

Did you know that every church has a life cycle? On average, it is similar to the human life cycle – between 70 and 80 years. There are churches that do survive longer, but there are also churches that don't survive this long. **Here is a graphic of a typical life cycle of a church.**

We begin at birth, a new church start, and then it experiences growth, then stability, and then what tends to happen after prolonged stability – for whatever reason -- decline. We like to blame it on pastor changes, the Millennials, youth sports on Sundays, our current culture, demographics around the church change, etc. Despite the reasons, there's a natural life cycle of the church, as it is with everything.

If you notice, this follows the natural life cycle of humans too – birth, growth, stability, decline, decline, decline, then death. That's pretty much life in a nutshell. The generation who attended church faithfully is now dying, and so the universal church does too...unless it experiences rebirth.

In the middle of this graphic, it says, "Redefinition, redevelopment, and rebirth." So, really, the best time to re-evaluate things, re-define, redevelop the mission and vision of the church, is when it is stable. But, too often, we don't do that. When things are stable, we get comfortable. We have a false sense of security that all our hard work getting to this stage has finally paid off, and we can rest. Or, at some churches, when they get to the stability phase, they think, "Finally, this church is exactly how I want it! Nobody change anything! Let's keep it just like this!"

When churches get comfortable or closed-off to new ideas and new people, it

starts to decline. And, the graphic shows, decline, decline, decline before death. Decline is a slow death. Statistics have shown that if a church is in a state of decline for over 7 years, it is nearly impossible to turn it around.

Where do you see Chapel of the Hills in this cycle? The church was established in 1949 with a group meeting weekly at the Town Hall. This year, we celebrate our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Construction began on the first floor in 1954. The sanctuary was built on top of it in 1966, and the education building was built in 1988. Worship attendance, membership, and the church's finances were probably up and down from year to year as all cycles are, but there was steady growth.

After I arrived in 2017, I did an analysis of the state of the church and found that there has been a steady decline for the past 6 years. Last year, there was a slight blip up in worship attendance, but overall, there has been a steady decline. Decline in members, a decline in worship attendance, and a decline in financial resources. So, to get real with you, this is where I see Chapel of the Hills on this life cycle (just before death).

But, hear the good news: we are a people who believe in the power of death and resurrection. Jesus died and resurrected, so through Christ, resurrection or rebirth is possible. Notice that this graphic shows rebirth can be experienced anytime throughout the cycle. Often, we don't begin re-defining or re-developing or seeking rebirth until we're in decline. Yes, we're close to the seven years, but we're not there yet! It's not too late for us! It's time for rebirth!

Here's another way to look at this graphic. Our spiritual lives follow this same cycle. We are born in Christ whether at our baptism or during our confirmation, and then we experience spiritual growth through our discipleship practices, and then, we reach a place of stability. Stability isn't always a bad thing unless we get lazy and comfortable, unless we close our minds and hearts to anything new, unless we stop growing. It is then that we find ourselves in a state of decline, and then one day we realize our spiritual life is dead. How did we get here?, we ask. We started off so strong.

Remember, we believe in the power of resurrection. Rebirth of our spiritual lives can happen any time in our lives. And, now is the time for rebirth!

How do we experience rebirth in our lives and in our church? Notice they go hand-in-hand. When we are at a place in our spiritual lives when we are excited and growing and experiencing God's presence, we can't sit still. We can't keep quiet about it. We want to tell others, and we want to serve. We bring that excitement into the church and find a place to use our gifts.

Paul affirms this in our scripture today. This passage tells us that God gives each of us spiritual gifts to be used for the common good. He says starting in verse 7 (*Message* translation): "Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits." Wisdom, knowledge, faith, and proclamation are just a few of the gifts Paul mentions. There are so many more that he doesn't mention. One isn't better than the other. We all work together for the sake of the church and for our own sake.

It's another cycle. We grow spiritually, it spills into the church through

our service, the church grows, and then that causes us to grow even more because we're excited about the church growth. We see God's hand in all of this. We feel God's presence with us.

To experience rebirth, we use our specific gifts that were hand-tailored for us by the Holy Spirit. Through prayer, study, fellowship, worship, and service, we use our gifts together as one, and we experience rebirth in our spiritual lives and in our church. Together, we can use our gifts to turn this church around. It's time for rebirth!

In the words of Isaiah 62:1: We cannot keep silent! We cannot sit still! God has done so much for us personally and with this church that we have to tell others about it! The Holy Spirit compels us to use our gifts for the sake of the community. No more pew sitting. No more committee fillers. We're done with being comfortable and closed-off to change. It's time for rebirth!

There are lots of ways to use our gifts here at Chapel of the Hills. Serving as a liturgist, singing or playing a musical instrument, greeting people, making worship banners, cooking, being a Stephen Minister, teaching, leading a small group, being on the prayer chain. So many possibilities! Since it's time for rebirth, pray how God is leading you to use your unique gifts. If you would like to sign-up to serve in some of these ways, there are clipboards on the table in the Narthex. There's even one for new ideas. If you need to pray on it a little longer, I encourage you to do that, but don't sit still for too long -- it's time for rebirth!

Another way we can experience rebirth is through the sacrament of holy communion. Let us prepare our hearts to receive God's grace.