



Congregational Life Cycle Assessment

Corps Ministries Department, Territorial Headquarters

The Salvation Army, Canada and Bermuda

Why have you been given this resource?

The Corps Ministries Department provides resources for the frontlines to support the mission of The Salvation Army. The congregational life cycle is a useful discernment tool because it is very simple to explain and quick to use for initiating conversation about the health of the corps.

If there is any way the Corps Ministries Department may be of service, please speak to your Area Commander or Divisional Commander or contact us at Territorial Headquarters or on the web (www.saministryresources.ca/contact-corps-ministries).

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2012

Why are you doing the assessment?

- If you are trying to identify potential challenges for your congregation's stage of development, then this assessment can help start conversation.
- If you are preparing for further congregational development or revitalization, then this assessment can aid you in identifying initial steps for that process.
- If you are preparing for a corps review and you would like to have a starting point for conversation with your Area Commander or Divisional Commander, then this assessment can provide an opportunity for discussion of your corps' health and future development.

This assessment will NOT provide a specific "solution" but can initiate spiritual discernment and good conversation about the current state of the corps.

Do NOT do this assessment if there is open conflict within the congregation – most assessment tools depend on open, honest and constructive sharing of perspectives that is not skewed by conflict.

Who should be involved in a congregational life cycle assessment?

The corps council or ministry board would typically be the group (or a task force appointed by them) for initiating the assessment and recording the conversation to discern what should be learned about present conditions and future directions. The congregational life cycle assessment (page 5) can be completed by either:

1. The whole congregation – this would involve a special meeting where the congregational life cycle diagram is presented and the congregation has opportunity to share where they feel the congregation best fits on the life cycle. Note that having actual copies of the diagram for the congregation will provide an easy means by which to record the responses. These responses could be collected anonymously if the meeting is a large group (e.g., more than 30 people).
2. A strategic and representative group from the congregation - it would be natural to include the leadership because of their roles as well as a select number of regular participants who provide particular perspectives to complement those of the leaders (different ages, cultural backgrounds, length of time at the corps, etc.). It will probably be difficult to collect these life cycle diagrams anonymously and it may be valuable to know who has said what.

How to do a congregational life cycle assessment:

Explain why the assessment is taking place and what will be done with the results. Present the description of the congregational life cycle (page 4) and ask participants to indicate on the diagram (page 5) where they feel the corps fits in the life cycle diagram.

Where do we go for help?

Your Area Commander or Divisional Commander can recommend process and the Corps Ministries Department is available to provide facilitation or support.

Description of the Congregational Life Cycle

1. **Dream** stage:

- A group discusses the idea of a new corps, or a small group (e.g., a Bible study, chapel) begins to grow to a size that is too large for a “small” group and people begin to ask about things a corps normally does (worship, outreach). Enthusiasm builds...
- Different partners may enter the discussion (local corps, DHQ, THQ), there will be discernment and if it seems to be God’s timing then a planter/team will be identified. Some dreams end.

2. **Plant** stage:

- Purpose (start a new corps) is very clear. Central idea(s) develop by trying out ministry.
- Much of the activity is experimental (“Sure, let’s try it!”). There are likely many failures (learning experiences) with some successes beginning to shape patterns for the ministry.
- Organized activities (e.g., meetings with worship) begin, ideally after attracting many friends.
- Many people involved are very excited to be there and readily volunteer for roles.

3. **Formation** stage:

- The vision is proving itself; administration is developing efficiently to support the vision.
- People feel they know the vision even if it is not stated anywhere, there is shared purpose.
- Certain “signature ministries” emerge that are bearing fruit. Corps identity is “gelling.”
- New people are attracted to the “life,” enthusiasm, vision and innovation that they experience.

4. **Stability** stage:

- Central purpose is assumed: keep doing what is going so well.
- Policies and procedures are well documented, efficiency of management.
- Positive reputation in community and Territory. New people attracted to well run programs.
- Significant changes in direction or ministry may be perceived as a threat to what is working well.

5. **Maintenance** stage:

- Recruiting for current programs takes more effort than it did in the past.
- Nostalgia regarding good ministry that has happened in the past.
- Probably few new initiatives and it may be challenging to rally support (finances, volunteers).
- Relationships can still be strong, but may feel somewhat closed to newcomers.

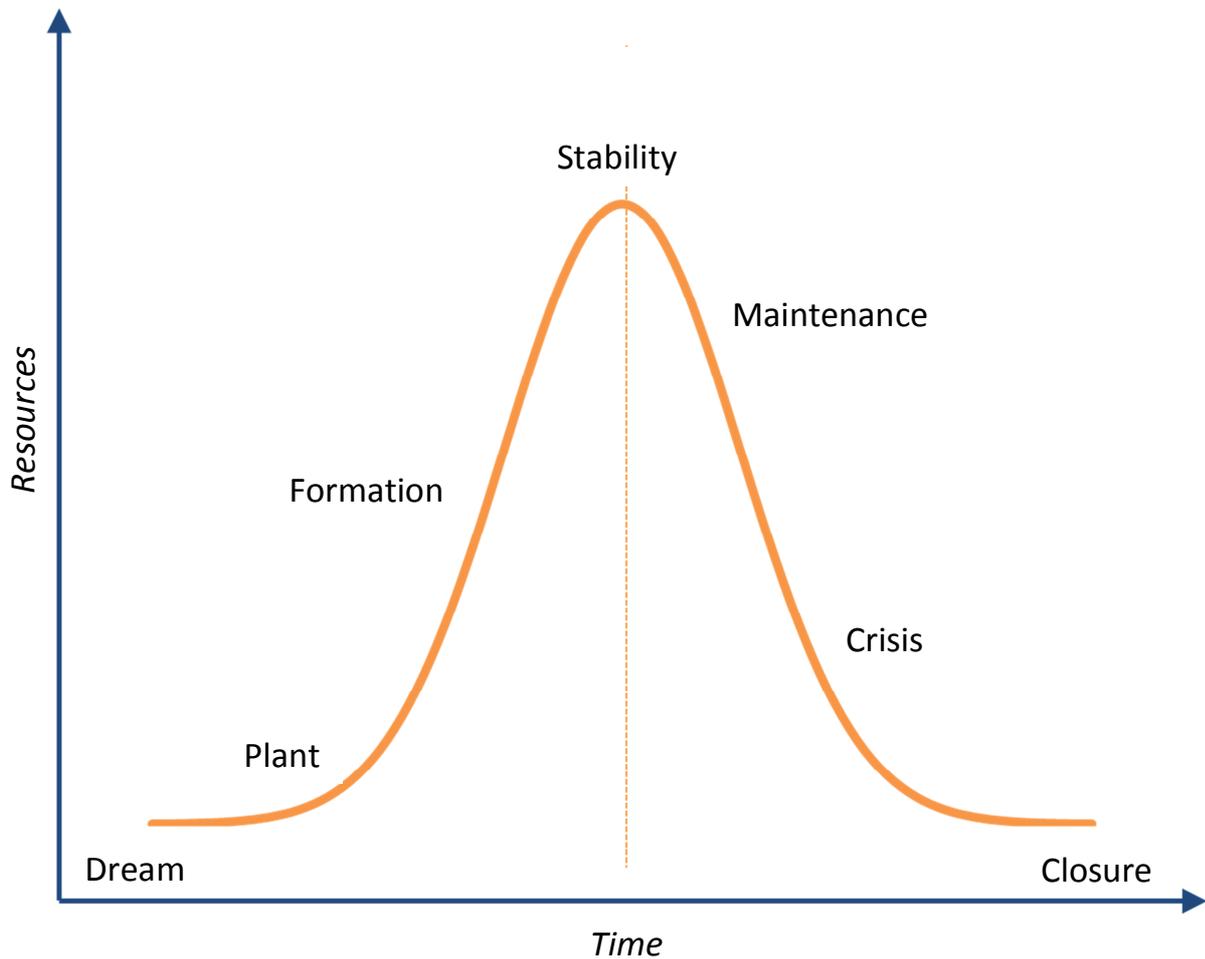
6. **Crisis** stage:

- There is notable decline in attendance, giving and volunteering within the corps.
- Something is not working, but there is a lack of clarity regarding the problem and solution.
- There may still be administration and maintenance of program, however shared understanding of the purpose for the effort, or how it fits into the “big picture” may be missing.

7. **Closure** – final stage (or is it?):

- Thankfulness for the ministry that has taken place can enable thoughts for the future.
- Potentially, resources can be gifted to a new dream.

Congregational Life Cycle Assessment¹



Where would you place your congregation on the life cycle diagram?

Why have you placed it there?

¹ Congregational life cycle assessment is based on the work of Martin F. Saarinen, Alice Mann and Gil Rendle who have all published material through the Alban Institute. This manual has also been influenced through presentations by Betty Pries (Associates Resourcing the Church), Jeff Steckle (Mennonite Church Eastern Canada), Glenn Gibson (Outreach Canada), George Bullard and the writings of Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim.

What do we do with this feedback on our congregational life cycle?

The corps council, ministry board or a team designated by the leadership will need to reflect on the information. Once there is a shared understanding of what it means and what some implications may be, a congregational meeting could be considered as a way to share what you have learned or to present next steps.

The book *Holy Conversations* presents 3 basic questions for consideration that can be applied to a number of the stages of the congregational life cycle for spiritual discernment:

- Who are we?
- What are we here for?
- Who are our neighbours?

Dream – Look for these questions at the centre of many of the conversations that take place.

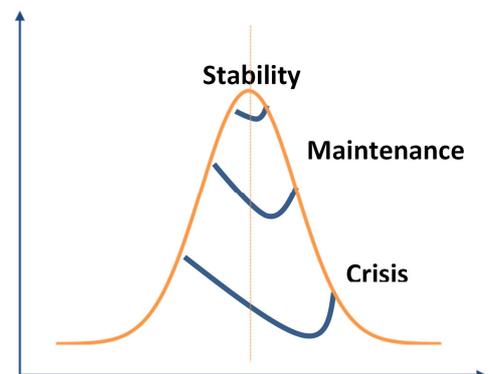
Plant – Work through these questions quite thoroughly, although some answers will be tentative.

Formation – This stage requires ongoing interaction with these questions in the midst of ministry. While it will likely happen quite naturally at first as new ministry ideas are tried out, these questions will eventually require attention from the leaders.

Stability – If the status quo is assumed to be sufficient, then there is the real danger that a change in the community (or in the congregation) may make the current ministry plan obsolete. The leadership will need to regularly evaluate current ministry and discern future direction. The corps will have sufficient resources to allow it to engage the 3 questions to re-enter the Formation stage, however it may be challenging for some people to identify the need to explore change because vibrant ministry may continue for a while during the community's or congregation's transition. When the need to adjust direction is identified, there are several ministry evaluation and refocusing resources that may be helpful at this stage.

Maintenance – At this point the questions can help to bring some clarity, however the corps will need to readjust ministry and re-enter the Formation stage. A strategic plan that is focused on revitalization, some major changes to basic ministry patterns and a lot of hard work can re-energize ministry and present opportunities for the future.

Crisis – At this stage a radical engagement with the 3 questions needs to take place; be as creative as a church plant in order to re-envision ministry in your community.



In each of these stages, prayer, willingness to work together and passion for the mission can enable us to do great things as we partner with God in the work of the kingdom.

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