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Life Cycles of Ministry Settings

1. **Birth & Infancy**: When churches are planted, they are all about the vision. They have a clear direction and a deep burden to reach people with the gospel and build up disciples. At first, though, that’s all they have. Vision is strong and relationships are natural, but programs are lacking and management systems are weak. This is why church plants can be so exciting but also so volatile in the early years.
2. **Childhood & Adolescence**: After about five to six years, a church moves into childhood and from there into adolescence. It’s at this phase when the numbers have grown to the point that more energy needs to be invested in programs and organizational structures. The vision is still strong and programs have been introduced, but relationships often suffer as a result. As in human adolescence, there’s an awkwardness in this stage of the church’s growth, because there’s been an infusion of new people to the church without an adequate plan or resources to handle them.
3. **Adulthood & Maturity**: A church reaches adulthood when the management systems or processes in the church have finally caught up with the growth, so that vision, relationships and programs find a healthy balance. The church feels like it has finally arrived. Unfortunately, though, it this feeling of having arrived that often leads the church into complacency. And the vision slowly fades from the clarity it once held. In the second half of this stage, as vision continues to diminish, younger age groups in the church start to decline. Although the church is facing an impending crisis, it is often oblivious to this fact because its programs are strong, its finances are healthy and it has a strong history of success. He quotes Peter Drucker who said, “It’s just human propensity to start in a clearly defined direction and then to veer off the path somehow and to wind up not doing what you originally started to do.”
4. **Empty Nest & Retirement**: Twenty-five to thirty years into the life-cycle of a congregation, the church enters the empty nest phase. Now the lack of intentional investment in the vision of the church begins to show and programs wane in their effectiveness as a result. Relationships are the glue which hold the church together and management systems control what happens. Nostalgia, dissatisfaction and conflict are common at this stage, but people often feel that the problem is a lack of commitment.
5. **Old Age & Death**: A congregation in the retirement stage is spinning its wheels trying for renewal. When it gives up hope and runs out of the resources to change, it enters old age. In this period, vision, relationships and programs are all weak and in decline and only management systems are functioning in a significant way.