

Why Churches Close

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Statistically, every Sunday, somewhere in the United States 71 churches will celebrate their last Sunday service. Annually, some 3700 churches end up closing their doors.¹ In many cases these congregations had been around for decades and had at one time been thriving and growing churches but decreases in attendance and the resulting decrease in donations led to the point in which the remaining members felt it was just time to call it quits. Many people do not realize that churches generally, regardless of denominational affiliation or doctrinal basis, will go through a series of phases from birth until their ultimate death. These phases are characteristically the same no matter what creed a particular church holds to. These include an Initial Phase, a Phase of Growth, a Phase of Plateau, Phase of Decline, and an Ending Phase and can correlated to the human life cycle of Birth, Adolescence, Adulthood, Old Age, and Death.

The Life Of A Church	
Initial Phase (Birth)	<p>The Initial Phase begins when a small group of individuals become motivated by what they perceive to be a lack of right thinking in the established churches of their community. They believe that God is not being honored by the existing churches in their area and feel that if they are to seek God in the purity and holiness that they feel He wants them to that they must start a new organization with the established goal of this purpose. Their mindset over what they feel is God's will for them is marked by excitement and zeal. They are very concerned with an agenda of seeking God in their <i>personal lives</i> (holy living, personal prayer times, fasting, etc.) as well as seeking God as a <i>corporate body</i> (prayer meetings, community days of fasting, etc.). At times they may seem legalistic as they are very adamant about even seemingly little issues that many other churches consider to be trivial.</p> <p>The Initial Phase is marked by serious steps being taken to ensure that the testimony of the group is maintained according to their strict standards (their strict standards being based upon what they understand the Bible to teach). Because their attention and energy is focused upon seeking God in purity and holiness "any and everybody"</p>

¹ *Church Closing Rate Only One Percent*, John Dart (*Christian Century*, May 6, 2008) at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_9_125/ai_n25427071/

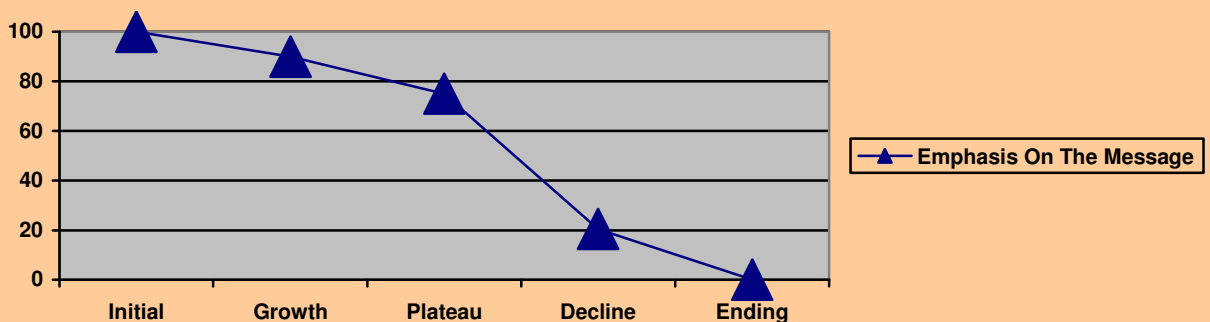
	<p>is not able to become an active part of the organization. Only those whose heart is set on the same values and principles of the organization are welcomed to join their group. Any who disagree with the values and principles (while perhaps being respected) are made to understand that they are not wanted in the group if they are not going to support the ideals of the group. Interestingly, the religious fervency to their ideals will generally act as a repellant to those who do not share their vision and values. In other words, in the Initial Phase a church will be so strict in the preaching, teaching and enforcing of their convictions that persons who do not hold to them will generally not feel comfortable being around the group.</p>
<p>Growth Phase (Adolescence)</p>	<p>The Initial Phase is followed by a period marked with an aggressive propagation of what the group feels is God’s will, not only for them, but for the whole community. This Growth Phase will be marked by an emphasis on the members to “get the message out” to the community. Marked steps will be taken to get this message out to include going door-to-door, setting up booths at events or outside of stores, contacting friends and relatives to share with them the group’s understanding of God’s will for humanity. This action, coupled with the groups fervent seeking of God through prayer, fasting, etc. will result in the addition of new members to the organization. It is usually at some point during this phase that an actual building is purchased or built by the organization to become a permanent meeting place for the group.</p>
<p>Plateau Phase (Adulthood)</p>	<p>After this phase the organization will reach a level where growth begins to wane. The group now begins to go through a period of stagnation. The original zeal that motivated the group has diminished. Now that an actual building has been procured the emphasis slowly becomes more about getting people to come to the building rather than to accept the message of holiness and purity towards God that was the impetus behind their starting. During this phase, the church will begin to resemble the established churches that existed at the time of the initial phase with their lack of right thinking. The focus during this time will make a shift from the spiritual to the physical. Whereas the group in the Initial Phase was concerned only with establishing a spirituality that was pleasing to God by the time of the Plateau Phase the new group has found itself becoming preoccupied with physical circumstances associated with owning property. Because a large amount of money has been invested into the purchase of a building and the organization of an “official” church the focus begins to shift towards making sure that the “physical church” keeps going. Whereas the original group in the Initial Phase cared so little for the continuing of the existing churches</p>

	<p>that they abandoned all of them to start their own group the individuals in the Plateau Phase become concerned with continuing what they have started. This continuation, however, is more of a continuation of the physical organization rather than a continuation of the spiritual discipline and principles that motivated the original group. Prayer and fasting are not as important as business meetings, the budget, building upkeep, etc. There are still vestiges of the old emphases. For example, during this phase it is common to see where on church signs that were created years ago that the Wednesday evening service is advertised as “Wednesday Evening Prayer Meeting—7:00” yet very little to any prayer goes on anymore at these meetings. Because the emphasis has become more on continuing the physical operation of having a church there will often be a fear of offending people that gains a stronghold in the minds of many. It will be obvious that persons attending are not in tune with the original ideals that the Initial Phase embraced but because the church has become more interested in just physically existing rather than seeking God in purity and holiness these people are allowed to continue on without any encouragement to change for fear that this will offend them and cause them to stop attending. In this phase the emphasis will be more on attendance than on salvation and spiritual growth. It is also common during this phase to find areas of compromise in order to 1.) Keep the church operating and 2.) Keep from offending those who are not in tune with the original ideals from leaving. This will manifest itself in scenarios such as allowing men who have been divorced and remarried to serve as elders and deacons, allowing individuals who have questionable business practices to serve on committees, etc.</p>
<p>Decline Phase (Old Age)</p>	<p>The Decline Phase is marked by a noticeable decrease in membership. This decrease often takes the form of the members of the congregation growing older and dying with no new people coming to replace them. Over time the numbers just seem to dwindle down. One sign that a church has entered this phase is the occurrence of a church split. Splits often occur because those who have adapted to the Plateau mindset (i.e. more emphasis on the physical nature of running a church than on the spiritual nature) clash with those who want to embrace the Initial Phase mentality (with its emphasis on spiritual things over the physical). It is not uncommon for the tension between these two competing mindsets to become so heated that one of them decides that they must separate. Those with a Plateau mindset will, generally, have a negative attitude towards those splitting and paint them in a negative light. In a split of this nature, there is a reminiscence of the members of the Initial Phase who <i>“believe that God is not being</i></p>

	<p><i>honored by the existing churches in their area and feel that if they are to seek God in the purity and holiness that they feel He wants them to that they must start a new organization.”</i></p> <p>During this phase it will be common to hear the expression “We really need to grow” but this only means that they need more people to attend and generally has little to no spiritual motivation behind it. In other words, there is little concern with actually seeing new people saved and little effort made by the members to see this happen in the Decline Phase. By this point in the life of the church they would be happy just to see the seats filled up on Sunday mornings regardless of whether the persons were saved or not.</p>
<p>Ending Phase (Death)</p>	<p>The Ending Phase occurs when the membership decreases to a point where that the physical church can no longer exist because there is not sufficient funding being donated through tithes and offerings to pay the utility bills, insurance, pastor’s salary, etc. By this point the church is no longer interested in the spiritual goals that the Initial Phase had and even though the remaining members are physically capable of pursuing these spiritual goals (i.e. meeting in their homes to study the Bible, pray for their communities, etc.) they usually just opt to find another congregation to start attending. The closing of the physical church and the decision to assimilate into an already existing congregation represents the Death and Ending Phase of the group.</p>

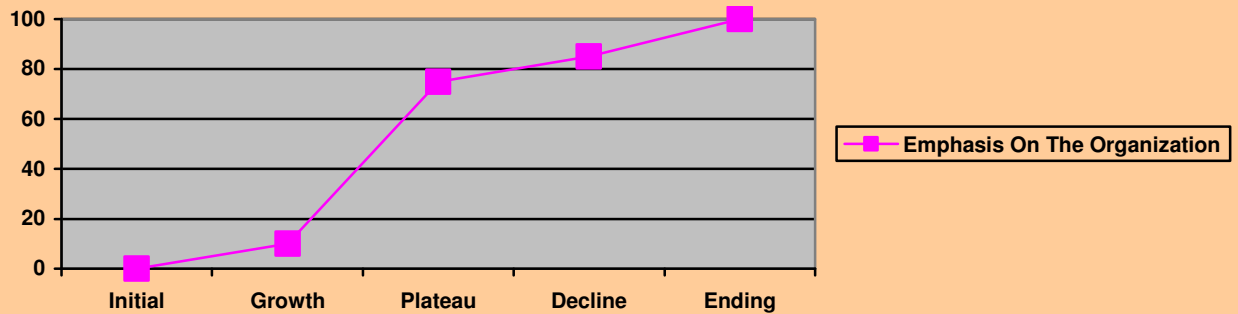
Emphasis On The Message Of Spiritual Purity And Holiness At Each Phase

As the following chart will show the emphasis on spiritual purity and holiness decreases for the church over time from its Initial Phase to its Ending Phase. Spiritual purity is the most important at its beginning (indeed, it is its sole reason for beginning) and becomes unimportant as the church heads towards its Ending Phase. The less important spiritual purity becomes the more the church will decline.



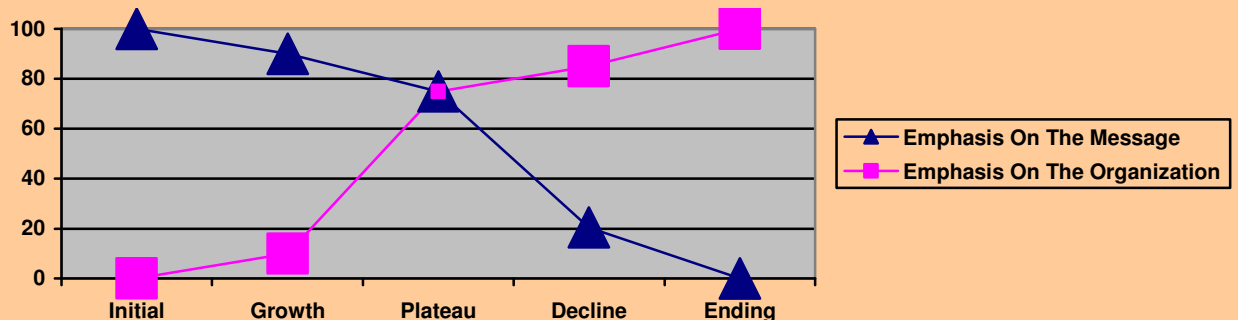
Emphasis On The Organization

As the following chart demonstrates, an emphasis on the official organization (physical church) is very unimportant at its beginning phase but over time becomes more and more important. Interestingly, the more the focus shifts to the physical church the more it heads towards the Decline and Ending Phases.



Comparison Showing The Difference In Emphases Between The Initial Phase And Ending Phase

As the following chart demonstrates, during a church's life cycle there will be a radical shift in emphases from the Initial Phase until the Ending Phase. In its Initial Phase a church's emphasis will be totally focused upon its message of spiritual purity and holiness but as it progresses towards its Ending Phase this will be emphasized less and less. Likewise, in its Initial Phase the church will place really no emphasis upon itself as an organization but as it progresses towards its Ending Phase the emphasis upon itself as an established organization increases tremendously. There is such a change in emphases that by the time the church reaches its Ending Phase it is really a completely different organization with a completely different emphasis and focus than it started out with.



Can A Church In The Decline Phase Be Saved?

The question has been often asked, "Can a church in the decline phase be saved?" The answer to that is "with God nothing will be impossible (Lk 1:37)" but just

because something is possible, that doesn't mean that it is going to be easy. In order to reverse the decline the church is going to have to go back to the basics that motivated the group in the initial phase. The emphasis upon spiritual purity and holiness that was at the center of the initial group's mission has got to become the center of the church once again. This can only be done by re-assessing the mission of the church in its current position. If a church in the decline phase is going to be saved it must ask himself some fundamental questions:

1. How important is the spiritual purity of those who are attending our church to us? Have we really made an effort to make sure that those whom we have embraced into our church have repented from all of their sins, are seeking God and growing in their relationship with him?
2. How would the first generation of our church have felt if they were attending our church today? Would they have felt that "if they are to seek God in the purity and holiness that they feel He wants them to that they must start a new organization"?
3. In times past were the members of our church more dedicated to prayer, fasting and outreach to the community? Do we see indicators that at one time we were (such as calling our Wednesday evening service a "Prayer Service", etc.)?
4. Have we compromised in areas where we knew that the Bible said we should do one thing but we overlooked that because we felt it was necessary in order for us to continue in operation as a church?

Ultimately the choice will be up to the church which direction it goes in. If your church is in the Decline Phase it is going to either close or rebound. But it will not rebound without a return to the spirit, discipline and heart of the church at its initial phase.