**The Seasons of the Life and Ministry of Thriving Congregations**

*Following a Seven Year Pattern of Seasons*

| **Season** | **Stages** | **Distinctives** |
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| **Congregational Planting Season:** This is the first public season of the life and ministry of congregations which may last for three to seven years. During this season they strive to develop high quality relationships with God, one another, and the community context or people groups they serve. One key factor for their full development as Thriving Congregations is that their mission, purpose, core values, and vision are deeply and broadly owned throughout the congregation, and not just closely held by the founding pastor and an early core group. | Birth  (Vrpm)  Infancy  (VRpm) | Up to the first seven years of a congregation’s life is an important time for establishing clarity and ownership around mission, purpose, and core values, and living out the first season of God’s empowering vision. The mission, purpose, and core values are likely to be modified during Infancy once the practice of ministry and the reality of who the congregation connects with is seen. The continuum of output to impact to capacity building to sustainability needs to be developed. This is what author Jim Collins calls the Flywheel of the congregation. |
| **Potential Thriving Congregations Seasons:** These are congregations who are developing the capacities needed to both become and sustain themselves as Thriving Congregations. This period may be seven to 14 years encompassing one to two seasons. They are working on the development of the characteristics of Thriving Congregations. If their mission, purpose, core values and vision are deeply and broadly owned, and they intentionally align their programs, ministries, activities, and processes to fulfill their understanding of God’s vision for them as a congregation, then they are likely to develop many of the characteristics of Thriving Congregations | Childhood  (VrPm)  Adolescence  (VRPm) | During the second and third seasons of a congregation are the times when they systemize the programs, ministries, and activities that fulfill their mission, purpose, core values, and vision. They add to the deep relationships they developed during their first season a task-oriented focus on building deeper strategies focused on capacity building for programs, processes, and projects. This risks lower their foundational focus on relationships with God, one another, and their context in favor of organizational success rather than spiritual and strategic significance and full surrender to God’s mission for them. |
| **Thriving Congregations Seasons:** For one or more seasons congregations may achieve and be able to sustain their ministry as Thriving Congregations. They embody many, if not all, of the ten characteristics of Thriving Congregations with great intensity. The key to sustaining ministry as Thriving Congregations is the ability to explore spiritually and strategically their mission, purpose, core values, and vision every season and make transitions and changes reflective of continuous disciplined innovation as Thriving Congregations. If they do not do this, then they are likely to lose focus and no longer be seen as Thriving Congregations. | Adulthood  (VRPM)  Early  Maturity  (vPRM) | By the end of season three congregations may achieve the status of thriving. They are fully expressive of Vision, Relationships, Programs, and Management. They have a synergy of efforts in ministry excellence. A key distinctive is that they are continual learners. Although they have achieved the status of thriving, they are not sure of their next steps and know they must continually learn from their peers plus highly experienced and respected spiritual and strategic thinkers, and continually innovative to keep expressing excellence. Vision may diminish at some point for these congregation, but they still thrive for a while. |
| **Potential ReThriving Congregations:** Following one or more seasons as Thriving Congregations, many congregations lose focus on their mission, purpose, values, and vision, and/or they resist changing their programs, ministries, and activities to remain relevant to the changing demographics within their congregation and their community context or the people groups with whom they may have lost touch. They need disruptive innovation. They have many of the resources needed to thrive once more. However, they deny the need to do so, focus on the past rather than the future, react to no longer thriving with disappointment and resisting transitions and changes, and ultimately are angry with their clergy and lay leadership. | Late  Maturity  (vRPM)  Empty  Nest  (vRpM)  Early to Mid  Retirement  (vrPM) | As early as the fifth season congregations have definitely lost vision if they stop learning and continually innovating. They are often in denial of their situation. They may become examples of the response characterized by working harder but not smarter. Their openness to transition and change focuses on incremental innovation where they are adjusting their tactics and not changing their core ministry or seeking to be empowered by a new vision from God. Their situation requires disruptive innovation, but they are often unwilling to engage in the discontinuous transition and change needed. They have the resources to engage in disruptive innovation and once again be a congregation which is thriving. They have a past to present focus and not a future focus. |
| **UnThriving Congregations:** For an undetermined number of seasons congregations exist as UnThriving Churches. This is a place where they have lost many of the resources needed to once again serve as Thriving Congregations, have lost key leaders who could help them engage a transition and change processes, are out-of-touch with their community context or the people groups they serve, and are characterized by few of the Thriving Congregations characteristics. They are primarily focused on surviving. They need radical revitalization, to restart as a congregation, or at some point to reinvest their resources in a new ministry such as a new church plant. | Late Retirement  (vrPM)  Old  Age  (vrpM)  Death  (m) | As early as the seventh season congregations have not only lost vision, but they have lost the disciplemaking relationships which are the key to their fulfillment of the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment. They also tend to lose innovative leadership and the next generations who leave to go to congregations who address their discipleship needs. In many ways they are still congregations composed of persons of worth created in the image of God to live and to love. Yet, their focus is more on the gathered church than the scattered church. They no longer have the resources to engage in the radical transitions and changes required. They must accept outside resources and guidance. |