

The **Life Cycle** *of*
the **Church**

Introduction

The death of a congregation is **tragic**.

It is a sad when a congregation, that has faithfully served God and the community,
closes its doors permanently.

Why do Congregations die?

What are the factors that lead them to close?

How can we avoid the deterioration that leads to the closure of a local church?

Why do churches die?

The Main Reason

The main reason why churches close is *the lack of a clear vision of the future.*

Without a Vision, the People Perish

The vision is the element that helps us discern and articulate the mission of a congregation.

They yearn for the past

Congregations that age and close go through a relatively long process of **deterioration**.

During this process, **they remember the past, with so much love, that they want to relive it.** They regret the passage of time, thinking that **“past times were better.”**

It is impossible to walk into the future while looking back at the past.

They cling to the past

Churches that die **cling to the past**.

For example:

They use the same style of worship as in the past.

They refuse to review meeting schedules.

- They continue to meet in unsuitable buildings (either because they don't have parking, are too large, or too small), etc.

They prefer to die rather than change.

Deterioration

Deterioration occurs simultaneously in *all areas of congregational life*, from *the building* where it meets, to the congregation's *prayer life*.

In addition, **relationships with the community surrounding the Church deteriorate**, along with the hopes of those who remain in the congregation.

Survival

The deterioration of the Church is so cruel that the congregational leadership begins to care more about surviving as an institution than about meeting the physical and spiritual needs of the people.

This provokes a defensive attitude on the part of the Church, which can lead it to consider the world around it as its “enemy”.

All organisms have a life cycle.

They are born, they grow, they mature, they multiply, they grow old and they die.

Churches, like organisms, also have a **life cycle**.

Understanding the cycle of congregational life can help us avoid the deterioration that leads churches to close prematurely.

The Four Organizational Principles

Principles of Church Organization

The life of a congregation is organized based on these four principles:

Vision

Relationships

Program

- Administration

Vision

When we speak of vision, we are referring to how the congregation understands its divine call. Discernment of God's strategic purposes gives a sense of direction to the congregation.

It refers to *the future that God prefers for the congregation*. Therefore, it is imperative that the Church understands and affirms its vision.

Relationships

Interaction between the people who
are part of the congregation.

**Remember that the congregation
has 3 main groups.**

People of influence (made up of the Pastoral Team, passionate people, people in positions).

The congregation.

- **The crowd.**

Good relationships are important in all groups
and among all groups.

Program

The program includes *all the activities that the congregation* carries out during the year.

Program

Most congregations have a regular activity schedule, which is only altered when there are special events.

Continuous Programs

Seasonal Programs

- Occasional Programs

Administration

The purpose of administration is to facilitate the work of the Church.

**Administration achieves its purpose
when it drives the movement toward
the vision.**

In a healthy congregation,
stewardship serves the vision and the
mission of the Church.

There is a hierarchy in these 4 elements.

We are assuming that the Vision is the dominant principle in the life of a congregation.

It is closely followed by Relationships, because a person does not stay in a Church until he or she establishes seven significant friendships.

- The Program and the Administration must be at the service of the Vision, fostering good Relationships.

The Wrong Order

When **Administration** becomes the dominant principle of congregational life, the Church creates a huge bureaucracy, whose gaze is set on the past.

The *Administration's dominance* over the other elements is a *clear sign of congregational deterioration*.

10 stages

Gestation

Birth

Childhood

Adolescence

1. Adulthood

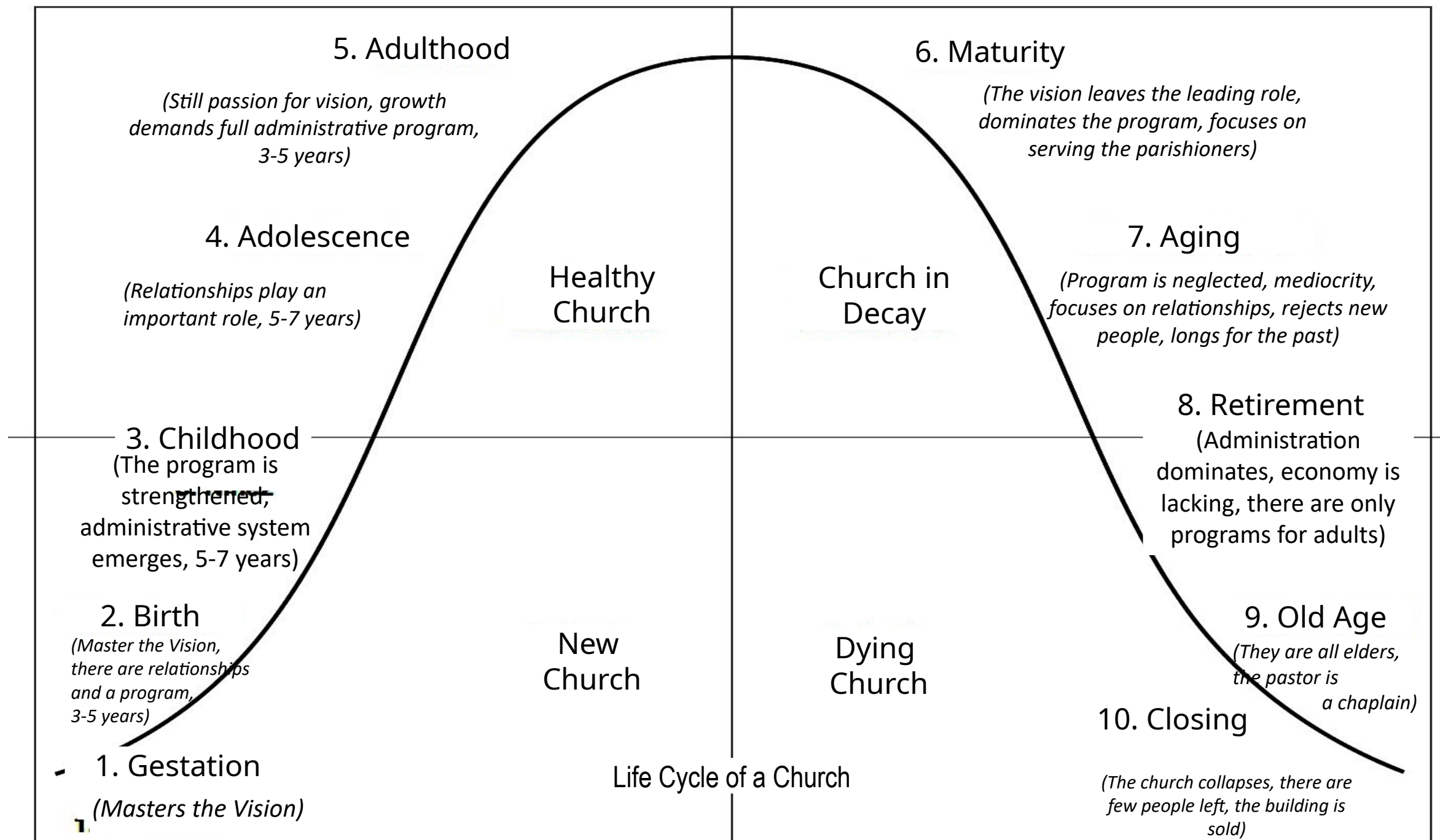
Maturity

Aging

Retirement

Old Age

6. Death



1. Gestation

It is the time when you begin to **dream** of establishing a new congregation in a certain area. It is a time **dominated by the Vision**, where the other elements are not yet present, since there is still no congregation.

Vision-driven gestation results in the establishment of a new church.

2. Birth

The **vision-driven Church** planting team begins congregational meetings.

The **Vision dominates**. In this stage, the Relationships and the Program are born, and are still fluid. This stage lasts between 3 to 5 years.

3. Childhood

The Church is still in a **changing stage**. Worship times, meeting places, and even volunteer staff can be constantly changing.

The program begins to expand.

An administrative plan begins to emerge.

This stage lasts between 5 and 7 years.

4. Adolescence-Youth

The Church is still full of **passion and enthusiasm**. Having expanded the program in the previous stage, it is now concentrating on **developing good interpersonal relationships**.

That is, Relationships begin to take a dominant role, together with the vision and the program.

This stage lasts between 5 and 7 years.

5. Adulthood

The adult Church has *a stable staff, a full program, and a permanent location.*

The growth of the Church demands that a complete **administrative plan** emerge at this stage. It is the best time of the congregation, for it is still **full of passion** for the vision.

This stage lasts between 3 to 5 years. Counting from birth, **between 22 and 27 years have elapsed.**

6. Maturity

Although most of the congregation is satisfied, in reality, **this stage marks the beginning of its deterioration.**

The Vision loses its leading role, giving preeminence to the other principles. The Church **ceases to evangelize** to concentrate on serving the regular and extended membership.

This *stage can be long*, if the program is attractive and the administration is effective.

7. Aging

The Church **begins to age** when the program is neglected, and little by little, the congregation becomes accustomed to mediocrity.

The congregation **prioritizes Relationships**, defining itself as a family and differentiating between those “of the house” and the “visitors”.

The Church lives longing for the past.

8. Retirement

Recognizing the **undeniable deterioration**, the congregation strengthens the adult programs, eliminating the programs for children and youth. However, so many people have left and so many quarrels have arisen that **Relationships** have deteriorated.

The administration is in the hands of the “Guardians” of congregational traditions, who **tend to reject “new” people** and oppose all change. They cannot support a pastor.

9. Old Age

The **Church becomes old**, both literally and metaphorically. The average age of the congregation tends to be very old. There are no children or youth, nor are there any evangelistic efforts.

The pastor is seen as a **chaplain**, in charge of visiting the sick, bedridden, and institutionalized people.

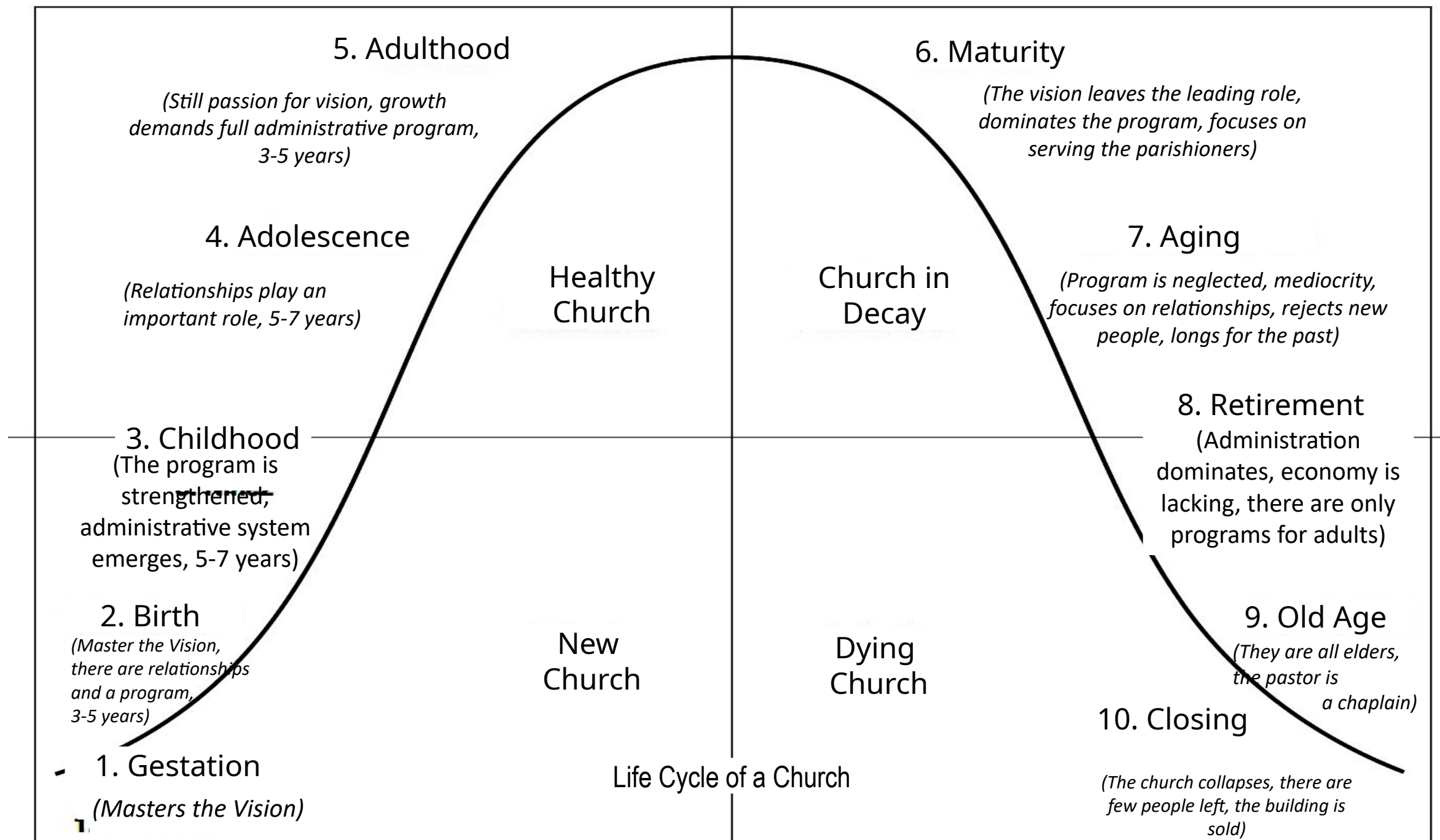
In the face of the collapse of the program, the **administration** dominates.

10. Closing

The **congregation collapses**. A handful of people remain, very committed, but in the process of mourning the loss of their beloved Church.

The budget is minimal. If the temple has debt, it may be turned over to the bank. If it is solvent, it may be sold or used to establish a new congregation.

None of the congregational principles have any vitality.



Vision vs Management

As you will see, in the first five stages, the dominant principle is the **Vision**, which motivates passion and generates enthusiasm for the future.

However, in the last five stages the dominant principle is **Administration**, which concentrates on serving the congregation and looks to the past as the golden age of the congregation.

Strategies

In the maturity stage, it is necessary to **update the Vision**, which will propel the Church for a period of between 7 and 9 years. The process takes 6 to 18 months.

Strategies

In the old age stage, it is necessary to **reinvent** the Church. This involves a redesign of the program, and sometimes even changing the name of the congregation and the location of the temple. The process takes 3 to 5 years.

When a congregation dies, it is necessary to **resurrect it**, establishing a new church in its place. The death of one church must give way to the birth of another in its place.

How long?

While a congregation takes 22 to 27 years to reach maturity, **the deterioration, death, and closure of the Church can take several decades.**

A Church in crisis can survive for a long time,
particularly if it has little debt and if it has
committed members, with good financial
resources.

Pastoral leadership

**Effecient pastoral leadership knows
how to update the vision and
enthusiastically communicate the new
one.**

Conclusion

Each congregation must determine **where it is in the cycle and update the vision**, which will lead the church to a resurgence.

The **Strategy of Jesus** is the divine vision that can lead your church to revival.

**Bullard Jr, George W. Pursuing the
Full Kingdom Potential of Your
Congregation. St. Louis: Lake
Hickory Resources, 2005.**