

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Small Group Lifecycle

Living things are born, they grow, and they die. Small groups could be considered living, since they are parts of the Body of Christ, which is certainly a living organism.

But while the life of the greater Church is eternal, local congregations—and the small groups within those churches—have lifecycles. Groups are born, they grow, and they die.

“All small groups go through three life stages: Infancy, Adolescence, and Adulthood.”

-Gary L. McIntosh
& Charles Arn

Behavioral scientists have conducted a good deal of research on the lifecycle of small groups. The consensus is that all groups (religious or otherwise) go through three life stages in their development, analogous to the human being: “Infancy,” “Adolescence,” and “Adulthood.” And, like people, groups eventually die.

Infancy. Participants are eager and somewhat anxious when a group first comes together. The attitude of group members is positive and expectant. Dependency on the group leader is common in this first stage. Members begin to take baby steps as they get closer to each other. Growth spurts happen quickly. A self-identity begins to form as the group defines itself through spoken and unspoken rules, expectations, and other behavioral traits. The group leader, like a good parent, should encourage this growth in relationships by providing facilitative exercises, outings, and opportunities.

Adolescence. This can be a challenging time of life for the group. Members are moving beyond superficial relationships and becoming more vulnerable. Feelings can get hurt, tears can be shed, arguments may disrupt the equilibrium of the group. But conflict is easily forgotten and reconciliation strengthens relationships. Participants accuse the leader for lack of progress in the group. Power plays are not uncommon to try and usurp his/her influence in the group. The struggles of the group in this adolescent stage, however, are necessary for the group to move on. In fact, avoidance of the unpleasantness in this second stage can lead the group back to the infancy stage rather than on to the adult stage.

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Groups are born, they grow, and they die.

People desire to stay together as long as possible.

Adulthood. With the frustrations of adolescence behind them, the group begins to “get their act together” in a growing show of maturity. Words and action, that would have been in-flammatory in the adolescent stage, are now absorbed with grace and compassion. Group members are not as concerned with the activities as with progress of the group. Members become less self-conscious and more others-conscious, and the well-being of fellow members takes on significant importance.

Death. The natural tendency for people who have “grown up” together is to want to stay together as long as possible. But, just as a person must face the inevitability of life's end, eventually groups must die. It may be because the group has accomplished its purpose or that the time for its existence has expired. It may be simply that the group can no longer constructively contribute to the health of its members or the church. At some point, the group must decide whether it will redefine itself and continue, or simply dissolve. Such loss is often accompanied by pain and grief. But in death can come the rebirth of new life, through a new group, and the beginning of a new lifecycle.

One of the most helpful benefits of this information is simply awareness—the realization that groups have lifecycles with recognizable characteristics and behavior. It is also important to realize that not all groups “grow up.” Some never leave the “infancy” stage, while others get stuck in “adolescence.” Group leaders who can be made aware of these stages will be better able to 1) recognize their characteristics, and 2) guide the group to a productive “adulthood.”

Examine the groups you presently have from

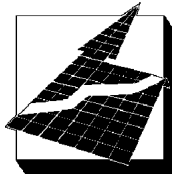
the perspective of the lifecycle stages. Which groups seem to be making progress in their growth? Which are stuck in infancy or adolescence? Remember that not all groups move through these stages with equal speed. Sometimes groups naturally move from one stage to the next. Other groups may need help in being made aware of their stage of growth, and be asked to think about what might be involved in facilitating their own maturity.

A third implication of the lifecycle of a group is the final stage of death. Are there groups in your church that need to die...that have reached a point where they have completed their useful purpose? There may be some groups that have become detrimental to the health and purpose of the church whose members need to be released for further ministry. At the same time, don't be too quick to pull the plug on a group that may actually be providing a real sense of meaning, value, love, and caring for participants who might otherwise not experience it. An axiom about small groups is that it's better to add new groups by addition than by replacement.



Adapted from the forthcoming book *What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Leading Your Church* (Baker Books March 2013).

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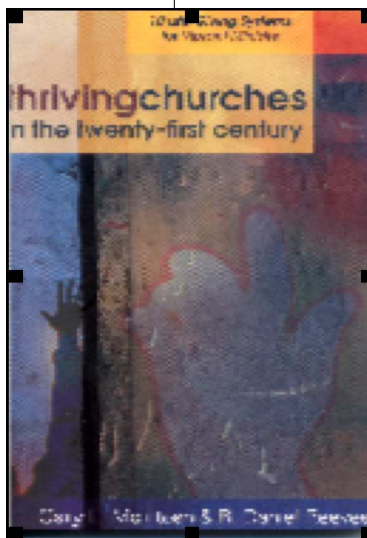
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