

# The Life Cycle of Nazarene Churches

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Churches, like people, change as they grow older. While there are important differences between the stages of human and organizational development, the analogy of the human life cycle fits the development of churches fairly well. Both are usually born with a great deal of joy, pain, and excitement. They tend to struggle for an extended period of time to achieve maturity and stability. They experience rather predictable stages of development. Both are more effective in coping with the challenges of each stage when they are aware of its particular challenges and opportunities.

David O. Moberg and Carl F. George are two of the scholars who have used the life cycle analogy to facilitate a more thorough understanding of the church. Moberg's theory is presented in the book, *The Church as a Social Institution*, (1962: 118-126). He wrote about the "Life Cycle of the Church," which includes five predictable stages: incipient organization, formal organization, maximum efficiency, institutionalization, and disintegration. Carl F. George, of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, also presented a model of congregational development and change. His model drew on Moberg's earlier insights but focused more specifically on congregations rather than both denominations and congregations.

Moberg's theoretical model proposes a curvilinear relationship between church age and effectiveness. For many years effectiveness and growth increase as age increases, however, midway in the life of the institution the reverse begins to be true.

In the beginning of the ascending curve there is a phase of *incipient organization* characterized by a negative reaction to existing churches, emotional enthusiasm for the new church, and diffused leadership. As the age and effectiveness of the organization increase, there is a phase of *formal organization* characterized by the membership commitments, specification of goals, symbolic separation from the larger society, and a gradual move from charismatic leaders to rational or bureaucratic leaders. As the curve rises to a crest, there is a phase of *maximum efficiency* characterized by decisions based on research, increased tolerance of other groups and society, rapid expansion of the formal organizational structure, and rapid growth.

In the descending curve there is a phase of *institutionalization* characterized by an expanded bureaucracy which has become an end in itself, declining intimacy, passive members, and leaders who are remote from followers. Finally, the curve declines to nothingness in a phase of *disintegration* characterized by loss of members' confidence in the institution and its leaders, formalism, indifference, obsolescence, absolutism, red tape, patronage, and corruption. If reform takes place at this final stage, efficiency may be regained.

In his theoretical model Carl F. George theorized that it takes special talent and commitment to start a church. Even with such a leader, churches tend to begin small and take about twenty-five years to reach maximum efficiency and size. He hypothesized that from the beginnings to the peak size there is a tendency to have relatively steady growth.

When organizational efficiency is finally achieved, according to the theory, there is apparently a tendency for a means-end substitution. The organizational efficiency, which began as a means to achieve church growth, tends to become an end in itself. The goal of evangelism tends to give way to the goal of protecting and advancing the institution. Therefore, according to George, by about the twenty-seventh year the church tends to begin a period of lower efficiency and consequent decline.

This decline is not understood to be inevitable. Churches may intercept the process. Mature, efficient organizations might continue to devote most of their resources to evangelism. Churches which have begun to make the organization an end in itself might choose to reverse this. However, the tendency is evidently strong itself might choose to reverse this. However, the tendency is evidently strong enough that breaking the pattern requires intentional, sustained, powerful intervention. It appears, according to Moberg and George, that most churches do not recognize this problem as a process. Therefore, most churches continue to decline and eventually pass out of existence.

These life cycle models of the church raise some interesting questions for Nazarenes. How old are the more than five thousand congregations in the United States and Canada? Are the current members more likely to be found in older or younger churches? How long does it take for the typical congregation to reach average size? What proportion of the churches die by the time they are thirty, forty or fifty years old? What do these age related patterns help us to predict about the growth of the denomination during the next decade? And, which policies or programs should be expected to successfully intervene to modify predictable growth restricting patterns?

To find answers to these questions, all Nazarene congregations in the United States and Canada were examined using data from the 1986 assembly year. The period covered by the study was 1908 through 1986. Churches were categorized by ages in five year increments for the entire history of the denomination. Individual and groups of churches which joined the denomination were identified as "new" churches in the year they joined the Church of the Nazarene. The original churches making up the Church of the Nazarene were considered "new" in 1908 although they may have been as much as twenty years old then. The earliest increment was only three years (1908-1910). the most recent increment included churches that could have been as much as six years old (0-5 years).

## Churches

How old are the Nazarene congregations in the United States and Canada? Table 1 presents the distribution of the 5,169 Nazarene churches according to the number of years it had been since their founding. The largest group of churches (10.97%) were 31 to 35 years old. Slightly over half (52.18%) were under 40 years old.

***Table 1***

***Distribution of Nazarene Churches in the United States and***

<b>Canada by Age* of Church at the Close of the 1986 Assembly Year</b>			
<b>Years Since Founding</b>	<b>Number of Churches</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative</b>
1-5	354	6.85	6.85
6-10	191	3.70	10.54
11-15	196	3.79	14.34
16-20	209	4.04	18.38
21-25	277	5.36	23.74
26-30	424	8.20	31.94
31-35	567	10.97	42.91
36-40	479	9.27	52.18
41-45	455	8.80	60.98
46-50	417	8.07	69.05
51-55	380	7.35	76.40
56-60	328	6.35	82.74
61-65	355	6.87	89.61
66-70	212	4.10	93.71
71-75	166	3.21	96.92
76-78	146	2.82	99.75
Unknown Date	13	.25	100
Total	5169	100	

[Figure 1](#)

## Membership

Are the current members more likely to be found in older or younger churches? Table 2 summarizes the location of the Nazarene members as they were distributed in the churches of various ages. The largest concentrations of members were in the churches which were 61 to 65 and in those which were 31 to 25 years old. The churches between these two age groups also had large numbers of the Nazarene members. Fewer than one in ten (9.31% members were in churches 20 years old or newer. Only 4.34% were in churches ten years old or less.

<b>Table 2</b>
<b>Distribution of Nazarene Churches in the United States and Canada by Age* of Church at the Close of the 1986</b>

<b>Assembly Year</b>			
<b>Years Since Founding</b>	<b>Number of Members</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
1-5	12411	2.30	2.30
6-10	10981	2.04	4.34
11-15	11689	2.17	6.51
16-20	15102	2.80	9.31
21-25	20156	3.74	13.05
26-30	38966	7.23	20.28
31-35	49006	9.09	29.37
36-40	41362	7.67	37.04
41-45	43155	8.01	45.04
46-50	47881	8.88	53.93
51-55	45300	8.40	62.33
56-60	47994	8.90	71.24
61-65	51028	9.47	80.70
66-70	33787	6.27	86.97
71-75	34406	6.38	93.35
76-78	34751	6.45	99.80
Unknown Date	1070	.20	100
Total	539045	100	

[Figure 2](#)

[Figure 3](#)

How long does it take for the typical congregation to reach average size? Table 3 compares the size of the average church in the various age categories. Arithmetic means were used here as the measure of average. The high standard deviations relative to these means suggest the need for caution in inferring that these churches are the most representative or that most churches are concentrated around the mean. In fact, the relatively high standard deviations indicate a great deal of dispersion or variety in size. In other words, rather than a distribution that resembles the bell shape of a normal distribution curve, these distributions tend to be more flat and spread evenly across the range of sizes.

With that caution in mind, it may be seen, at the bottom of the table, that the average size of all congregations was 104 members. The average size tends to increase with age from about 35 for the newest churches to nearly 250 in the oldest. The average size is as large as the overall average from the 46 to 50 age category on to the oldest.

**Table 3**

**Average Size of Congregations in the United States and  
Canada by Age\* of Church at the Close of the 1986  
Assembly Year**

<b>Years Since Founding</b>	<b>Number of Churches</b>	<b>Average Members per Church</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
1-5	354	35.06	32.40
6-10	191	57.49	58.72
11-15	196	59.64	45.23
16-20	209	72.26	67.48
21-25	277	72.77	66.60
26-30	424	91.90	94.23
31-35	567	86.43	95.43
36-40	479	86.35	80.41
41-45	455	94.85	88.68
46-50	417	114.82	119.09
51-55	380	119.21	129.22
56-60	328	146.32	112.35
61-65	355	143.74	123.61
66-70	212	159.37	142.01
71-75	166	207.27	281.09
76-78	146	238.02	399.25
Unknown Date	13	82.31	34.67
Total	5169	104.28	132.75

This description of the sizes of churches within various age categories is cross-sectional. This was the pattern in 1986. It may be inferred that what was found in thirty year old churches in 1986 will also be true for the new churches when they reach that age. However, it would not be possible to test this inference without longitudinal, rather than cross-sectional, data.

Figure 4 presents the gradual increase in average size graphically. Again it should be noted that the relatively large standard deviation values suggest the need for caution in inferring too much about "average size" from this graph. Churches were not concentrated around these sizes. There was considerable variation in size in all age categories. However, on the average churches tended to begin small and grow very gradually, reaching the denominational average size after about 45 years.

Figure 4

## Institutional Life-Cycle

What proportion of the churches die by the time they are thirty, or fifty, years old? In table 4 the number of churches later disorganized are added to the churches which were still in existence in 1986. A survival percentage was calculated by dividing the number of churches organized. This percentage is reported in the far right column of the table. As might be expected, almost all of the most recently planted churches had survived. From that high percentage there was a gradual, steady decline in survival rate.

<b>Table 4</b>				
<b><i>Average Size of Congregations in the United States and Canada by Age* of Church at the Close of the 1986 Assembly Year</i></b>				
<b><i>Years Since Founding</i></b>	<b><i>Number of 1986 Churches</i></b>	<b><i>Churches Later Disorganized</i></b>	<b><i>Total Churches Organized</i></b>	<b><i>Percent Organized Surviving</i></b>
1-5	354	8	362	97.79
6-10	191	15	206	92.72
11-15	196	28	224	87.50
16-20	209	52	261	80.08
21-25	277	94	371	74.66
26-30	424	189	613	69.17
31-35	567	260	827	68.56
36-40	479	250	729	65.71
41-45	455	291	746	60.99
46-50	417	314	731	57.05
51-55	380	368	748	50.80
56-60	328	327	655	50.08
61-65	355	383	738	48.10
66-70	212	346	558	37.99
71-75	166	332	498	33.33
76-78	146	196	342	42.69
Unknown Date	13		13	100
Total	5169	3453	8622	59.95

[Figure 5](#)

[Figure 6](#)

Since 1955, the sharp decrease in church planting is evident. Failure to survive makes the absence of church planting from about 1955 to 1980 even more severe.

There was a relatively consistent, high level of church planting from about 1921 through about 1955. However, the demise of many of these congregations had resulted in a present distribution which shows a more or less steady gradual increase from the earliest days of the denomination to about 1955.

As Carl F. George and David O. Moberg might have predicted, there appears to be a tendency for Nazarene churches to follow a predictable life cycle. They tend to remain small for several years, to reach the denominational average by about 45 years, and die by perhaps the 100th year.

## **Conclusions**

In 1986 the average age of the 5,169 Nazarene congregations in the United States and Canada was 39 years. More than four out of five churches (81.6%) were more than twenty years old. Slightly over half (52.18%) were under forty years old.

For the first fifteen years of the church there were dramatic numbers of churches planted or merging with the new denomination. Each five year interval showed a strong increase over the previous one. From the early 1920's through the mid-1950's there was a period in which church planting was generally sustained at a relatively high level, in fact, gradually increased. Something apparently changed in the mid-1950's. From that time until the late 1970's there was a rapid decrease in churches planted. In the 1980's there has been an improvement in church planting.

Moberg and George were apparently accurate in their understanding that churches, like humans, tend to begin small and to struggle through a period of development before they reach maturity, or peak organizational efficiency. Undoubtedly there are churches which very quickly achieve a strong, viable organization. Others never reach beyond the small, unstable stage of their beginnings. However, Nazarene congregations show some tendency to gradually increase in size as they grow older. On the average, it takes Nazarene churches about 45 years to reach 100 members. Therefore, the positive effects of a quadrennium of rapid church planting will tend to become evident only after a few decades have passed. Church planting is more of a solution for the long-term than for short-term.

For the same reason, the effects of the deep "valley" in church planting from about 1955 to 1980 are also more severe over the long, rather than the short, term. The "valley" in churches planted (from about 1955 to 1980) was something like the "baby bust" that followed the "baby boom" in the American society. Both the baby boom generation and the baby bust generation are having foreseeable effects as they move through the various stages of their lives. Similarly, the small generation, or cohort, of the churches planted in the 1960's and 1970's

will have negative consequences for the denomination as it moves through the various stages of the institutional life cycle.

The implications of these findings can be considered more tangibly by using the practical example of the denominational decidual goals for church growth. The denomination has prayerfully established a goal of 1,000,000 members by 1995. If this goal is to be achieved, the churches in the United States and Canada, that is, the churches examined in this report, should grow from the 1986 total of 539,045 to a 1995 total of 700,000, a net gain of about 160,000 members.

Assuming that past membership patterns over the typical church's life cycle continue, the impact of past and future church planting on total membership and growth rates may be projected. Figure 7 presents a graphic projection of growth. The line from the left of the graph to the center shows the actual growth in members experienced in the United States and Canada from 1955 through 1985. If we can continue to do what we have been doing in church planting - about 60 churches every year - and in church expansion, we should continue to grow slightly. However, this growth alone will probably not allow us to reach the decidual goal. This pattern is the bottom of the two lines in the right half of figure 7. The line at the top right of the graph is a projection based on planting 300 churches a year.

#### [Figure 7](#)

During the past decade approximately 60,000 members were gained through the existing churches. However, as the small cohort of churches planted from about 1955 to 1980 moves through the years of best growth potential, there are fewer of them. Therefore, if the existing churches continue in present patterns, the lost potential for outreach would result in approximately 30,000 members gained by existing churches.

The 570 churches planted during the last eleven years had 23,392 of the 539,045 USA and Canadian members in 1986 - or an average of 41 per church organized. If this rate of church planting is sustained and 600 churches averaging 41 members are planted this decade, their contribution to the goal of 700,000 would be 24,600 members. The combination of 24,600 members from new churches and 30,000 from existing churches is over 100,000 short from the goal. Therefore, improvements in both church planting - extension growth - and evangelism - expansion growth - are essential.

A great investment has been made during the past decade in the attempt to reverse the trend in church planting. It has begun to make a difference. Organizations of new churches are up to about 60 each year. This improvement must continue. Indeed, if 1,500 churches averaging 41 members are planted this decade, their contribution to the goal of 160,000 more members will be 61,500. If it were possible to increase church planting dramatically to a level of 3,000 - 300 per year - which averaged 41 by the end of the decade, their contribution would still only be 123,000 members.

Therefore, improvement in the expansion of existing churches is also essential. It is not possible now to move back into the 1960's and 1970's to plant more churches. It may be possible to improve the survival rate of the existing churches. And, it should be possible to

increase expansion growth by applying church growth principles more effectively in existing local churches.

To view the church from the vantage point of David O. Moberg's and Carl F. George's theories that institutions tend to experience typical life cycles is enlightening. Some interesting questions have been raised. Some have been answered. Others remain. Questions like that of the causes of the dramatic change in church planting, which began about 1950, may be important areas of future research.

The research has been very instructive. Probable consequences of the denominational change in church planting of the 1950's have been identified. The negative nature of these findings are somewhat discouraging. However, the research also suggests policies and programs which should be successful as interceptions. In the first place, the recent improvement in church planting should continue. To level off at 60 new churches each year, or to decline again, will have serious negative consequences for the long-term health of the church. Secondly policies and programs to improve the potential for survival of existing churches should become a priority. Without change in existing programs and policies the tendency for churches to die should be expected to result in the reduction of already dangerously small 1960's and 1970's cohort of churches. Finally, more effective means must be found to apply church growth insights and methods in existing local churches. Investments in training and implementation of church growth principles have made a difference in the extension growth of the denomination. The difficulty of delivering extensive church growth training to local churches thus far restricted the impact of church growth movement on existing congregations. Improvement in expansion growth as a result of church growth insights has been limited, at least among Nazarene congregations. The necessity for improvement in the expansion growth of existing congregations challenges the church to find effective ways to provide extensive training in church growth principles to local pastors and lay leaders.