

The Concept of Church Life Cycles

Author George Bullard has broken the “life cycle” of a congregation into ten distinct periods. These periods are:

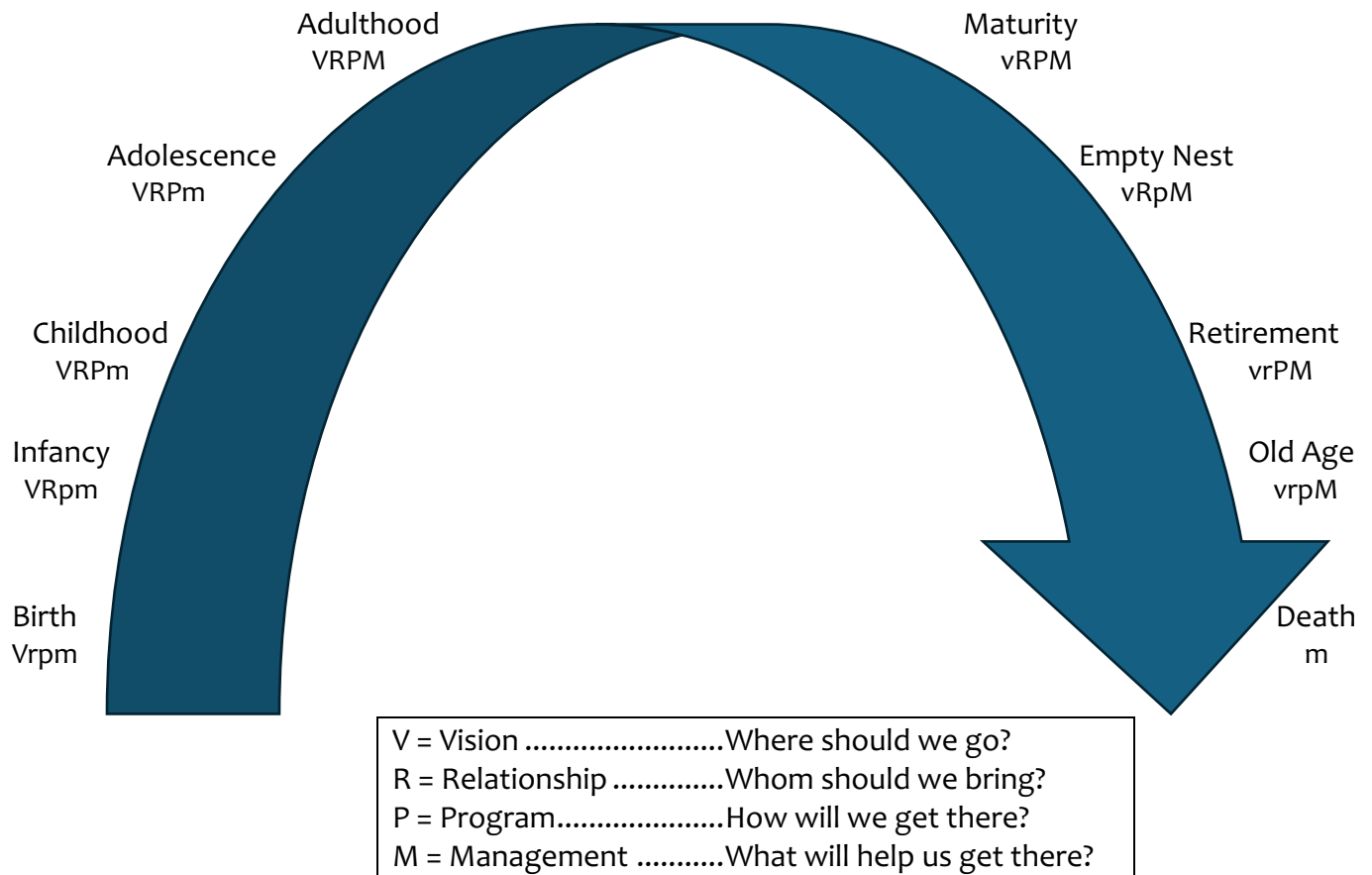
Upside of Life Cycle

- ◇ Birth
- ◇ Infancy
- ◇ Childhood
- ◇ Adolescence
- ◇ Adulthood

Downside of Life Cycle

- ◇ Maturity
- ◇ Empty Nest
- ◇ Retirement
- ◇ Old Age
- ◇ Death

LifeCycle OF A CHURCH



This life cycle can be further broken down into the following four major categories: **Growth** (Birth, Infancy, Childhood), **Maintenance** (Adolescence, Adulthood, Maturity); **Complacency** (Empty Nest, leaning into Retirement), and **Decline** (Retirement, Old Age, Death).

Growth:

The dominant theme is **vision**. People have a shared sense of ministry and direction. There is excitement and openness to change – a sense of forward momentum.

Maintenance:

The dominant theme is **customs**. The excitement of growth begins to slow. What were once new and creative programs now move into the ongoing category with less frequent development of new programming. Malaise and apathy set in.

Complacency:

The dominant theme is **sameness**. At this point the congregation is into a full ‘maintenance mode’. Relatively no new programming is established. There is a loss of a sense of direction and shared purpose. Factionalism and conflict, malaise and apathy move in.

Decline:

The dominant theme is death. At this point the church is in a steady state of decline with decreased membership, attendance, finances, etc. People move into a victim mentality and see very little hope for the future.

Rebirth:

Congregations can begin a new lifecycle by awakening a renewed vision for the future tied to the mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

For existing churches, the big idea is to be intentional about disrupting the natural life cycle by causing Vision and Relationships (focused outward as well) to be more dominant than Programs and/or Management. In this way, the church is continually renewing itself. The closer your church is to the left side of the curve, the less dramatic the effort needed to spark growth. However, if a church has been focused on maintenance/Management issues for a long time, it may be time to allow the current version of church to die so that a new birth might happen.

Take time to discuss:

1. Where is our congregation on the curve? Which organizing principle is the one that dominates our decision-making (mission, relationships, programs, or management/maintenance)?
2. What would it take to get us back to the focus on mission and relationships?
3. What might our next steps be?

Additional recommended reading includes a brief Alban Institute Article (There are limited handouts). You can google Rev. George Bullard and find other articles about the Life Cycle of a Church as well.