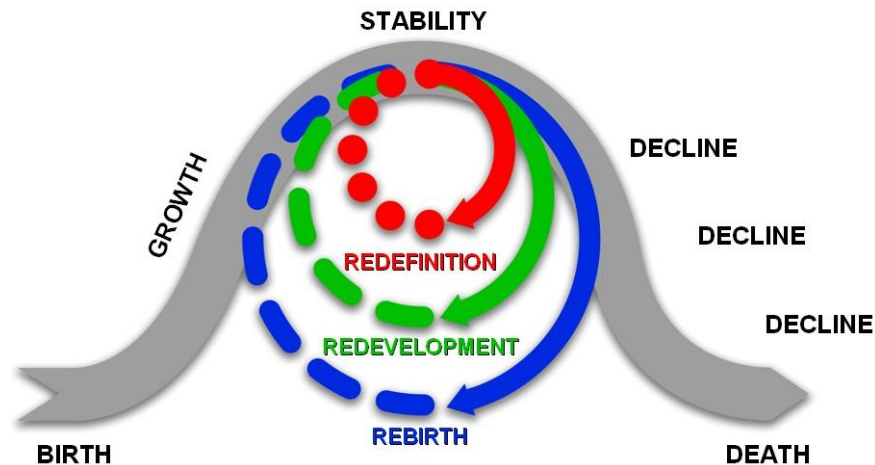


Practical Applications for the “Parish Life Cycle”

This article is part 3 in a series, based on lessons learned by Tanya Moxley and Colleen Tizzard at the Start Up! Start Over! Conference held in May 2008. Start Up! Start Over! is a conference designed and led by the Congregational Development staff of The Episcopal Church, USA.

Are you familiar with the parish life cycle? Many of you will have seen it or heard of it over the past few years. I'm including a graphic as a reminder:



Have you ever tried to use this in your parish? It can be difficult to explain when you don't feel you're a congregational development expert! Here is a practical way that you might use the "life cycle" with your Parish Council. Do Step One during a meeting before Step Two, so the responses can be typed up and provided as a handout for the next meeting.

One: Have the Council members brainstorm a list of all the organized ministries in your congregation. List them on flip chart paper. Have someone type these all up into a list on one sheet of paper and make enough copies for each attendee to have one at the next meeting.

Two: Each person reviews the list and marks a plus by the ones s/he perceives to be in the growth phase of the life cycle. Put a minus by the ones that are declining, and a checkmark by those that are stable. Yes, this requires that the Council members make some judgements about what's happening in the congregation. This is part of the job.

Three: Make it well-known to the parish that the Council is undertaking an overall ministry review, and that each organized ministry group will get a visit as part of this process.

Four: Focus on the 'stable' groups first. Have at least two Council members attend the next meeting of each of these groups and have each group member take a few minutes to answer (in writing) on a handout:

1. What was the original vision of this ministry?
2. What has been accomplished?
3. What is new that was not anticipated?
4. Where do we want to see this ministry in three to five years?

Groups that are truly in the 'stable' phase will usually find their way into redefinition by discussing their answers to these questions.

Five: Next, two Council members meet with the groups identified as growing. Give them a 'pat on the back', recognize their efforts in some way in the life of the parish – give them a way to tell their story. Ask them if there is something the Council could do to help, e.g. if we had \$500, what would help?

Six: Lastly, at a Council meeting, provide a handout of the groups identified as declining. Have members circle those that have served their purpose. For example, has the community or congregation changed such that the ministry is no longer required?

Seven: Two Council members meet with each 'declining' group. Review where they've been, what it was for. Usually the group knows that their work is done. Often these groups just need to be encouraged to recognize that they have served their purpose. If there is a group in this category that is causing a drain of time/energy/funds but doesn't seem able to stop, consider asking them to 'suspend' their activities for a year in favour of something else. Encourage some discussion of what the 'else' might look like.

Eight: Now comes the difficult part – who will talk to the groups that you really need, but that are in decline? In most cases, the group's leader is the issue. These are usually the situations that the Council wants the rector to deal with. In this case, Council members must be clear what they want done, and that they will fully support the rector if the group leader starts complaining about the rector. The rector must have as many facts as possible about what has been said to who, by whom, and when. The first task is to help the group leader acknowledge that there is a problem, then to invite ways to solve the problem. One option is to raise up the ministry with the congregation and encourage new people to attend an information session to learn more about it. Try a few different ways to solve the issue, but likely the group leader will need to be encouraged to retire. Sometimes they can help find a successor by identifying what they originally most liked about the job. The rector needs to realize before beginning this process that this person will likely not ever be their good buddy.

And there you are – you have used the congregational life cycle in your parish to do an overall review of your organized ministries.

A final comment: If there are stories about a past activity that was wildly successful (or not!) that are 'haunting' your congregation, make a time to bring together a group of

people to tell the stories about it. The reality will usually float to the top and help 'exorcise' the 'ghost'. Another way to approach this is to form three or four small groups during a Council meeting and have each group write a brief history of the congregation that they then present to the other groups. There will be a wide variety - remember to acknowledge that there is some truth in all of them!