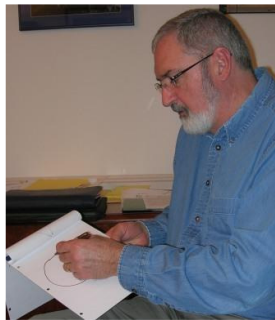


**Wise Leaders Discern WHERE God Has Placed Them:
The Life Cycle of Congregations and Parachurch Ministries**



A handwritten signature in black ink on a white background. The signature is written in a cursive style and clearly reads "Roy M. King".

Roy M. King

Introduction: PERSPECTIVE is Critical to Effective Leadership

Dr. Robert Clinton, professor of leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary for many years, says that leadership is all about PERSPECTIVE. The better the perspective the better is the leadership contribution. Perspective is a way of seeing. Godly perspective sees people, events and circumstances as God sees them and then responds in alignment to his vision. Jesus rebuked people for their lack of perspective. They had eyes but failed to see. They had ears but failed to hear. Echoing the prophets of the Old Testament this kind of blindness and deafness was the work of God for hearts that had drifted into a pride filled attempt to walk with God.

In my own spiritual journey God seems to exert a great deal of effort by His Spirit using the Bible and close advisors to help correct my vision. During my children's teen age years I was struggling with knowing how to love them in a season of rebellion. God's correction came through a friend challenging me to go home and get with my wife and go through the photo albums of our daughter's life. He encouraged us by saying, "See your daughter as more than the problems she is causing and the bad choices she is making right now. See the whole person who God loves and Jesus died to redeem." That one shift in our vision fueled the proper kind of love we needed to offer her at that time.

When I first began coaching church and ministry leaders one of my first clients had already served in three churches in less than ten years and was struggling in his fourth. To make the story briefer his perspective was, "These people are the problem. They do not want to change. The leaders told me they wanted change but once I was here and started leading us into change they resisted me." And that was basically the story of all four congregations. He had a difficult time receiving my counsel that while I am sure there was real resistance to change perhaps how he was leading was part of the problem. Letting go of self justification is like never eating dessert again – why would a person let go of something that makes them feel so good!

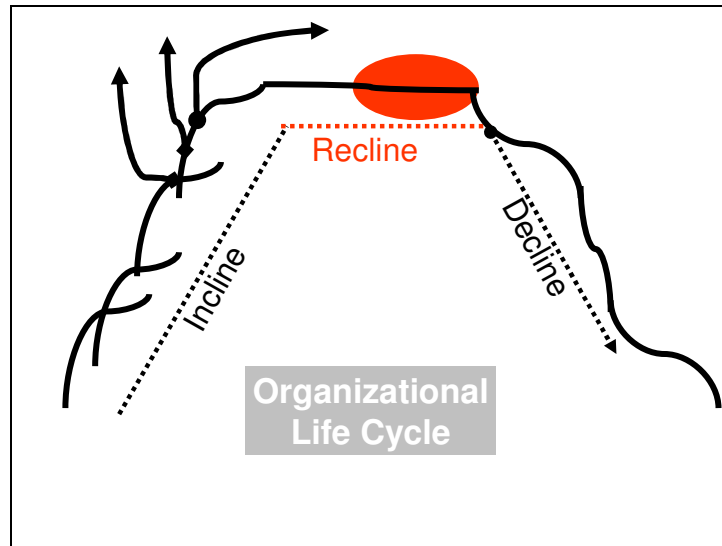
Perspective shows up in hundreds of ways. In our first home I went wild with my trimmers and cut my azalea bushes back away from the windows. But because of **when** I did it I guaranteed they would not bloom the next season. But I did not have a correct vision of the flowering season and so my choice, which was made with good intentions, had a negative impact.

In the pages that follow I am asking to bring out your current understanding of the church or ministry you lead and hold it up to God asking him to correct your perspective. Also I am asking you to take your view of daily work and be willing to exchange it for God's view.

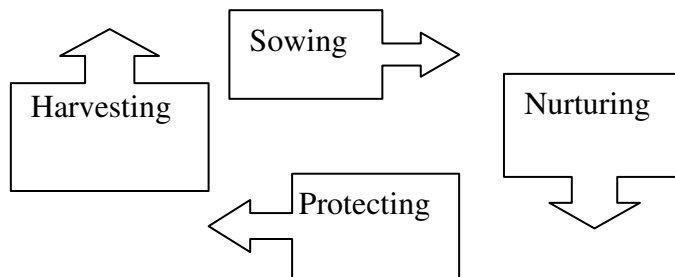
My goal – Leaders with a vision that aligns with God's vision will make better leadership decisions. They will be more effective in solving problems,

resolving challenges, and seizing opportunities. They will love God and others better! They will reduce the damage they do to those within their influence.

This article is about two facets of perspective, the **stages** of organizational life cycle and the **seasons** of fruitful work.



Seasonal Cycle of Fruitful Work



Here are some examples of the important leadership questions that shape a leader's perspective:

- **WHY does this organization exist?**
- **WHAT are the results or outcomes if this organization is effective?**
- **HOW will the organization be structured to assist the people in accomplishing the results?**
- **WHO will have authority and responsibility for investing the resources of the organization (resources = time, money, facilities and equipment)?**
- **WHEN will the organization take the next round of necessary actions?**

This article focuses on two leadership questions.

- **WHERE is the organization in its stage of life?**
- **WHAT kind of work is most needed to make this effort fruitful?**

The Importance of SEEING the Stage of Life

The life cycle is a tool to help leaders understand any organization in its development or decline. Life cycle theory helps leaders answer the question, **"Where are we living"?** As I coach congregational and parachurch ministry leaders I observe that many of the wrong strategic decisions made by leaders result from failing to consider the stage of the organization.

A young pastor serving his first congregation has all of the answers for what a healthy effective congregation should be and do. He read all of the books his seminary professors suggested and he had all of the answers. At least that was perspective. His vision of course was to turn the church into the next "Saddleback". And even thought it took Rick Warren over 20 years of labor in a church plant before he had made enough mistakes (and successes) to write ***The Purpose Driven Church*** this young man would knock it out in two years! Somehow he failed to account that he was arriving and would be leading on top of a seventy five year old congregation in a declining small town. I think you can probably see the light at the end of the tunnel – and it is not sunlight – it is the train!

Ministry leaders love to get together and glean leadership principles, practices, and models from the most successful ones in the room. Then the leaders scatter back to their ministry setting and seek to apply them without carefully considering the organizational life stage where they live. They are not only ineffective but can be destructive. After a few cycles of adrenaline rush at a conference, and returning home with a new notebook, only to see almost no in depth change a few months later, they arrive at the conclusion that the problem is the conference setting. They become cynical and hardened to going to more events. When leaders ignore the reality of the setting where God has placed them they risk squandering their leadership influence and speeding the decay of the organization.

Defining the Life Cycle Stages

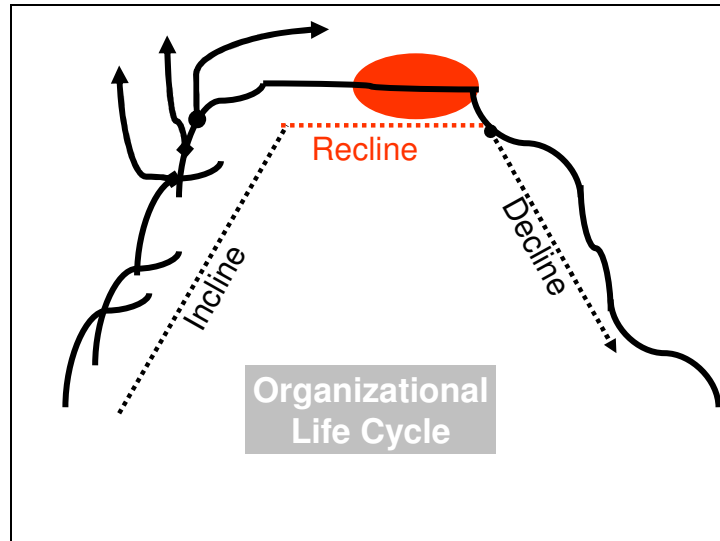
Those who have written on life cycle theory divide the life cycle into various stages. To provide a foundational overview I have chosen three major stages with some specification within them.

Incline – Includes birth, early childhood, adolescence, and early adult hood. **(Represents approximately 15% of congregations in the United States)**

Recline or Plateau – Includes mature adulthood and midlife (often involving a midlife crisis)

(Represents approximately 60% of congregations in the United States)

Decline – Includes early aging, late decline and death. **(Represents approximately 25% of congregations in the United States)¹**



Some consultants use five stages:

1. **Birth** (a fragile beginning with many threats to survival)
2. **Resourcing** (organizations that are growing and are asking resource investment questions and includes those organizations that are a learning resource to others)
3. **Refocusing** (organizations at a plateau stage and early decline)
4. **Restoring** (organizations at late decline)
5. **Replanting/Rebirthing** (organizations at death and taking the remains of the organization to birth new organizations)

One way the statistics on percentages of congregations listed above impacts our perspective is to recognize that if we desire to be a congregation that is on the incline we will be in the minority and must conduct church differently from the way over 80% of the churches around us are carrying out ministry.

The Importance of SEEING the Season of Work

God has created this world so that most of what is produced develops over a season from seed to fruit. This biological progression was a common experience of Adam's original work as he tended the garden.² After the rebellion by Adam and Eve to their creator's rule God increased the resistance that would accompany Adam's work. God did not remove our desire for productive work but he did insert hurdles to fruitfulness, "in pain you shall eat of it all of the days of your life".³

God also broadens creation's resistance to our efforts at fruitfulness to include the woman's pain in the labor of bearing the fruit of a child. The 'seasons' of conception, pregnancy, labor and delivery share many similar elements to the thorns among the seed bearing its fruit.

The seasonal fruit cycle in brief is:

1. Sowing
2. Nurturing
3. Protecting
4. Harvesting

SOWING – Scatter the seed. The farmer breaks up the soil so the seed can be easily buried. In a mysterious way, there in the damp darkness, God has placed life in the seed that breaks out and grows.⁴

NURTURING – God must provide the right amount of sun, rain and food for the growing plant to survive. The farmer can often contribute some supplemental water or fertilizer but in most cases the survival of the plants depends on God giving the essential contribution.

PROTECTING – There is opposition to growth. Bugs attack. Birds, rabbits and other animals make a meal out of the tender plant. Blight and disease can kill or damage the plant. Weeds threaten to choke it out. The good farmer invests the sweat to fight them all.

HARVESTING – Now comes the fruit. Often months of labor go by with very little fruit. Buds turn into blooms which then grow into the fruit which then slowly ripens. And at just the right moment, in a flurry of depleting around the clock investment of energy, the harvest is gathered before it spoils in the field.

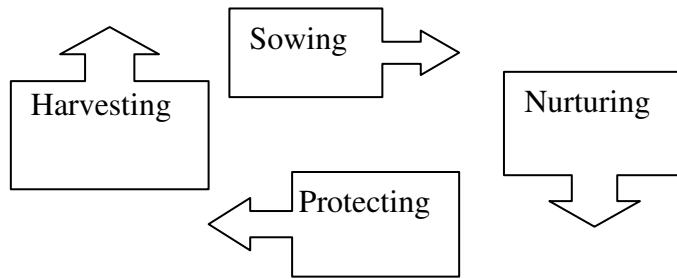
These same four seasons are present in the work of a business, a church or ministry or almost any productive work we attempt. They may not be quite as sequential as the biological journey from seed to fruit but discerning the season gives good clues of the type of work required.

THINKING IT THROUGH:

What is an example in your life where having the wrong perspective, even if you had good motives, produced little or even negative results?

How would you hold up your perspective to the Lord and invite His Spirit to bring your vision into alignment with how God sees the place he has assigned you?

Seasonal Cycle



Example:

A church in the early adult stage wants to give birth to a new expression of ministry. At this stage they have staff and volunteer resources that can be brought to bear on a worthy new work. They want to reproduce new ministry that is bearing redemptive fruit.

They discover that in their community families with special needs children often do not feel that church is a safe place for them or their child. People who do not know the child may judge them as poor parents. The church environment may not provide adequate safety and address specific needs of the child. And the parents may also not want their child to be a hindrance to the spiritual instruction of typically developing children the children's classes are designed to serve.

But these families also have pressing needs for support, encouragement and a spiritual perspective on the challenges they face daily. They are also often networked with other families with special needs. The leaders' sense investing well in the families with whom they have some contact the word will spread quickly through this community.

The church leaders recognize this as a people group in their community who have limited access to the gospel because of the barriers to being a part of many church communities. They know that the love and compassion of Christ followers can make a significant and life changing contribution. The Gospel is surely GOOD NEWS from God for ALL PEOPLE!

So the church leadership begins the journey of asking God to take the seed of an idea and a recently surfaced need and bring kingdom fruit for His glory. They step out with some element of risk and uncertainty. It is a faith adventure because they have never tackled this kind of ministry.

SOWING – We cast many ideas around. We brainstorm broadly. We “blue sky” think and pray and trust that from many of our creative thoughts at least a few will take root and begin to grow a solution to a problem, an answer to a need, or a victory to a challenge in our work.

The Example continues: They go and meet with families of special needs children they do know. They listen widely, read widely, and at they are slow to judge whether any specific idea is workable. They look for ways God may already be at work in giving people a passion in this area or bringing someone into the church with some background working with special needs children.

NURTURING – Most new work goes through a season of fragile establishment. We do our best to invest what has been entrusted to us but we know that if God doesn’t supply passionate leaders, finances, or other resources that are beyond our capacity the start up may die out.

The Example continues: They start small with a shadow program of special trained volunteers who focus on meeting the needs of the three families they already know. There is constant evaluation and a specific prayer support team to undergird the work.

PROTECTING – There are corruptions that can grow from within and there are enemies that may attack from the outside. Work always takes place on battlefields, or other places that are resistant to bearing fruit. It is an odd truth that the world needs the seed to fruit cycle to survive and yet the threats are often so great that fruitfulness seems impossible. It is miraculous that God gets anything done in the church with the likes of us sinful workers with whom he ties His activity coupled with the resistance he allows.

The Example continues: One of the families leaves with hurt and tears one Sunday when they over hear some people wrongly ascribing the behavior of their autistic child to a lack of good biblical discipline. A pastoral staff member must go to the family and also lead in deciding how to best communicate to all of the parents in the children’s ministry the unique challenges the new family is facing. It is a messy, time consuming challenge to turn this pain into a teachable moment for everyone without placing the special needs children and their families in an unwanted spotlight of attention and pity.

HARVESTING – Nothing beats the juicy reward of ripe fruit. There is nothing like the “light bulb” of a student’s understanding coming on as a reward to the teacher patiently sowing and working with students. There is nothing like sharing in the joy of a new Christian freshly liberated from the burdens of needing forgiveness and guilt removed. Paul describes the joy in the work of ministry where one plants and another waters but God gives the

growth.⁵ Jesus reminds the disciples of the joy of the sower and the reaper in God's harvest of souls.⁶

***The Example continues:* A small group in the church begins to provide respite care so two of the couples raising special needs children and who have no family close by can have a date night or even go shopping without always being a caravan. Two volunteer young ladies in the youth ministry are so enjoying being shadow assistants they are considering a career in special education. And one of the children with Down's syndrome is teaching everyone in the children's ministry how to really worship with a free passionate spirit.**

Question: So how does the seasonal cycle of productive labor apply to the stages of the life cycle?

Answer: Some stages of life are more conducive to fruit bearing than others. Just ask most couples in their late fifties if they want to have more children! But as we know God specializes in taking the barren and bringing forth new life. His grace and power shine bright when the dead comes to life. As a coach I encourage leaders to believe God for the fruit of "making disciples" regardless of the stage in the life cycle. But discerning the stage does help know how to pray and helps us accurately the resources God has already supplied and what we need to see him provide for fruit bearing to occur.

Work is really about being PRODUCTIVE or FRUITFUL. Work is rarely satisfying if we sense we are just moving paper around on our desk. Work has a goal, a destination, a harvest as the motivating vision and energizing hope. We may need to stop our work in order to clarify the goal, outcome or desired results. A lack of clarity paralyzes decision making and leaves workers feeling like they are wandering in an endless maze.

Fruitful work is actually known to extend life and enhance health. The most fulfilled people I know who have gone through retirement from one career are still engaged in very productive labor. Boredom and making life all about my pleasure is the opposite of the loving life that is patterned after the love of Jesus. It is the loving life that really knows the abundant life God designed for his children.

Work will always encounter resistance. When we engage in productive labor we frequently face the reality that our resources will not be enough. Humility is an attitude that approaches life's challenges knowing that we need help and that help must come from outside of our self. God needs to show up or little lasting impact will be accomplished. Resistance reminds us that our resources, without God's resource are never enough. The pain God introduces into his creation in Genesis 3 serves a very valuable purpose of

driving us to God. Just ask students who are praying before a test if they need God's help. Just ask teachers who are walking in to the classroom full of students if they need wisdom. The confidence that we were designed to bear fruit is tempered with the awareness that we are not enough.

Fruitfulness is a mystery. There is a part of seeing the seed grow into a fruitful plant that we can understand and participate in, but as Paul says three times in one short paragraph God gives the growth⁷. That is why PRAYER is so foundational and essential in all of our work. Many of the examples of prayer in the Bible encourage us to pray specifically (ask God for what we need to the best degree we can discern it) but also pray submissively (in humility acknowledging our limited perspective) trusting in his good heart to supply what he knows is best.

Mystery also limits the weight we can place on our planning. Farmers, doctors and church planters conduct research seeking to understand the mystery of the seed, the new business or the church plant. The need for investigation highlights our inability to predict the perfect formula that will guarantee the intended results. Some leaders continue to seek the five or seven critical elements that must be present and will guarantee success. The formulas do not work.

Work takes time. A good farmer is a patient farmer. "Shortcuts", "Fads", and "Miracle Cures" abound to speed up and reduce the effort in losing weight, getting rich, growing a church or doing almost anything. They are of little value and in most cases these schemes are a distraction to the work that is really needed. Save your money there is no \$19.95 quick fix to accomplishing fruitful work. Productive labor requires sustained effort over time. Work is exerting the right kind of effort that fits the season of the journey from seed to fruit. There is no shortcut.

Work demands discerning what kind of effort is needed at the right time. A good farmer discerns the season and gives the right kind of investment at the right time. Pull up weeds at the wrong time and you damage the plant growing nearby. Water the fields at the wrong time and the plants rot. Harvest too early and the fruit never ripens. Prune at the wrong time and you may miss a whole cycle of harvest or even kill the plant. Sow at the wrong time and the plant may never break ground before it is killed in a harsh cold. Talk with a church planter to see that these principles apply to more than just raising corn.

The Wisdom in Discerning the Life Cycle Stages

In many ways leading within an organization parallels parenting. The apostle Paul had a perspective of leading the church as "parenting leadership".⁸ Just as parents prioritize various goals and ask different questions at each stage of a child's development leaders need to make sure they understand the priority issues appropriate to the life stage of the organization.

When parents are watching over the child’s development they ask two sets of questions:

One – Health questions – Questions about levels of energy, vitality, ability to learn, and symptoms of illness are examples of the topics that generate various measurements and assessments.

Two – Growth questions – Questions about height, weight, posture, and appearance are examples of the growth topics.

While most parents correctly prioritize health over growth there is a range of normative expectations for both. Poor health surely erodes growth. Growth in itself may not indicate health. Just last week, here in our area, a 15 year old high school student died during a football practice. His growth was very normal but his enlarged heart that went undetected (a health issue) shortened his life. Health normally produces a satisfactory rate of growth.

It may sound spiritual to say, “We may be the same few but we are focused on depth and not shallow breadth.” Often dismissing the lack of growth is masking illness and decay below the surface. There may be cases where simple head count does not indicate the true growth taking place. For example congregations living among a people very resistant to the gospel, or an area where many people physically move and leave the geographic circle of the congregation. But, it is normative to expect health to contribute to fruitful growth.

Thinking It Through:

Can you identify the life cycle stage that best describes where you serve?

Can you identify two examples of from your ministry right now of how the development of fruitful work goes through seasons?

Work Activity or Event	Sowing	Nurturing	Protecting	Harvesting

List the critical task to accomplish or prayers that need to be answered for that season of work to be completed well.

Part Two: The Life Cycle Is a Fact of Life & Death

Everything in God's creation has built in limits.

There is no Biblical or historical basis for the idea that our created structures are blessed with eternal life. If we admit a similarity between the God imposed biological life cycle and organizational life cycle it actually makes more sense to believe that as a person follows a progression from birth to death so would the organizations that are the created work of our hands.

We cannot choose to avoid going through the life cycle.

Doesn't it look foolish to see a 70 year old man attempting to dress like a 25 year old? The preoccupation with avoiding the appearance of getting old does little to change the impact of aging on our state of health and vigor. So, why do we often attempt to manage and envision our organization as if it has an unlimited life line?

Would we build and run our organizations differently if they had an expected terminal point?

The five year mission partnership into Russia known as "CoMission" and the "AD 2000 movement" perhaps are models of organizations built around developing and advancing the overall mission of God's global work without leaving monuments of creaking, aging organizations consuming strategic resources for others to sustain.

People are more valuable than the organizations they build.

Structure emerges out of relationships. People gathering around a mission and experiencing life in community will stimulate the birth of a *context*; some kind of structure. Whether it is the Chinese home churches, Korean mega-churches, or denominational networks the activities of people around common purposes gives birth to organizations.

The structures that emerge are surely colored by cultural definitions of power, responsibilities and economics and many other organizational forces. That cultural finger print on every organization is one reason the church has had many varied shapes through out church history. The organizations have some value serving as the "clothing" for the group. But we cannot equate the value to the everlasting individuals to which they provide covering.

We can "abort", "euthanize", "attempt cloning", and engage in "genetic manipulation" of organizational structures. We are not constrained by the biblical ethical concerns that apply to the most precious work on the planet; human life which is His creation and bears His image.

Organizations are the boxes God gift wraps people in. People are the treasured gifts. Organizations are the containers for communities of disciples to reside in as they gather around a common mission.

People tend to ascribe value to organizations because of the cost and sacrifice invested to create and sustain them. They usually came into being through great sacrifices of sweat and blood; time and money. The facilities that are part of the organization become the sites of many memories of our encounters with our God.

Perhaps God gives organizations a limited shelf life to prevent them from becoming idols we treasure more than Him.

A human life is more like WALKING on a journey than PLANNING with a blueprint.⁹ “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” Most organizational planning processes are very different from going on a journey where God is the initiator and we are responding to His lead.

I have turned Fifty. Yet I had to arrive at that mile marker one day at a time; 18,250 of them to be exact. Each of those days included thousands of steps, leading to hundreds of crossroads, and hundreds of choices. And each day placed me at a different point in my journey. Every one of those days I could say, “I am once again at a place I have never been before”. This “new” place invites me to look around and approach each step in a child like questioning learning mode. Daily, in my never-before-walked-path I am discovering God’s presence and power to respond to every person, event or circumstance He brings to me. Ministering to aging parents, adult children, and a seasoned marriage requires a fresh daily dose of God’s grace.¹⁰

Yet Christian organizations have spent millions of kingdom dollars on long term planning and most of it is a waste. Much of our planning in the church is a sad attempt to copy corporate models of planning. These models have a starting point that leaves no room for a dramatic intervention by God.

Our time lines, projections and budgets may even dull us to anticipating and hungering for Him. Long range planning is often an attempt to extend our very limited human control into the future and “play God” when Jesus has clearly instructed us to invest in the future by how we live today. We are to always place our planning, in humility, under His sovereignty not seeking to project an appearance of our control of the future¹¹.

Christian organizations do need to plan.

Planning for Christians is reminding ourselves what God treasures and then committing to be intentional in pursuing steps, regardless of the reaction of the world around us, to invest in bringing those gifts to him. And what does he treasure? People!¹² This will place the people in a continual process of planning that is more like “walking with the God who is building His church”

instead of a static set of predictions and goals. A "WALKING WITH GOD" planning process will parallel the biblical principles of how an individual navigates the life cycle through seeking wisdom, clinging to God and joining Him in what He is doing.¹³

When it comes to planning there is good news and bad news.

The "good news" is that planning forces us to acknowledge reality and cuts through our denial of serious issues facing us. The Bible is always calling God's people to see them and their world as it really exists.

The "bad news" is that planning will always leave us with a sense of disappointment. In a "fallen" world a great deal of the dreams and desires found in our plans become just another notebook on the shelf. The "planned" point of destination and where we actually arrive will almost never match. And that can be discouraging. West Point teaches soldiers to always plan to replan. They capture the limit of planning with the phrase, "No plan survives contact with the enemy".

God's Spirit often gives leaders a perspective that the future needs to be different from the present.

God's grace gifts leaders with the skills and creativity to propose what those improvements would be and "plan" how to bring them into reality.

God does stir His people with a "groaning" (2 Cor 5, Romans 8) of longing for the sinful decay of this world to be replaced by its intended glory.

God does stir up deep passion in His people for redemptive action, salt and light intervention, and justice inspired compassionate sacrifices. These biases to actions are elements of a normal walk by faith with Him.

But to sit down in a room with "outside experts" and the organizational leaders and map out a 3 to 10 year time line that preserves and advances the organization is often about as far from capturing the wind-like moving of the Spirit as a written program on Sunday morning can predict and orchestrate the worship God intends for His people to experience.

God does not give us a guarantee of long life.

There is a normative 70 year life cycle stated in the Bible but it can be cut short by many different causes. People often ask me to put time frames on the stages of the organizational life cycle. I can't do it. Just as you meet some individuals who at 75 years old are on the "incline" in terms of living with a sense of new beginnings and faith risks, you can meet 25 year olds who have already reached serious "decline". Some organizations may serve the people of God for just a brief historical moment and yet leave a legacy of a prayer movement or a mobilization of laborers for the harvest.

God's sovereignty surely includes our created structures.

God raising up leaders and casting down nations is seen many times in the Bible. God has many ways of touching our structures to accomplish His greater goal of freeing human hearts to a loving relationship under His rule.

Psalm 2 illustrates how God sees the world's attempts to "rule" in rebellion against Him. At the end of the Psalm the call goes to leaders to both bow and find refuge in His gracious rule. Many of Jesus parables described in visual terms how God deals with those who attempt to live apart from acknowledging their need for Him. (Luke 18:8-9) God often uses forces outside of our organizations to either "shape" or "replace" our structures. Just ask Jeremiah! God has no problem sweeping our kingdoms into the dust bin to get our attention and bring us to him.

Organizations only have value to the degree they serve God's people.

One of the key indicators that an organization is in "decline" is when people feel in bondage to the organizational structure instead of empowered by it. They feel pressured, often by the leaders, to sustain an organization that no longer is contributing effectively to the original mission. Healthy structures channel empowerment and engagement to all involved. Unhealthy structures become like massive ticks—sucking resources, strength and focus from people that should be invested toward the mission.

An organization only has value to the degree that it serve God's purposes.

Desire and passion motivates the choices that build a life. C.S. Lewis in MERE CHRISTIANITY says the problem is that many expressions of human desire are too small. We go for food, drink, and sex – because they are shadows of the real desire for God, heaven and glory.

Many organizations built by Christians as tools to propel people into God's kingdom adventure but within a few generations become museums; filled with casual observers slowly filing past pictures portraying victories of days gone by. The desires of the people within the organization become too small. These shrunken motivations speed the decay of the organizations. What a challenge to make sure that the desires that are fueling an organization are fitting and God sized.

Since there seems to be strong historical evidence that desire declines from the founding generation to latter ones we should not be surprised that our structures begin to falter as the vision, drive, and passions of the people decline. Perhaps this is why God often is into birthing new organizational expressions as others decay and die? Scripture and history tell repeated stories of God's people raising up new ministry expressions out of the death

of other structures. Perhaps we could advance the work of Christ by holding some organizational funerals and being more open to new births.

Thinking It Through:

Can you see organizational drift from the original purpose of its creation?

Have the perspective on these aspects of organizational culture affected the health of the organization?

Plans and View of the Future

Value on People Over Structure

Organizational Values Shifting from Empowering People for Service to Consuming and Being Served by the People

Shrinking of Desires and Motivations Fueling Decisions Being Made

PART THREE: The Symptoms of a Declining, Unhealthy Organization

Unhealthy organizations resist and avoid change.

I find one major reason organizations shift from an incline/growth stage to an incline and then decline stages. A single, often unstated, value is given permission to take root among the people and pushes the organization over the top and into decline. This hidden value is, **"Our major job is to preserve and protect the past"**.

The leaders are usually the ones most acutely aware of the challenges and cost that have been incurred to get the organization to a point of stable existence. They now shift to seeking ways to avoid challenges, and measure new ideas against how they will shake up the current structure that has been raised.

One characteristic which shows up in many declining organizations that live to preserve and protect is the high investment in perfecting the systems. Bylaws, policy manuals, and detailed plans outlining how the people can conduct the coming year in much the same manner as the previous year are often a serious hindrance to change. While many of these elements are not in themselves bad they often become used as anchors to keep the organization in place.

For example, a procedure manual can conserve energy so that the leaders are not treating every decision and action as a precedent. It also serves as a template to reflect and distill what has been gained in previous experience. But if the unstated agenda for these organizational refinements is a way to resist change these tools lead against the flow of creativity and risk that is vital to a living walk of faith. **In declining organizations the refined structure becomes a source of security and safety that displaces God as our refuge.**

Declining organizations experience an uneven rate of decay.

In our biological life cycle aging becomes a series of small losses punctuated by a major loss which then triggers other major losses. With an individual a person's weight increases slowly just a few more pounds each year and in turn slowly decrease mobility. The weight may also "shift" into certain parts of the body so that physical flexibility also decreases. The vision and hearing may erode so slowly the person fails to even notice the loss. Then one day a poorly placed step as the person is going down some steps results in a fall and a hip (which has slowly in small increments over several years become more brittle) shatters. Now, in a moment of crisis, a series of major decisions have to be made. The home place is closed and the person is moved into long term care. Driving their car and a large degree of independence are lost forever.

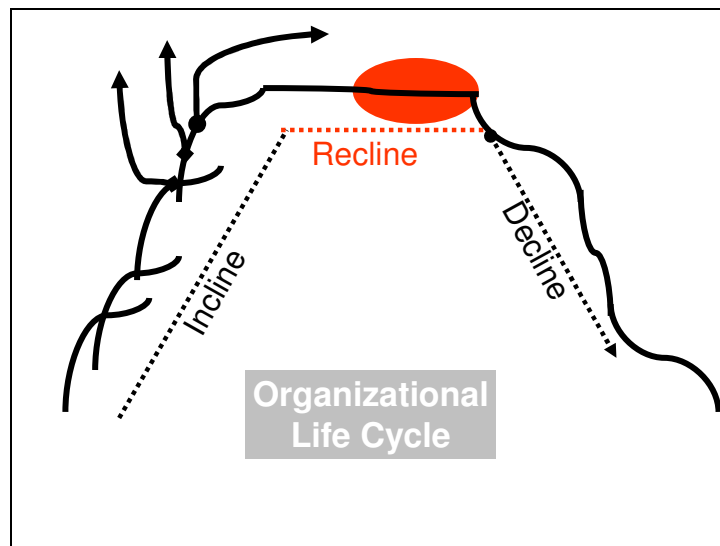
The same kind of uneven rate of decline can be observed in organizations. That is why the reality of decline is easy to deny until it is almost too late to correct and lengthen the healthy productive adult years of the organization.

Declining organizations usually require a crisis before they will face reality.

Many of the reclining or serious declining organizations, who contact me for consulting, feel that a painful failure has forced them to consider reaching out for help. They want escape or relief from the circumstances that threaten the life of the organization.

Examples of a crisis that triggers a call for help could be:

- Failing to received the income for the general budget,
- A major push for funds for a new facility crashes and does not produce enough resources to even begin to act on the plan,
- Major staff or volunteer leaders leave or resign their positions and move to the sidelines to observe.



I have placed a colored circle in the life cycle diagram to indicate this critical moment. In the life of a person it could be when they experience the "first heart incident". Picture a male, in his early fifties, 30 pounds overweight, no vacation in three years, long hours under stressful work, junk food, and couch potato life style – and now a wake up call – the first heart attack.

What do the doctors ask the man?

- "Do you want to live for a short time or a longer time?"
- "What do you want the quality of the life you have left to be?"
- "Do you want to push yourself into major surgery?"

This is a painful way to get one's attention.

The only good news is that basic habits of a healthy life (proper diet, rest, and exercise) that **should** have been part of the adult life style since the fellow's early twenties must become part of how he lives; starting today. The doctor's prescription is calling the patient to serious, radical repentance. Many habits must be abandoned RIGHT NOW and many new habits formed or reformed. And the reality is that most patients know deep inside what the healthy life style should be, but somehow lived by the deceptive thoughts that the rules do not apply to them.

There are basic habits of walking with God into steps of engagement, evangelism, and discipleship that developed a healthy spiritual heart maturing in faith, hope and love. Somewhere along the way these very basic disciplines became fondly told memories of the past but have been lost to the present experience. The people talk about the messy early years, like a couple recalling the first few years of financial struggle in their marriage.

But all of those risky adventures are in the past. They have lost the desire to be in a place where the resources are few, and the creativity and risk are high. They have attempted to create a lifestyle that allows them to avoid the almost helpless sense of dependence on God and replace it with "blessings" of comfortable clean predictability.

Does our organizational life ever fall into a similar lifestyle?

It is amazing that some who have the first heart attack fail in making the simple prescribed lifestyle changes. They may make some attempts, and the first few months hope may grow from the new steps being taken, but somehow the changes do not really "take". Like a wave breaking on the beach, the crisis subsides and life drifts back into the tidal pools of unhealthy habits.

Leaders in declining organizations hasten the decline if they are afraid to call for the deep level of surrender and repentance needed.

If leaders fear the level of conflict will be too great because of the degree of change needed they simply back down and the organization fails to learn the lessons from their "heart incident". Some will blame a pastor or other staff member and think the cure is simply in swapping leaders. Others will turn on fellow leaders. Blame and denial become ways to direct energy away from the intentional repentant like changes needed.

Leaders can also seek to avoid the cost of long term endurance and look for a "magic pill" that will suddenly (in no more than 3 months to a year) bring the organization back into vital health. In most cases the organization did not get into unhealthy recline and decline in a just a short period of time and in reality there are no magic pills that allow a person to continue to eat all of the bad stuff they enjoy and drop 30 pounds in 30 days.

There is no substitute for daily steps of faith. These **faith** steps attempt the risky journey holding God's hand. These steps are made with a God focused **hope** that endures like a long distance runner putting one foot in front of another mile after mile, and **love** that gives, sacrifices for the beloved, and serves no matter the costs.

But in declining organizations a spirit of **fear** has choked out steps of faith. **Addiction to fads**, shortcuts, and attempting to copy what God is doing somewhere else has displaced enduring, steadfast, creative positive hope, and a consuming, "what is in it for me" **lusting** has blocked the vessels of a heart designed by its creator for a flow of sacrificial, laying down life kind of love.

Unhealthy organizations are fueled by fear.

Fear has many looks. Leaders can use bureaucracy and paperwork as a low cost substitute for sitting down in honest conversation. Where fear dictates the choices will be expressions of denial, pride, and selfishness. There will many hours spent in "us" and "them" and "win/lose" types of conversations.

Declining organizations cultivate a culture of control that seeks to minimize or avoid risk. One indicator of whether an organization is being fueled by faith or fear is to examine how "conversation" takes place. When people use e-mail or letters to confront instead of a face to face encounter they are usually avoiding relational risk in other ways as well.

The fear culture reeks with the smell of death and the rotting infected flesh. Around a dying person lights are kept low, conversations are held at low volume off in the shadows, and frequently no one wants to talk openly with the person about what is really going on. **Truth becomes a rare commodity.** Leaders say what they sense people want to hear. People talk to everyone about the problems except those who could do something about them. Gossip, disunity, and selfishness thrive in the declining organization.

Small issues that really don't matter become major topics of debate. In Jesus day it was issues like hand washing, Sabbath practices and avoiding contact with certain people, that allowed the religious leaders to avoid their heart and the major work God wanted to do in them.

Since it is only faith that pleases God the fear ruling organizational culture must be confronted, repented of, and replaced with a culture of trust, endurance and devotion.¹⁴ And no new draft of a plan or fresh vision statement on the wall will help.

Declining organizations live for the short term.

Strategies to pursue comfort, ease, stability, and avoid pain fill up the calendar. Yet Jesus spoke often of investing the present moment for long-

term heavenly reward. In unhealthy Christian organizations the blessing of God is being defined as the absence of pain or risk. This is in sharp contrast to a biblical definition being God's blessing TO his people so they become a blessing TO others. He pours blessing through his people. But in a declining organization personal comfort becomes the new definition of blessing and the focus of prayers.

Declining organizations are often very busy places.

They are choking on high levels of activity. They are drowning in their in a full service menu of providing a buffet of blessing for those who are members of the organization. Remember the parable of the seed being choked out by the thorns. Go back to Jesus' commentary on the parable and make a list of what the weeds really represent.¹⁵

Healthy organizations give away. Unhealthy organizations fill the garage, basement and attics with stuff they are determined to hold on to with a death grip. This abundance creates confusion and complexity to the organization. Every decision that needs to be made has to consider so many factors that it becomes almost impossible to move forward. New people are lost in a maze that only long timers can navigate. This effectively cancels the influence of anyone who does know all of the written and unwritten rules.

Many people never make it to the mission field because they settle down and fill up their lives with cars, home, debts, obligations (many of which may not be wrong in themselves) but are dead weight a person on the move cannot afford. Many churches need a good house fire or at least a clean sweep garage sale to free the leadership to introduce changes that express "tearing down the gates of hell" advances.

Thinking It Through:

Read this passage and note any application to your life or your leadership.

**May the God of peace,
who through the blood of the eternal covenant
brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great Shepherd of the sheep,
equip you with everything good for doing his will,
and may he work in us what is pleasing to him,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.
Hebrews 13:20-21**

Look back over the list of characteristics of reclining and declining organizations. Are any of these present in your organization? How can you pray about them?

PART FOUR: Key Principles and Practices of Vital & Effective Organizations

Have you ever heard any of the comedian Jeff Foxworthy's "redneck jokes"? They all follow the same opening. **"You might be a redneck if... your house has wheels and your cars sit in the yard on blocks."**

Well, your organization might be inclining if... you are practicing vigorous continual assessment. Effective organizations measure everything they spend time or money on in pursuit of the purposes.

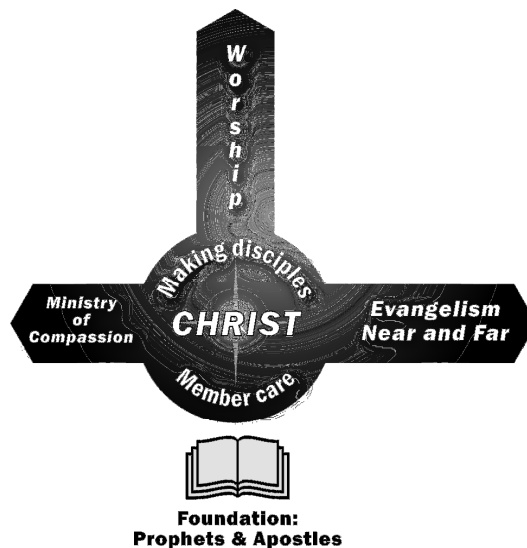
What are the biblical purposes of the church?

They have been outlined in different ways by leaders seeking to focus disciples strategically.

Gene Getz over 40 years ago had two: edification and evangelism¹⁶. Chuck Swindoll used the acrostic W.I.F.E. (the church as the bride of Christ) to help us remember the purposes of worship, instruction, fellowship and evangelism.¹⁷ More recently Rick Warren uses a baseball diamond visual for the five purposes of worship, loving, growing, serving, and sharing.¹⁸

One thing these various lists have in common is that they seek to describe a healthy gathering of Christians in terms of "being" and "doing".

A very clear and balanced description of the purpose of the church is found in Unit Two of Robertson McQuilkin's *The Five Smooth Stones: Essential Principles for Biblical Ministry*.



For each of these critical functions leadership asks questions to determine if the money, time and gifting of God's people is carrying out these purposes.

Leadership continually revisits the “right questions”. Here are some sample questions based on Robertson’s work of bringing how we do church under the functional authority of the Bible.¹⁹

1. Worship is defined biblically in terms of whole-life worship. The music ministry is God focused, not man-focused, and developed in a way that all can fully participate emotionally and spiritually.
2. The teaching ministry of the church is multi-faceted, including small group accountability, and the results in spiritual transformation and growth are evident.
3. Member care reaches beyond spiritual pastoring to full-service emotional, physical, and material responsibility for all members.
4. The congregation has programs and involvement in mercy ministries to the community at home and abroad.
5. It is assumed that every member has a Spirit given ability (gift) to minister. The church has a program and leadership in place to help every member discover, develop to the full, and deploy his or her gifting and calling.
6. People understand that talents, while not the same as Spirit given gifts, but given in creation and growth, should be invested for Gods’ glory.
7. When some purpose of the church is less than optimally fulfilled, the leaders and members actively “desire earnestly” in prayer the Spirit gifts necessary.
8. Corporate prayer is pervasive (involving a majority of members, and in many formats), vital, expectant (faith-filled), and focused on spiritual needs of the congregation, the community and the unreached of the world, not just on the physical needs of the members.
9. The constantly articulated goal is for all members to be faithful witnesses in life and talk.
10. Teaching and training are provided to guide and empower for effective witness. Evidence is seen in consistent ‘body-life reproduction.’
11. Leaders are constantly on the look-out for those who might be evangelistically gifted and provide training and encouragement to make them ever more effective.
12. The church body is knowledgeable and concerned about the unreached of the world, and a steady stream of career missionaries moves out from the congregation.
13. Short-term ministry and financial provision for God’s people away from home are carefully planned and harnessed to maximize Kingdom effectiveness.
14. Prayer for global outreach is informed, vital, and pervasive throughout the body, throughout the year.
15. Great effort is put into in helping people progress in their level of investment in ministry. Tithing is expected and honest managership is encouraged. Sacrificial love giving is celebrated.

Evaluation is not always a written inventory. It is part of the culture to be asking how everything is going and how it can be improved. For example here are four questions used in a weekly pastoral staff meeting to help them focus their time on the right purposes.

- 1. How did you invest time with pre-Christians this past month?**
- 2. How did you invest time developing new Christians?**
- 3. How did you invest time in developing leaders?**
- 4. How did you invest time in self-leadership development of your private, personal and public spheres of influence?**

By the way, the pastoral staff members are not penalized for admitting struggles in these four questions. For people to grow from facing hard questions there must be a "safe place" where grace and truth are mixed in equal portions to empower change and growth.

Rigorous intentional evaluation and assessment in some of Christian organizations is viewed as unspiritual; because it is argued this is seeking to measure outcomes only God can give. **We should carefully examine to make sure our questions, yardsticks, and benchmarks are aligning with the questions God asks His people.** Spiritual blindness and deafness was a major problem among the Jews of the first century. They saw and heard truth but were unwilling to use their eyes to see or their ears to hear how it connected to their hearts. John Gardner of Common Cause says, "Most ailing organizations have developed a functional blindness to their own defects. They are not suffering because they cannot solve their problems, but because they cannot see their problems."²⁰ Healthy evaluation that challenges us to examine our actions closely is simply making sure we are "seeing" and "hearing" the connection between what we know and are doing. A heart that is not seeing and hearing is a divided heart.

Psalm 86:11-12 Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. **12**I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.

2 Chron. 25:1-2 Amaziah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Jehoaddin; she was from Jerusalem. **2**He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, but not wholeheartedly.

Your organization might be inclining if...your leaders have a mature perspective on conflict.

Healthy leaders understand that when people show up filled with questions, even if the questions are delivered with some anger, they need to receive

them. The attacking manner of conversing provides a character development teaching moment but we can begin by giving thanks that they feel strongly about something. One of my pastoral mentors, Ron Barker, has often said, "It is easier to tame the demoniac than to raise the dead!" Strong emotion may not always be justified but it does indicate passion and life and perhaps even a deep desire for the organization to be effective.

Your organization is probably inclining if...leaders are open to questions.

Revisiting good questions is a means to keep us before God in a healthy humility. God delights in the pliable heart of soft potter's clay. When leaders are teachable and anticipating His correction, guidance and grace in their walking with Him He delights to walk with us.

**"He lets the proud walk alone as they desire, but He walks closely with the humble"
(Roy's paraphrase).**

Leaders who chop off the head of those raising the tough questions, or leaders who only allow those around them who agree with them, are in a dangerous place. An unwillingness to be exposed by a probing question usually indicates pride and a desire to cover up what deep down we fear may be wrong.

The life cycle divides organizational life into three stages. The incline stage could be broken down further into "birth", "early childhood", "adolescence", and "early adult." The organization's right questions change at each stage.

In "birth" there is a blank page and the leaders are simply asking how to invest the few resources they have for a make maximum impact.

- What is critical to our survival and let's make sure it is getting most of our focus?
- How do we get new people IN?
- How do we get everyone contributing their time and energy?
- How do we get people to support this cause?
- Who is praying?
- Are our families surviving our sacrificial investment of time?

As the fragile newborn moves into **childhood** the challenges become one of taking the many "firsts". The first step, first word, first tying of shoes, by a young child parallel organizational "firsts" such as, the first mission partnership, the first multiplication of small groups, and the first church discipline crisis.

- Who has the camera? Did you get a picture/video of THAT?
- We have done... (fill in blank with almost anything) before. How do we do it?

- Will we perform basic practices like singing, baptism, communion, collecting offerings based on the experiences we have had in our past experience or does this need to be different to capture and express our new values we are seeking to live out?
- A church that is helping to sponsor us has offered --- a communion set of plates and trays, OR their last year Vacation Bible School curriculum, OR an invitation to participate in an evangelism rally. Do we receive the gift and hide it in the closet until the next yard sale? Do we just go with it? Do we carefully decline?
- A friend is going into missions and has asked for our support. Do we ignore his e-mail and hope we don't run into each other? Do we seek to get the leadership to see this as a faith exercise and go for it? Do we take the time to work on how our vision and values will be lived out in our missions giving?

As the organization matures there is a wildness that comes with discovering new levels of **teenage** like energy and resource. There is a flood of good ideas and the "good" questions become ones of determining priority and separating the good from the best.

- Why can't we do every good idea someone has read about, heard on Christian radio, or was done in their previous church?
- On one hand we want everyone involved but how do we also tell them we cannot lead if everyone is doing their own thing?
- Everyone has an opinion but who is willing to commit to really sacrifice and follow through?
- Do we continue to handle every decision or do we form some policies that express our values and speed up decisions on some things?

In early **adulthood** we choose long term relationships and often begin to have our own children. There is a need to plan for the future, and determine what percentage of resources will be "saved" for future opportunities versus pouring out all resources on the present situations.

- At what level can we partner with organizations that differ from us on some beliefs or values?
- What aspects of the work do we invest paid staff energy in and which do we seek to continue with volunteers?
- Where are the leaders? How do we discover and develop and deploy enough leaders for all of the opportunities around us?
- What facilities do we need to serve the organization?

Your organization is probably inclining if... you are practicing frequent organizational repentance.

I am using repentance to seek a fresh word for describing what is often radical organizational decision making. Personal repentance is "turning from" and "turning to"²¹. Organizational repentance is stopping and making needed realignment. Continual refocusing corrects the natural tendency to turn inward or turn away from walking with God in His purposes. Organizational

life has many parallels to organic life. Plants will grow out in many directions and require a gardener willing to intentionally cut if the plant is to be effectively fruitful.

Pruning creates capacity.

Just look at apple trees that have been carefully pruned each year and then contrast it to the quantity and quality of the fruit from an old tree that has gone many years without pruning.

Too often when I come in as a consultant I feel like I have entered an archeological dig with all of the layers of years of life exposed.

Sunday School was evaluated during this year and instead of making needed changes we left it alone and added another layer of Sunday evening small groups.

A few years later small groups are exposed as having some failures in making disciples so we do nothing that would threaten or stir up those leaders. Out of fear and just the fun of doing something new we add a dynamic Men's and Women's ministry.

You get the idea.

Twenty years down the road we have layers upon layers of mediocre ministries which are only marginally effective in making disciples and now we have no more margin to add anything new and we couldn't find breathing leaders for a new layer anyway.

Fear based layering also limited personal growth of those leading and faithfully seeking to make the programs in each layer work.

At some point it begins to cave in on itself.

The good thing (satirical humor here!) is there so many layers and people involved we can find lots of people to blame!

There are three ways for leaders to choose to invest the life of an individual or organization:

- 1 – Do nothing,
- 2 – Do too many things; the distracted, busy, shallow life,
- 3- Do a few things; the ones placed in your path by God. (Matthew 25:21)

[1 John 5:2-3](#) "This is how we know [ASSESSMENT] that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. [3](#)This is love for God:

[ACTION ALIGNMENT] to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome”

1 Cor. 9:25-26 Everyone who competes in the games goes into [ALIGNEMENT] strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶Therefore I do not run like a man [ASSESSMENT] running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.

You might be in an inclining organization if... you embrace living in a messy organizational life.

If you notice in the visual of the life cycle the “incline” side of the cycle is not one smooth upward swing but many spurts, births, restarts, and new expressions. Instead of finding something that works and then just staying with it until it dies, leaders see that the context around them is changing, the people in the organization are changing (new people arrive, others leave, as well as many people growing) so they anticipate and actually give permission to “experiments”, “creative risks”, and “new ventures” which flow in alignment with the mission.

At times, the leaders will detect there has been mission “drift” and they will “kill” or “dismantle” some structures that many casual observers would say are working fine. They have a learning spirit that says we must go back to the foundation, assume we know nothing, and rebirth. Willow Creek Church leaders say that at any given time 20% of their ministry structures are in forced “remodeling” from the ground up. It gives the organization the feel of always being under construction, never being finished. It is intentional flexibility.

In Daniel 1 Daniel and his three friends bring redesign to the training structure imposed on them. How? Junias Venugopal points out they functioned as thermostats not thermometers. A thermometer only reflects and records the temperature while a thermostat brings the room temperature into alignment with its standard. Leaders in healthy organizations are thermostats.

You might be in an inclining organization if... there is energy being invested in making sure people know they matter.

In effective organizations people are treasured the way God treasures them. The leaders are committed to never leaving one of their own behind on the battlefield. These leaders possess a shepherd’s heart going looking for the one lost from the ninety-nine. They do not shoot those wounded by their sinful choices. And they cultivate a culture where there is a freedom to fail. I am not primarily speaking of sinful failure but of simply missing a goal or trying something that does not produce the anticipated result. Wounding (sinful actions) and Failure (faithful service with a learning opportunity), both

require wise application of grace and truth. In healthy organizations there are costly investments of relational energy yielding fruits of healing, restoration, learning, and growth.

You might be in an inclining organization if... there are seasons of grieving the loss of some people.

While leaders are committed deeply to an environment that reflects God's heart for people, they are also not forcing or manipulating people into staying in the organization. Jesus never begged, forced or manipulated followers. People may choose to not stay with the organization as it moves along in its journey.

Sometimes those who leave may gain perspective and return having experienced a personal surgery with God that sets them free from fears or resistance of the changes. Some people may simply need another environment to live out their walk with God. And some may be like the people who simply turned and followed Jesus no more.

People breaking away, or those who are moved along by God assigning them to another expression of service are some of the relational painful losses leaders grieve. Learning to mourn is essential for those who will endure in leadership.

You might be in an inclining organization if...people are enjoying and encouraging both DIRECT and FACILITATIVE ministry.

Leaders enjoy contributing their gifts to the work of God in human hearts. But an even greater joy is seeing people around them beginning to contribute what God has entrusted to them. Leading requires being "player/coaches". The leaders may run, block or tackle, but the effective player/coaches know the most strategic part of their work is when they are assisting others on the team in being effective.

Does it often take more time to do something "through" or "with" someone else for the sake of their development versus doing it myself? Yes! But as we can observe in both God's creation and redemptive dramas He does not place the priority on efficiency that some cultures do. God is surely effective but often extravagant, patient, and goes to the extreme to connect to and involve us in His work.

You might be in an inclining organization if...if open heart surgery has become a normal occurrence and is not really a "big thing".

We all live with three spheres of influence and responsibility around us. The outer circle is our public world. People touching our public life usually only see what we plan for them to see. We control what is known about us. Our inner circle is our personal world. Family, friends, and close associates see

us in more unguarded moments. They observe more of our life so they know more of who we really are, and what our heart values. But even in our personal world we hide and determine levels of disclosure. In our private world only you and God are the required audience. We may choose to let part of our private world show into our personal or public worlds, but we can also close out aspects of it –even to our spouse.

When God works in the human heart He touches all of these circles. But He is never content to only work in the public or even personal world. He is always aiming at the private, the heart, the intimate place where He lives and connects with the real us. Effective organizations understand God's target for activity and actively participate in the process.

You might be in an inclining organization if... there are parties celebrating and embracing change as a good and healthy aspect of being alive.

How can we read passages like 1 Corinthians 15 or 2 Corinthians 5 and not see that God is all about resurrection, restoring glory and new creation. God's physical world, even in its groaning with sin and death, still reflects His love for change. Change is very similar to physical movement. Change is an expense of energy that influences motion. Movement in the organic world is one indication of life. It is the same with our created structures. Change is an indicator of life. No change – check the pulse.

You might be in an inclining organization if... people are not surprised that change (movement) has created a level of conflict (heat).

Lay down this book for a moment. Place your palms together and begin to move them back and forth against each other. Your hands were created to "fit" and yet these incredibly similar parts still create friction in their movement.

Christian leaders should be those who celebrate change just like the angels in heaven rejoice over the "change" of one sinner's heart. And at the same time leaders are in tune with the reality of sin's pollution of the human heart and the basic resistance to God's will present throughout creation. Healthy leaders then are not surprised by conflict. They expect conflict to be present and approach it with both God's **truth** (fuel that drives change through asking questions, learning, and experimenting) and God's **grace** (the oil of authenticity, vulnerability, healing compassionate care, and a thankful praise filled spirit).

Most things wrong in an individual's or organization's life are the result of failing to do the right things.

That means that many of our changes are really steps of repenting; turning so we can go in the right direction. Repentance is THE path of transformation with God. We never come under His touch that is making us more like Christ apart from a loving assault on our pride and a submission of humble trusting in His will being best.²² Therefore, needed organizational change is often simply part of God's way to get at deeper individual repentance and our relational conflicts are the heat needed to thaw the unresponsive heart.

In marriage one says "NO" to all other possible spouses in order to say "YES" to the one beloved. During the wedding the man and woman are not even aware of the "NO" they are declaring to all other potential partners because his/her heart is responding to the loved one with a declaration of "YES, yes, yes". God is working into the hearts of His disciples that same kind of loving, relaxed, unforced obedience to His will.

Thinking It Through:

Read these passages on the heart and apply them to leading an inclining/growing life and organization.

Psalm 119:32 I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.

Psalm 73:25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

Psalm 16:2 I said to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."

Philip. 3:8-11 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. **10** I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Review the characteristics of inclining organizations.

Select the ones that need to be reviewed often for you to maintain a correct perspective.

Are there characteristics that you need to discuss with the leaders in the organization?

Are there ministries that need PRUNING? What would pruning to increase capacity look like?

Instead of adding new layers what would it look like to use this as a teachable moment to develop those involved in this ministry?

Remember the SEASONS of work (Sowing, Nurturing, Protecting and Harvesting). What are some aspects of your ministry that need these specific types of work?

According to the Life Stage of the organization list good questions you need to be asking often that will keep you in alignment with walking out a faith adventure of redemptive love.

A Prayer For Leaders

Father, we need leaders with Christ-courage who will hold a funeral before they pray for a resurrection.

We need leaders who lead the way in repentance.

We need leaders who know how to lead, not from above, or even from below, but leading from among the people.

We need leaders to step back in order to gain a wise perspective but are not "armchair quarterbacks" who feel it is their right to shout instructions from the stands.

Lord, it is unnerving to consider but it is true. Organizations become like their leaders. To a large degree organizations DO what the leaders and people pray about. Please help us repent of praying too small and with fear instead of faith.

Great Reconciler, we know that in a sinful world there will always be relational breakdowns. But just as the major story of the Bible is you reconciling us to yourself through Christ's suffering and death give us leaders willing to embrace a ministry of reconciliation and the loving sacrifice that will be required.

By faith we declare that until the mission of God for the church of making disciples among all people is fulfilled and Christ returns no Christian is ever unemployed.

In hope we affirm that organizations will surely decay and die and new organizations will be birthed from the passion and gifts invested by leaders and the people.

In love we desire to work with our brothers and sisters through these various frail organizations to demonstrate the truth and grace found abundantly in Christ our Lord.

For His Glory – Amen.

Would you like to receive a free e-mail that links you to fresh ministry resources?
Go to www.royking.org

Resources

I have been learning about Life Cycle theory for several years. Here are some readings that apply it to churches and parachurch structures.

Arnold L. Cook. Historical Drift: Must My Church Die? Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 2000. Arnold is past president of the CMA Canada. As a denominational leader he writes to both congregational and parachurch leaders. He offers hope through a biblical model of repentance, revival and renewal to extend the effective life of declining organizations.

George Bullard. "Congregational Passages," an occasional publication of the National Consultant for Denominational Transformation, Vol. One, No. One, (August, 1996) George can be reached through www.bullardjournal.org . He has many self-published articles, reflections, and research on the life cycle applied to congregations. George is a national church consultant.

Terry Walling. Refocusing Leaders and Refocusing Churches available from ChurchSmart Publications (1-800-253-4276). Terry has become a mentor and friend who has taken the leadership emergent theory concepts framed by Bobby Clinton and applied them to leaders and organizations. I am especially grateful to the CRM (Church Resource Ministries) team, including Gary Mayes, who instructed me on life cycle theory in their Refocusing training workshops.

Martin Robinson & Dwight Smith. Invading Secular Space: Strategies for Tomorrow's Church. London: Monarch Books, 2003. Martin is a church consultant in the UK. Dwight is president of Saturation Church Planting Intl and has taught at Columbia Intl. University. Chapter six deals specifically

with life cycle but this is a helpful book written in the format of consultants seeking to coach church leaders into multiplication strategies.

Hans Finzel. Change is Like a Slinky: 30 Strategies for Promoting and Surviving Change in Your Organization. Chicago: Northfield, 2004. Hans is the president of World Venture (formerly known as CBIInternational) Chapter 22 deals with assessing your organization from a life cycle perspective and offers probing questions. Hans writes as one journaling a season of major change in an established mission agency.

Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch. The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ, 2003. Two Australian church leaders outline a global perspective on the church and practical strategies emerging in a the new global context. Starting on page 177 they connect the APEPT model (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor, Teacher) of cluster leaders to life cycle theory. They suggest which types of leadership contribution are most relevant to each life stage.

¹ David Olson, The American Church in Crisis

² Genesis 2:15

³ Genesis 3

⁴ Mark 4:26-29 This parable about the mystery of life within the seed is also used as a foundational principle of Natural Church Development by Christian Schwarz.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:1-10

⁶ John 4

⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:1-5

⁸ 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

⁹ 1 John 2:6

¹⁰ Matthew 6

¹¹ James 4:13-17

¹² Study Romans 15: 1-17 to see how Paul reminded himself and the church of God's heart for the entire world and how Paul saw worship and ministry as intentionally being priests bringing an offering of Gentiles to God.

¹³ See 2 Corinthians 1:1-21 for an example of how Paul viewed his ministry as radical dependence on God and the prayers of other believers.

¹⁴ Hebrews 11:6

¹⁵ Mark 4:1-20

¹⁶ Gene Getz. *Sharpening the Image of the Church*

¹⁷ Charles Swindoll. *The Bride*

¹⁸ Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Church*

¹⁹ For a full study on the purposes of the Church see Robertson McQuilkin's *Five Smooth Stones: Essential Principles for Biblical Ministry*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007.

²⁰ Price Pritchett & Ron Pound. *Change: Facing the Problems and Finding the Opportunities*.

²¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

²² Luke 9:23 is a good principle for God's activity. The encounter with the rich young man who Jesus loved but walked away is a good example.

Roy King, 2010

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