

# Dimensions of Congregational Vitality

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LINDA BOBBITT

# What is congregational vitality?

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## Mission + Viability

### Mission

- Great Commandment, Great Commission
- Relationship with God, Each other, World

### Viability:

- Able to perform mission into the future
- Finances, critical mass, energy, commitment, hope

**“Christian churches exist to worship God, to teach and nurture people in the faith and to spread the Good News. Managing to gather an ongoing group of people who regularly do these things together is my definition of success.”**

(Nancy Ammerman 2005)

# What about growth?

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## Growth = Success?

- Healthy congregations not always growing
- Some unhealthy congregations do grow

Right size of congregation=Most people contributing and receiving.

- Too few – stretched thin
- Too many – not engaged

# What factors influence vitality?

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## 9 Domains

Programs

❖ Local Context

Resources

❖ Leadership

Administration & Governance

❖ Relationships

Identity – attitudes & culture

❖ Mission/Purpose

❖ Sense of God's presence

# Exploring Domains

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## Programs

### Description:

Things a congregation **does**. Includes: worship, faith formation, mission planning, youth/ young adult ministries, hospitality, evangelism, community outreach, stewardship.

### Assumptions:

If a congregation **does** the right things - with intentionality, quality and authenticity, then they will thrive.

# Exploring Domains

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## RESOURCES

Description:

Money, facility, tech, people

Assumptions:

If a congregation has strong resources they will thrive. Those with poor resources will struggle.

## ADMINISTRATION & GOVERNANCE

Description:

Decision Making, Administration of finances and personnel, communication

Assumptions:

If the congregation is run well it can remain *nimble* and able to adapt as needed.

# Exploring Domains

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## ATTITUDES & CULTURE

### Description:

How the congregation engages with each other. (e.g. sense of family, belonging, engagement, willingness to change, ability to fight, expectations & accountability)

### Assumptions:

If a congregation has the right attitudes we will be able to make the changes needed to thrive.

## LOCAL CONTEXT

### Description:

Level of engagement in local context,  
Conditions within the local context

### Assumptions:

Congregations accompany and reflect their communities will thrive.

Congregations in communities with strong economics, demographic growth have an advantage

# Exploring Domains

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## LEADERSHIP

Description:

Pastor and professional staff, lay leadership and informal leaders.

Skills, personality characteristics, health

Assumptions:

If lay and rostered leaders have strong skills, appropriate personalities and are healthy we will thrive. Informal leaders can be helpful or harmful.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Description:

Relationships among leadership, pastor/staff, leaders and congregation and among the congregation

Assumptions:

If we all get along well, support each other and work together we will thrive.



# Exploring Domains

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## MISSION/PURPOSE

### Description:

The congregation's sense of God's purpose. Where is God calling them here and now?

### Assumptions:

Congregations who are centered in God's mission focus their efforts strategically. Strong theology matters.

## SENSE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

### Description:

The congregation's experience of God in day to day life.

### Assumptions:

Congregations that sense God's active presence can trust God's leadership and walk into the future with God.

# Relationship among domains

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Schools of thought:

Focus on individual domains

- (System's theory, Leadership models, Stewardship, Evangelism models, etc.)

Cumulative effect

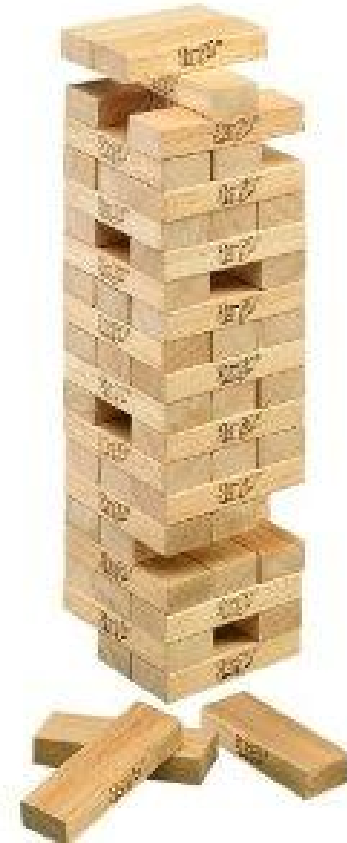
- Critical mass of strengths or lift all areas into strengths.

Necessary but not sufficient

- Some domains are critical to success without them success is impossible.  
Competing claims of necessary domains.

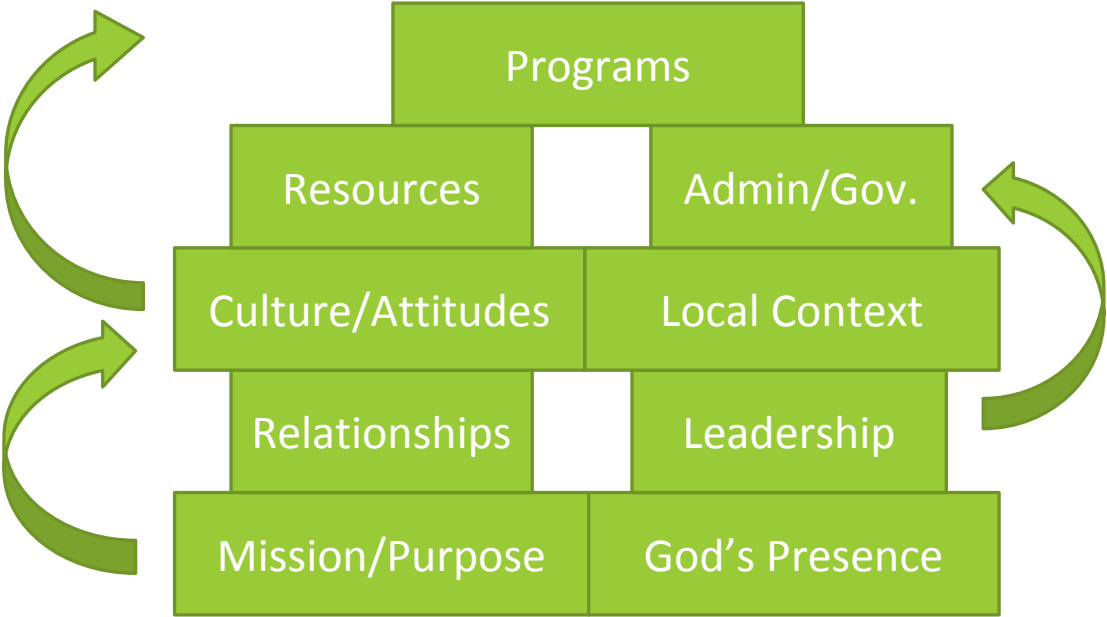
# Working theory of Relationship among domains

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# Relationship among domains

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# How domains apply to congregations

## *- organizational development*

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(Hannan 1998) Describes 5 concepts associated with organizational mortality:

Endowment (resources)

Imprinting (attitudes/culture/behaviors)

Inertia (getting stuck with imprinted culture)

Capability (ability to do mission efficiently, encrusted)

Position (influence and reputation in local community)

“Age tracks the fit between an organization and its environment”.(p.158)

# How domains apply to congregations

## - *organizational development*

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Healthy Start matters:

- Organizations are fragile or robust from onset. This dictates mortality.
- It takes longer to start strong org. but is worth it.

(Dougherty 2008) applied theory to congregations.

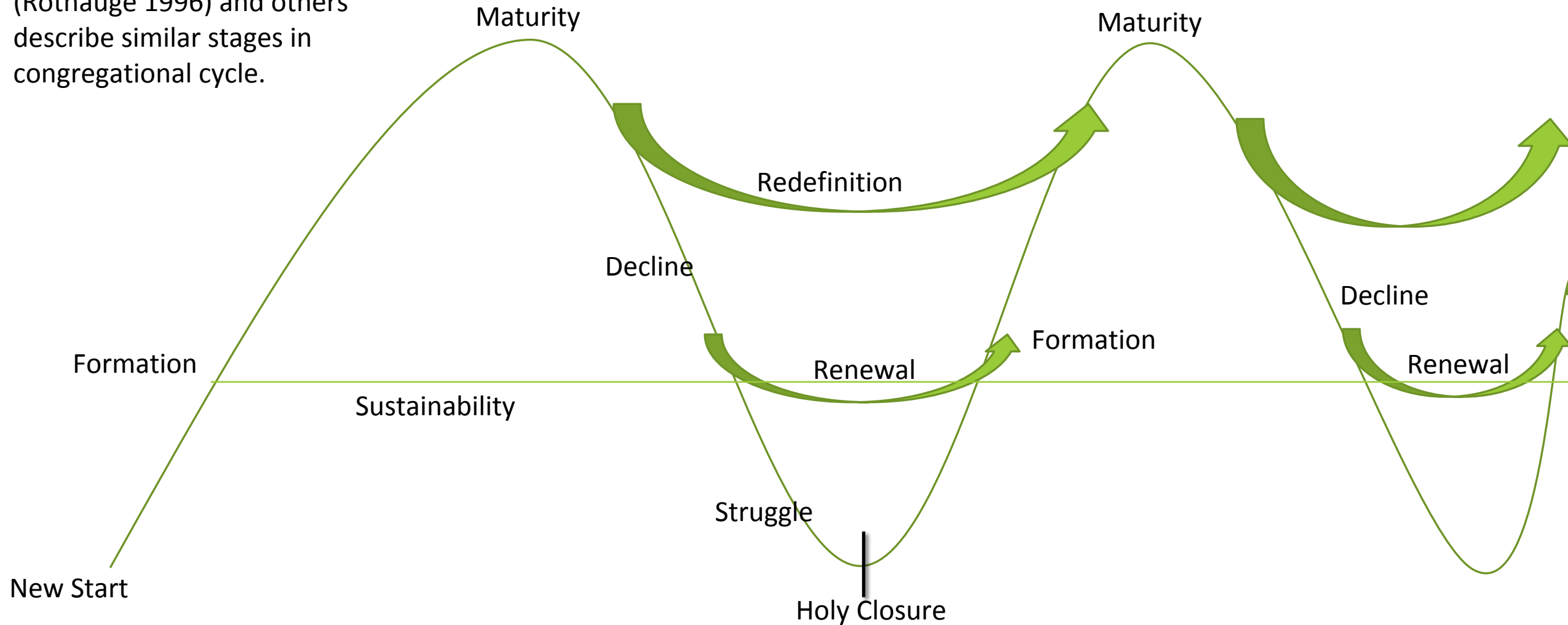
- 2 critical times: first few years & generational transitions (40 & 75 years)

Erik Erikson described human development as stages with key tasks.

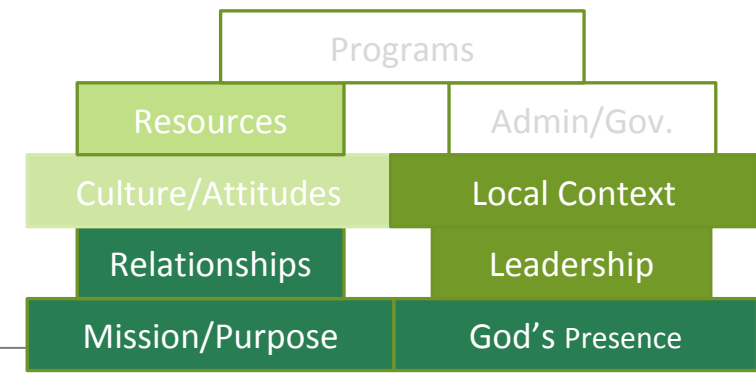
- Potential for positive or negative outcome at each stage.
- Negative outcome at earlier stage makes future positive outcomes less likely

# Developmental Cycle of a Congregation

(Rothauge 1996) and others describe similar stages in congregational cycle.



# New Start



## Description

- Congregations invite, begin to worship together create a new community of faith.

## Key Theological Tasks

- Create supportive Christian community
- Establish initial missiology & sense of God

## Practices

- Worship, community, sharing faith, outreach to new people

## Dangers/Threats

- Lack of resources, failure to create community.
- Community based on poor missiology

## Leadership Role

- Vision, excitement, empowerment, connecting with community, recruitment

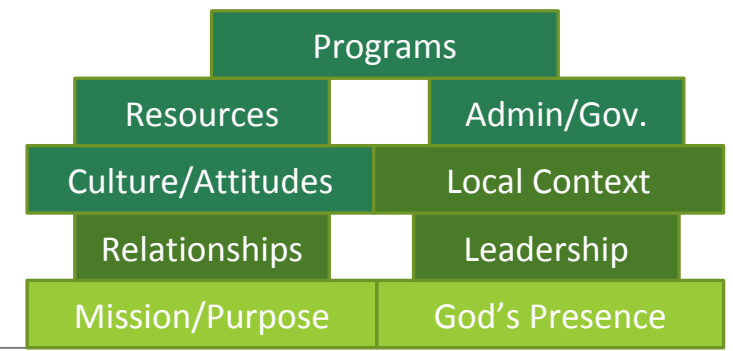
## Positive: Continue growing

- Paul starting new churches
- Joshua leading Israelites into promised land. (Establishing a new counter-culture community.)

Negative: Don't get off the ground or weak foundation.



# Formation-Learning



## Description

- Growing church gets organized & self-sustaining

## Key Theological Tasks

- Establish healthy culture/attitudes, expectations
- Establish initial ecclesiology (structures)
- Evangelism, inviting

## Practices

- Create admin, build lay leadership, discipleship, spirituality, hospitality, evangelism

## Dangers/Threats

- Fail to gain critical mass or resources
- Imprint unhealthy culture

## Leadership Role

- Create lay capacity, dev. programs, stay missional

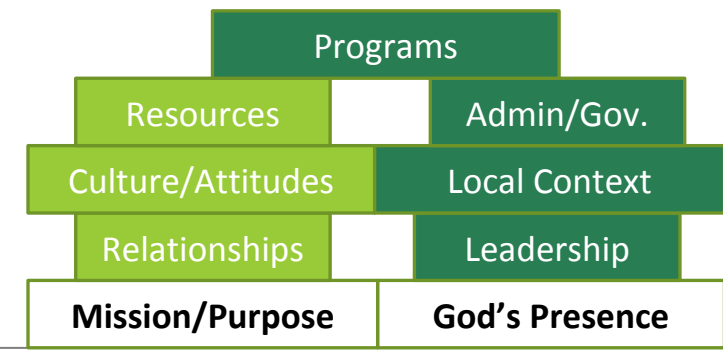
## Positive: Grow to maturity

- Moses in wilderness
- Philippians

## Negative: Back slide or establish unhealthy culture.

- Israelites worshipping other gods
- Corinthians

# Maturity



## Description

Community living its faith and adapting with context.

## Key Theological Tasks

- Focus on creating disciples & leaders

## Practices

- Faith formation and spiritual practices- all ages. Stay deep, celebrate, talk about faith.
- Create strong youth program, ensure strong governance/admin, stewardship, etc.

## Dangers/Threats

- Disconnect from community, become rigid & bureaucratic, self focus
- Generational transitions

## Leadership Role: collaborative

- Pastor is spiritual leader: mission focus, God is present
- Lay leaders run business side

## Positive

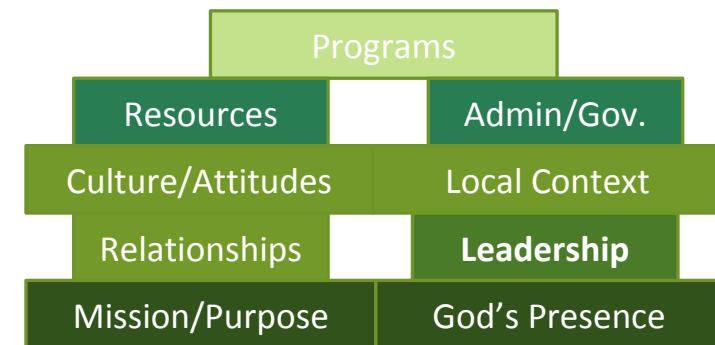
- David- Solomon's reign.??

## Negative

- Jerusalem in Jesus' time
- Israel & Juda before exile. (Judges)

Pattern of sin, repentance, rescue, brief improvement and further decline

# Decline



## Description

- Loosing members, money, energy, mission

## Key Theological Tasks

- Renew missiology, reconnect with God, Confession/Forgiveness & reconciliation

## Practices

- 8 practices necessary to turn around troubled churches (*see handout*)

## Dangers/Threats

- Congregation remains focused on survival not mission, loose critical mass, conflict

## Leadership Role

- Create a sense of urgency. Relate to head, heart and hands.
- Restore or establish new missiology, healing & reconciliation, role clarification, address cultural blocks & dysfunction, prioritize activities

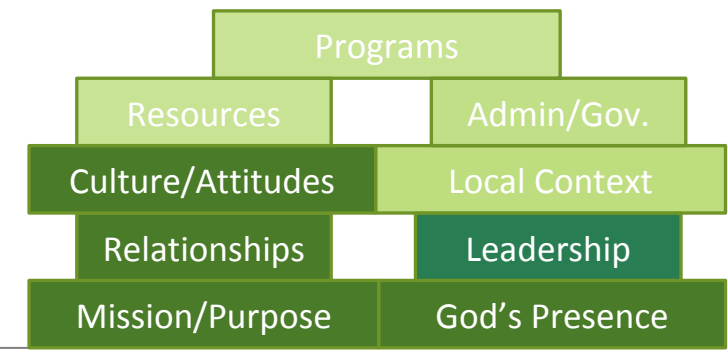
## Positive: Renewal

- Nineveh (Jonah)
- John baptizing in the wilderness

## Negative: Move to Struggling - unsustainable

- Jerusalem in Jesus' time

# Struggle



## Description

- No longer self-sustaining. Closure only option.

## Key Theological Tasks

- Let go of need for control and trust God's promise of resurrection

## Practices

- Prayer, reconciliation, celebrate life, administrative decisions

## Dangers/Threats

- Denial, refuse to plan, fail to reconcile

## Leadership Role

- Healing, accompaniment, planning, prayer, reconciliation, celebration, imagine a new life elsewhere

## Positive: Holy Closure to Rebirth

- Israel re-established after exile

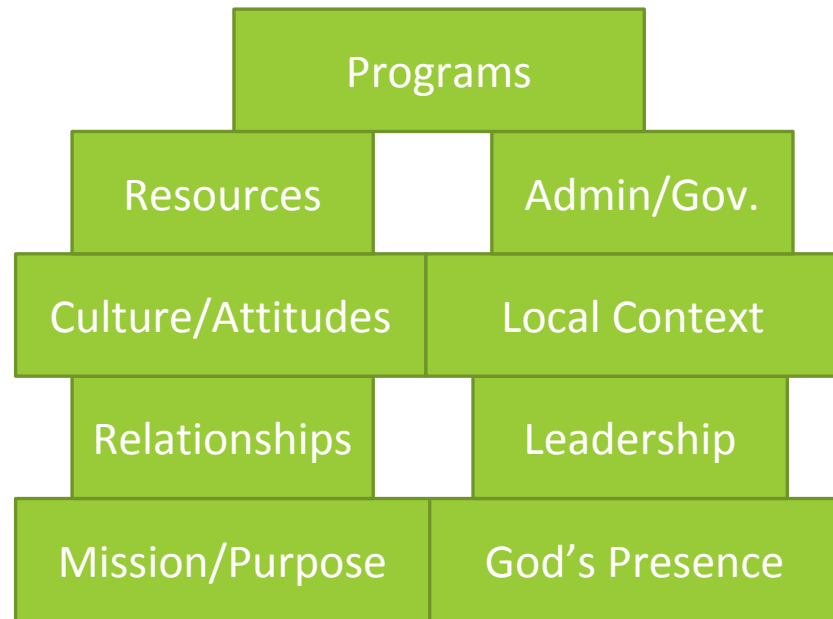
## Negative: Death

- Romans destroy temple

# Relationship among domains

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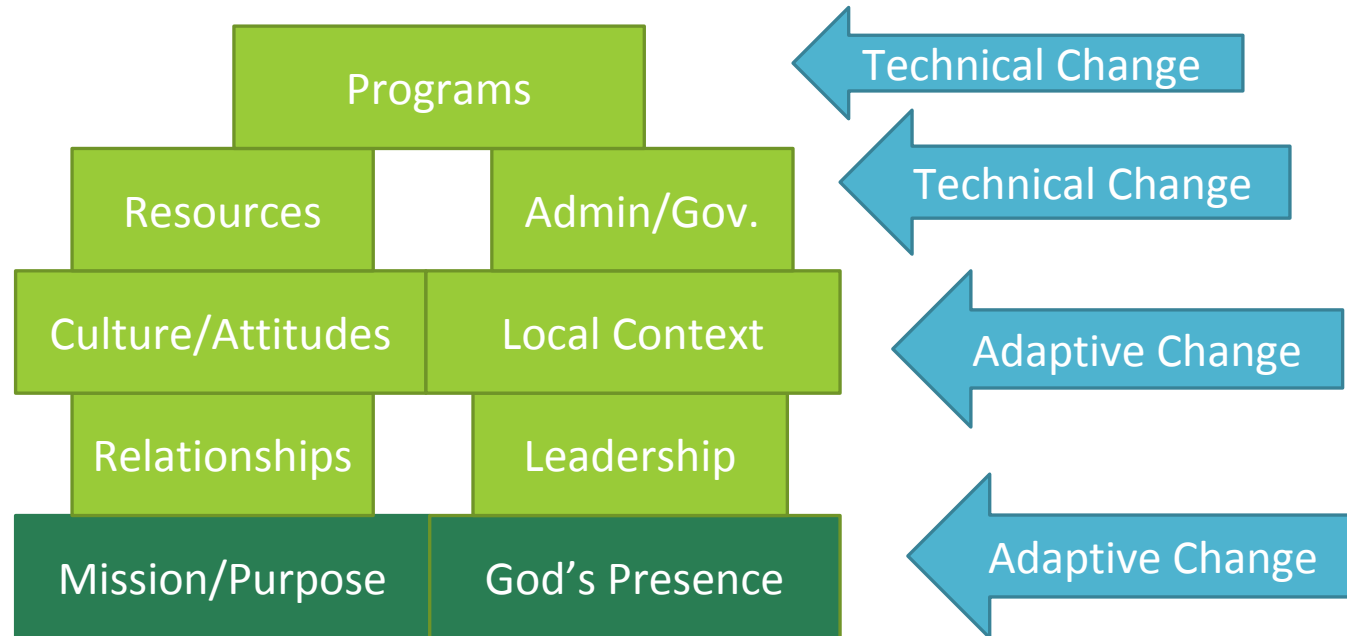
Internal crisis and outside forces – test strength and flexibility.



Core strength is critical. Gentle touch required.

# Types of Change

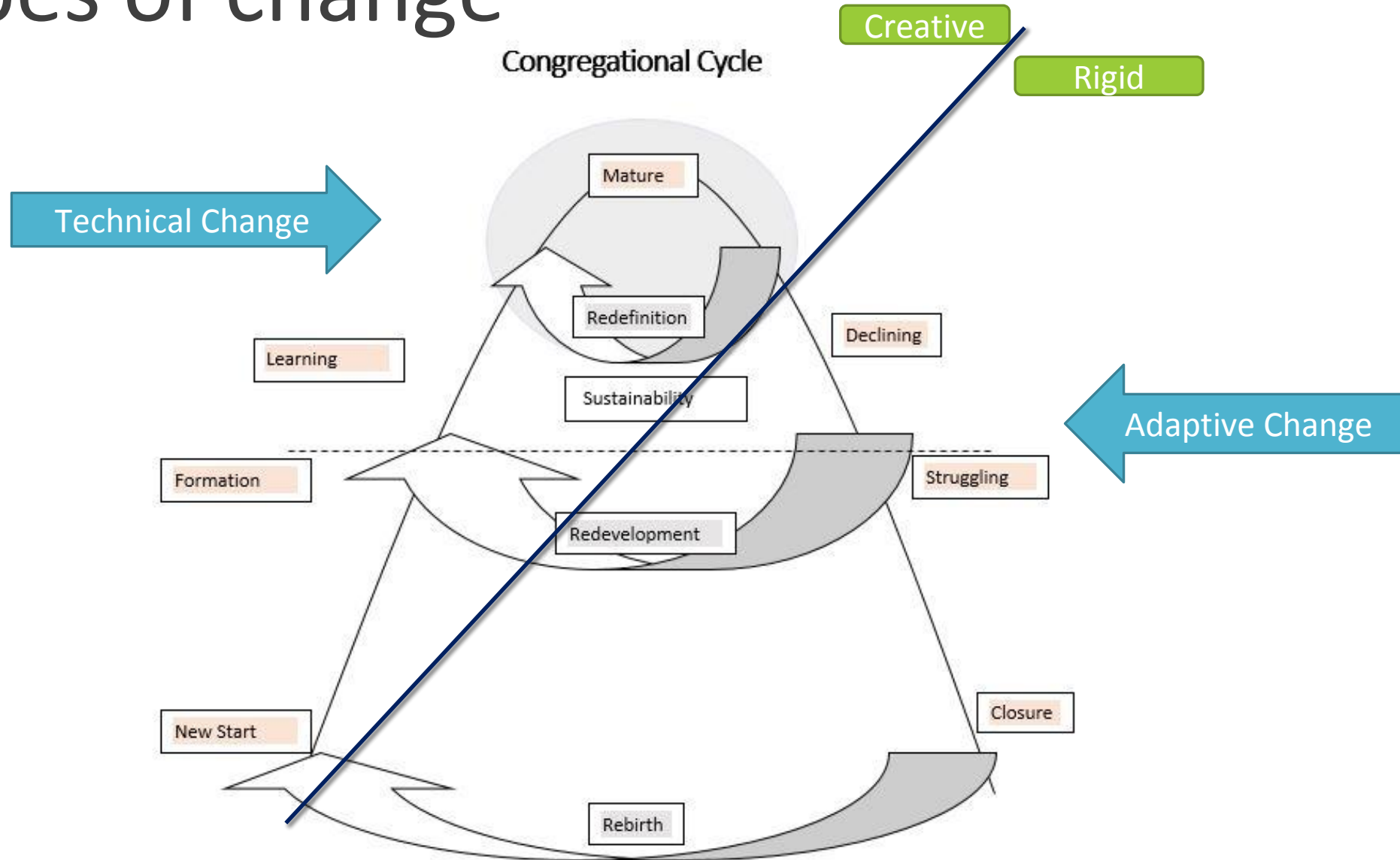
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**Technical change:** tweaks to the system to fix a problem. How can we do this differently?

**Adaptive change:** Asks a different question. What are we doing and why? Is this still what we are about?

# Types of change



# Implications for my church?

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- Determine where you are in cycle
- Review critical tasks and role of leader
- Seek resources and changes appropriate to your place in the cycle
- Attend to all domains especially the base.
- Create realistic expectations
- Pray, trust in the living God, Biblical work, Listening
- Recognize that each stage provides an opportunity for a faithful response to God's mission.