

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Stage Five: The Dying Church

The final stage in the life cycle of a congregation is the Dying Church. No one likes to think about churches closing their doors of ministry, but it does happen to about one percent of churches each year.

By the time a church enters the last stage of its life cycle its sense of mission and vision is almost totally lost. Ministries that were very fruitful in bygone years now are being eliminated due to a lack of leaders, participation, or funding. Few volunteers are available, as hardly anyone wants to serve in a decaying

program. Most people quietly say, "It's the pastors job." Ten percent of the people are doing ninety percent of the work.

Frustration and despair are evident throughout the church. Corporate esteem is based on meeting the budget and missionary obligations. Frustration is very high and morale is extremely low. People feel there is little to no hope for the future. Boredom and passivity are paramount. Disillusionment is a common feeling among the people.

Upkeep on the facilities becomes a critical problem during this stage. The church has much more space than it needs, and people actually long for less space and property.

Change is a threat to the church's existence, and people seem unwilling to try anything new. They say, "We've never done it that way before," or "We've tried that before and it didn't work."

If older, the pastor may be holding on while looking forward to retirement. Younger pastors eventually seek a position in a new church but only after trying hard for a year or two to see the church change.

The worship center is uncomfortably empty. Newcomers rarely come anymore, and when they do most are so embarrassed they never return. The music and style of worship are so out of touch with people outside the church that newcomers find it hard to relate.

Leaders ask *How can we turn this mess around?* Unfortunately, most are not open to the drastic changes that might bring hope for the future. So they continue to struggle until they are financially unable to keep open the doors of the church. Most of the time churches die a slow death. However, churches are tough, and as long as sufficient resources are available, the church may live for many years beyond any viable ministry.

**When
you're
through
changing,
you're
through.**

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There is potential for rebirth.

God's Spirit is at work to renew the church.

Churches that find themselves in the last stage of the congregational life cycle are in a very tenuous situation. Death is near, and several challenges are waiting in the near future.

On the hopeful side is the potential of rebirthing the church. The greatest challenge is leading the church to embrace the necessary changes to allow God's spirit to work anew in the life of the church. Observations of churches that have successfully restarted indicate they do at least the following. First, a new definition and commitment to mission is established. Second, a change of attitude is made so the people and leaders look to the future with hope and excitement. Third, a change of priorities in the use of financial resources is put into practice. Fourth, the church organization is reworked to allow for faster decision-making, new program development, and greater flexibility in all aspects of church life. Fifth, new resources, materials, and approaches to ministry are embraced. In most situations the church needs the assistance of an outside person to see this happen.

On the less hopeful side of the picture is the process of helping a church to acknowledge its real situation, and to assist the leaders to make difficult choices about when and how to close the ministry. This involves counseling people as they confront their feelings of hurt and loss, and it generally takes place in three steps. First as a result of declining finances, the church is no longer able to secure a full-time pastor. Second, this leads the church to secure the services of a part-time pastor who may be a layperson with independent financial resources, a retired pastor looking for extra income, a young pastor seeking a first ministry experience, or a pastor to share with another congregation. In nearly all of these situations the church ministry dwindles as people leave for other congregations that provide a full list of expected ministries. Third, the church reaches a point when it no longer can financially keep the doors open. The church dies, either merging with another congregation, simply going out of business, or turning over control to

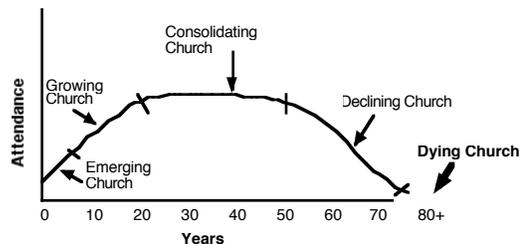
the denomination.

Generally speaking a church can exist in the dying stage for many years if the community around the church remains the same and the money holds out. However, when the community context changes and money becomes scarce, it is just a matter of time until the church closes.

Both options—rebirth or death—present challenges to church leadership. The unfortunate truth is that in most cases churches choose to die rather than go through the pain of rebirth. It is easier for church members to close the doors of their beloved church than it is for them to change.

Where is your church on the life-cycle?

If your church is in the dying stage, do you sense a willingness to rebirth a new vision for the future? Why or why not?



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

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