

EQUIPPING LEADERS FOR MISSIONAL OUTREACH

Issues in death and resurrection...

*Between the 1840's
and today, more than
600 Lutheran
congregations/
ministries in TX and
LA have gone out of
existence!*

From records assembled by
Rev. Luther Oelke,
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Recently, while attending a meeting of the Southwestern TX Synod Council, Rev. Luther Oelke, the Archivist for TX and LA, shared with me an interesting document. The name of the document is the Congregational Records Search Project. Some 18 pages long, the information in the document is a list of the congregations and ministries that are no longer in existence in the states of Texas and Louisiana. Since the 1840's, more than 600 ministries associated with towns and locations known to most of us have gone out of existence. In other words, these ministries have died.

I don't know about you, but I was very surprised by the number of ministries that have disappeared in

Texas and Louisiana. I would have expected the number to be quite low, even given the amount of time, 160 years or so, that we are considering.

Nonetheless, this bit of information got me to thinking. It reminded me that in life, everything has a life span. Everything has a birth, a growth to maturity, and a decline to death. There are no exceptions to this rule. Entering, as we are, the season of Lent, we will all be reminded of this truth as we impose or are imposed upon with these words: *Remember man/woman, you are dust and to dust you shall return.* This not so subtle reminder of our own mortality brings us face to face with the awareness that even congregations and ministries within

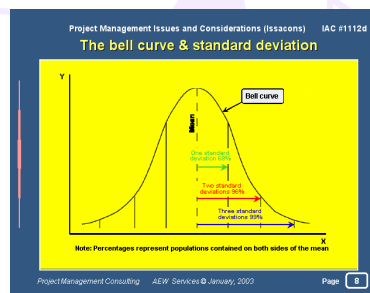
congregations have a life span.

What does that life span look like? Where is your ministry in the cycle of birth to death? Are there ways to bring life once again, maybe cheat death? After all, there are congregations that have been around for a very long time. Are they immortal?

Well, actually, no, they aren't. But they have learned something very important in respect to the nature of healthy and vital ministry. This month, we explore what that looks like and how a bell curve can help us better understand the ebb and flow of mission in our own setting. But first, a short primer on the substance of the bell curve, a statistical help.

What is a "bell curve?"

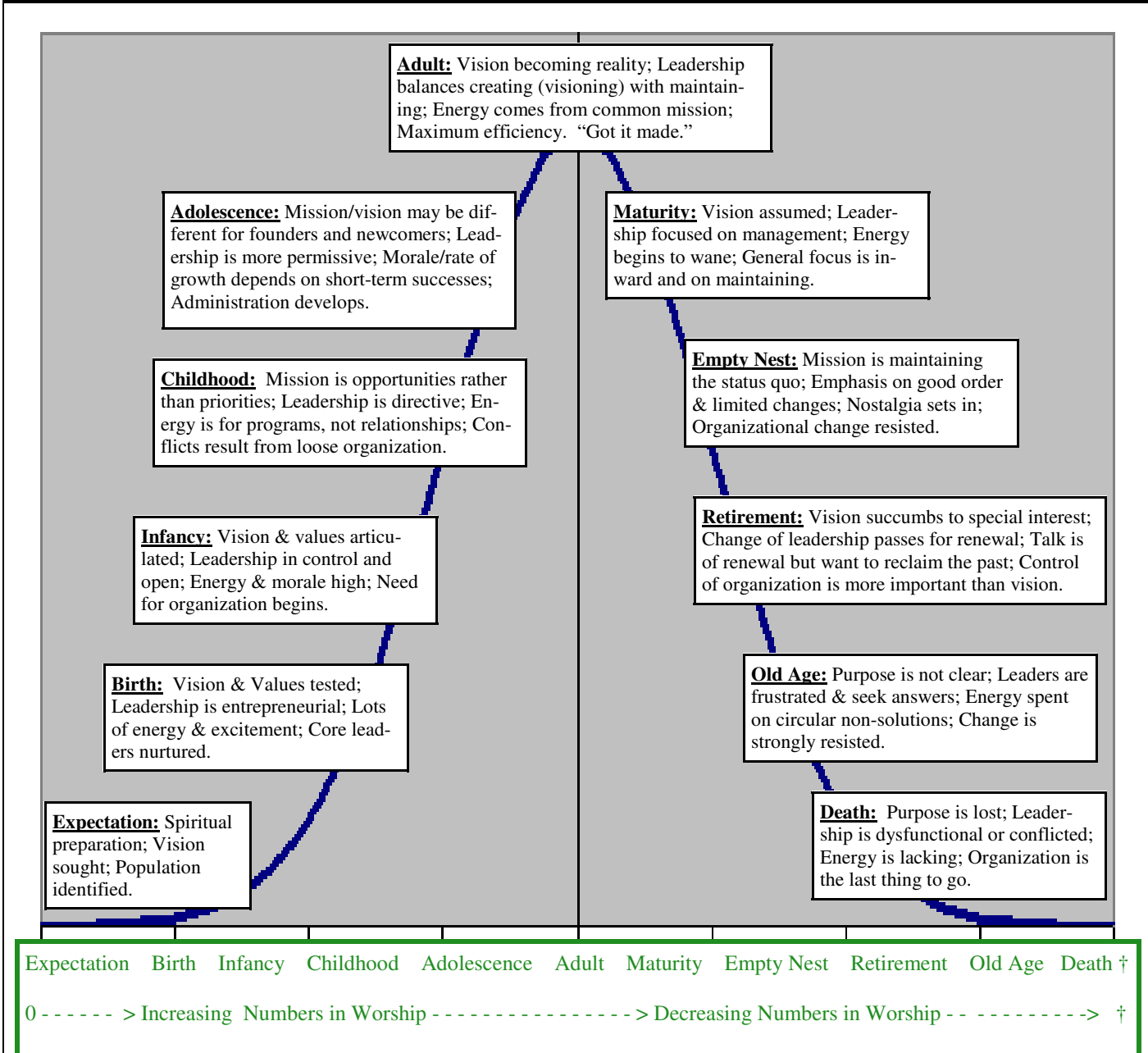
In the easiest form, a bell curve is a way of understanding a population or a set of information in graphic form. It is shaped like a "bell jar" that was often found in laboratories with a high mid-point and "tails" that extend outward to the left and right of the center point. In the case of understanding the life-



cycle of a congregation, the left "Y" axis would graph membership growth. The

bottom "X" axis would graph the progression of the years of existence of the ministry. Bell curves have been around a long time and have many different uses. For now, this is enough info to be aware of the implications of what comes next. In relationship to time, every ministry will die...depending....

The Life Cycle of a Congregation



Church Extension of the Disciples of Christ Church

This is a stylized form of the "bell curve life" of a congregation. The duration from birth to death may be long-lived or it may be very short-lived. Even if moderate, one thing is certain. Every living organism goes through a life cycle. So, what is the "depends" from the preceding page that helps ministries "cheat" death and live much longer than many congregations? Most ministries reach the "Adult" stage of development around 25 to 35 years of age and then move rapidly to "Maturity." Is this coincidence with real adult life? Actually, that's about the time of the third generation of a ministry. That's when the original generation who birthed the ministry have begun to "move away from" the mission field. For us Lutherans, that means the mission field has changed "faces." Know what I mean? Note what happens at that point in the ministry's life cycle. Read on for more insight about this development and how to avoid it.

The Life Cycle of a Congregation...

On the preceding page is the description of a bell curve that outlines the life span of a ministry from birth to death. Here is the intriguing question in relationship to this life span. *At what point is it appropriate for this ministry to think about starting another new mission with the gifting of people and resources of their own?* More about this in a bit.

In the meantime, let's observe some things about this life span. For example, before there can be birth, there must be expectation. That expectation period is an important time. As potential parents begin the process of planning for the birth of a child, so do ministries have a time of "expectant waiting." This time is critical for helping the new ministry "get it right." It is the time of planning and discovering what the potential of the mission field might be. It is the time of pulling together assets that can be used in support of the new ministry. It is the time of "putting the nursery in order" so that the new ministry will have what is needed at birth.

With the birth of a new ministry, there is always much excitement and anticipation of what this new "child" will look like. And as the mission grows and begins to take on

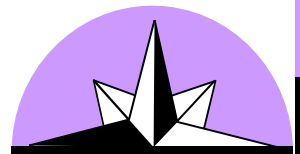
its own identity, there are growing pains along the way. The telling thing about this process is that at each stage of growth, there are growing pains and adjustments that must occur. Change is a normal part of the process and inherent in the success that is achieved in moving from one stage to the next. Eric Ericson, a noted psychologist, suggested that the movement from birth to death of a human being is marked by eight stages of growth. Each stage has certain accomplishments that must be mastered in order to successfully move on to the next stage. If something in one of those stages was not mastered, that led to arrested growth and the person would be unavoidably detained in that particular stage until it was mastered no matter how old, chronologically, someone became.

At what point should a ministry consider beginning another ministry out of itself according to this life span? The answer is anywhere on the left side of the curve between Infancy and Adolescence. That is where missions that are vital and healthy have discovered the opportunity to re-invent themselves for the sake of mission and that is where most long term, vibrant missions spend most of their

time. In one sense, they are perpetual teenagers. When that happens, the top of the bell curve as a description of the life span of the ministry is never reached. And that is the point.

Where is the first sign of danger in this life span of mission? The answer to that is just at that place where the leaders and people of the mission feel as though they have it made, at the top of the bell curve. Note, at the stage when the ministry becomes Adult, the leadership begins to balance creating with maintaining. And with Maturity, there is a sense of finally arriving and the emphasis is on management with an assumed vision. No ministry is able ever to come to a place of relaxation and a sense of taking it for granted.

Now, one final question: *At what point are there opportunities for re-purpose and re-birth in this life span?* The answer to this is at *each* point in the life span. At each place, energy and effort would be required at rediscovering the vision/purpose of the ministry, but it can be done. Because God is in it, God will bring you through with our responsive obedience to God's call. At no place is it hopeless, even in death! We are, after all, a resurrection people. Right!?



The first sign of danger in a ministry's life cycle is when the leadership feels as though they have "made it."

The Bell Curve in Understanding Congregational Dynamics...

How often have you heard someone say, "Everybody says/thinks/believes...." when faced with a change process in attempting to "manipulate" resistance to change or to control the larger group? Research has shown, in many cases,

that group dynamics usually reveal the following. About 5% of any group are Visionaries, that's it. The other 95% are concrete. The next 15% are Early Adopters. If a Visionary can speak it, they're all over it. The next 50% are

Middle Adopters. They would rather not change, but when you can show them the benefit, if they vote "yes" they will do what they vote for. The fourth group are the Late Adopters. About 22% of the group, if they vote "No" they will still do what the

larger group supports. They don't much like change. The last 8% are the Laggards. They're against everything. The secret? Find someone who is a Middle Adopter who is very close to being a Late Adopter to verbalize support for your project. Bingo!



**EQUIPPING LEADERS
FOR MISSIONAL
OUTREACH**

Texas Center for Mission

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Texas Center for Mission

Purpose statement:

"...do justice...love kindness...walk humbly with your God."

Micah 6.8

Solicitation is sought for additional articles to be included in this publication. Submissions to this newsletter will be considered when they follow the above purpose statement as well as the Great Commission and Great Commandment.

Please submit requests for inclusion in this publication to

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Upcoming events to consider for improving skills and insights....

Coaching for Excellence

Learn skills for coaching in your ministry to improve your effectiveness

March 24, evening and 25 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Dallas area, place TBA

NCD Coaches Training

Training for people who want to become effective NCD coaches

March 23, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

March 24, all day, and March 25, done at noon

For either event,

Contact: Rev. Nancy Fisher,

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NancyFisher@ntnl.org

Third Annual Second-Site Conference

May 7 to 9

Santa Claritas, CA

For ministries seeking to understand ways in which they can become engaged in starting new ministries. You don't have to be big, you don't have to be rich, you don't even have to be really, really smart...all you need is a missional heart and a willingness to follow God into the mission field.

Come hear stories of how others have done it in surprising ways.

Test the waters for yourself.

For more information, contact:

Rev. Stephen C. Kanouse

(phone and email above)