

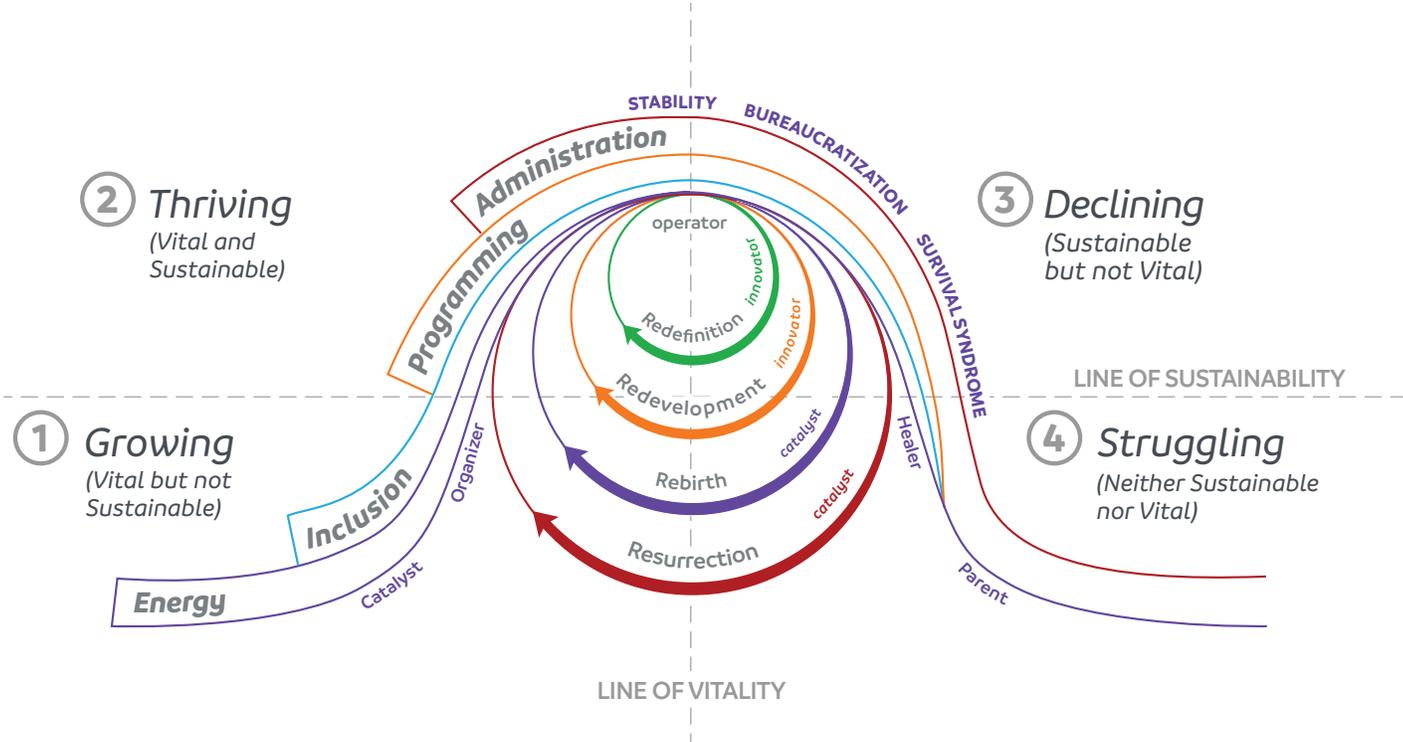
# The Life Cycle of a Worshiping Community

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 the congregation 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 location on this diagram, which will provide a basic assessment of where the community is currently located in this life cycle.



## FOUR QUADRANTS:

Note that the diagram has two axes: vertical (representing the line of spiritual health) and horizontal (representing the line of financial health). A worshiping community that is located above the line of financial health exhibits traits that suggest it will be able to sustain itself for a long period of time. Below that line, it either hasn't yet achieved financial health (too new) or had it in the past but has lost it. To the left of the line of spiritual health, we have communities that are spiritually healthy; to the right, becoming less so.

Putting these two axes together suggests four different quadrants (beginning at the lower left and moving along the curved line to the right, or clockwise).

**QUADRANT 1 — *Growing*:** Worshiping communities in quadrant 1 are in the development stage and are new, excited and vital. They exhibit lots of energy and vision, hope and enthusiasm and a belief that the community has great potential. They are very change-oriented. However, they're not developed enough at this stage to be considered financially healthy. Perhaps there is not enough participation for financial viability, or perhaps they're just not yet organized and fully engaged in planning and strategizing. It's a good place to be, but not for very long. Without more organization and stable leadership, a worshiping community is very vulnerable at this stage. The type of leaders best suited to lead a worshiping community at this stage are catalysts (those with charismatic qualities and entrepreneurial skills, the visionaries) and organizers (those who can grab the vision and run with it, people who know how to get things done). Usually the most growth occurs while a community is in this stage. As they become more organized, newer worshiping communities in quadrant 1 tend to think a lot about inclusion: both inviting those outside of the worshiping community and intentionally including those who have started participating. They need to be thinking about how to draw people in and then how to assimilate them into the group, how to engage members in discovering and using their spiritual gifts and how to distribute and use power and authority.

**QUADRANT 2 — *Thriving*:** Worshiping communities in quadrant 2 have achieved financial health while remaining spiritually healthy. Although energy levels may not be as high as they were previously, energy is still there, and it may be renewed or increased by some of the worshiping community's activity. By now, it has developed a culture of mission and also some services that meet the needs of its participants, the surrounding community and beyond. Saarinen refers to this as programming, which serves specific functions such as worship, music, learning, serving, managing and witnessing. In this context, administration refers to mission statements, goals, objectives, budgets and planning. Worshiping communities in quadrant 2 tend to be higher on programming and administration, and lower on energy and inclusion than quadrant 1 communities, but all four of these "gene structures" are present. A lot of change can lead to conflict; but if well managed, small inevitable conflicts are not detrimental to the overall health of the worshiping community. At this stage, the community has developed plans for reaching people, assimilating new people and providing intentional spiritual formation. The goal is to get to this quadrant, and when the worshiping community inevitably drifts into quadrant 3 (Declining), through some redefinition of its goals, it can return to quadrant 2 without a great deal of effort. The type of leaders we typically see at this stage might still be the catalysts and/or organizers who got the worshiping community started, but they may have lost some of their enthusiasm and moved from organizers to operators. If they forget about the passion that they once had, they can lead the community into quadrant 3.

Or they may have left and been replaced with an operator type. Or a new visionary catalyst or organizer has moved in and is trying to convince the community to do some redefinition of its mission and purpose. If that doesn't happen quickly, the worshiping community may slide over the hill into quadrant 3 pretty quickly. Worshiping communities in quadrant 2 are still growing, though perhaps at a much slower pace. They are in a pattern of adding enough new members to offset annual losses that naturally occur, and until they slip over the hill, are adding more new members than they lose. Because the energy expended on growth in quadrant 1 shifts to ministry and administration as the worshiping community moves into quadrant 2, growth tends to slow. This is probably the best time for a congregation to consider birthing a new worshiping community.

**QUADRANT 3 — *Declining*:** Worshiping communities in this quadrant at first would argue that they have not ventured over the hill and are still in quadrant 2. Indeed, it's difficult to tell when that point happens. But at some point, a congregation moves from thriving to less thriving, and if not checked, will continue down the quadrant-3 slope towards quadrant 4 (*Struggling*). Worshiping communities located in this quadrant have typically stopped growing, and at first are in a pattern of maintaining, which slides into patterns of more losses each year than gains. The worshiping community may become bureaucratized to the point where some people begin questioning whether it's lost its sense of vision or purpose. The people and leaders may have lost their sense of urgency to be on mission, and yet may maintain financial stability due to a large endowment, or by keeping a large enough member base to be able to maintain for years, maybe even decades. Note in the diagram that some redefinition, if it occurs early in the community's time in quadrant 3, (requiring the leadership of an innovator, who is often not the "operator" leader who brought them here in the first place) the community can return to quadrant 2 without a lot of effort and monumental changes. If not, the community is at risk of catching "survival syndrome," which is characterized by some of the following: fundraising efforts to keep the doors open, letting staff go to keep functioning with a steadily decreasing budget, developing an attitude of scarcity thinking that replaces abundance thinking, as well as conflict and blame. A worshiping community at this stage needs a healer to lead them. The further the community continues sliding down the hill toward quadrant 4, the more work will be needed to redevelop the community back into a quadrant 3 community. Such work requires the leadership of an innovator who can help the community through the conflict that will inevitably come to move into healthier patterns.

**QUADRANT 4 — *Struggling*:** Worshiping communities in this quadrant generally know that they are in trouble, because, at some point, they recognized that they were in quadrant 3 and tried to do something about it. They may have been engaged in major conflict, have developed unhealthy responses to conflict and no longer have healthy systems in place. They may have slowly aged as a community, with their younger generations growing up and moving out. They are usually more engaged in maintenance than in mission at this stage. They are becoming less financially healthy, and as they move toward the end of the cycle, they may come to realize that they are no longer healthy, either spiritually or financially. Quadrant 4 worshiping communities are at a crossroads where they have to choose between doing nothing and inevitably closing their doors, intentionally closing their doors and using any remaining funds to help fund something else, merging with another congregation in a union or federated relationship, or completely rebirthing as something new.