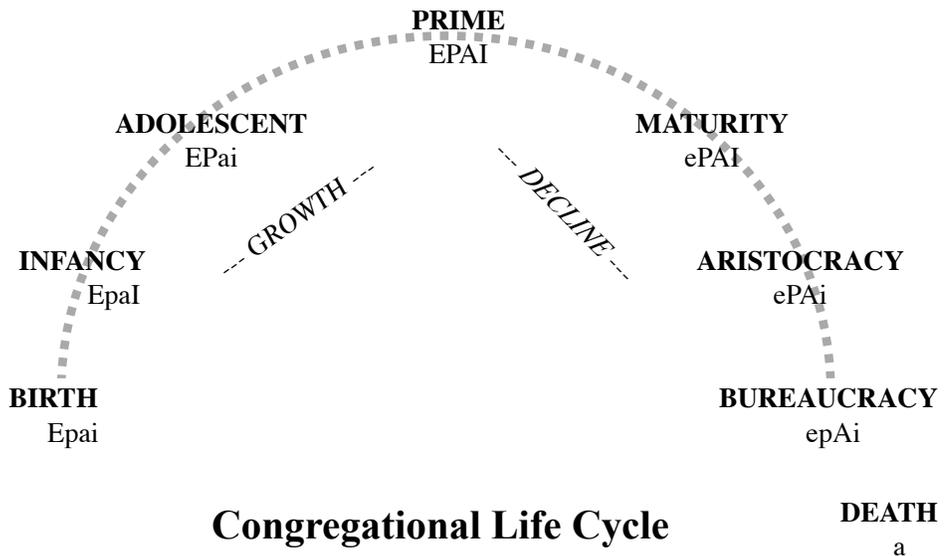
The "P" factor stands for those specific programs and services that the congregation undertakes to build up those who are part of the congregation. It includes all it does to tend its environment and its mandate to support the larger church. These programs go by names like church school, finance committee, Episcopal Church Women, Lenten programs, and more. Perhaps in proleptic anticipation of the full onset of post-Christendom, he also noted that this must include the faith community's orientation toward service in the world by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. He noted that there must be a connection between the internal and the external concerns of the church.

The "A" factor is the church as a corporate organism and is seen in mission statements, goals, budgets, and planning. It is the place of organization and coordination for the various components of church life to serve a common purpose. Administration is the place where concern is focused on the stuff and staff of a congregation.

The “I” factor stand for inclusion. How the people are drawn to the church and how they are assimilated is the focus. Are they given opportunities to discover their gifts and use them in service to God and the church? How is conflict handled? Is the congregation focused on its own life or does it have an outward orientation?

From Infancy to Prime the congregation is in a growth phase; from Prime to Bureaucracy and Death there is decline. Natural law is in effect. There is birth, life and death. This movement can, however, be arrested. Loss of energy will affect the growth phase and a re-energizing intervention will affect the decline phase. Every stage has it own set of task for implementing, evaluating and envisioniing. How the congregation performs its task contributes to either growth or decline, momentum or inertia.

In the life cycle represented below, an upper case “gene” indicates high or positive function. A lower case “gene” represents diminished or lowered function.



Use this chart with your leadership team. Ask each person to put their initials on the place on the line where they believe your congregation is living. A positive discussion will ensue that gives a diagnostic take on where your church is today.

Further Work with Life Cycle

Martin Saarinen’s study is available through Alban Institute. He gives some possible intervention strategies should you find the church in decline or stuck somewhere on the growth cycle. Arlin Routhage’s booklet, “The Life Cycle in Congregations,” may be downloaded from The Episcopal Church’s website. It gives strategies for renewal, redevelopment, and rebirth.