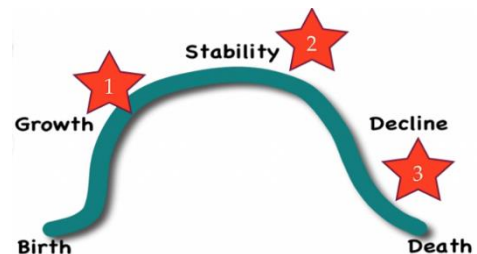


Our Evangelist Jeff Trahan having just completed an excellent series on the Seven Churches of Asia – this classic by Frank Walton serves to supplement

The Lifecycle of a Church

by W. Frank Walton

"So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase" (**Acts 9:31**). Luke describes the church in Palestine (brethren in the aggregate) as experiencing dynamic growth. In general, they had their spiritual priorities in place, with a reverent attitude toward the Lord and reliance on the promises and guidance given by the Holy Spirit. God's people doing God's work in God's way will reap God's blessing. How many of us are bearing "much fruit" (**John 15:5**) to the Lord's honor and glory?



In a local church, as in our individual lives, we often pass through different stages in our spiritual development. The church at Thyatira was improving, though plagued with false teaching (**Revelation 2:19**). The church at Sardis was past its prime (**Rev. 3:1-3**). The church at Corinth has some good points and spiritual talent (**1 Cor. 1:4-7, 11:2; 2 Cor. 8:7**), yet they were plagued church problems due to carnality (1 Cor. 3:1-3) and a failure to follow through on their promises (**2 Cor. 8:7,10-11; 9:2-5**).

Paul teaches that the ideal path of a church is ever onward and upward: "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain" (**1 Cor. 15:58**). A vibrant life-cycle in the church comes from the renewal of firm commitment to the Lord and to the spiritual mission to which we have been called. The Lord's soul-saving work is the most important work in the world. It deserves and demands our best effort, both individually and collectively.

Those who study organizations of people have observed that most organizations go through 3 stages in its life-cycle: (1) risk-taking stage, (2) caretaking stage, (3) undertaking stage. Let's see how this might apply to the life-cycle of a church.

1. Risk-Taking Stage. A new or small congregation often struggles. Yet, everyone must pull their own weight to not pull others down. Members are willing by faith to take risks to advance the cause of Christ, or as Jesus put it, to "launch out into the deep" (**Luke 5:4**). The adventure of faith means commitment to work hard and sacrifice to build up the local church in doing the Lord's work.

Such characterized the church at Philippi in zealously supporting gospel preaching (**Phil. 4:15-16**). The Lord's church in Rome was widely known for their active, aggressive and encouraging faith (**Romans 1:8,12**). The churches of Macedonia were materially poor but rich in dedication and sacrifice that even the apostle Paul marveled (**2 Cor. 8:1-5**).

In this stage of growth, members gladly volunteer their involvement. Members are active and aggressive in evangelism and inviting others to church, like the newly planted church at Thessalonica (**1 Thess. 1:8**). Launching out in this daring faith means a church has the willingness to face the possibility of failure, problems, rejection or difficulty in doing the Lord's work. The Thessalonian church had this bold devotion for Jesus, because of their idealist, vibrant spiritual traits: active faith, loving service, and steadfast hope in the Lord's second coming (**1 Thess. 1:3**). This is why the gospel grew and was glorified among them (**2 Thess. 3:1**).

2. Caretaking Stage. The church at Laodicea thought they had "arrived." They smugly thought that we "have need of nothing" (**Rev. 3:17**). Yet the Lord evaluated them accurately, "You are lukewarm" (**Rev. 3:16a**). His sobering warning of "repent!" (**Rev. 3:19**) or else would apply to all churches today who are smug and self-satisfied. Lukewarm churches that are content to putter along make the Lord sick!: "I will spit (or vomit) you out of my mouth" (**Rev.3:16b**). The caretaking church loses its vision of ever expanding growth, thereby missing its sense of mission and spiritual urgency.

After a church has grown, it is easy to drift into a "comfort zone." A nice building is built. They hire a good preacher who will do their work for them. There's usually enough members now that things that have to be done will eventually get done. Maintaining the status quo becomes a rut. This church seeks to "hold its own." Members become weary of work and sacrifice. Religion becomes more of convenience instead of conviction. Is the church where you attend satisfied with the "status quo" and "holding your own."?

3. Undertaker Stage. If a church remains in the caretaker stage long enough, it will soon be ready for the undertaker. The Lord said of Sardis, "You are dead" They were existing on their past reputation: "You have a name that you are alive" (**Rev. 3:1**). This rut has become "a grave with both ends knocked out." Someone at such a church may say, "The church here is at peace." This means someone needs to come preach their funeral so they can "rest in peace." There's not enough life to cause a stir about anything, either good nor bad. A church in the undertaker stage lives in the past. Or, they may think they're a good church because they have much potential that one of these days could be developed, if they really put their mind to it. Also, they think they are a sound church mainly because they have good intentions and theoretically stand for the truth on all the important issues.

As a member of a local church, how do YOU fit into that church's life-cycle? Make sure that you help the local church to renew itself by the Word of Christ in following Christ. Then by "speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him" (**Eph. 4:15**).