

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

The Challenges of Church Growth - Episode 291

The Challenges of the Church Lifecycle

Regardless of their uniqueness, every church has the potential to go through a very similar lifecycle: Most churches start, grow, thrive, decline, and eventually end. But God's plan for our churches is to mature to a place of sustained health.

It's important that church leaders understand every phase of a [church's lifecycle](#) in order to keep from getting stuck in them. That's why, in our new series, we'll be exploring the key challenges that churches face in every phase of the lifecycle and how to overcome them, starting with the left, growing side of the lifecycle (launch, momentum growth, and strategic growth).

The overarching theme is this: **Churches on the left side of the lifecycle must overcome the challenge of finding strategic clarity and developing systems to power their strategy.**

The Launch Phase

The launch phase is the starting line where everything is new. The leaders celebrate every time someone shows up, and, at the same time, regularly wonder if anyone will show up. For that reason, the church is pretty much entirely focused on reaching new people and putting on their weekly Sunday service.

Key Challenge: Resources constraints, including both people to serve and money:

1. **People.** Churches that are just starting out typically don't have many paid staff and must rely heavily on volunteers to serve and lead the ministry.
2. **Money.** There are three major financial "buckets" new churches need to prepare for: 1) one-time start-up costs, 2) ongoing costs, supported by giving, and 3) the initial gap, supported by outside sources.

If the church is going to survive beyond launch:

1. The lead pastor needs to be a strong leader who willingly gives ministry away and empowers and energizes volunteers.

2. Churches need to “count the cost” (Luke 14:28-30) and make a realistic financial plan (that includes spending less than they plan to receive).

The Momentum Growth Phase

In the momentum growth phase, it’s as if nothing can go wrong. People start showing up and inviting their friends. Growth seems to be happening supernaturally. The church is extremely outward-focused at this time, and it’s as if the momentum is contagious.

Key Challenge: Space constraints, including both physical space and ministry space.

Adding services is one of the best strategies you can engage to improve the health of your church, because:

1. Adding services forces you to multiply the number of leaders and volunteers in your church, which will encourage people to embrace ownership in the ministry.
2. Adding services will challenge you to create new systems to simplify how people connect to the church, how you communicate priority information, how you scale ministry programming, and how you encourage more people to take steps in spiritual formation.
3. Adding services creates more options for people to check out your church.

How to know when to add another service:

1. Get to critical mass. (When you are consistently more than 80% full in all your services, it’s time to add a service.)
2. Shift people first before you start adding services.
3. Move to multiple services as soon as you have the opportunity.

The Strategic Growth Phase

In the strategic growth phase, there’s a shift from personalities to teams. The entrepreneurial bent is complemented by an awareness that structure and systems need to be established. Churches also focus on helping people grow through a discipleship path that encourages spiritual formation.

Key Challenge: Systems and structure constraints, because both were established when the church was ministering to fewer people:

1. Systems are the day-to-day methods for executing the ministry strategy.

2. Up until this point, it's not unusual for everyone on the staff to be directly connected to the senior pastor. As the team grows, however, the senior pastor has to supervise and lead more people, which becomes a span of care challenge.

Systems: Simple, repeatable systems need to be implemented so that ministry can expand and grow. If a process happens over and over again, get the process out of one person's brain and onto paper so it can be executed by teams of people now and in the future.

Common characteristics of healthy systems:

- Healthy systems empower leaders to accomplish ministry without always having to get permission.
- Healthy systems are embraced and championed by the top leadership.
- Healthy systems mobilize more people rather than lean on a handful of talented individuals.
- Healthy systems simplify the path.
- Healthy systems improve over time—and NEED to change over time.

Structure: The structure of the staff needs to reflect the church's ministry strategy and leadership development should be a core focus. The only way to appropriately address this challenge is to develop additional layers of leadership, beginning with a senior leadership team.

Common characteristics of a healthy structure:

- Your structure should reflect your strategy to accomplish your vision.
- Your structure should put leaders (not doers) in leadership roles.
- Your structure should begin to include high-level volunteer leaders.
- Perhaps most importantly, your structure should support future growth.

Listen to the full episode on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or at theunstuckgroup.com/episode291.

Take the Unstuck Church Assessment

Over time, most organizations start, grow, thrive, decline, and eventually end. But that's not God's plan for the Church. If you're unsure where your church sits on the church lifecycle today, [take the free Unstuck Church Assessment](#).

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