

11-02-14

Series: The Anatomy of a Church

The Anatomy of a Church (35)

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

[Acts 20:28](#)

(Continuation from 10/26/14)

Why Your Church Will Die (But That's Okay)

[John 12:20-26 \(NASB\)](#)

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast;

²¹ these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and *began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."*

²² Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus.

²³ And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

²⁴ "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

²⁵ "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal."

²⁶ "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him."

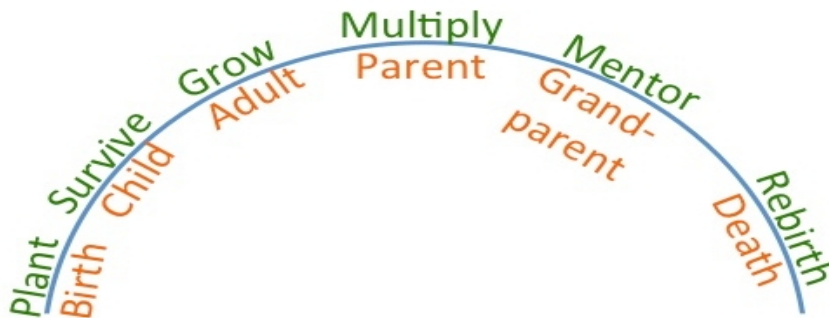
[John 12:24 \(NLT\)](#)

²⁴ "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives."

[John 12:24 \(NASB\)](#)

²⁴ "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

What if from day one of planting a church we embraced the natural cycle of life? It might look something like this:



11-02-14

Series: The Anatomy of a Church

If we can figure out how to make every stage in the life cycle of the church something to embrace, and if we can turn the death of a church into something that breathes new life into the Kingdom, we might actually see the tide turn in the decline of the American church.

What does each stage look like, and how can you evaluate which stage your church is in? How can embracing the church life cycle change the scorecard for success in America and lead to a much more collaborative environment where churches are constantly being born fueled in part by churches that are dying (and being reborn)?

We are looking at the scary reality that your church, if it follows the pattern of practically every other church on the planet, will die. (Thank you to those who have pointed out that your church hasn't died...yet.)

Before we get too depressed, however, let's take another look at the life stages of a healthy church.

Stage 1: Birth

This is where the excitement is. Whether a church launches large, forms from a small group, or splits off from another church (not the ideal, but it happens), the beginning is crucial. This is where the DNA and future trajectory of the church is set. The cool thing is that today there are a plethora (you get five points every time you use plethora in a sentence today) of resources for leaders who want to birth a church.

Stage 2: Child

This is the make or break period for most churches. Will the new congregation be able to support itself? Will they be able to make an impact in their community? Will the excitement of the birth carry on, or will the church quickly stagnate? Unfortunately, many churches never make it past this stage.

Stage 3: Adult

Now the church has an identity and some stability. There is a core of people that the leaders know they can count on, and there is a financial base so that every week's offering isn't do or die. Ministry moves beyond a Sunday service into daily Kingdom expressions, and the congregation begins to reach out beyond its own neighborhood to spread the Gospel message around the world. The bad news is that this is the stage where many (most?) churches stay. Forever. Until they die.

Step 4: Parent

Just like all healthy, mature organisms, healthy, mature churches reproduce. Reproduction comes in many forms; some churches give off part of the congregation and form a new church, some churches train church planters and deploy them to other communities to start churches, and some churches open new campuses in different parts of their community. Regardless of the form, it is vital for the health of the church as a whole that mature congregations reproduce. God wants your church to reproduce.

11-02-14

Series: [The Anatomy of a Church](#)

Step 5: Grandparent

There comes a time in the life of a church that it is difficult to reproduce. The congregation has stopped growing, and there are very few new young leaders. The church has reached the grandparent stage. How can a church act like a grandparent? We'll dive into that in a future. Until then here are some grandchildren:

Stage 6: Death

Eventually, a church will die. The money runs out, the last member dies, or the creditors take over. All that is left is the empty building where life transformation used to happen.

There is an amazing trend, however, happening across America in which churches are recognizing that they are at the end of their lifecycle. Attendance is dwindling, and the end is in sight, but rather than selling the building or simply shutting their doors, churches are being reborn as entirely new congregations. They are handing the keys over to another church or church plant. They then get a front row seat to the new thing God is doing in their community. They literally experience the resurrection of a new body.

I want to spend some time unpacking some of these stages and what they could practically mean for the church you lead or attend. (Thank you to everyone who has pointed out its God's church not your church. I was kind of hoping that was implied, but I shouldn't assume.)

In the meantime, how have you seen churches successfully embrace their life stage?

First, let me define my terms. When I say YOUR CHURCH, I'm not implying that the church belongs to anyone but God or that the Church universal will die. I am referring to the local faith community you lead or belong to. My premise is that your church, the local body of believers you are attached to, has a natural life cycle that ends in some form of death.

For the following discussion, I've added one identifiable stage in a church's life cycle:

Senior citizen: The congregation has aged and is no longer attracting or deploying young leaders. The focus turns to what will happen when the congregation can no longer support itself.

Core activity

At each stage, a church is engaged in a core activity to ensure health and growth.

Stage	Activity
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Child	Survival At this stage, the church plant is simply trying to become self-sustaining. Each week, the question is "Will we be here next week?" Attendance
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11-02-14

Series: The Anatomy of a Church

growth is crucial at this stage because the larger the baby, the more likely she will be viable.

Maturity

Adult As an adult, the church should be developing a clearly defined pathway for discipleship (linear or non-linear), a structure for community beyond the weekend service, and a strategic plan for local and global evangelism and transformation.

Multiplication

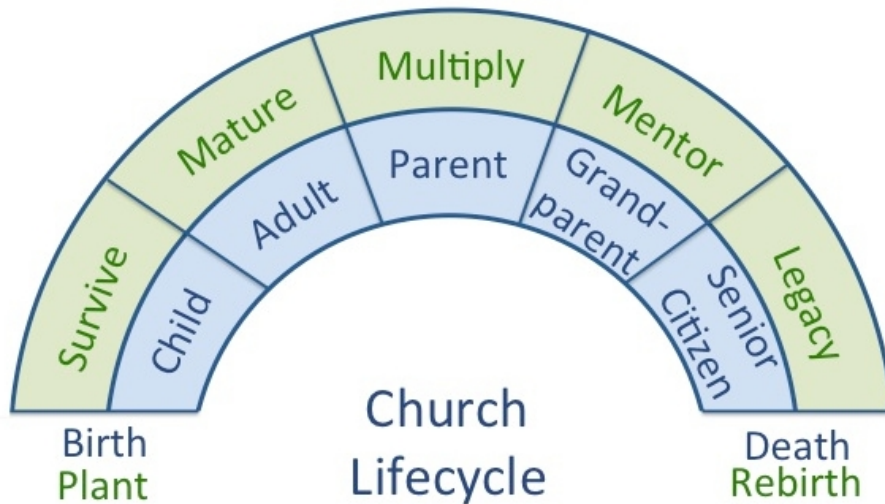
Parent The key activity for a parent is healthy reproduction. Is the church regularly giving birth and providing support to ensure the survival and maturity of her children?

Mentoring

Grandparent The key activity for a grandparent church is to leverage her experience and resources to encourage, resource, and strengthen younger churches. Grandparent churches often find ways to cooperate with other churches either in an informal or formal way to continue to plant new churches both domestically and internationally.

Legacy

Senior Citizen As a church begins to decline in attendance and giving, the focus turns either to survival (returning to the Child phase) or legacy (What will be our long-term contribution to the Kingdom?).



Measurement

We have different measures of health at each stage of life. When we were babies, the doctor measured our height and weight to see if we were growing in a healthy manner. The doctor, however, is no longer excited when I add 5 pounds a month; at some point, the measurements of health change. So how do we measure at each stage of a church's life cycle?

11-02-14

Series: The Anatomy of a Church

Stages

Health measurement

Child and Adult

Numerical growth

The key areas to measure are attendance, giving, small group participation, and serving both in the local congregation and in the community. The goal is to be growing in each of these areas.

Parent

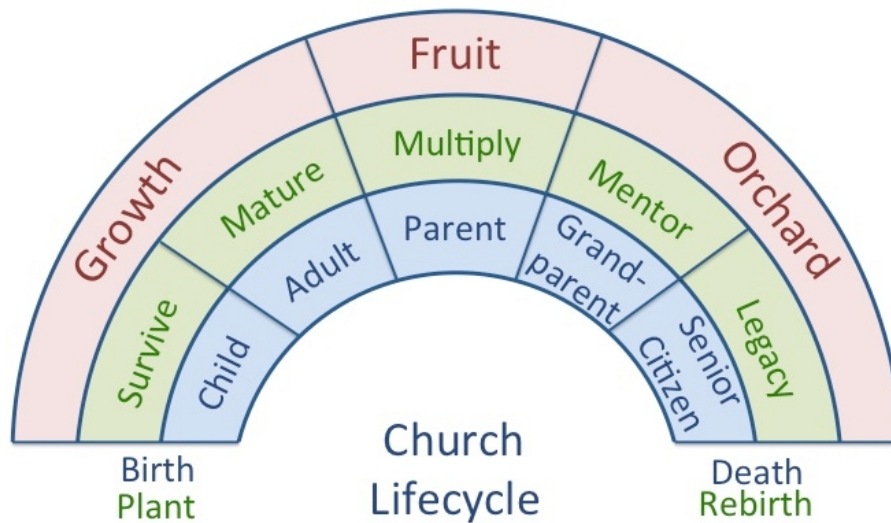
Fruit

What fruit is the church reproducing? Are new leaders being developed at every level? Is the church planting new congregations? Are leaders being sent out to lead in other contexts?

Grandparent and Senior Citizen

Orchard

This is where the real fun is. Rather than focusing solely on local attendance and giving (which will always be a measure of health), the mature leader begins to count the orchard. What is the sum of all the congregations the church has directly planted around the world?



If we begin with the end in mind, the ultimate goal of every church planter will be a healthy orchard.

So what do you think? Is this a helpful paradigm? What would you change? What would you throw out all together?