

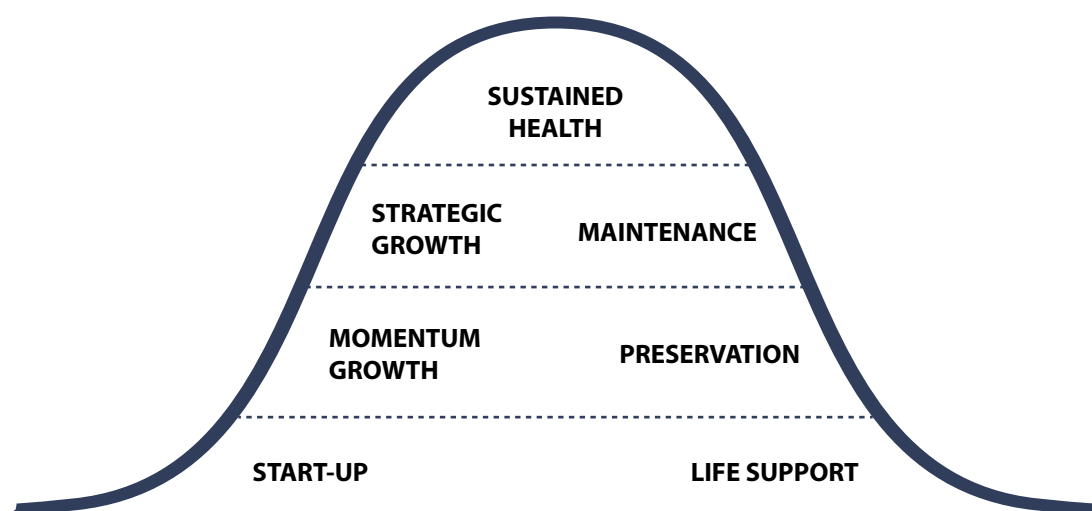
EXPANDING THE KINGDOM THROUGH HEALTHY CHURCHES

Why Church Health Matters

In 2017 Lifeway Research reported that 65% of all churches in the United States are either stagnant or in decline.

84% of all churches are either in decline or experiencing a growth rate slower than the population growth for their community.

Most church growth experts agree (Aubrey Malphurs, Tony Morgan, etc.) that churches have a natural lifecycle. Just like all living organisms, churches will naturally flow from birth to death. The lifespan of the church is variable, but the stages in the lifecycle are inevitable. Lifeway's numbers would indicate that, in America today, we have more churches on the back end of their lifecycle than on the front end.



Our ability to identify where a prospective church partner is in its lifecycle will determine our ability to offer appropriate services, the right kind of coaching and the best way forward.

What the Numbers Say and Why it Matters

Duke University's National Congregation Study, in combination with a national study conducted by Faith Communities Today, reports that 97.5% of the approximate 300,000 protestant churches in the U.S. average less than 1000 in worship attendance each week.

More than one-third of all churches in America average between 100-499 in Sunday attendance.

| ATTENDANCE | APPROX # OF CHURCHES | PERCENT |
|-------------|----------------------|---------|
| 7-99 | 177,000 | 59% |
| 100-499 | 105,000 | 35% |
| 500-999 | 12,000 | 4% |
| 1,000-1,999 | 6,000 | 2% |
| 2,000-9,999 | 1,170 | .4% |
| 10,000-plus | 40 | .01% |
| TOTALS | 300,000 | 100% |

Church attendance is not, by any means, an absolute measurement of church health. It is, however, a metric by which we evaluate a church's multiplication and sending capacity. Larger churches have larger budgets, a larger pool of human resources and, typically, more influence in the communities in which they serve.

Church Health > Church Size

A church's capacity for impact, growth and multiplication is affected more by its overall health than by its attendance numbers or budget size. Our ability to identify where a prospective church partner is in its lifecycle will determine our ability to offer appropriate coaching and support services.

Using the same bell curve to signify the church lifecycle, let's examine the ministry realities of a church in each of the stages:

START-UP

The Start-Up stage of the lifecycle may either be a new church plant or a new multi-site campus. The sending church will be a joint partner with Assist for the purpose of qualifying a church planter and helping the planter develop his strategic plan for ministry. The sending church should be in the phases of Strategic Growth or Sustained Health.

MOMENTUM GROWTH

During the season following Start-Up, a healthy church will be growing at a pace that forces transition in leadership structure and facilities. Often, the church will be in catch-up mode to move from a single pastor model to multiple full-time staff. Facilities are often rented in the Start-up phase and during a season of Momentum Growth, the church will begin planning and fundraising for full-time ministry space. During this season, the church will have lower amounts of

financial resource available for outward focused ministry and will use its resources to solidify internal ministries, systems and structures.

During a season of Momentum Growth, Assist can partner with these churches to refine their systems and structures to ensure that they are making maximum impact and moving towards a season of Strategic Growth.

STRATEGIC GROWTH

The Strategic Growth phase of the lifecycle begins when the staff, facilities and systems of the church are stable, and the leadership team begins to focus renewed efforts on reaching more new people. The latter half of this phase will be more financially stable, and more resources can be allocated towards multiplication.

SUSTAINED HEALTH

The Sustained Health season of the church is the one in which there is both the greatest possibility for significant impact OR the risk of decline. In his book "Advanced Strategic Planning," Aubrey Malphurs writes that it is during this season that a church must initiate a new S-curve in order to avoid plateau and eventual decline. The upside to this season is that the church is likely at its most financially stable season. The downside is that it can be a time during which complacency sets in.

In the Sustained Health season there is typically a stable leadership team. The budget is healthy and both discipleship and evangelistic ministries are effective.

One antidote to complacency is the prospect of planting a new church or campus.

The Other Side of the Curve

MAINTENANCE

The Maintenance season of a church is a defining time for a church. Just like in the Sustained Health phase, leadership and finances are stable. But this stability has begun to breed complacency.

While it may seem like a stable and safe place to be for the congregation, it is often the time in which visionary leaders grow discontent and look for greener pastures.

Maintenance seasons may also occur in the latter stages of a senior pastor's

tenure. If he has an eye on retirement, his instinct may be to maintain the status quo until he rides off into the sunset. He is often a well-loved figure, and his congregation will unlikely challenge him to do any more than he is doing. They are well fed, well cared for and are oblivious to the cliff that looms around the corner.

It is during this season that the community around the church will often change, demographically. The congregation will age and the effectiveness of the ministry will begin to wane.

Evangelistic energy remains strong, but the ability to create effective strategies requires too much risk, so we just don't do much. *"We're a good church. If people want to learn about Jesus and the Bible, they should come on Sundays."*

PRESERVATION

According to Jordan Gorveatte at the Unstuck Group, up to 40% of all churches in the U.S. are in the Preservation phase. It is difficult to detect and even more difficult to admit. The vision is outdated. The congregation no longer reflects the community in which it meets. Ministry begins to creep towards complexity because new ministries get started to meet immediate needs, none of which serve the vision and mission of the church. They tend to serve only those who are already a part of the church.

Evangelistic fervor is fading with little vision or ministry to support it. *"People don't come to church because they're not interested in God. Other growing churches in the community have watered down the Gospel."*

LIFE SUPPORT

In the Life Support phase, there is no longer a vision or strategy for reaching lost people. New people rarely attend and if they do, they don't return. The tell-tale sign of a church on life support is that corporate meetings focus more on how the church is managing building maintenance than the mission of the Gospel. Typically, the pastor is underpaid or not paid at all.

The majority of the budget is allocated to keeping the lights on. The congregational attitude is that "as long as we get to keep having services on Sunday, we're ok". There are typically not enough people left in the congregation to meet the requirements of the constitution and by-laws.

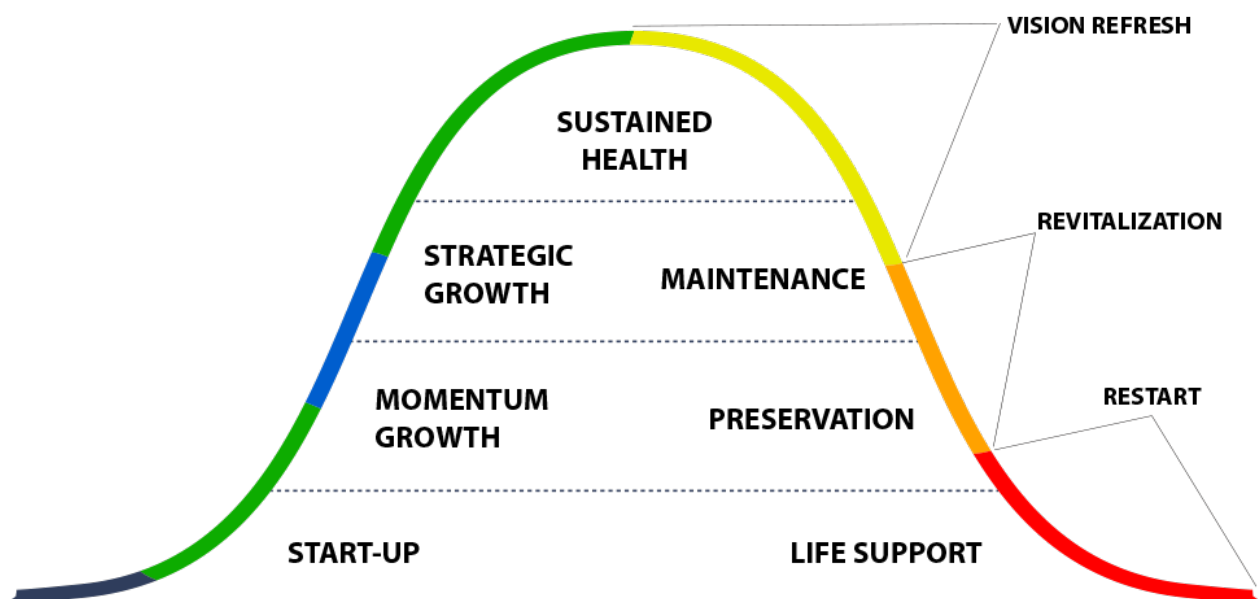
CONCLUSION

No phase in the lifecycle of a church is cut and dry. No two churches face the same challenges, regardless of the which side of the curve they are on. Every church does, however, face three common enemies:

1. The success of past generations
2. A rapidly changing culture that waits for no one
3. An enemy of God who is working overtime to render the local church ineffective

Jesus is building a church with an “offensive” game plan (Matthew 16:18). It is our desire to help churches develop and manage an offensive strategy that helps them maximize who God has designed them to be, reaching more people for the Kingdom and glorifying God.

Church Planting is the obvious offense. We want to plant more churches and see our Fellowship expand its Gospel footprint across the United States and Canada. But sometimes the best offense is a good defense. We recognize that in order to plant more churches, we need more healthy, life-giving churches to be a part of that work. So, we have developed a partnership strategy to help churches reach and maintain the appropriate level of health to become self-sustaining, reproducing churches.



Vision Refresh

For churches that are in a season of Sustained Health or the beginning of Maintenance, an opportunity to review and refresh the church's vision and strategy will ensure that it, as Aubrey Malphurs says, "reverses the S-curve." The goal for a Vision Refresh is to get ahead of the decline and ensure that ministries are still effective at reaching the surrounding community. And if they are not, strategic change will be embraced.

Church Revitalization

Churches that have been in an elongated season of Maintenance or that are drifting towards Preservation are good candidates for a Church Revitalization. The difference between a Refresh and a Revitalization is often found in the existing leadership and vision of the church. If there is not a strong, visionary leader (or leadership team) and if the church does not have an existing strategic plan for evangelism and discipleship, it is more likely a Revitalization.

This assumes that the church is still self-sustaining and there are enough church members with the giftings to assemble a Vision Team to work with the pastor to reposition the church for its future.

Church Restart

Churches that are in the Life Support phase or that have been in Preservation for an extended time are less likely to be revitalized and must be considered as Restarts.

At this stage the pastor who is empowered to lead the church into a new season, will likely have to rely on the gifts and talents of people who are not yet a part of the church. The church is likely not self-sustaining and will need to either leverage its assets or find a sponsoring church to help fund the effort, similar to a church plant.