



HEALTHY CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND RENEWAL

Help for Strategic and
Not-So-Strategic Congregations

PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICE

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resources/church-leadership-and-
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Helpful insights from current literature

Table 3 – Five Eras of Church Growth, 1940-2040

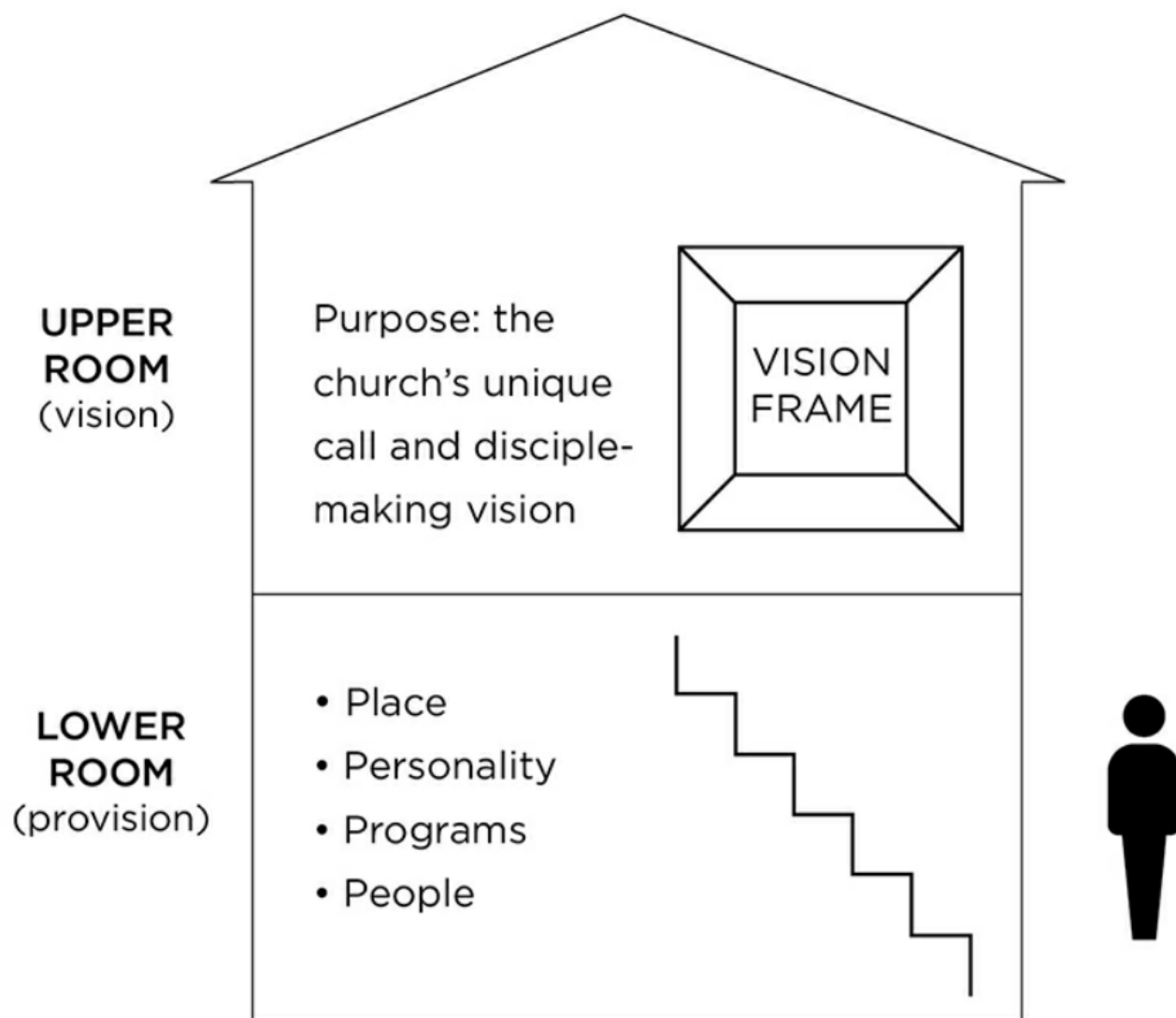
	Wartime Revival (1940-1960)	Golden Era of Denominationalism (1960-1980)	New Permission Era (1980-2000)	Missional Reorientation (2000-2020)	Future Church (2020-2040)
Church Identity	Teaching center with promotion of national ideals as a community institution	Teaching center with doctrinal legitimacy and membership in a familiar faith family	Teaching center with applicable truth and ministry involvement at church	Teaching center with mindset shift to be the church not just go to church	Training center where disciple-making is expected of everyone
Attraction Driver	Prominent option	Heritage option	Relevant option	Community option	Training option
Rally Cry	We are the best church in town	We are the best church in the tribe	We are the best church for the times	We are the best church for the city	We are the best church for your calling
Ministry Focus	Beside the church	Inside the church	Inside the church	Outside the church	Outside the church
Evangelism Paradigm	Disciple as audience	Disciple as representative	Disciple as inviter	Disciple as missionary	Disciple as reproducer
Program Philosophy	Alike is more	More is more	Less is more	Out is more	To be is more
Worship Promise	Provide unity	Provide liturgy	Provide relevance	Provide encounter	Provide integration
Connection Vehicle	Fraternal organization	Sunday school	Small group	Missional community	Microgroup
Retention Method	Community service	Full service	Customer service	City service	Vocational service
Maturity Model	Christian citizen	Program activity	Assimilation funnel	Living sent	Multiplying practice

Seven Laws of Real Church Growth

1. The Law of Mission: Real church growth starts with a culture of mission, not worship (i.e. you need both the “Lower Room” and the “Upper Room,” see diagram, next page).
2. The Law of Power: Real church growth is powered by the gospel, not relevance.
3. The Law of Love: Real church growth is validated by unity, not numbers.
4. The Law of Context: Real church growth is local, not imported.
5. The Law of Development: Real church growth is about growing people, not managing programs.
6. The Law of Leadership: Real church growth is led by calling, not celebrity.
7. The Law of Vision: Real church growth is energized by shared imagination, not shared preference.

From Will Mancini, *Future Church: Seven Laws of Real Church Growth* (Baker Books, 2020), 92-94.

Figure 1 – Two Different Motivations for Church Attenders



Sam Rainer, The Church Revitalization Checklist¹

Definition: Church revitalization is the process of leading an established church to a place of better health, typically with an existing pastor and without changing the identity of the church.

- An *established* church is a church with a defined location and history in a specific community.
- *Adoption* is a newer term referring to the process of blending two congregations into one family. Some refer to this process as a church merger. I prefer the term adoption because it pulls in biblical language. Most adoptions occur when a larger, healthier church assimilates another church into a multisite system.
- *Fostering* is a term connected to the adoption process in church revitalization. Fostering happens when a healthier church sends people and resources to help a struggling church over a set period of time, typically three months to a year.
- *Replanting* occurs when new leadership enters an existing church and the church decides to be “a new church in the old building.” Churches are replanted in several different ways: The building is given to a church plant; the building is shared with a church plant; or a core group decides to become a brand-new church with a replanting pastor.²
- *Relaunching* is like replanting—with one key difference. A church relaunches by shutting down for a season and then reopening with a completely new identity.

A Typology of Church Revitalization

Because every church is different, every revitalization effort will have its own unique challenges. An urban church will use different approaches than a rural church. A church with a recent split is different from a church with a slow, decades-long decline. Though these differences will always exist, certain themes will emerge as you examine the broader scope of church revitalization.

In a simple Church Answers research project, we asked church revitalizers to categorize their work. From hundreds of pastor and lay leader responses, we were able to create a typology of church revitalization. The figures below represent the percentages of churches we found in each category.[6]

- *Geriatric churches* (40 percent): The median age of the church’s members has increased significantly over the past several years. Few, if any, children or young families are present.
- *Great Omission churches* (25 percent): The church’s ministries, resources, and efforts are focused inward with hardly any evangelistic efforts. People either give lip service to outreach or simply stop caring about the lost.
- *Ex-neighborhood churches* (15 percent): The membership of the church does not reflect the demographics of the community. The church is a cultural island in the neighborhood. Typically, few people from the immediate community attend the church. Most members drive in from other communities.
- *War-torn churches* (12 percent): These churches have a reputation for fighting, conflict, harsh treatment of pastors, and—often—schisms and splits. There is a palpable tension at meetings and

¹ Sam Rainer, *Church Revitalization Checklist: A Hopeful and Practical Guide for Leading Your Congregation to a Brighter Tomorrow* (Tyndale House Publishers, Church Answers Resources), 49-52.

² See Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2016). This book is considered the seminal work on church replanting. It is an inspiring must-read for all churches doing revitalization work.

even in casual conversations around the church. The leaders pour most of their energy into mediating disputes and responding to arguments.

- *Mismatched leadership churches* (8 percent): The pastor is not the right leader for moving the church forward. In many cases, the pastor has no love for the community and may demean the people who live there. This leadership mismatch is often the product of an older pastor hanging on too long and not having a vision for the future. A younger pastor with overly idealistic desires for the church can also be a poor fit for effective change.

Seven Points of Church Revitalization

- **Priorities:** How do you discern what is most urgent?
- **Pace:** How fast can you lead change? Perspective: Are the church's expectations properly aligned?
- **People:** What is your true capacity to move forward?
- **Place:** Is your church facility ready for revitalization?
- **Purpose:** What can you do to shift your church to an outward focus?
- **Pathway:** What is the most realistic next step?

"Old Gold" from George Hunter

Every church that can do strategic planning should do strategic planning. There are no good reasons not to, and there is no more proven approach to the future than to plan your work and work you plan. Page Smith, a social historian who studies social movements, observes that "The leader with a system, however inadequate it may turn out to be, is at a vast advantage over a systemless rival, however brilliant." Strategic work may be a universal law of church growth. I have not yet found a church that had a strategic plan in place that was informed, had wide ownership, and was being diligently implemented, that was not growing.

But strategic planning presupposes an ingredient in churches that often is not present: It presupposes that the church is already healthy enough, with enough self-esteem, to risk a revealing "diagnosis" that would expose its weaknesses. Furthermore, strategic planning presupposes that the congregation already faces the future with confidence and assumes they can make a difference.¹

What if your church just isn't (or can't be) strategic? Is there hope?

The “Breakthrough Project” Method of Church Revitalization
George Hunter³

George Hunter was an avid researcher of growing churches in the 1980s – 2000s. He discovered an often-repeated pattern, typified in the example of Shiloh Church that moved from “tradition to mission” through the catalytic experience of a series of “projects,” namely, a building project following a tornado, an organized response to the critical illness of one of their members and the difficulty pregnancy of another, and others.

Typical features of these projects include:

1. The project takes a limited period of time, weeks (or months at most), to achieve the project’s objectives.
2. The project usually requires special “promotion” among the members, or the target population, the supporting constituency.
3. To achieve the project’s objectives, the church usually needs to devote priority deployment of resources (human, financial, or physical) for the duration of the project.
4. The project frequently requires the close orchestration of the services of many people with different gifts necessary to the project’s success.
5. The achievement of the project is usually visible and is publicly celebrated.

Often, in churches that experience turnaround through projects, the projects typically become the milestones that shape the church’s identity. The first project is often a response to a crisis. But the “energy” derived from this event often builds into multiple projects that are focused on achieving something special in ministry for the people and for God.

Many Christian leaders seem to know, intuitively, that periodic achievements give a necessary “shot in the arm” to congregational movement, so they organize and promote projects – to keep spirits up and people involved, and to maintain momentum.

This is often especially helpful for churches who feel beleaguered, with a low image of themselves. They do not have the resources or the capacity to observe the hard discipline of an intentional discipleship model or a missional strategy. But, very few churches lack what is necessary for the renaissance-forming impact of projects. So, based on significant organizational research at the time Hunter wrote this book, he suggested that churches lay low on diagnostic activities. He says:

“Looking at the weaknesses of an organization that is not ready for that only depresses the organization and arouses and intensifies the very forces (“restraining forces”) stacked against the changes the organization needs. [But] pathological organizations are never as unhealthy and hopeless as appearances suggest.”

He quotes one researcher:

“In any situation, no matter how many problems exist, no matter how many gaps and weaknesses in the people and the systems, no matter how many conditions beyond the control of management are impeding progress, it is almost always possible to identify one or to specific short-term bottom-line goals for which the ingredients for success are in place and could be readily marshaled.”

³ Hunter, *Leading and Managing a Growing Church*, 110-136.

Furthermore, in such organizations a focus on specific goals and results will motivate action more than focusing on problems and grand designs. The experience of one of more successful projects will help the organization feel more competent. The way forward is through aiming at tough-but-attainable objectives and should take place in groups, where individuals publicly contribute their ideas to what is being considered, commit themselves to the objectives, and feel ownership in the emerging projects.

Hunter then proposes the “Zest Factor,” or a set of project-worthy conditions that can stimulate radically higher performance than usual.

- Sense of urgency
- A challenge
- Success near and clear
- People collaborate – an new “esprit”
- Pride of achievement
- Fear of failure
- Exciting, novel, like a game
- People experiment and ignore “red tape”

Organizations who experience this must resist the temptation that the energies revealed through such a circumstance are not “normal” and thus cannot be sustained. Instead, Hunter suggests that these factors should be allowed to breathe new life and satisfaction into work, and show people a “new normal.”

Facilitating such projects usually requires a project manager who collaborates with a guiding task force to do the following:

- They define the project’s objectives, and the periodic milestones toward achieving the objectives, and the scheduling of each milestone’s achievement.
- They divide the project into tasks and subtasks and define who will need to achieve each task by when.
- They determine and allocate the resources – the people, time, funds, and facilities that will be needed for each task and for the completed project.
- Once the project is underway, they periodically monitor the progress of the project, to perceive problems and engage in interventions of midcourse corrections.
- Throughout the project, they are reminding everyone of the objectives of the project and communicating its progress to each work unit and to the church. This communication is usually amplified visually.

What project should you choose? Start with the principle of “exploit existing readiness – don’t try to create new readiness.” He suggests several criteria:

1. Consider beginning with an urgent and compelling goal.
2. Consider choosing a project that is achievable in a relatively short period of time – thirty to sixty days maximum.
3. If the project will take longer, choose a first-step sub-goal that can be achieved in thirty to sixty days.

4. Choose a project that expresses what people are ready, willing, and able to do.
5. Choose a project for which the resources and authority for achieving it are already available. Many churches (and other organizations) wring their hands over what they cannot do, and ignore what they can do.
6. Choose a project that, when achieved, would be a clear and visible success, breaking the hand-wringing syndrome.
7. With the momentum of several successes, and the people's increasing confidence and competence, take on larger projects.
8. Choose projects that would advance the long-range objectives of the organization, as those become defined.
9. In time, with increased congregational self-esteem, the leaders will want to put their project orientation more clearly within the service of a strategic plan.

Celebration: Building Momentum Through Strength

Key idea: Renewed vision for established churches begins with the capacity to discern and celebrate God's gifts.

Church from three perspectives

Textual focus: Ephesians 3:14-21

1. **First perspective:** _____

2. **Second perspective:** _____

"They talked about grace but lived by law; they spoke of love but showed signs of hate. ...Christianity kept me from Christ. ...Far fewer people attend church on Sunday than claim to follow Christ. ...they feel burned or even betrayed by a former church experience." – Philip Yancey

"Yes, the church fails in its mission and makes serious blunders precisely because the church comprises human beings who will always fall short of the glory of God. That is the risk God took. Anyone who enters the church expecting perfection does not understand the nature of that risk or the nature of humanity. Just as every romantic eventually learns that marriage is the beginning, not the end, of the struggle to make love work, every Christian must learn that church is also only a beginning." -- Philip Yancey

We enter most relationships with ideal notions as to what those relationships should look like. But we must be careful to embrace the reality as we long for the ideal. When we engage church leadership with the illusion that churches should be ideal, we resist the *truth* that they are not. We pretend that they are, and police ours and perhaps others to suppress the *truth* that they are not.

"But God quickly frustrates all such dreams. A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community. ...The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both... Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. Those who love their dream of Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

3. **Third perspective:** _____

"This is a big old ship. She creaks, she rocks, she rolls, and at times she makes you want to throw up. But she gets where she's going. Always has, always will, until the end of time. With or without you." – J. F. Powers

"For all of its foibles — lousy preaching, political infighting, self-centered focus, stagnation, a gaggle of special interest groups — the pokey local church...is still the most fertile environment for spiritual development. In fact, there can be no genuine spiritual progress without a long-term attachment to a pokey local church.... Disillusionment with one's church, then, is not a reason to leave but a reason to stay and see what God will create in one's life and in the pokey local church. What I perceive to be my needs — "I need a church with a more biblical preacher who uses specific examples from real life" — may not correspond to my true spiritual needs. Often, in fact, I am not attuned to my true spiritual needs.

Thinking that I know my true spiritual needs is arrogant, narcissistic, and so American. Staying put as a life practice allows God's grace to work on the unsanded surfaces of my inner life. Seventeenth-century French Catholic mystic Francois Fenelon wrote, "Slowly you will learn that all the troubles in your life—your job, your health, your inward failings—are really cures to the poison of your old nature." – David Goetz, "Suburban Spirituality," *Christianity Today* (July 2003)

The Practice of Prayerful Attentiveness

Key text: Philippians 4:2-9

Amid the welter of possible distractions, leaders need time in solitude so we can notice those things we would otherwise miss due to the pace and complexity of our lives. We need moments in our life where we let the chaos settle a bit and invite God to show us evidence of his presence at work in big ways and in subtle ways and allow him to guide us in our understanding of what these things mean. This practice alone can propel us into an exciting part of the journey – a journey full of surprises and pronouncements and messages from God.⁴

The challenges of leadership often restrict our ability to see beyond our difficulties into the progress God is making toward his will for mankind. A popular curriculum rightly emphasizes that God is always at work in the world around us, and that wherever we see God at work, we should rejoice in that. There should be an intentional effort to saturate ourselves with the ever-present reality of a powerful God.

This is not the same as the excessive “happy talk” of conflict-avoidant, risk-averse leaders who want to merely cover up serious issues that lie in the sub-terrain of their congregations.⁵ In contrast, this practice of celebration is concurrent with the tough obedience that faces issues head-on. It is a responsible joy that, while engaging the “messiness of ministry,” refuses to be limited by the finite and maintains a faithful gaze toward God, sustaining the irrational confidence that despite every disappointing feature of the church, God still empowers them for ministry that is beyond imagination.

Leaders must maintain a kind of *meta*-vision for what the church, in union with God, is destined to be and do. This is not necessarily a *vision statement* (though such are helpful), but a grasp of God’s ultimate vision that is both behind and beyond any human conception of vision, in the spirit of Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21.

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family^[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Consider how this radical hope is reflected in Paul’s statements in letters to troubled churches:

- 1 Corinthians 1:4-9
- Ephesians 1:15-23

⁴Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking god in the Crucible of Ministry* (IVP Books, 2008), 63.

⁵John P. Kotter’s description of the over-managed and under-led corporate culture in *Leading Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 28.

- Philippians 1:3-11
- Colossians 1:3-14
- 1Thessalonians 1:2-10

*"I believe that these opening prayers of thanksgiving are rooted in Paul's theology — his deepest beliefs about God and salvation and the church. Gratitude is not just a fleeting emotion — it is foundational. As a response to God's gracious initiatives, gratitude changes us at our very core. Gratitude is not first affect (emotions), although it often helps us move from fear or doubt or anger; rather, gratitude is a stance that changes our perceptions, our thinking, our discernment. When our beginning place is thankfulness — for God, for God's creation and redemption, for God's ongoing mercies, and for evidences of God's grace— then we give attention to any and all signs of grace. Our thankfulness, especially when voiced, makes grace more available, more present, more powerful — to oneself and to one's community."*⁶

The Practice of Appreciative Inquiry

The Nature of Appreciative Inquiry (AI)⁷

Many forms of congregational development assume that the job of leaders is to find the problems and fix them. Perhaps members observe that their church has a declining membership, a changing neighborhood, and a dearth of young families. Church leaders, by fixing these problems, should create a new, reenergized way into the future.

Textbooks and seminars offer numerous options: move the church to a new suburb, evangelize those new neighbors (or market church services to them), and prepare the nursery. Or, change the worship music to the styles that some aging boomers prefer, lower the membership threshold (assuming that younger generations usually avoid commitments), and recruit anyone with a pulse to the board (this will increase their commitment and give us a rest).

These problems are real, and the solutions often help. The difficulty is when this problem-solving approach dominates, most discussions are about problems and inadequacies. This is what is called a "deficit model." We all have our own perspectives, our own historical accounts and analyses that help us articulate problems. I believe that these can lead to valuable learning, but the approach itself creates the wrong interpretive grid.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) assumes that all congregations have significant life forces, and these forces surface in stories and imaginations. By bringing these resources into the congregation's conversations and planning, major changes can be implemented. In other words, by discovering the best and most valuable stories and qualities of a congregation, churches can conceive of new ways that have important links to the past and the most hope for the future.

Appreciative inquiry is more than a planning method—it is a way of seeing and creating. AI is not something that is done once or every few years as part of strategic planning—it is a way of continually forming an interpretive community that can thereby perceive, think, and create with the most life-giving resources. The deficit-based paradigm sets up its own grid for seeing and acting. AI offers a different reality—a different way of perceiving and living.

⁶Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), Kindle Locations 275-280.

⁷The section on Appreciative Inquiry (pages 3-6) is adapted from Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations*.

Appreciative Inquiry Assumptions

1. **In every congregation, some things work well.** AI assumes that even the most challenged and dispirited church has stories and practices that can point to a hopeful future.
2. **What we focus on becomes our reality.** When a congregation gives its attention to some aspects of the corporate life, those aspects tend to define the whole. The “reality” of a congregation is defined by whatever participants think about, talk about, work on, dream about, or plan. AI teaches us that, while we do not need to dismiss the serious challenges we face or the lessons of previous wrong turns, we need to center our attention in our strengths. ...Simply by refocusing attention, giving energy and priority to positive narratives, we will become a different congregation.
3. **Asking questions influences the group.** No process for revitalization is neutral or inconsequential; no method of inquiry stays “outside” the congregation. The process itself—interviewing people, using surveys, seeking opinions, and weighing percentages—changes a church by influencing the thinking and conversations and images of participants. Memories, perceptions, and hopes are shaped in the midst of the questions. Change, of one kind or another, begins with the very first questions.
4. **People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.** The unknown easily creates fears. When a congregation approaches change by talking about everything that is wrong and all of the innovations that are to be adopted, participants express their fears in resistance. Confidence and trust can be built when questions create direct links with the organization’s best and most appreciated narratives. The future will be a little less strange, and participants can envision their own roles in that future.
5. **If we carry parts of the past into the future, they should be what is best about the past.** Congregations embed their purposes and goals in their structures, and there is a strong tendency for the structures to continue even after they cease being effective means of embodying the organization’s goals. Social groups of all kinds also tend to carry forward dysfunctional practices. Patterns of behaviors, embedded through habitual action and words, can end up undermining core purposes and values. Generative change should displace meaningless structures and dysfunctional practices with the strengths of the organization’s most life-giving narratives and behaviors.
6. **It is important to value differences.** It is not likely that congregational participants in an appreciative inquiry process will always agree on what is “the best.” When a congregation surfaces various stories and works together interpreting the data, everyone gains if mutual respect and attentiveness is the norm. Change is too often seen as a “zero-sum” game: your gain is my loss. AI assumes the synergism of the congregation’s best practices—that there will be a cohesive and cumulative effect as diverse strengths are brought together in conversations and imaginations.
7. **The language we use creates our reality.** We create our social environment, our organizational reality, through words. We use words to bring to the present our moods, memories, perceptions, thoughts, and visions. A story, an idea, a motivation, or a behavior remains hidden, outside the congregation’s reality, or hidden in unarticulated moods and behaviors, if it is not brought into the discourse. Our reality, the world in which we see, converse, dream, and act, is formed by the words that we and others utter.

8. **Congregations, like all organizations, are heliotropic.** This is a botanical term about a plant's orientation — plants lean toward the sun. Similarly, congregations lean toward the source of energy — whether that energy is healthy or not. (This is why problem solving often inhibits an organization's life.) As memories and imaginations are engaged to nourish participants with the best and most life-giving resources, the church will lean in the direction of those narratives and practices.
9. **Outcomes should be useful.** AI is facilitated through a series of discussions, or interviews, where people ask each other about the most life-giving features of their congregation. As the stories accumulate, they must enter an interpretive process that helps participants envision and create their way toward a hopeful and fruitful future. While there may be affective (emotional) benefits from "just talking," AI assumes we are doing more—we are constructing. That means the interpretive work and the parallel visioning must move the church toward implementation — doable steps, attainable structural changes, and generative practices. AI fosters "grounded dreaming" — that is, the interpretive work deals with the data, then constructs steps forward that are connected to both the past ("the church's best") and the future (as it motivates us to faithful imaginations).
10. **All steps are collaborative.** AI is not a process of giving stories and ideas to experts who then create a plan for everyone. Every phase requires wide participation—interviews, interpretation, visioning, embedding changes. AI provides numerous and ongoing means for a congregation-wide discourse. At its best, this contributes to the formation of a learning community in which all participants have voice and responsibilities. If we are to have any long-range, significant impact, trust needs to grow and participation needs to be broad.

"Churches can be like carnival goers in a house of mirrors. What they see is a distortion of who they really are. Often the mirror magnifies their struggles and losses and minimizes the work that God is really doing among them. Appreciative inquiry can help us see God graciously at work among an imperfect people through a history pockmarked with scars and struggle."⁸

Five Basic Processes of Appreciative Inquiry

There are five basic, required processes for Appreciative Inquiry. Even though there are several ways to delineate the actual steps, these five processes must be included.

1. **Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry.** Because our organizations tend to be habitually involved in discussing deficits, participants need to be intentional and specific about their commitment to positive narratives and images. This focus does not eliminate the work of critique but it does frame the entire project. It is our gratefulness to God and to each other that provides the foundation for all we do. Those who are leading will need to be clear and intentional about this choice.
2. **Inquire into the stories of life-giving forces.** Based on our assumption that every church has generative stories, we engage our commitment to a positive focus by asking questions that surface those generative narratives. This sustained work of inquiry— asking questions in various ways, of diverse persons, brings life-giving resources into the church's conversations.

⁸Cameron Harder, *Discovering the Other: Asset-Based Approaches for Building Community Together* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers), Kindle Location 1497.

3. **Locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry.** As participants read and discuss the interviews, participants note recurring themes. By locating these themes, this interpretive process, which may continue to encourage additional stories, forms basic directions for the church's future.
4. **Create shared images for a preferred future.** The themes, with special attention to the wishes that were generated in the interviews, lead to what are called "provocative proposals." These are focused, imaginative scenarios that encapsulate and then stretch the church's greatest strengths, describing these images as potential futures.
5. **Find innovative ways to create that future.** Because old structures can easily malform new images, a church needs to create carefully new modes of implementation for the provocative proposals. This is a risky and energizing phase of forming new partnerships, testing directions, and engaging the Holy Spirit's life-giving presence.⁹

Appreciative Inquiry – Sample Introductory Exercise

1. Remembering your entire experience at our church, when were you most alive, most motivated and excited about your involvement? What made it exciting? Who else was involved? What happened? What was your part? Describe what you felt.
2. Don't be humble— this is important information: What are the most valuable ways you contribute to our church— your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities?
3. What are the most important things our church has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference? How did it affect you?
4. What have been the most important spiritual experiences, lessons in belief, or steps of faith that have occurred for you at our church? Describe what and how they happened. What was most helpful?
5. What do you value most about our church? What activities or ingredients or ways of life are most important? What are the best features of this church?
6. Make three wishes for the future of the church.

Peter Senge sees an intimate connection between personal and corporate vision. An organization's vision is a by-product of individual visions. It's up to the organization to develop a context for conversation, to nurture the discussion about these visions, so that individual visions can be shared and a common corporate vision developed. The first step in the visioning process, in Senge's view, is "to give up traditional notions that visions are always announced from 'on-high' or come from the organization's institutionalized planning process." Sometimes they do, but often they simply "bubble up" from the ongoing conversation about personal visions in an organization. These need to be conversations in which "individuals not only feel free to express their dreams, but learn how to listen to each others' dreams. Out of this listening, new insights into what is possible gradually emerge."¹⁰

⁹ Branson, Kindle Locations 643-666

¹⁰ Jeffrey Jones, *Heart, Mind and Strength: Theory and Practice for Congregational Leadership* (Alban Institute/Rowman and Littlefield Publishers), 79.

Clarity: Facing Reality with Humility and Hope

Key idea: Vision forward requires clarity on the implications of the past and present.

Approaches to Renewing Established Churches

1. At least 16 options: <http://www.lifeandleadership.com/church-development-strategies>
2. Three broad categories
 - A. “Plan and do” – Standard Strategic Planning / Vision Casting
 - B. “On Your Marks, Get Set, Go!” – Diagnostic/Prescriptive Benchmarking
 - C. “Do and Plan” – Ministry Directed Vision Emergence

“Plan and Do” – Standard Strategic Planning / Vision Casting

Defined: Strategic Planning is an intentional effort to redefine or clarify congregational purpose within one’s missional context, evaluate and / or justify every existing ministry in light of that purpose, lay out short-range (immediate, 6-12 months) and long-range (3-5 years) goals, objectives, and strategies for each ministry, and establish a system for evaluating the effectiveness of all efforts toward accomplishing the plan. It involves the entire congregation and takes 12-18 months to complete. If a church is willing to engage in strategic planning, a guide is necessary. There are many guides that lay out strategic planning with clear suggestions on how to execute the process in a congregation. They are not tied to a prescriptive picture of a healthy church or a list of characteristics that all churches must incorporate into their plan.

The Basics:

1. Understand your external mission environment
2. Clarify congregational purpose statements: mission, values, motivating beliefs and vision
3. Do S.W.O.T. analysis against congregational purpose
4. Do gap analysis: look at your vision and compare it to where you are currently
5. Write S.M.A.R.T. congregational goals: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely
6. Align new and existing ministries with congregational purpose and goals
7. Employ and empower people to fulfill mission according to gifts
8. Go forward and evaluate on regular cycles

Evaluation:

Strategic planning is a good model that works well in many churches, but usually requires most of the following conditions:

1. The overall church spirit and momentum is strong enough to sustain a 12-24-month process (e.g. in the excitement and short-term wins of a honeymoon period that attends the beginning of a new minister’s tenure).
2. Staff, elders and other point people possess strategic giftedness and available discretionary time to work on planning without sacrificing ongoing church functions. Bud Wrenn describes in four dimensions the range of activities and people required for this to work well. If a church does not have all of these types, it is difficult for strategic planning to work.

- a. Visionary planning: “Where are we going? What does it look like?” This requires Dreamer types: the big picture people.
 - b. Missional planning: “What will we do while we are moving toward our destination?” This requires Developer/Big Project types who have had success in implementation.
 - c. Strategic planning: “How will we do what we need to do while moving toward our destination?” This requires Developer/Problem Solver types: the “how to” people.
 - d. Tactical planning: “When will they get it done?” “Who will do what needs to be done?” This requires Doer types who are dependable, reliable people with great integrity and initiative saying “Give it to me and let me run with it.”¹¹
3. It is a highly systematized process requiring tenacious attention to each stage in a kind of “lock-step” linear sequence. It makes sense from an engineering perspective, in that it says the *infrastructure* must be in place before you can expect the other parts of the system to work. In mechanical systems, each piece waits on the other before the next one moves. Human systems, however, are not linear-sequential. They are organically unpredictable, and often act in ways the defy efforts to carefully orchestrate their movement.
 4. It *assumes* that the church will be motivated to act upon the plan once it is complete. Not uncommonly, however, the planning process actually depletes congregational energy and defers hope so long that it actually discourages all but the most organizationally adept strategic thinkers (a very small percentage of the population).
 5. Strategic planning tends toward spiritual disengagement that depends on human analysis and corporate initiatives toward well-defined consensus derived goals. Throughout the process, people tend to pray less and ponder obsessively. It also tries to “project” everything, both in the church and the external community, discounting God’s surprising movements in both, and at times resists important missional and spiritual developments that do not seem to fit the plan. In short, it lacks missional and spiritual flexibility, and assumes too much about our human capacity to project into the future. For this reason, the current missional emphasis on listening to God, to each other, and to the community as a set of spiritual exercises tends to be more appealing.

“On The Marks, Get Set, Go!” – Diagnostic-Prescriptive Benchmarking

Defined: Prescriptive approaches usually are based on a specialist’s intuition, experience, or research as to what constitutes a healthy church, and lay out a responsible process for helping churches develop those characteristics. As such, they provide...

- Benchmarks that prescribe what healthy churches should be and do (“On the marks!”)
- Assessments to diagnose your church in light of the benchmarks (“Get set!”)
- Proactive steps for churches to align more with those characteristics (“Go!”)

Examples:

[Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, Revised Edition \(Church Smart Resources, 2006\)](#) This volume is based on what in its original version was the most extensive study of healthy churches (1,000 churches, 32 countries, 6 continents). It presents the eight “growth automatisms,” i.e. elements

¹¹See Bud Wrenn, *Innovative Planning: Your Church in 40-D*. Chalice Press, 2008.

that if present allow God's kingdom to grow "all by itself" (Mark 4:26-29). Schwarz calls this the "biotic paradigm," which points to natural church life and development, over against the *technocratic paradigm* (church growth) or the *spiritualistic paradigm* ("let go and let God"). His list of eight characteristics and the suggested process are used by a network of thousands of churches worldwide.

1. Empowering leadership
2. Gift-based ministry
3. Passionate spirituality
4. Effective structures
5. Inspiring worship service
6. Holistic small groups
7. Need-oriented evangelism
8. Loving relationships

Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Abingdon, 2007) This is the result of an effort of the Ohio West and Missouri Conferences of the United Methodist Church to search the scriptures for images to define congregational health. Five images emerged:

1. Radical hospitality
2. Passionate worship
3. Intentional faith development
4. Risk-taking mission and service
5. Extravagant generosity

Since their inception, many congregations have used these images to create congregational strategies and stimulate other aspects of their congregation's ministries. The book refines the teaching and description of each practice into a format that is usable by Sunday School classes and small groups. Each chapter is divided into distinct sections that focus on explanation/Bible exposition, examples from churches that have adopted the practices, and practical suggestions and resources to help congregations go to the next level.

Evaluation: Churches all over the world benefit from these approaches. If a model 1) is biblically compatible, 2) fits your church ethos, and 3) you are willing to send a cadre of your leaders to get well trained in the use of the model, and 4) you are committed to use that model consistently, go for it!

"Do and Plan" – Ministry-Directed Vision Emergence

Defined: This approach guides the church through an organic, momentum-based process of discerning congregational vision (a full sense of congregational purpose). The vision *emerges* out of the actual performed ministry of the church, and is discerned through intentional listening in three areas:

- Listening to God in scripture, prayer, and discernment
- Listening to each other to discover God-given assets and spiritual gifts
- Listening to the community to discern how God may position the church missionally

Characteristics:

1. **Organic** – This model affirms the good work already occurring in the congregation, and the placement of the congregation in a particular community, as a reflection of God’s presence, power, and purpose. It may help to view this in comparison to two other common models.
 - A. *Strategic planning*, or “plan and do,” seeks renewal through deep assessment, evaluation, vision crafting, and then aligns current and new initiatives toward fulfilling that direction. By comparison, “do and plan” honors the work that currently happens among the people, appreciates the assets and opportunities within the surrounding community, and dwells in the word and prayer to discern recurring themes and emphases that express God’s clarity and direction for the future.
 - B. *Diagnostic-prescriptive* models (“On your mark, get set, go!”) uses research to prescribe a set of benchmark characteristics that have been found in effective churches. Churches evaluate themselves in light of those benchmarks and set qualitative and quantitative goals for ministry development. By comparison, “do and plan” does not assume a set of benchmarks, but seeks to involve people in ministry that expresses their current gifts and aspirations, looks at the places where church and community intersect, and prays and reflects to capture the spiritual essence of those relationships as indications of God’s desire for their future.

“Do and Plan” does not assume that everything happening in the congregation is healthy or outside the need of correction, but accentuates what is *“true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy”* (Phil. 4:8) as God’s current imprint among the believers in their local context. This positive inquiry also provides a more favorable climate for considering the unmet opportunities and obstacles in a church’s ministry path.

2. **Momentum-based** – This model builds upon and hopefully increases momentum and morale by encouraging and celebrating good work that is already close to the church’s heart. In contrast to “plan and do” and diagnostic-prescriptive approaches, it does not require that any part of congregational life be placed on hold until the end of an evaluative process that defines the future before it can be actuated, or which benchmarks an external set of characteristics. With “do and plan,” while leaders may choose to forestall some high-impact strategic initiatives and system-wide changes until a clearer vision has emerged, the overwhelming majority of congregational work may simply forge ahead. This work actually serves as the subject of appreciative inquiry into what God is doing in the church and the community. “Do and plan” does not delve into heavy deficiency-based analyses characteristic of most strategic planning models. These are appropriate in their place, but must be used so as not to impede congregational momentum and deplete morale. Often, the end-result of strategic planning is often a fatigued church that needs considerable down time to rest on the accomplishment of the plan, but with little energy left to “do” the plan. With the “do and plan” vision emergence model, the people are encouraged to simply “do” ministry, share stories about their experience, and purposely reflect on how God is at work in those who serve and are served. The intent is to lift the spirit of the congregation and give insight into God’s promising purpose for the future.

Method:

Appreciate Congregational Gifts, Assets, and Opportunities through THREE LISTENINGS

Listening to God is accomplished primarily by using Bible classes, small groups, retreats, etc. to lead people into meaningful reflection on texts that expound on the theology of church mission, as well as texts that are close to the heart and lips of people in the congregation. Using methods such as *Dwelling in the Word* or *Lectio Divina*, the people are attuned to God's love for them and for the world.

Listening to each other opens dialogue among those who lead or work within the current ministries of the church and those who are impacted by their service (both in and outside the church). Appreciative Inquiry is used to craft interviews and discussion guides, perhaps along a rubric of S.O.A.R. – Strengths of the Spirit, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results. Then, either during or shortly after the completion of a ministry effort (ongoing or project-based), they help those involved describe the good that was/is accomplished and reflect on how they see God at work in the efforts. The leaders prayerfully collect the information after each interview and construct inspiring narratives and other descriptions that chronicle the movement of God they have discerned in the interviews. They may also designate efforts to feature in ministry spotlights (interviews, testimonies, encouraging reports) that become regular (even profuse) in brief 3-4 minute vignettes in the assemblies, Bible classes, church bulletins, small groups, etc.

Listening to the community is accomplished through Asset-Mapping, both of the church itself and of the church in relation to the community.

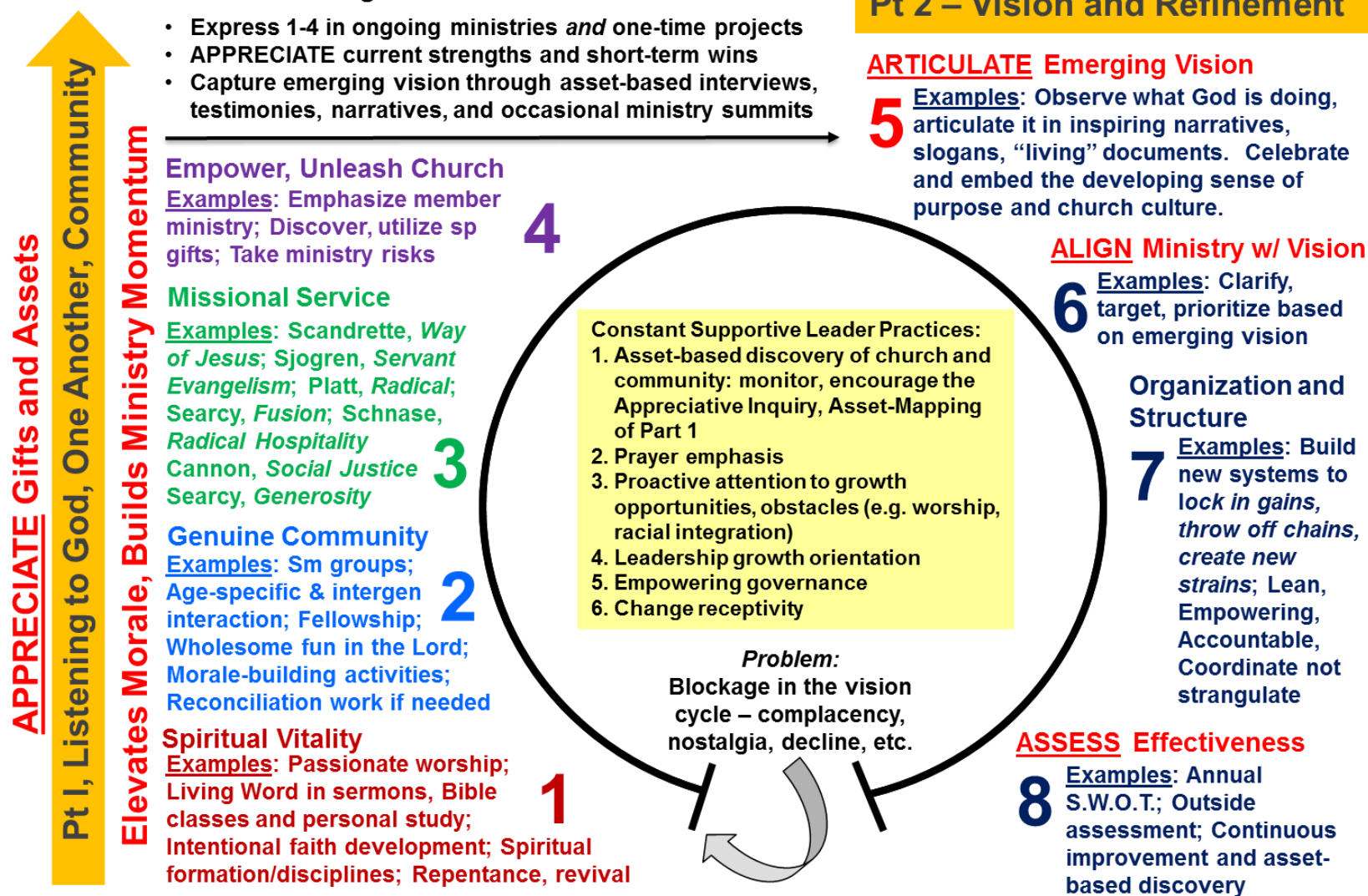
The intent is that the cumulative effect of appreciative listening and asset-mapping will be the emergence of a discernible pattern of congregational purpose, and hopefully a growing number within the congregation who have been encouraged by either the stories they have told, the interviews they have conducted, the good work they have done and/or witnessed, and the ministry spotlights they have heard and seen.

Once the congregation has been led through the *Appreciation* phase, the leaders then enter into Phase 2:

- ***Articulate the new sense of mission***
- ***Align ministry efforts with that mission***
- ***Assess missional effectiveness at various checkpoints***

The graphic on the next page illustrates each phase of the Vision Emergence Model.

“Do and Plan” Vision Emergence Model



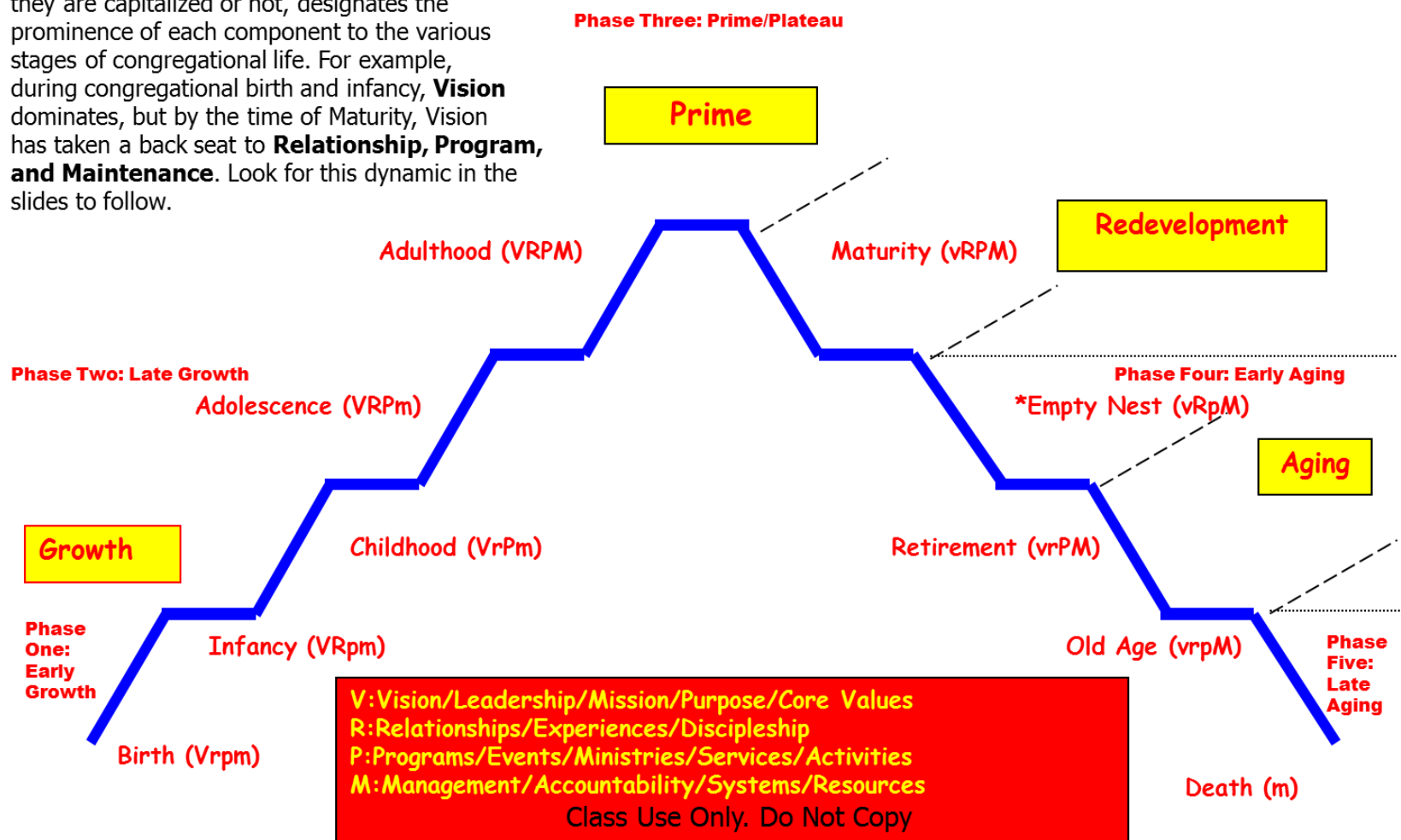
“If you make disciples, you always get the church.
But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples.”

Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture*.

The Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development

Adapted from: Life Cycle Model, Copyright 2001, George Bullard

Key: This is George Bullard's model of the Congregational Lifecycle. The letters, VRPM, (see legend in the red box at center bottom) and whether they are capitalized or not, designates the prominence of each component to the various stages of congregational life. For example, during congregational birth and infancy, **V**ision dominates, but by the time of Maturity, Vision has taken a back seat to **R**elationship, **P**rogram, and **M**aintenance. Look for this dynamic in the slides to follow.



Courage: Challenging Ourselves and Others With Decisive Action

Key idea: Growth requires courage to chart a new course and stay with it.

Challenging the “Norm of Non-Discipleship” and Spiritual Immaturity

Dallas Willard describes the “norm of non-discipleship” as the elephant in the church’s living room

“It is not the much discussed moral failures, financial abuses, or the amazing general similarity between Christians and non-Christians. These are only effects of the underlying problem. The fundamental negative reality among Christian believers now is their failure to be constantly learning how to live their lives in the kingdom among us. And it is an *accepted* reality. The division of professing Christians into those for whom it is a matter of whole-life devotion to God and those who maintain a consumer, or client, relationship to the church has now been the accepted reality for over fifteen hundred years. ...It is now understood to be a part of the ‘good news’ that one does not have to be a life student of Jesus in order to be a Christian.”¹²

Consider Matthew 7:24-27. If Jesus asks us to *hear* and *do* what he says, then it must be *possible* for us to *hear* and *do*. Also, combining this with Jesus’ call for us to “go to every ethnic group and help them become my students” (Matthew 28:19), it must be possible for us to train others who *hear* to *do* also. Willard paints an interesting scenario.

“Imagine driving by a church with a large sign in front that says, ‘We Teach All Who Seriously Commit Themselves to Jesus How to Do Everything He Said to Do.’ If you had been reading the Gospels...you might think, ‘Of course, that is exactly what the founder of the church, Jesus, told us to do.’

But your second thought might be that this is a highly unusual church. And then, ‘Can this be *right*?’ And: ‘Can it be *real*?’ When do you suppose was the last time any group of believers or church of any kind or level had a meeting of its officials in which the topic for discussion and action was how they were going to teach their people actually to do the specific things Jesus said?”¹³

Ed Friedman says that anxious emotional systems, which includes many churches, tend to coddle immaturity.¹⁴ In anxious times, social institutions, such as churches, begin to adapt to immaturity, and may actually coddle it by placing a higher value on empathy and consensus rather than responsibility and principle-centered direction. In other words, anxiety encourages leaders to be weak and timid. But “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7)

¹²Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life With God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 301.

¹³*Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁴Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Seabury Books, 2007).

Principled Presence vs. the “Illusion of Congregational Happiness”

At the risk of overstatement, the driving force behind many decisions in established churches is holding down complaints and pursuing what Gil Rendle calls the “illusion of congregational happiness.”¹⁵ This plays out in a variety of ways.

For example, the leaders of a congregation want to make some needed changes in the worship assembly. They realize no matter which route they choose, significant individuals or groups in the congregation will be unhappy. Fearing stiff resistance either way they go, the leaders freeze, sometimes for years. This inertia increases congregational anxiety. One group wants movement and is upset about the stalemate. Another group fears change and is anxious about the “slippery slope” that could be around the corner. Everyone observes the “no talk” rule about the issues, fearing that “if we bring that up, it will make some folks unhappy.” Church members dance around the issues, practicing a fellowship of shallow church-chat. It’s like a gathering of porcupines doing a strange religious dance. Believers come together and waltz around the vestibule, come just close enough to feel each other’s quills, and then back off whenever the discussion starts going “where everyone knows we don’t go.” Then come the leaders’ meetings. The elusive “Some of our people are saying...” and “You know that will upset so-and-so,” become the all-sufficient force to bring discussion to a halt. Quelling complaints and keeping them from occurring become the measuring sticks of church effectiveness.

This “happiness trap” hurts the congregation *in at least eight ways*:

1. We reduce our faith practice to only those aspects we enjoy or appreciate, which assumes we are already where we need to be spiritually. This constrains the Spirit of God by not allowing us to grow and change in needed areas. Quelling complaints shields the congregation from spiritual maturity.
2. We preserve stability and status quo by reducing the evaluations of our effectiveness to whether we have complaints. If we have no complaints, everything is fine. If we have complaints, we eliminate the problems by returning to the status quo where happiness overrides complaints.
3. We focus the attention and energy of the congregation internally, and avoid, ignore, or minimize the call to external ministry.
4. We begin to see our appointed leaders as elected representatives. Anxious churches tend to politicize leaders, treating them as elected representatives and pressuring them to cave in to dissent or to act rashly to champion the agenda of this or that faction. Church members may put their leaders in the “double-bind,” asking for decisive action, all the while with the clear insinuation that the decision should be agreeable to them. And if not, they may leave, because their “needs” are not met.

“The focus on ‘need fulfillment’ that so often accompanies an emphasis on empathy leaves out the possibility that what another may really ‘need’ (in order to become more responsible) is not to have their needs fulfilled. Indeed, it is not even clear that feeling for

¹⁵Much of this point is my adaptation of Gilbert Rendle, “The Illusion of Congregational Happiness,” in *Conflict Management in Congregations*. Alban Institute, 2001, 83-94.

others is a more caring stance (or even a more ethical stance) than challenging them to take responsibility for themselves. As mentioned earlier, increasing one's threshold for another's pain (which is necessary before one can challenge them) is often the only way the other will become motivated to increase their own threshold, thus becoming better equipped to face the challenges of life." – Ed Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*

5. We refuse to recognize leaders who do not "represent" our interests, and may actually work in active or passive aggression to have them removed. Elder rotations and reaffirmations begin to serve political interests.
6. We begin to manipulate meaningful Christian concepts into tools to get our own way.

"It has been my impression that at any gathering, whether it be public or private, those who are quickest to inject words like sensitivity, empathy, consensus, trust, confidentiality, and togetherness into their arguments have perverted these humanitarian words into power tools to get others to adapt to them." – Ed Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*

7. We focus our frustrations on the most visible and vulnerable members of the congregational system (e.g. the ministry staff). Members express their dissatisfaction toward what they can see and hear most readily. This allows them to avoid the growth of being gracious and forbearing. They may also be unaware of how their dissatisfaction is actually an "acting out" of a cluster of personal anxieties that they have been unwilling to manage. An easy way to avoid growth and change is to keep leaders in a beholden position to congregational whims.
8. We enable social "herding," where the forces of togetherness become so strong that it moves everyone to adapt to the least mature members of the congregation.

Paradoxically, efforts to stop complaints are self-defeating. They actually create opportunities for additional and competing complaints from those who feel differently than the satisfied party. For example, if you try to address complaints about the lack of genuine community by allowing the minister to shift his time into developing small groups, new complaints will emerge that he is not available to make hospital visits.

What is the best response? Freeze? No. Again, inertia creates as many complaints as action.

The truth is there is no way to stop complaints, thus the "illusion of congregational happiness." The best response is to move the emphasis away from fixing complaints and prioritize actions based on what contributes best to the ***mission, maturation, and ministry of the church***. The keywords here are *priority* and *emphasis*. This is not to suggest a false dichotomy between being principled and making people happy, as these are often compatible interests. The problem arises when mission loses priority. Again, this chart illustrates the principle.

Focus Less on <i>Pleasing the Preferences of Your Members</i>	Focus More on <i>Pursuing the Purpose of the Kingdom</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who wants what? • How do we satisfy.... [a person or a group]? • What should we do about.... [a problem or a complaint]? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does scripture call us to be and do? • What are we called to do in this chapter of our history as a congregation? • What are the goals we set out to accomplish? • What are the appropriate strategies for our ministry, and how will we measure their attainment?

Leaders should remember, however, that making this shift brings even more complaints. The temptation is to return to soothing others' pain by anxiously adjusting actions until happiness is restored. I call this "adjusting the shower water." When we turn on the shower and the water is first too hot or cold, we go through several adjustments until we find just the right temperature. You can do this with water, but trying it with people brings four results:

1. It destroys leadership trust in those who favored your original decision.
2. It destroys leadership credibility even among those who know they can manipulate you back into their perspective.
3. It trains your members to get what they want by complaining.
4. It results in the loss of healthy, high energy members who can make strong contributions to congregational life. Healthy people have the most options.

In contrast, Rendle suggests a three-fold response of principled presence.

1. **Stay connected.** This involves both listening and talking. First, listen to everyone, including complainers, in order to understand congregational concerns. This can include listening to those who represent others, inviting focus groups to meet with the elders, convening systematic listening groups, etc. Second, talk and inform members of the what and why of the decisions. Always tie actions to the overall purpose, and challenge people with the church's mission. Third, help members understand how they may grow through the situation without necessarily getting their way.

Remember:

- "Division loves separation; peace loves conversation."
 - "Anyone can have their say, but no one is guaranteed their way."
2. **Maintain a clear and reasoned position.** Rendle says, "People have a right to be heard, but they do not hold a mandate to be accommodated." If leaders have addressed the higher purpose questions mentioned in the right side of the chart above, they will be able to articulate their positions in terms of purpose and not personal agenda or politics. It is also important for a leader's soul to be ordered by God's peace and free of its own internal chaos, not shamed by its own inadequacies but made confident by God's sustaining grace and power. This frees one to lead from a peaceful spiritual center. Such a leader is not easily politicized, polarized, or threatened.
 3. **Resist anxious reactivity.** Allow people to adjust to changes, and realize they may not always be at their best behavior. Do not fight back. Be consistent in your communication with all interested parties. Do not take things personally. Listen to critics without caving to dissent. Keep a sense of humor. Help people through the chaotic wilderness into the new and better realities that your decisions are aimed at unfolding.

Non-Anxious Presence/Self-differentiation in Relation to Church Leadership¹⁶

Undifferentiated	Differentiated
1. Quickly offended, easily provoked, too sensitive, slow to recover.	1. Self-managing, shapes the environment, resourceful.
2. Reactive, instinctive, automatic.	2. Responsive, intentional, thoughtful
3. Underhanded, covert, flourishes in the dark.	3. Open, light-shedding, aware
4. Demanding, willful, stubborn, resistant (especially to reason and love), unbending	4. Resilient, has sense of proportion
5. Think in black/white or yes/no, intolerant of ambiguity, seek final solution, want all or nothing.	5. Have breadth of understanding, allow time for things to process
6. Blame, criticize, displace, fault-finding, have poor discrimination	6. Take responsibility for self, learn when challenged, define self from within self
7. Uptight, serious, defensive	7. Relaxed, at ease, sensible
8. Competitive, either with or against, see life as a contest, contemptuous	8. Take turns, collaborate, stay in touch even when tension grows
9. Vague, non-specific, cloaked	9. Clear, objective, purposeful
10. Create too much or too little space and one-sided solutions	10. Create space, options, and common goals

¹⁶Pete Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, pp. 11, 91-92.

Sample Covenant of Conduct
(Pete Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*)

In order for the congregation and the elders to deal effectively with issues, the following guidelines are to be followed:

1. All members affirm their right to express their opinions about the life and ministry of the congregation.
2. The congregation operates with a participatory form of government that allows members to share their opinions directly with the elders, ministers, deacons, ministry leaders, and at congregational meetings.
3. When members of the congregation express an opinion to an elder, the elder shall ask, "What would you like me to do with this information?"
4. If the member desires to have the information transmitted to the elders, the member shall be invited to bring the information / opinion to the next elders meeting. The time and date shall be given.
5. If the member does not wish to appear in person, the elder shall ask the member for permission to use their name in reporting. If permission is not given, the elder shall say, "I'm sorry but I will not be able to repeat this to the eldership since we do not deal with anonymous letters or comments."
6. If permission is given, the elder shall report the information / opinion to the eldership and use the member's name.
7. At his discretion, an elder may ask the member to refer this issue to another elder for presentation.
8. Each issue shall be placed on the agenda and written in the minutes along with the action taken by the elders. Action may include: "Received as information," "Elder to visit member and report at next meeting," etc.
9. Opinions may be shared in writing with the elders and shall be handled in the above mentioned manner if the letter or statement is signed.

Exercise

In what ways would such a covenant be helpful?

What would be the greatest challenges in adopting such a policy?

Ideas for Healthy Response to Member Concerns

Note: Not all of these work in every situation, but they are very helpful when applied correctly in appropriate contexts. These are not listed in any priority.

- Listen and affirm. Use reflective listening to understand and acknowledge their concerns in a safe conversation. (Recommend *Listening Laboratory*). Thank them for speaking with you about their concerns.
- Explore.
 - What is your biggest concern?
 - What would you prefer?
 - What would you like me to do with this information?
- Encourage direct communication.

Examples:

"I understand your difficulty is with _____ concerning _____. Have you spoken directly with him/her? I would be happy to set up a meeting or go along with you to support both of you in the conversation."

"I would be happy to bring this before the rest of the elders, but before I do, let me make sure I understand it correctly.... Now, when I bring this to their attention, it will be important for me to give your name. Are you OK with this?" If not, describe to them how difficult it is to respond to anonymous comments, and that the results may be disappointing.

- Avoid triangulation. Triangulation is where a person expects you to deal with their conflict with someone else. In these cases, you "affirm and deflect."

Speed Leas' three-fold response to triangulation:

- "Have you talked with _____?" If no, then...
 - "Would it help if I went with you to talk with _____, as a support to help the two of you communicate?" If no, then...
 - "I don't think it's helpful for us to continue the conversation. When you are ready to discuss things with _____ directly, let me know, and I'll be happy to help."
- On a deeper level, understand that often, member concerns about church are the "presenting issue" of deeper anxiety clusters that can only be revealed through sensitive pastoral listening.

Once you have built strong rapport through genuine concern and pastoral devotion, consider helping people grow through the situation. Questions like this may help.

- "How we respond to this situation is important. Help me think for a moment about a way to respond to this situation that best _____." (fosters unity, deepens respect, builds trust, shows forbearance, etc.)
- "Is this the (best, most mature, most Christ-like, most Spirit-filled, constructive, etc.) response you can make to this situation?"

- “I understand and appreciate your perspective. Now that we have an understanding, let’s try and practice Jesus’ example and consider the needs of others who feel differently than you on this issue. How might you be able to submit to their needs?”
- “I understand and appreciate your concern, but I also know _____, and have great respect for him/her as well. For just a moment, let’s give him/her the benefit of the doubt and reframe our way of thinking...” (i.e. practice Philippians 4:8, think about what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy)
- “I wonder, is there room here for you to extend grace to (or overlook, etc.) this weakness in _____.”
- “I realize you disagree with what is happening, but is it possible for you see an opportunity to learn from the others’ perspective?”
- What are you afraid of learning? (Use only in situations where there is strong rapport 😊)

Other Responses: