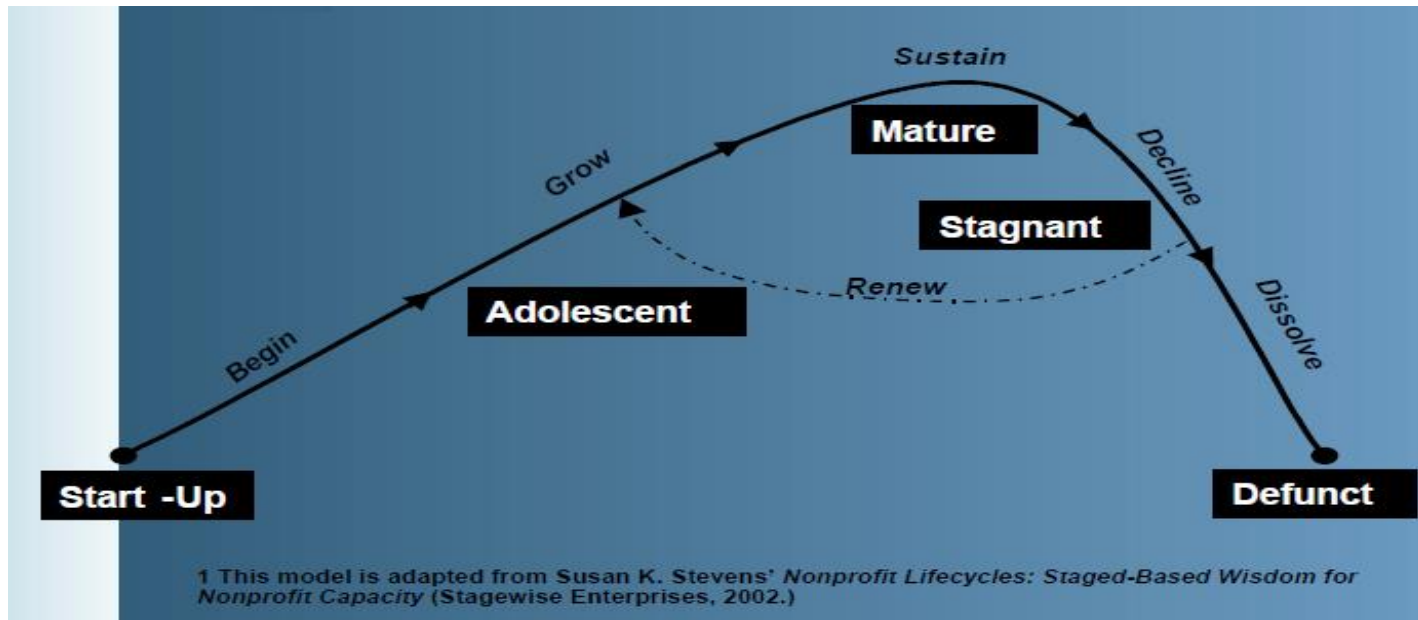




LUMP OF KOHL

The Organizational Lifecycle



There are exceptions to every rule, but the life cycle pictured above presents the realities by which all organizations, including churches, live and eventually die. At the start, a mission/purpose/dream/goal is conceived and gives birth to a new organization/church. If the organization/church does not fall victim to childhood mortality (as many do), it goes through the tense growing pains of its adolescence until it becomes a mature organization, fulfilling the purpose for which it was created.

Maturity presents the ideal time for leadership to reevaluate the effectiveness of the church and make changes that assure a fruitful future. Unfortunately, that is not what usually happens. Usually the hardworking members of the church view this as a time to kick back a little bit and enjoy the fruits of their labors. They let off the gas and coast for a while. This turns out to be the beginning of the end. This is when a church goes “over the hill,” experiences declines in its health, and starts to age. As its health declines, it loses more and more of its ability to fulfill its mission to exalt God in worship, evangelize in the community, and build up one another in the church. Just as some people live with declining health for a long time, so it can be with churches. But at last, they eventually lay on their deathbeds, unable to make any difference for the Lord. It is just a matter of time before they draw their final breath. That’s how 3700 churches in the US close annually.

But there is hope! Renewal (pictured by the dotted line) can take place and extend the life of a church like open heart surgery or chemotherapy can extend the life of an otherwise ill person. Early detection is the key. The earlier the decline is detected, the better. The further down the downward slope a church goes, the more radical are the changes that need to be made to restore

the church's health. And then, there is a point of no return at which no great leader and no great innovation will be capable of keeping a church out of the grave. The surgeon must merely concede that there is nothing more that can be done.

One major problem is that church members do not like to visit the doctor, they do not want to hear a negative diagnosis, they do not want to change their ways. They'd rather see the church die than endure the treatments that will sustain its life. They don't want to surrender anything of the church as they love it. The dominant personalities in the church don't want to surrender their influence and power.

If, however, the threat to the church's life is great enough, church members are often willing to make some tolerable changes. But they usually only accept changes that do not cost much money, are easy to implement, fit in with existing programs, won't rock the boat, don't stretch people very much, and don't require much training. Like water, congregations like to follow the path of least resistance when it comes to change. But 3700 churches incrementally changed themselves to their death last year. This is understandable. After all, the changes that are needed are almost always painful, confronted by strong forces, and sometimes churches die on the operating table.

There are some things that can artificially extend the life of a church without improving its health. It might be a charismatic pastor, funds in reserve, a property to sell, a split in another church that brings in new members, or a bailout of one kind or another. But without heart surgery that aligns the church with the heart of God, those measures do not bode well for a church's long-range future. They can produce a flash fire but not a hot, sustained fire.

Where do you think FCC stands in the lifecycle of an organization? In living memory, when was FCC at its strongest? Has it ever been weaker? I'm sure we would all rate things differently but I'm also sure that none of us see the church as having reached the point of no return. We are still blessed with conscientious leadership and a wonderful facility that's getting more wonderful by the minute. If we add a pastor who warmly loves our people, teaches the Bible effectively, and can lead us into an outward focus, I'm sure this church has a future in which it can thrive and not just survive.