For humans there are rather clearly understood stages of development: the pre-natal period, infancy, toddler-hood, elementary age, adolescence, etc. Each stage has its unique characteristics and challenges. But one of these is never pretty – someone who in chronological age has reached adulthood but in emotional age has never grown up. There is a less understood, but just as real, progression in the life cycle of another God-created organism – the church. The following is a brief synopsis of my own characterization of these stages. Church leaders would do well to be students of the history of the church they are leading and understand clearly the current stage and how to move to the next stage of development.

**ACQUISITION STAGE**

Sometimes this stage starts with a church plant, the opening of a new campus, a church seeking to free itself from denominational control or a reboot after a major life-changing event. Whatever the beginning point, the acquisition stage involves the acquiring of three essential ingredients:

1. **A Charismatic Leader**

Movements don’t begin or flourish without leaders. At this stage a leader emerges who has the charisma to attract followers to himself and to the vision of the new work. He is often emotional, driven and focused. He is all about the success of the ministry and seeing it become self-supporting and sustainable. His work is often marked by early and amazing growth and excitement. He is a pioneer and a risk taker. This type of leader often burns out early, as the pace and passion of what must be accomplished for God can become overwhelming. He will often go into another type of ministry or will begin a pioneering work in a new location. Some early pioneers can transition into long-term ministry but there are few who understand the following stage of development and can adapt with the changing needs of the congregation.

2. **A Passionate Cause**

Churches in the acquisition stage also acquire a compelling passion. If they do not, they will decline and die at this stage of development. The passion can take many forms: a new style of ministry, a new area of ministry, denominational or structural freedom, a targeted audience and many others. There is usually a big “something” that drives a church at this point. The “something” is often lost or forgotten as the church ages. The leader who wishes to move a church to the next stage of development must be able to identify and tap into this “something” as a means of helping the early pioneers move to the next stage, rather than staying focused on “what used to be.”
3. Energetic Followers

There are those who bond with the charismatic leader and buy into the passionate cause and become energetic followers. They will serve; they will sacrifice and be committed to the ministry of the church. It is a time of great excitement and the future is the focus. They dream big as to what may be and clearly see their current efforts as part of something bigger than themselves and the present. This is usually a time of little conflict as “the cause” overwhels much negativity.

Transitional Realities

After a time of growth and excitement there comes a time of recognizing more specific needs within the congregation. The young families want a vibrant children’s ministry and youth ministry. Working professionals need community and older adults want care. A church that fails to address this pressure to move to the next stage will suffer as growing dissatisfaction with a proper addressing of these needs will erode growth and enthusiasm. The wise leader will see this as an opportunity to either move to another pioneering work or adapt to the stage to come.

ARRANGEMENT STAGE

The arrangement stage is when the meeting of the diverse needs of a congregation is at center stage. It is marked by four common realities:

1. Growth and Introduction of Programs

This is a time when growth continues but perhaps slows. Growth in human organizations is usually not in a straight line, but according to Charles Handy in “The Age of Unreason,” it usually occurs in the pattern of a sigmoid curve. There is a period slow growth, followed by a period of rapid growth and then a plateau. Rather than a straight line it is more in the shape of an “S.”
The slowing of growth at the top of the “S” should not be seen as a sign of a problem but as a sign of a significant transition, such as to the next stage of the church’s life.

This is usually the time when programs are in the forefront. The church begins to arrange its internal assets in such a way to most effectively and efficiently minister to the congregation.

2. Expansion of Personnel

This is also a time where there is an expansion of staff to oversee the new programs of ministry. The addition of staff brings new opportunities and fresh thinking to the church. There is also the danger of the new ideas being perceived as a threat to the “something” by the original pioneers. The leader must help all see this time of transition as natural and needed.

3. Adoption of Business Models and Techniques

Often, the pattern for a growing a program-rich organization is the structure seen in the modern business community. While much can be gained by this influence, there is likewise a danger of loss. While seeking to be well organized and led, there must be a constant focus on the teaching of Scripture and a constant focus on the things that make a church unique from every other organization.

4. Creation of Facilities and Policies

This is often the time when a church will focus on facilities through a building project or relocation. While facilities can be wonderful tools for ministry, they cannot be allowed to replace the focus on the community of believers that exists apart from a location.

This is also a time when policies are created in attempt to control and guide the organization. While healthy, this must be done with balance. The policies should focus more on “who we are” rather than “what we do.”

Transitional Realities
Unfortunately, this is the stage where most churches stop. They continue arranging the deck furniture rather than seeking to determine where the ship should sail. It is easy for the church to become all about “doing” church. Personnel changes or programmatic changes are seen as the solution to every problem or the cause of every problem. This time of transition will likely occur at the top of a second sigmoid curve. This is the time to take the well-tooled machine which has been acquired and arranged and take it to the next stage of development. However, if you stop here you have stagnation of either numbers or spiritual growth, or both. One sign of remaining here too long: the pioneers will exit.

ALIGNMENT STAGE

The leader must see the flattened growth at the top of the curve not as an end, but rather a beginning— for the top of one curve should be seen as the bottom of the next.

At this point the leader must lead in three key areas:

1. Defining of Purpose

All the machinery in the world is only effective if it produces a product or service. Its point is not to run but to produce. The ultimate purpose of the church is to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31). The specific purpose of the church is not to “do” church but to produce disciples and other churches (Matt. 28:18-20). This specific purpose must be infused into all that the church is. The question that must ever be asked is…”How does this (program, activity, budget, hire, expenditure, event etc.) make disciples?” If you want to know if you are in this stage or stuck in the arrangement stage – just listen – do we talk more about programs or purpose? In this stage the church must take the assets so carefully arranged in
stage two and bring them into alignment with purpose. Whatever is not about producing disciples must be retooled or discarded.

2. Development of Strategy

A key to bringing a church into alignment with its purpose is to develop a simple and clearly defined process that moves people from unbelief to the point of spiritual maturity. For each point of purpose there needs to be corresponding steps of action. Everyone should know these steps - where they are in these steps and how to encourage others to take the next step. For example, if a church has this as a purpose statement:

*We believe that our purpose is to produce followers of Christ by our commitment to*

- Gather in Worship
- Grow in Community
- Go in Mission

Then there needs to be an understanding that the steps toward maturity are: attending a large group for worship, participating in a small group for community and to be involved in ministry, both within and outside the local church.

The power of clear purpose and simple process cannot be underestimated. This will allow a church to be aligned with its purpose and this will drive the church to take the assets acquired and arranged to be aligned to drive the church forward to accomplishing its God-given mission. If not, each individual program will become an isolated silo that operates more or less independently of the rest of the organization, and often these silos compete with each other for resources and attention rather than working together for a common purpose. If silos can be turned horizontally, they can become a conduit to move people through a process toward maturity.
3. Measurement of Process

A church must also measure this process. Often, a church measures vertically— we measure giving, giving per person per week, worship attendance, etc. But these measurements only tell part of the story. We need to measure horizontal movement of the process toward maturity. A church must create the metrics that allow a comparison of the steps in the process. For example, how does attendance growth compare with small group growth and the growth in participation in ministry? This type of measurement is not easy but it is the best gauge of true alignment.

Transitional Realities

If a church stops at this stage, you will have growth but only to a point of limitation. The limiting factor may be worship space, parking, pastoral capacity, cost-effectiveness of an expansion or relocation, or something else, but there is a finite capacity for a church to grow. It is at this point that a church must truly become missional in its thinking. For the next stage will take the church beyond itself.

ADVANCEMENT STAGE

The advancement stage can be described as a church seeing its purpose as beyond itself, in that it is the advancement of the kingdom that is in view, not just the advancement of an individual church. Just as most organisms are declared to be in a state of maturity when they are able to reproduce, so it is with churches.

One seldom discussed reality of church in the arrangement and alignment stages of development is the loss of those who have pioneering spirits (those who need and want to experience stage one). If a church can be led properly in the advancement stage, you can have growth and multiplication in which the pioneers can go back to stage one without a traumatic cause, but rather with a seamless mission.

Various means of advancement can be identified. A church can go multi-campus, it can purposefully become two or more congregations, or it can use its assets to plant churches.

Transitional Realities

The focus on church multiplication should be a concept introduced early in a church’s life, even in the acquisition stage. A wise leader should sense when points of limitation are being reached or are approaching. A leader must seek to identify pioneers who can be the key leaders in the next sigmoid curve, starting with a new congregation beginning its own stages of church development.