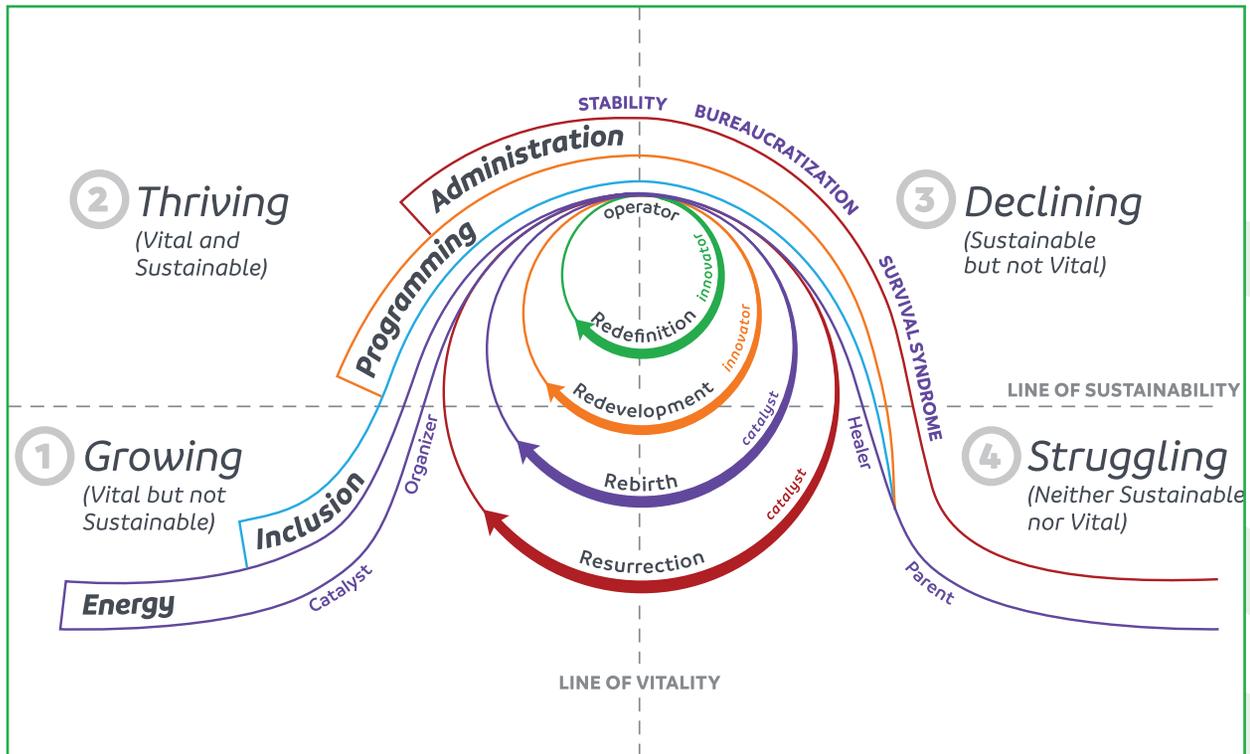




The Church Life-Cycle



The Life Cycle of a Worshiping Community

The concept of a congregational life cycle has been around for a long time, and is typically illustrated with a diagram such as the one here, which is inspired by models developed and used by the ELCA, American Baptist Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Rothage Life Cycle, the US Congregational Life Survey, George Bullard, and others. The bell-shaped curve shows the stages that a congregation can proceed through, from left to right. Note that as we move from left to right, we see that the congregation is growing and then eventually plateauing (the top of the curve), but only for a short while, and then steadily declining.

But, a gradual progression toward decline and even closure is *not inevitable*. Worshiping communities can, and often do, break out of this cycle. Note where the model shows a “circling back” toward the thriving stage. This is the result of intentional work on the part of the worshiping community. Note that the further a worshiping community moves over the top of the curve and to the right, the more effort is required to move back to the thriving stage. The easiest, when caught early enough, is to redefine the worshiping community’s vision. But if the community has gone too far for mere redefinition to work, then they must redevelop. And finally, if it has declined too far to be redeveloped, it must birth a new community. We’ve also been experimenting with the idea of adding “resurrection” as a fourth loop, at the bottom.

Using new surveys measuring components of spiritual health and financial health, we will be able to place each participating worshiping community at a particular location on this diagram, which will provide a basic assessment of where the community is currently located in this life cycle.