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UNDERSTANDING & OVERCOMING THE  
**CHURCH LIFECYCLE**



KEN PRIDDY

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FRESHSTARTNETWORK.COM

# INTRO TO KEN PRIDDY & THE CHURCH LIFECYCLE

In the early 90's I asked Ken to replant a church in Phoenix, AZ. The church was down to twelve people, half from one family. These faithful people were trying to keep the doors open and maintain the old building. Ken and his wife Sharon took the challenge, applied their past church planting experience and saw God's hand at work. The result was a vibrant fresh start. Coming out of the replanting journey Ken was motivated to pursue his PHD. What Ken learned from his studies coupled with his replanting experience served to formulate the training detailed in this white paper, Understanding & Overcoming the Lifecycle of the Church. Now, two decades later,

Ken has trained hundreds of church leaders in revitalization. For replanting or revitalization, the journey to new life begins when a struggling church honestly comes to grips with its condition.

For the remaining leaders it is an honest look in the mirror. When reality is understood and accepted the leaders become open to a fresh start. At the Fresh Start Network, lifecycle teaching continues to unlock doors to new beginnings.

We are confident that Ken's Lifecycle tool will serve you well as you work with churches at various stages of health. Especially churches on the backside of the lifecycle.

**- BILL MALICK**  
FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT

# UNDERSTANDING AND OVERCOMING THE CHURCH LIFECYCLE

A church, much like a person, has a lifespan that can be characterized as a lifecycle. A person's lifespan or lifecycle is directly linked to his or her chronological age.

For example, at the age of thirty, she is unequivocally thirty years old, and at sixty, he is unequivocally sixty years old. Of course, genetics, circumstances, one's life choices, and, perhaps, other factors might make one person's experience at thirty or sixty somewhat different from another's, but a birthdate is a birthdate, and on any given date, a person is simply as young or as old as chronology dictates.

A church's lifespan or lifecycle has similar parallels that manifest in similar ways, at least in generalities. A church that was founded a hundred years ago is likely showing signs of aging such as a congregation that is getting older as it gets smaller.

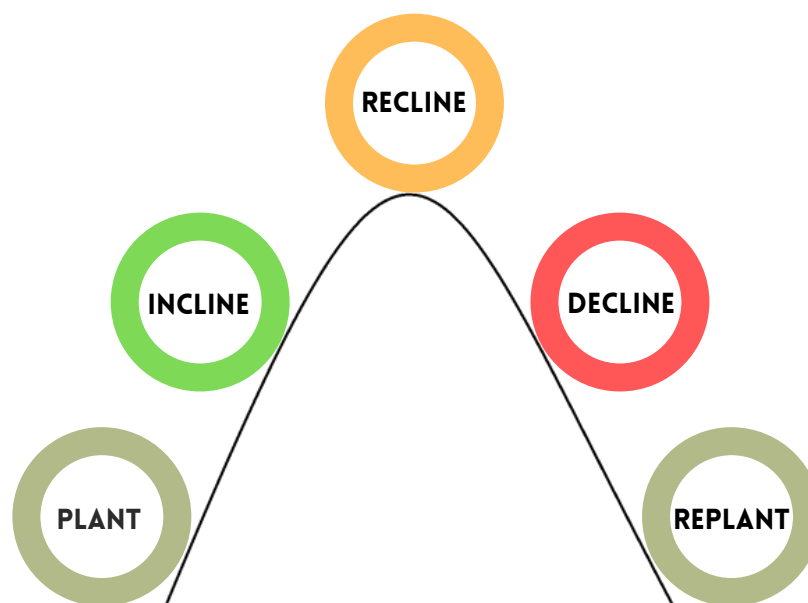
A church that was planted five years ago tends to have a younger congregation that is growing in number. A hundred-year-old church is likely inwardly focused, having little impact on its surrounding community. A five-year-old church tends to be outwardly focused, having significant impact on its surrounding community.

So, a church can, indeed, feel the impact of chronology much like a person. However, while a person can't stop time and recalibrate her or his personal lifecycle, a church can. Not literally in terms of stopping time, but a church has options. A church sliding downward on the backside of the church lifecycle has a choice to make. That choice is to continue as it is and simply let the future happen, or to take bold action to end its current lifecycle and launch a new lifecycle. Such a church can be born again, beginning a new lifecycle. How? Church leaders can opt for Church Replanting.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH LIFECYCLE:**

Church Replanting can be positioned in reference to the church lifecycle. I first developed the lifecycle schema that I use today almost thirty years ago. That schema remains tried and true. Its framework is a bell curve that spotlights three lifecycle macro- stages: Incline, Recline, and Decline.

### **Church Lifecycle Macro-Stages:**



## UNDERSTANDING & OVERCOMING THE **CHURCH LIFECYCLE**

A key distinction to be made between Incline, Recline, and Decline is their relationship to ministry capacity. Inclining churches are expanding their capacity to minister, creating more ministry capacity over time. Reclining churches have stabilized their capacity to minister, neither losing nor creating capacity, but maintaining the status quo. Declining churches are losing their capacity to minister, able to provide less and less ministry over time.

### **A Comparison of Distinctive Characteristics of Incline, Recline and Decline:**

<b>INCLINE</b>	<b>RECLINE</b>	<b>DECLINE</b>
<b>Key Indicators</b>	<b>Key Indicators</b>	<b>Key Indicators</b>
• Future-Oriented	• Present-Oriented	• Past-Oriented
• Vision-Driven	• Program-Driven	• Structure-Driven
• Community-Focused	• Congregation-Focused	• Core-Focused
• Innovative	• Routine	• Complacent
• High-Risk Faith leading to...	• Low-Risk Faith leading to...	• No-Risk Faith leading to...
Faith Decisions	Resource Decisions	Indecision
• People Serve through Gifts/Call/etc.	• People Serve Slot-filling	• People Serve by Default
• Resources of Kingdom Investment	• Resources for Program Provision	• Resource for Preservation
• New Leadership	• Established Leadership	• Incumbent Leadership
• Growth by Conversion	• Growth by Transfer	• No Growth

## **COMPOSITES OF MACRO-STAGE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS:**

Leaders of Inclining Churches are future-oriented, always anticipating what the future holds and always seeking God's leading for the future. They are vision-driven, guided by a never-wavering commitment to aligning ministry with the Great Commission.

As such, they are community-focused, placing a priority on laboring in the harvest that is the community around the church. Inclining leaders place a high value on innovation, willing to seek out and employ new and better ways of doing ministry. High-risk faith leads these leaders to make decisions based on that faith. If God's leading seems clear, action steps are taken regardless of whether all necessary resources to support those decisions are in hand.

People throughout the congregation are mobilized for ministry according to their giftedness, callings, talents, interests, or passions, thereby promoting ministry effectiveness and satisfaction. Resources, such as finances and personnel, are invested in kingdom ministry with an expectation of positive kingdom ministry returns. Development of new leaders is a priority to avoid stagnation and to foster the expansion of ministry capacity.

Combined, these characteristics contribute to growth by conversion.

Leaders of Reclining Churches are present-oriented, desiring to freeze time in a perpetual present that keeps ministry exactly as it is. They are program-driven, believing that whatever success the church is experiencing is the product of its broad, conventional programming.

This programming is focused on the current congregation and provides what that congregation wants in the way of ministry services.

Ministry operations are conducted with well-established routines that border on fill-in-the-blank ministry with each department operating as a ministry world unto itself.

Low-risk faith dominates decision-making that demands that all resources for action are in hand, and that the cost of falling short is very low with not much at stake.

So, resources and safety tend to eclipse God-dependency.

People throughout the congregation are mobilized for ministry through slot-filling, making sure that serving slots needed to deliver the programming are occupied.

This provides program coverage but often places willing ministry providers in ministries for which they are not suited. Resources, such as finances and personnel, are viewed as the provision that keeps programming in operation, programming that is centered on the congregation and not on a potential community harvest.

With ministry capacity bounded, leadership positions have been identified and filled with established leaders, leaving little room for the development and placement of new leaders.

Combined, these characteristics contribute to growth by transfer as the Reclining Church tends to appeal to the already-Christian population but not to the unbeliever. This transfer growth, while it lasts, creates a false positive concerning growth because the local church might be growing though the kingdom is not.

**“ It is entirely possible that the numerical growth of a church may have little or no effect on the expansion of The Kingdom ”**

Leaders of Declining Churches are past-oriented, longing for a return to the good old days. The nature of decline is that the church has declined from a previous time that is viewed as preferable to the present.

When the gloss of nostalgia and the fear of a foreboding future are added to this perception, an idealized past can be quite compelling and becomes, or supplants, a vision for the future.

Leaders are structure-driven, preoccupied with the inner trappings of ministry such as finances, personnel, buildings and grounds, organizational elements such as policies and procedures, and committee work. Structure becomes the center of ministry rather than the main support for ministry.

Ministry becomes core-focused, the core being a longstanding subset of the declining congregation. These folks tend to be steadfast and faithful over the long haul, but also tend to be stuck in the past. Their leadership and financial support are often seen as indispensable, so their perspectives tend to dominate decision-making and action, or inaction, as the case might be.

Leaders in Decline have become complacent, resigned to the way things are and resigned to their inability to do anything about it proactively. Any risk is viewed as too great a risk, and the fear of making a costly, wrong decision leads to indecision. Ironically, indecision is itself a wrong decision.

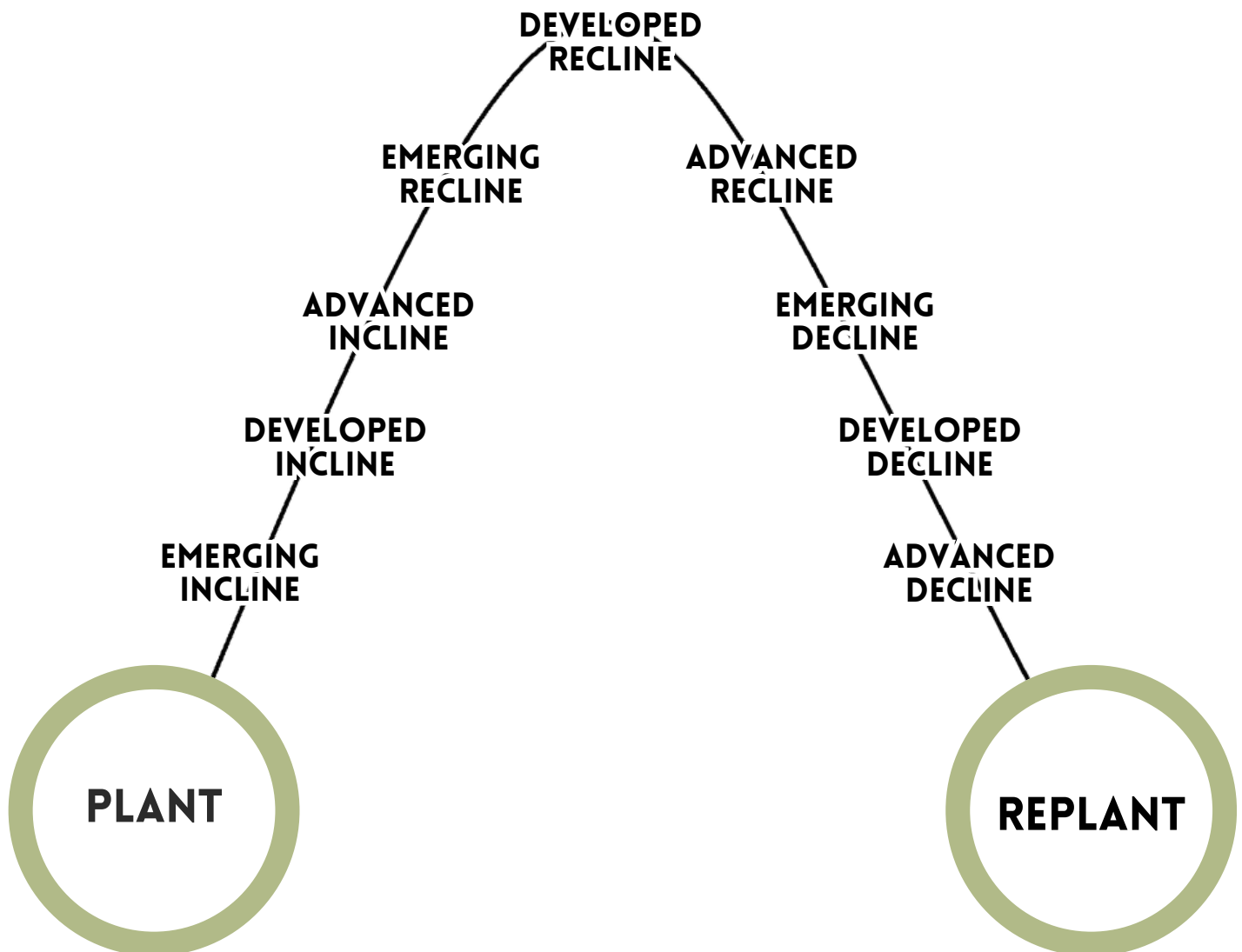
“ Ironically, indecision is itself a wrong decision. ”

The overemphasis in maintaining the structure results in the attempt to keep all structural elements alive. Therefore, there are often more structural slots to fill than people to fill them.

Consequently, folks take on multiple assignments by default as there must be a name in every slot. Resources are guarded for self-preservation, the opposite of kingdom investment. Established leaders become incumbent in their leadership positions, calcifying leadership operations. Combined, these characteristics contribute to the church's lack of growth, or, perhaps more accurately, to its negative growth.

This broad look at the Macro-Stages of the Church Lifecycle, with its Distinctive Characteristics and Macro-Composites, provides a foundational understanding of the lifecycle. There is more to the lifecycle story, but those nuances are beyond the scope of this paper. However, the following diagrams provide a brief glimpse into those nuances which manifest as a church moves through its lifecycle.

### **Church Lifecycle: Micro-Stages**



## COMPOSITES OF MICRO-STAGE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS:

Arnold L. Cook, in his informative book, *Historical Drift: **Must My Church Die?*** describes the movement of a church through its lifecycle as an unconscious and unnoticed drifting through time. The dynamics of a church lifecycle are largely unknown to pastors and church leaders, so there is typically little awareness that this drift is taking place, and little attention is paid as to where a church might be on its lifecycle at any given moment.

**Emerging Incline** is a pure form of Incline that features strong commitment to the Distinctive Characteristics of Incline. When launching a church plant, or when launching a new lifecycle, it's necessary to invest heavily in these characteristics.

However, a church that starkly features Incline and Incline only is a virtual parachurch ministry that will need to move deeper into the lifecycle to establish balanced health.

**Developed Incline** continues to feature a strong commitment to the Distinctive Characteristics of Incline, but also has begun to build an infrastructure of Reclining characteristics in a subordinate position. For example, leaders remain Future-Oriented but are tending to the present. They remain Vision-Driven but are building program ministries internally. They remain Community-Focused but are shepherding and mobilizing the congregation.

This is the optimum micro-stage of the lifecycle in terms of laboring in the harvest.

**Advanced Incline** occurs when the commitment to the Distinctive Characteristics of Recline rises to being equal to those of Incline. Rather than producing balance, however, the result is competition between Incline and Recline for ministry preference.

Laboring in the harvest is still effective but Community-Focus and other Inclining characteristics are beginning to lose momentum in favor of Reclining characteristics.

**Emerging Recline** occurs when the commitment to the Distinctive Characteristics of Recline pulls slightly ahead of Incline with more and more interest and momentum being given to Recline.

Laboring in the harvest can still be effective, but the church is moving dangerously close to losing its outward focus as it shifts more and more to inwardly focused ministry.

**Developed Recline** occurs when Incline takes a major step back, giving way to a greater and greater emphasis on congregational ministry.

A word that could be associated with Developed Recline is the word plateau. In his book, **Turnaround Churches**, George Barna observes that churches in plateau don't realize that they are in crisis.

**Advanced Recline** is the most dangerous micro-stage of the lifecycle. Incline disappears altogether, supplanted by the emergence of Declining characteristics. The church has moved to the backside of the lifecycle, but leaders are rarely aware of this subtle movement which is camouflaged by the fact that Recline is dominant in both Developed and Advanced Recline.

So, on the surface, ministry appears to be the same. However, below the surface, Decline is eroding away any serious commitment to Incline.

**Emerging Decline** occurs when the commitment to Decline pulls even and then begins to overtake the commitment to Recline.

This is not conscious on the part of leaders but is evident in how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and how actions are taken.

**Developed Decline** occurs when Recline takes a further step back and the Distinctive Characteristics of Decline clearly move to the forefront.

**Advanced Decline** is the final stop on the lifecycle and occurs when all traces of both Incline and Recline have disappeared and the church is trapped in a pure, stark form of Decline that features only the Distinctive Characteristics of Decline.

# UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH LIFECYCLE SPARKS SELF-DISCOVERY

When church leaders are first presented with an objective look at the Church Lifecycle, their tendency is to project their churches to be somewhat healthier than they truly are. Subjectively completing the Church Lifecycle Assessment, then, provides a wake-up call that ranges from informative to shocking.

## Example 1:

Leaders in a small church in central Pennsylvania knew that ministry in their church was stagnant but were reluctant to own responsibility for that stagnation and make the changes necessary to turn ministry around. A Church Lifecycle Assessment forced the issue and when they discovered they were well down the backside of the lifecycle into Developed Decline, they were prompted to take action.

## Example 2:

Leaders in a large metropolitan church in Kansas came into a full day training seminar on strategic planning for ministry in a friendly, jovial mood with lots of smiles and chatter. Then they were presented with the Church Lifecycle and its accompanying assessment workshop. To their surprise, eleven out of twelve workgroups discovered that their church was in Advanced Decline and the twelfth, made up of younger leaders, placed the church in Emerging Decline. Eyes were opened, the mood shifted, and, following training, leaders acted.

# **OVERCOMING THE CHURCH LIFECYCLE:**

## WHEN REPLANTING IS THE RIGHT CHOICE

Often, a church is well down the backside of its lifecycle in Emerging, Developed, or Advanced Decline before alarm bells go off. By then, a church is in such a weakened state that changing course is extremely difficult.

The rule of thumb, then, is for churches to make moderate adjustments to ministry early in the lifecycle of the church from a position of strength rather than having to make severe adjustments late in the lifecycle from a position of weakness, preferring change as choice over change as a response to crisis. Still, it's rarely too late in the lifecycle to make the sacrificial commitment to turn ministry around.

The seriously Declining Church can become a Church Replant; it can be born again.

The key to new life, to being born again as a church, is lifecycle intervention. Arnold L. Cook further informs that the story of lifecycle is vitality lost over time. Without lifecycle intervention, a church will drift through its lifecycle, peaking and then waning as vitality begins to slip away.

The good news is that intervention is possible throughout the lifecycle, but, again, church leaders tend to be unaware of this dynamic and remain in the dark about lifecycle until finding their church in Decline.

Ideally, they would have intervened earlier, at some point within the scope of Incline or Recline when intervention could have been relatively moderate, and when they could have leveraged any number of proven spiritual and strategic methodologies that promote revitalization.

“ The key to new life, to being born again as a church, is lifecycle intervention ”

However, churches reach a point deep into Decline when it's too late for simple revitalization. At that time, assuming there are enough assets or resources in hand to sustain viability, the right choice, the bold choice, the godly choice, is for the church to Replant. In this way, leaders can avoid further lifecycle victimization and overcome the lifecycle currently in play by launching a new lifecycle that prominently features the Distinctive Characteristics of Incline.

The Declining Church can become an Inclining Church, being born again as a Church Replant.

# **STORY OF THE LIFECYCLE APPLIED TO MISSION CHURCH IN REDLANDS, CA**

BY BILL MALICK

The Redlands, CA church was blessed with many people and good leadership from members of Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF). When MAF relocated away from Redlands the church felt the loss. Years later they experienced the pain of the passing of their beloved pastor.

The church continued to decline and was struggling as it decreased to a few dozen people. At the same time, I was working with a church in Woodland Hills, CA that was successfully replanted. When I met with the leaders at Redlands to discuss possibilities for a new beginning it was clear that they wanted help.

However, they were reticent to “let go of the wheel” and allow new leadership and a partner church to walk with them on the journey to a new beginning. I recall sitting with the Redlands leadership as we watched the video story about the Woodland Hills church. They were intrigued as they watched the video testimony. While their interest was piqued, they continued to hold back. Eventually as they understood the lifestyle training they agreed to a new beginning. What was the trigger? It was the introduction and grasp of Ken's teaching on the church lifecycle. It became their 'Oh No', followed by their 'Ah Ha' moment. 'Oh No' we are in deep trouble, 'Ah Ha' there's help and hope for us. The result over the next year was a vibrant new beginning that continues to this day.

## GOING DEEPER:

The Book of **Nehemiah**, a widely recognized biblical model for renewal and revitalization, begins with an assessment.

Its opening verses explain that Nehemiah, who was serving in exile at the court of the King in Susa, received a report from eyewitnesses concerning the Jews back in Jerusalem who had survived the exile.

That report, revealed in Nehemiah 1:3, reads,

***“The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall in Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates destroyed by fire,” (ESV).***

View this assessment data through the lens of the Church Lifecycle and consider these questions:

1. In what ways do Jerusalem's broken-down walls and destroyed gates foster “great trouble and shame” for these remnant survivors?
2. In the nomenclature of the Church Lifecycle, is this remnant in Incline, Recline, or Decline? How so?  
Read Nehemiah 1:4-11
3. How does the report from Jerusalem impact Nehemiah? How does he respond?
4. In what ways does Nehemiah respond spiritually?

5. In what ways does Nehemiah respond strategically?

Read Nehemiah Chapters 2 & 3

6. In what ways does Nehemiah, blessed by the hand of God, launch a new lifecycle?

7. In what ways does this account of Nehemiah's actions inform today's local church remnants in terms of possible responses to their current lifecycle positions?

# RESOURCES

*Historical Drift: Must My Church Die* by Arnold L. Cook: Note the in-depth treatment of lifecycles in Chapter 3: *The Cursed Curve* – pp. 43-62.

*Turnaround Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church* by George Barna: Note Chapter 1: *Reshaping the Lifecycle*, pp. 19-29, and Chapter 2: *The Symptoms of Decline*, pp. 31-40.

*Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* by Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson. Note Chapter 12: *Making a Comeback – Top Factors and Biggest Challenges*, pp. 199-208, and Chapter 13: *Comeback Conclusions*, pp. 209-219.

*Building Nonprofit Capacity: A Guide to Managing Change Through Organizational Lifecycles* by John Brothers and Anne Sherman: Note the treatment of lifecycle and the Logic Model (developed by the TCC Group) on pp. 3-28.

*How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In*, by Jim Collins: Note the *Five Stages of Decline* summarized on pp. 14-26.

*Jumping the Curve: Innovation and Strategic Choice in an Age of Transition* by Nicholas Imparato and Oren Harari: Note Chapter 3: *Rising to the Occasion*, pp. 53-77, and Chapter 4: *The Innovation Imperative*, pp. 81-102.

*Church Lifecycle Assessment*: Free online at [assessment.church](http://assessment.church), provided by Ken Priddy.

*Community Demographics*: Percept Group – online at [perceptgroup.com](http://perceptgroup.com). Note Percept Group's *Ministry Area Profiles*.