

Preachers’ Pen Points



OK. Maybe the words “pen points” are a little outdated, but they go well with “preacher”! The fact is, I wouldn’t exchange my computer and Microsoft Publisher software for a thousands ink pens; but I do look forward to sharing some ideas with you through this weekly column.

For the next few weeks I want write about church growth and to think out loud with you about Perry Heights—where we’ve been and where we’re going in view of the principles we’ll consider together. I hope that you will find the series interesting and useful. Let’s think about:

Church Growth Cycles

People who study churches professionally have affirmed that virtually all of them go through organizational stages or cycles of growth. Let’s consider those stages and some of the characteristic features of each stage.

Stage one—Pioneering & Growing

Most churches begin bound by a common vision of what kind of church they intend to be. There is great enthusiasm and passion to recruit others and the members acknowledge the challenges of the future with confidence and hope. Each person sees a role he can fulfill in achieving the church’s goal. All these ingredients work together to produce steady if not explosive growth.

Stage two—Programming and Slowing

As the church moves toward maturity, emphasis shifts to accommodation of the new growth, implementation of programs for the congregation, and less stress on evangelism. There is the need for planning and building accommodations and setting in motion

programs for the newly acquired members. The “who will we reach and why” of the stage one has changed to “how can we serve those already reached” in stage two. The church is very busy; but growth is slowing as time for evangelism is replaced by other activities.

Stage three—Maintaining and Plateauing

The successful organization and implementation of needed programs and facilities tends to give a church a sense of arrival and reputation. It is as if all that the pioneer church hoped for has been achieved. Thoughts of evaluation and meaningful change are rare. Now the future depends upon teaching our children and continuing to preserve the structures implemented. Conversion of outsiders has become increasingly rare. Already the seeds of decline have been planted and are awaiting their full manifestation.

Stage four—Declining & Losing

At this stage the church has begun to lose members. The losses may be due to various factors, some over which the church has little control and some which the church has created. The morale of the church wanes as attendance figures slide downward. Weak members are the first to move away. Stronger members of the church can be overcome with depression, discouragement, and even capitulation to the downward trend. Here the church is faced with a critical decision— to make the needed changes to turn things around or to let things run their course and watch the church be reduced to a shell of what it once was or even become an “ex-church”.

(Next time we’ll explore in more detail the common characteristics of churches in decline.)

—Johnny Felker