

# Spiritual Vitality in the Rural Church



A thriving rural church family is undergirded by earnest prayer and finds empowerment through the Holy Spirit towards spiritual maturity and the reproduction of disciples.



The Rural Church Pastors Network  
[www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com](http://www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com)

## Welcome!!

We are delighted you have taken time to make an investment in your life and leadership by joining us. Twice a year the Rural Church Pastors Network creates events for rural pastors that focus on both relevant church ministry matters and pastoral personal health and well-being. All events are designed by a team of seasoned and committed rural pastors who ensure each RCPN gathering offers a meaningful experience that is not only encouraging, but can be applied to your life and your rural church setting.

This course's theme focuses on *Spiritual Vitality in the Rural Church* and is designed to engage participants in discussions and exercises that help us discern where the church is at in its transformational journey.



### Our Goals for the Course

- To provide pastors with a day away experience from normal ministry routines & practices.
- To offer encouragement and support to pastors as they consider their current rural church setting and ministry demands
- To gain a fresh appreciation for the uniqueness of rural based ministry.
- Laughter and fellowship will permeate our gathering as we learn and pray together.
- To harvest the great deal we can learn from each other... there is wisdom in the room – both lessons we have learned and mistakes made along the way!
- To encourage networking between rural pastors for continued contact and accountability.



## If I had A Mission Dollars!\*

Where there is no vision the people perish (Proverbs 29:18)

Imagine getting this letter in the mail!

---

“Dear Pastor ... please find enclosed a personal cheque made out to you for \$5000 with the understanding you spend it in the next two months. The only other condition is that the funds are to be used in their entirety in a manner that *will best move your church forward towards fulfillment of its mission statement...* I assume it will involve leading your people toward an expression of spiritual vitality. Please write to me after two month telling what you did with the money – with receipts covering your expenses. Upon your response I may provide additional funds.”

---

On the lines below – share with those around the table your strategy in spending your \$5000 and the outcome you perceive the investment in your ministry will have within a year towards fulfilling your church mission.

---

---

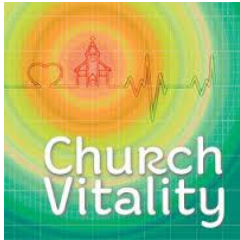
---

---

\*This exercise can be used in a local church setting with leaders and congregational members. It helps people declare their ministry priorities and what they consider to be the pressing needs of church life. Another variation on this is for the church to be gifted a full time ministry assistant fully paid for 6 months. Where would you have them serve to help the church fulfill its mission?



The RCPN wants to express thanks to our friends at **Focus on the Family** for their deep commitment in support of rural pastors. Visit them at **Focusonthefamily.ca** for a full list of their resources. Every find yourself in crisis and need immediate help and assistance? Call their confidential call-in counselling line at 1.888.5.CLERGY. Also, in need of a retreat that focuses on spiritual revitalization? Google [kerithretreats.ca](http://kerithretreats.ca). Scholarships available.



## A Biblical Consideration of Church Vitality

The following questions are designed to stimulate conversation around the experience of church vitality and a consideration of what happened to churches in the Bible who seemingly missed the mark. Discuss two or three questions that seem of interest to those in your group.

**I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not stand against it.** The words of Jesus carry with them a sense of strength and vitality. How would you unpack what Jesus is conveying in Matthew 16:18 when compared to current statistics that reveal 80% of all North American churches are either in a state of plateau or are in decline?

---

---

**Fan into flame...** if Paul were talking to the church today, using this phrase that he passed on to Timothy (2 Timothy 1:6) admonishing him to be all that God had planned for him to become, what might he be alluding to in our day when considering the rural church?

---

---

**Return to your First Love...** this was the painful description of the Church in Ephesus in Revelation 2. What do you know about the church that led to this challenge? Is there any parallel message to the church today? If so, how would it be evidenced in a rural setting?

---

---

**Lukewarm – I am going to spit you out of my mouth...** this was part of the message to the church of Laodicea... neither hot nor cold! (Revelations 3). Is there any parallel message to the church today? If so, how would that be characterized in a rural setting?

---

---

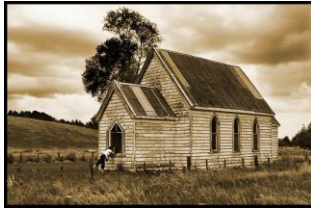


### **Not by might nor or power, but by my Spirit says the Lord...**

(Zechariah 4:6). In your church and/or denomination, what emphasis is given to the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church related to spiritual vitality? What part does 'earnest prayer' play?

---

---

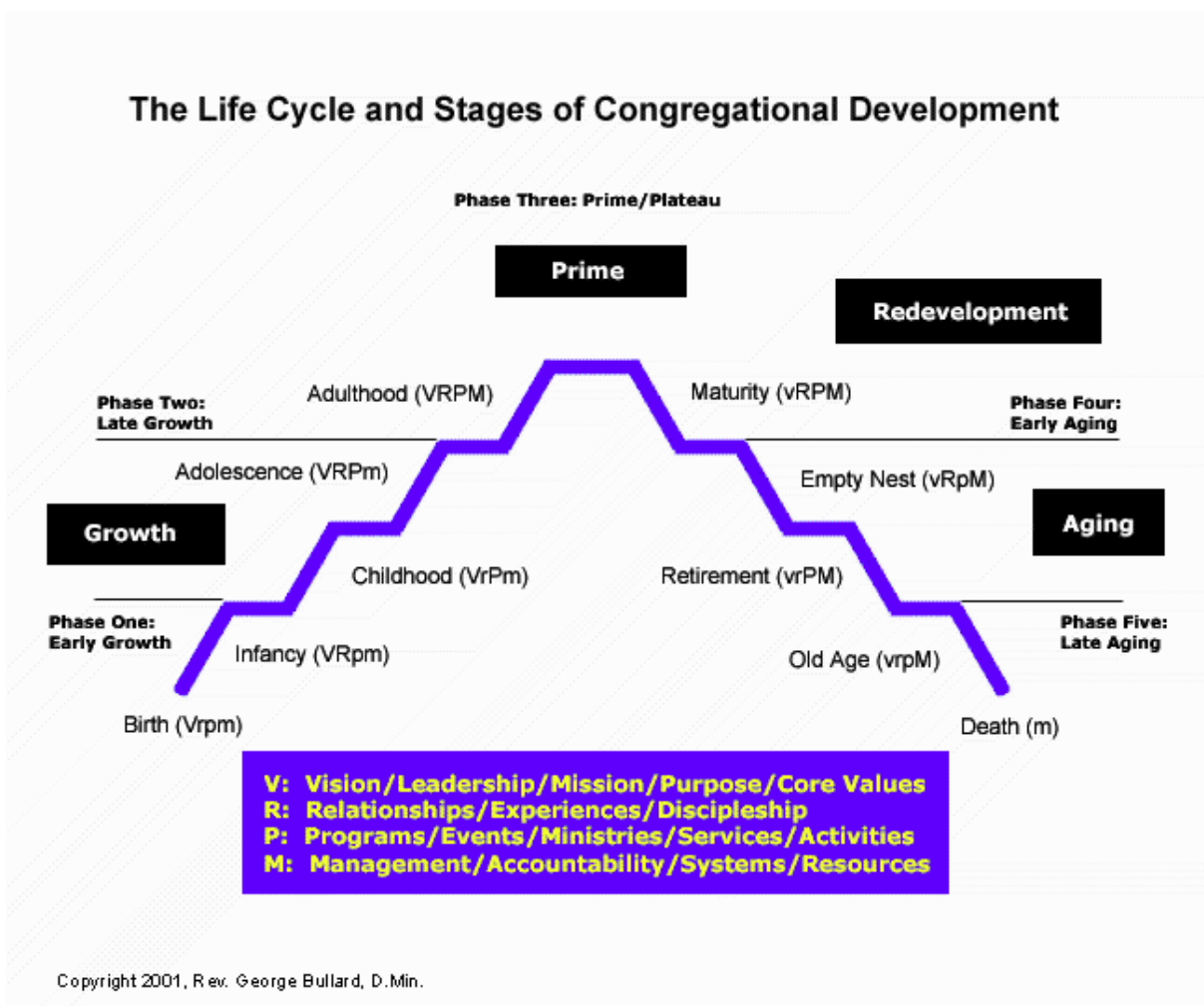


## The Church Life Cycle

### Understanding the Spiritual Age of Your church.

Dr. George Bullard has done extensive research and writing on spiritual vitality and congregational development in the church. Go to [http://sed-efca.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/stages\\_of\\_church\\_life\\_bullard.pdf](http://sed-efca.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/stages_of_church_life_bullard.pdf) for more information.

An understanding of church spiritual vitality cannot be complete without an understanding of the current state of your church related to its inherent development. Consider the following diagram and familiarize yourself with the description provided. By the time you finish reading the description, you will intuitively know where your church is at, on the life cycle!



The church life cycle describes not only the various stages of congregational development but relates them to stages of human life. Four organizational principles (Vision, Relationships, Programs and Management) are the central elements through which it can be determined what stage of the life cycle a church is at.

You will note that at various stages of the life cycle, the four elements will either appear as a **upper case (V)** or **lower case (v)**. When letters are upper case it means their impact on church life is **DOMINANT** while lower case letters mean the element is **secondary**.

**Consider the following church development narrative and get a sense of where your church is at this time:**

### **1. Birth (Vrpm)**

When a new ministry is birthed, it occurs through someone coming forth with **Vision (V)** but there aren't many **relationships (r)**, no formal **programs (p)** and nothing to **manage (m)**.

### **2. Infancy (VRpm)**

**Vision (V)** attracts **Relationships (R)**, people who become committed to the cause associated with the vision. Everything is relational at this point without any **programs (p)** as such and nothing much to **manage (m)**.

### **3. Childhood (VrPm)**

There comes a point where you need to develop programs to keep those attracted to the vision, organized otherwise chaos sets in. So setting up **Programs (P)** related to the **Vision (V)** becomes prominent, even over attracting more **relationships (r)**. There is still nothing much to **manage (m)**.

### **4. Adolescence (VRPm)**

With meaningful **Programs (P)** in place related to furthering the **Vision (V)**, the capacity to engage additional **Relationships (R)** occurs, with still not a lot to formally **manage (m)**.

### **5. Adulthood (VRPM)**

Eventually the church hits its stride when things all seem to be going in the right direction. **Vision (V)** continues to attract new **Relationships (R)** which are ministered to meaningfully through church **Programs (P)** and a **Management (M)** system is now in place, exercising good stewardship of resources associated with the church.

---

**At this point the church experiences Spiritual Vitality as it is living out it's original Vision. Studies show it usually takes approximately 20 years for a vision to grow within the context of a church to 'Adulthood' (VRPM)**

You will note that throughout the GROWTH side (right side – upward slope) of the life cycle towards adulthood... only the element of VISION (V) has been upper-case/dominant for the entire period. This is directly linked to development of spiritual vitality in the church.

At this point in the church life cycle something happens to vision... it is naturally set aside for the sake of keeping things going well (which becomes a status quo that is no longer driven by vision – but is maintained by management). Unless church leadership revisions every 5-7 years – it will move from the desired PRIME setting at the top of the life cycle and move into the signs of early aging with the need for redevelopment due to vision being set aside... and the rest of the life cycle story takes shape!

---

## 6. Maturity (vRPM)

Because the original **vision (v)** has been accomplished it doesn't remain a driving force in the experience of the church. Because there is still momentum from the original vision however, with rich friendships (**R**), meaningful **Programs (P)** and sound **Management (M)**, people don't really notice that the church is starting to lose vitality and is beginning to 'age.'

## 7. Empty Next (vRpM)

Eventually the **programs (p)** that proved meaningful in years past have now become outdated but because of the strong **Relationships (R)** in the church, program don't seem as important. A sort of 'club' has formed with people just looking after themselves in a **Managed (M)** setting. By now **vision (v)** isn't spoken of very often.

## 8. Retirement (vrPM)

Relationships (r) only go so far however when there is not a **visionary (v)** cause in the church. People's commitment decreases and the church decides to promote all of the **Programs (P)** that made them successful. A well developed **Management (M)** system continues in place.

## 9. Old Age (vrpM)

Pressure develops in the church due to a lack of attendance/**relationships (r)** because it doesn't have enough leaders to run the **programs (p)** of the church. **Vision (v)** for the future has long died within the fellowship. The only thing that hasn't changed is a **Management (M)** system that now controls the church.

## 10. Death (m)

At this stage there is not much of anything at the church – there isn't enough money to support a pastor, not enough of a critical mass to run programs, and the building is old and weary with little to **manage (m)**

---

**Notice on the right side of the church life cycle (AGING)... the only element that remains dominant until the death of the ministry is that of MANAGEMENT (M) Spiritual vitality died with the church's vision years before and the church dies a slow and prolonged death.**

### **What's Your Story?**

In light of the description of the stages of congregational developing in the church life cycle – with **Vision** dominant in the first half and **Management** dominate on the second half of the cycle... look at the diagram and decide where your church and congregational currently are.

What elements of church life or experiences in recent congregational life would convince you that your 'placement' on the life cycle is accurate?

---

---

---

How far do you believe you are from moving to the next progressive stage of the cycle?  
Why do you sense that?

---

---

Record the story of your church's progression through the life cycle over the years ... then be prepared to share the story with those around your table.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Refer to George Bullard's Life Cycle online for a full description of the life cycle.**





## The Disciple Making Capacity of Your Church

### **Vitality - Bringing Church Ministry To 'Life.'**

It's one thing to have a church mission and list of programs on paper. It is another thing to see it working functionally in moving people along a relational church pathway to maturity in Christ and connectivity to the church family. The following scenario is presented, with follow up questions, to allow you to develop a working knowledge of your church's current preparedness related to leading people towards maturity in Christ.

#### **SCENARIO**

Last weekend, a family (parents in their late 30's, 16 year old son, 12 year old daughter) arrived at your church worship service unannounced. In casual conversation following worship they shared they had just moved into your rural community from another town where they attended a church at Christmas and Easter.

This weekend they will return to your church and after worship will share with you that they would like to come to your church regularly. They shared that they feel something 'is missing in life' and they want their kids to grow up with good morals.

#### **QUESTIONS**

As pastor of this church, and based on the information shared about this new family who wants to come to your church....

1. Where would you like to see each member of this family in one year's time related to church involvement/connectivity and spiritual formation? How about in two-year's time?

---

---

2. What processes/pathways are in place in your church so your desires for them actually occur and aren't left to good intentions? (The issue: intentionality in bringing vision/mission to life)

---

---

3. How are your church ministries designed/configured to help you achieve your desires for this family?

---

---

---

---



## Spiritual Maturity – the Goal of Suggested Bibliography

### Discipleship and Spiritual Vitality

- Boice, James Montgomery. Christ's Call to Discipleship. Chicago, ILL.: Moody Press, 1986.
- Griffiths, Michael. The Example of Jesus. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1985.
- Hawkins, Don. Master Discipleship: Jesus' Prayer and Plan for Every Believer. Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Resources, 1996.
- Hull, Bill. Jesus Christ Disciplemaker. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2004.
- Ogden, Greg. Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- Peterson, Jim. Lifestyle Discipleship: The Challenge of Following Jesus in Today's World. Colorado Springs, CO.: NavPress, 1993.
- Wilkins, Michael J. In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life. Colorado Springs, CO.: NavPress, 1997.
- Willard, Dallas. The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus Teachings on Discipleship. HarperOne, 2006.
- Willard, Dallas. Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ. Colorado Springs, CO.: NavPress, 2002.

### Disciplemaking and the Church

- Barna, George. Growing true disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ. Colorado Springs, CO.: WaterBrook Press, 2001.
- Bennett, Ron. Intentional Disciplemaking: Cultivating Spiritual Maturity in the Local Church. Colorado Springs, CO.: NavPress, 2001.
- Bridges, Jerry. The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness. Colorado Springs, CO.: NavPress, 1994.
- Boa, Kenneth. Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation. Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishers, 2001.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. The Cost of Discipleship. rev. ed. New York, NY. Macmillian Publishing, 1963.
- Coleman, Robert E. The Master Plan of Discipleship. Old Tappan, NJ. Fleming H. Revell Co., 1987.
- Hawkins, Greg L. & Cally Parkinson. Reveal Where Are You? Barrington Il. Willow Creek Resources. 2007.
- Hull, Bill. The Disciple Making Church. Old Tappan, NJ.: Fleming H. Revel Company. 1990
- Hull, Bill. The Disciple-making Pastor. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revel, 2002.
- McIntosh, Gary. One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2002.
- Putman, Jim. real-life discipleship: building churches that make disciples. Colorado Springs. CO.: NavPress. 2010.
- Peterson, Eugene H. A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society. Downers Grove, IL.: Intervarsity Press, 2000.
- Sanders, J Oswald. Spiritual Discipleship. Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1994.



For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-13



The Rural Church Pastors Network  
[www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com](http://www.ruralchurchpastorsnetwork.com)