

1-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Machel, E. (2002). Will Church Planting Help a Denomination to Stay in Prime? A Reflection about the Lifecycle of a Denomination and Church Planting. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 13(1), 9-18. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol13/iss1/3>

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**Will Church Planting Help a Denomination to Stay in Prime?
A Reflection about the Lifecycle of a Denomination and
Church Planting**

Edgar Machel

Introduction

The concept of the lifecycle is well known in the Church Growth movement. It is applicable to local churches as well as denominations.¹ Recently Ichak Adizes, founder and director of the Adizes Institute in Los Angeles and Dean of Studies of the Adizes Graduate School for Organizational Transformation, summarized his consulting experience and methodology, which has been applied to more than 1000 companies around the world, in his book "Managing Corporative Lifecycles". His insights, though coming from a business background, may lead us to add understanding to the development of denominations as well as local churches while reflecting on the topic of church planting.² The thesis is, that the future of denominations will depend on a church planting multiplication structure in order to stay healthy and to keep growing based on the implications of the lifecycle. The importance of church planting is not new, but the concept of the lifecycle underlines it.

The Lifecycle of an Organization

Adizes describes the lifecycle as a process of growth and decline. The early stages leading to Prime are Courtship, Infancy, Go-go (the wild years), and Adolescence. The final stages leading to the death of the organization are The Fall (Late Prime), Aristocracy, Salem City and Bureaucracy. The main goal of any

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organization must be to stay in Prime as long as possible. The early stages, because of the lack of organizational elements will hinder a long-term success and the later stages, because of the lack of an entrepreneurial spirit, will lead to the loss of vision. Just Prime is the real satisfactory stage. Therefore, this article mainly focuses on the Prime stage, and how church planting can help to stay in that stage of development.

But first, we need to get a better overview of the lifecycles theory as presented by Adizes. During the first stage "Courtship", the emphasis is on the exploration of the ideas of the founder(s). He or they are looking for commitment, being themselves full of excitement but reasonable enough to understand, that it can not be done alone. The ideas become real when people express commitment and are willing to undertake some risk. This will lead to the stage of "Infancy". While Courtship was a time for ideas and dreams, now is the time to act and to make it happen. Transferred to churches, this is the time where a new church or movement is born. The very young organization is personal, full of energy, but lacking structure and systematical depth. Uncontrolled energy can lead to the death of an organization, unless needed change is implemented and stability can grow. By this they enter into the stage called "Go-Go". Now the organization is not just functioning, it's flourishing. Everything looks like a new opportunity to grow and to make things better. Since they have made right decisions, have drawn correct conclusions and acted wisely, the growth of the organization can overwhelm every participant. But the growth is still uncontrolled because they reacted to opportunities rather than according to a plan. They are not controlling their environment, it is much more the opposite. The stage of "Adolescence" is described as an "emotional rebirth".³ This very critical stage requires the delegation of authority, the change to a more professional leadership and a goal displacement, meaning to "switch from a more-is-better goal to a better-is-more goal".⁴ This change of priority is probably the most difficult change because the leaders have to balance management and leadership, growth and stability. "Prime" stage, as logical consequence, is indicated by a systematized and institutionalized kind of leadership. Since Prime is the most effective and efficient stage, we will look at it more deeply after finishing the lifecycle. The life of "Prime" stage losses momentum, when functional systems turn slowly into traditions, when people stop nourishing the vision and encour-

aging entrepreneurship. Eventually, people respond slower to change and initiate less and less. The stage of "Fall" has begun, mostly unconsciously. Though the organization has made it to the top, they may have forgotten that it took a lot of work to get there. They are not willing to meet the challenge to remain in Prime. The danger of the next stage "Aristocracy" is to overlook the problems because the organization is still functioning quite successfully. They turn inward, glorifying their past and therefore unable to deal with the future. "They can operate as if they exist in a vacuum."⁵ It is almost a stage of denial where nobody is willing to take responsibility and everyone is waiting for someone to act. When stage "Salem City" is reached the momentum is lost and problems get obvious and personalized. The game of finding a scapegoat is now the frustrating trial of a helpless organization, which feels incompetent to deal with the desperate needed change. While in "Aristocracy" people were determined to overlook the problems, it does not work anymore. The organization becomes dysfunctional and the following stage of "Bureaucracy" creates an organization of "clinically sustained life".⁶ Everything is administered and change agents will leave or already have gone. "Bureaucracy" makes people feel trapped within a system unable to change. Rules are known, but not the reason why they were created. "The health of full-fledged Bureaucracies is very delicate. Although they appear to be dangerous monsters, it may be relative easy to destroy them. Many are rotten to the core, teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Any sudden change could ruin them. Bureaucracies forced to reorganize quickly do not often survive the effort. A new computer may throw a Bureaucratic system into a spin. Since they get their financial resources from politicians, they survive as long as they are political assets. When they become political liabilities, and funds are withdrawn, they collapse promptly."⁷ Therefore, the final stage, the "Death" of an organization, is when you will find no resources and no commitment anymore.

The real challenge of any organization is to reach and to stay in Prime, to keep healthy, alive, flexible, vision-driven and future-oriented. We will focus now on a deeper understanding of Prime, to realize a close relationship of church planting and the longevity of a denomination.

The Prime Stage of an Organization

In Prime stage the interaction of four elements within any

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organization functions effectively and efficiently: The Entrepreneurial force (E), which is leading an organization forward, the Purposeful Programming force (P), helping to work goal-oriented and to perform successfully, the Administrative factor (A), making the interaction efficiently and finally the Integrative role (I), creating interdependency and therefore developing a culture for long-term survival. The declining stage starts when E loses its impact and administrative structures determine the future of the organization.⁸

The challenge in order to stay in Prime as an organization or denomination is to stay healthy, to keep the vision alive. But since change is inevitable, the status quo will always be questioned and even the most satisfying stage "Prime" requires constant modifications. If the vision will lose its driving energy, administration will take over. Form will become stronger than function and this will lead into decline. But how can a denomination structurally remain in Prime? Adizes suggests that you "can nurture E by decentralizing, spinning off satellites, and creating new lifecycle curves."⁹ The use of decentralization will prevent decline. From the viewpoint of lifecycles, church planting is *the* instrument to stay in Prime. New churches create new life cycles. As new satellites they keep the vision alive. Denominations, who want to stay effective and growing, need to consider a church planting movement as an instrument to develop a strategical mission plan. McGavran already pinpointed that denominations do not plant enough churches if the growth rate of members is higher than the growth rate of new churches.¹⁰ Denominations which introvert begin to lose their vision and the energy to move forward (E) will be substituted through managing and administrative endeavors (A). Most denominations have historically a visionary and missionary background, though they have not built a structure that fosters that vision. A church multiplication structure could prolong the period of Prime. In addition, it calls for and creates a different kind of leadership, coming close to an apostolic approach.¹¹ It is a leadership style, less focusing on management, and more concentrated on vision casting.

C.P. Wagner, challenging the inevitability of administrative leadership, used the example of The Assembly of God in Australia.¹² They implemented a new church planting movement, revitalized leadership, redefined a mission-oriented role of the pastor and eventually reversed years of plateauing. The real chal-

lenge is to create a church planting *structure*. Interestingly in the business world companies in Prime “create new companies - new business units that have their own products, their own production capabilities, and their own sales capability. Like a mature tree, fruits of a company in Prime contain the seeds of new saplings. The Prime organization is an extended family of businesses, well-coordinated and disciplined with a common focus and system of values.”¹³ The spinning off of satellites is essential for the survival of the company and the longevity of the vision.

Theologically, the main mission of the church is to build the kingdom; a non-missionary church is an anachronism. Church Planting is not just the most effective evangelistic method, it is biblically required.¹⁴ But it does not mean that missionary denominations should focus on themselves. Church planting might help to keep a vision alive within a denomination, but the driving force must be to build the kingdom and to bring the Gospel to lost people. Church planting is a helpful *structure*, but not the immediate *goal*. The danger of *ecclesiocentrism*¹⁵ or of a *plantatio ecclesiae*¹⁶ movement needs to be turned off. But if a denomination shares and understands the Mission of God (Missio Dei!), church planting will inevitably be part of the mission strategy. Church planting will be the result of obedience and not the conclusion of a self-preserving mind set. A good missiological structure is the result of a sound theological reflection of mission.

Church Planting and Prime

The best time to plant churches is during Prime. Since the church functions effectively and efficiently, decentralization will have a strengthening impact on the whole organization. During the early stages a church planting effort might weaken the church because the structure is not balanced enough. The time of planting a church is not just dependent on numbers but also on an adequate structure. The more a church developed a church planting structure during the process of organizing themselves, the more it will be natural to experience a church planting movement during Prime.

The longer a church is declining spiritually and eventually numerically, the more difficult it will be to consider planting new churches. Therefore a lot of independent churches developed recently because structures of many denominations did not allow them to experiment with different styles. According to Adizes, decentralization is more than delegation, it includes “the

transfer of discretionary power".¹⁷ Declining denominations often delegate responsibilities but neglect the question of power. If denominations leave the freedom to experiment and for structural plurality, without compromising their beliefs, it can keep the visionary energy within the church. Many denominations tried to retain unity by reducing and controlling all visionary energies, which usually question the status quo and create an atmosphere of plurality. The question of Prime is not to create unity through administrative, meaning controlling, instruments, but to keep focused on the mission. The atmosphere will be experienced as threatening, because it will create plurality: new churches will challenge older ones, new methods will question old methods. But if the church is in Prime, the structure is strong enough to deal with those tensions.

Declining denominations which struggle with "Aristocracy" and "Bureaucracy" developed structures with low impetus to change. Though the church planting movement got hold of many denominations it also created a lot of tension among church members. Probably a few church plants will not change the mind set and the underlying system. The older the denomination gets, the more a structural renewal is needed.¹⁸ Till "Prime" stage a structural reorganization is unnecessary and therefore any denomination needs to be aware of a decline of mission and reaching out because the structure will freeze and produce future problems.

Church Planting and Renewal of Denominations

Church planting is therefore a factor for a renewal of networks. "Integration is a factor that retards aging."¹⁹ As children keep parents young, so can young churches help older churches to keep in touch with modernity. This questions the movement of planting independent churches, because the entrepreneurial energy, which is necessary to create and to sustain vision, leaves the denomination and creates long-term problems.

Paul, though accepting the sovereignty of the local church, tried to build a network of churches. He traveled a lot and visited churches, he transmitted greetings from other churches (1.Cor. 16:5-8, 19,20) and asked to distribute his letters among the churches in the area (Gal.1:2). He was very much concerned with the unity of the church.

From a short-term perspective it is much easier to create new structures without the boundaries of old ones, but from the long

term perspective the creating of a network of churches, younger and older ones, is more effective (e.g. resources can be bundled up, greater projects can be started, world mission can be better funded). It requires flexibility from both sides. New churches need patience and endurance, and organizations or denominations need to provide an atmosphere of creativity and freedom. A vision for church planting deeply engraved in a strategical mission plan and supported by a functional structure can produce a strong movement. Independent churches (some already denominations) can argue that they are free to focus on mission, since they left a (denominational) bureaucratic structure. They did not want to be a church without mission, they started independently. But the argument is one-sided. Theologically, not just "church without mission" is unacceptable, but also "mission without church."²⁰ As church we need to strive for unity and community, not to strengthen the organization or denomination, but to make the fulfillment of the Great Commission easier. Therefore, we need to be careful not to quickly leave old networks behind. Revival takes longer and requires courageous leadership, but for Christ sake and for his mission it should be worth a try.

Practical Implications

As we already mentioned, the main goal of any denomination should not be to focus on themselves in order to survive. The (local, universal or denominational) church is called to build the kingdom and to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. If denominations want to do it as best as possible, they should ask five important questions to stay as effective and faithful as possible:

1. What do we do to implement and sustain a church planting movement within our organization and what kind of strategy do we have?
2. How much are we willing to invest - do we fund church planting projects to such a degree that members recognize church planting as a priority?
3. Do we support church planters, which means what kind of mentoring, training and counseling do we offer?
4. Do we look for church planters and coaches and do we have an assessment strategy?
5. Are we willing to learn by reviewing constantly what are we doing? Are we (still) open to change and are we

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(still) willing to undertake some risk?

A Final Thought

A mission-minded, church planting strategy is one indicator for a denomination to be and to stay in Prime. The loss of mission usually goes along with a loss of vision. Unfortunately, the begin of "Fall" can not be "seen"; everything is still in function and everything works as in "Prime". But the entrepreneurial spirit, the courageous risk-taking attitude and the future orientation becomes less dominant among leaders, because leadership had to be institutionalized. The administrative type is more needed in an effective and efficient organization. But within that system the stage of "Prime" is always in danger.

The constantly reviewing of the denominational strategy from the perspective of mission is the challenge for every leader.

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NOTES

1. Martin F. Saarinen, *The Life Cycle of a Congregation*. New York: The Alban Institute, 1986. Robert D. Dale, *To Dream Again - How to Help Your Church Come Alive*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981. Both adapted the concept from the business world and made it applicable for churches. David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962 applied the model to denominations.

2. Ichak Adizes, *Managing Corporate Lifecycles*. Paramus: Prentice Hall, 1999.

3. Ebd., 77.

4. Ebd., 78,85.

5. Ebd., 163.

6. Ebd., 174.

7. Ebd., 179.

8. Ebd., 193-204.

9. Ebd., 362.

10. Donald McGavran, James H. Montgomery, "The Discipling of a Nation" in: *Global Church Growth Bulletin*, 1980, 49.

11. See C.P. Wagner, *The New Apostolic Churches - Rediscovering the New Testament Model of Leadership and Why it is God's Desire for the Church Today*. Ventura: Regal Books, 1998. Another but similar model could be pastors as church planters. The early Seventh-day Adventist Church did not have local pastors. Each church was responsible for their own missionary efforts and pastors supported them, but mainly spend their time in entering new fields. Not before 1920 local pastors became common in Adventism. The change introverted the church eventually, and the growth in the western world started to plateau, in some parts to decline. A revitalization of a church planting movement is taking place today, but has to deal with a lot of administrative obstacles (Russell C. Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life & Mission of the Local Church*. Fallbrook: Hart Research Center, 1998, E. Machel, *Verkirchlichung: Schicksal oder Herausforderung - Eine Bestandsaufnahme der Siebenten-Tags Adventisten* in: *Spes Christiana* 11, 2000, 72-82).

12. C.P. Wagner, *Churchquake! - How the New Apostolic Reformation is Shaking Up the Church as we know it*. Ventura: Regal Books, 1999, p. 149-152. Also Adizes is convinced that organizations do not have to leave "Prime". No organization is predestined to die (A.a.O., 116).

13. Adizes, 106.

14. C.P. Wagner, *Gemeindegründung - Die Zukunft der Kirche*. Mainz-Kastel: C & P Verlag, 12, 21.

15. Hoekendijk warned against the institutionalization of evangelism. Churches exist as mission and have no other right of existence than in actu Christi. The focus of the church is the world, its mission, the proclamation of the gospel and not the church itself. Though he had a too narrow definition of church, he helped to rethink the question of missiology and ekklesiology (J. Chr. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964, 15, 42).

16. P. Charles, a catholic missiologist, understood plantatio ecclesiae as an extension of his own denomination. It was the basic philosophy of the Catholic Church till the I. World War (See A. Freitag, *Mission und Missionswissenschaft*. Kaldenkirchen: Steyler Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962, 38-41).

17. Adizes, 363.

18. See Robert Fritz, *Corporate Tides - The Inescapable Laws of Organizational Structure*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996, 113;

W. Warner Burke, *Organization Development - Principles and Practices*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982, 17-18.

19. Adizes, 378.

20. Karl Müller, *Missionstheologie*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1985, 89.