How Church Leadership May Influence Growth by Applying an Organizational Life Cycle Perspective on Church Development

A Literature Study

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Abstract

Birth, growth, and decline processes in organizations have been studied in the leadership literature for many years. An important perspective applied in this research has been the life cycle perspective. In the church growth literature, traces of the same research can be seen in some growth barriers studies. Using research within the church conducted in different kinds of organizations is not trivial. In this article, I apply a narrative synthesis approach to review the literature and discuss factors that influence growth processes, the strictness of the life cycles, challenges in the transitions between phases, and how these challenging transitions can be addressed for growth to continue in local churches. I argue that the life cycle perspective is relevant in a church context. I propose that many of the same challenges that other organizations meet also have to be handled in churches to prevent growth from slowing down or stop. I also suggest several organizational means to increase churches' chance to pass challenging transitions and maintain further growth.

Keywords: Life cycle theory, growth barriers, church growth, church development

Introduction

Background

Researchers have, for many years, studied how knowledge of organizational life cycles can help leadership to influence growth in organizations (e.g. Burns & Stalker, 1961; Gurianova, Gurianov, & Mechtcheriakova, 2014; Mintzberg, 1979). This has also been discussed in literature on church growth (George & Bird, 2017). The thoughts on church barriers to growth appear to have been obtained from the life cycle perspective, and empirical research on the

growth barrier is limited and immature. This article aims to further develop the thinking concerning how leadership can handle growth constraints in churches to contribute to *church development*.

Purpose

The research question in this article is *how church leadership can influence growth by applying an organizational life cycle perspective on church development*. In this discussion, I will use published literature on how organizational life cycles and leadership and organization are interrelated.

To answer the research question, I will: a) use literature on the organizational life cycle and growth barriers in churches (Fletcher, 2006; George & Bird, 2017; Hunter III, 2005) to discuss factors that influence growth processes, b) discuss the strictness of the stages of the life cycle model, the challenges that organizations face during phase transitions and how these can be addressed for growth to continue. Organizational phases and stages are used as synonyms in this article. Strictness concerns the precision of the number, and the content of the phases can or should be defined.

Perspective

Applying an organizational life cycle perspective on organizational development is challenging because it involves a mix of reasonable arguments, case studies, cross-sectional studies, and some longitudinal studies performed in different contexts (industrial sectors, locations, etc.). In regard to churches, the most justified arguments related to growth constraints are derived from organizational life cycle research. The application of this thinking to churches is based on reasoning from life cycle research on non-church organizations rather than empirical data from church organizations.

The reason for applying the organizational life cycle theory to churches is that it may help us to diagnose leadership and organizational constraints or barriers to further growth. Such a diagnosis is a prerequisite for choosing the correct tools or methods to shift the organization toward further growth.

Churches are different

It is important to mention that churches are organized very differently. There are small *house churches* with a simple family-like organization, where plenary meetings or a father-like leader makes the most important decisions. On the other end of the spectrum, there are *mega-churches* with many thousands of members. These mega-churches have a well-structured organization with sections and departments that work on specific tasks and with clear and formalized decision-making routines. The different levels of leadership know what they can decide for themselves versus what they need to clarify with their superiors. In some churches, the top leader makes most of the decisions. In other churches, such decisions are made by a board or a group of elders. However, other churches make many decisions during the church assembly.

Leaders of churches also perform their leadership in different ways. The pastor in some churches has great authority to make decisions. In other churches, the pastor is primarily the preacher and counselor. There is a large variety of leadership styles. While one cannot freely choose a particular leadership style and organization, it is possible to influence it using church leaders and the staff. We shall, therefore, look more closely at how the adjustments and choices made in these areas in the church affect its development and growth.

Churches have a spiritual-theological and a human-sociological dimension, and they operate in both a historical and contemporary context. Leadership and organizational research from other types of organizations can be applied to a church context. The use of such research should be applied to the extent that it supports the theological and spiritual development of the church and not violate the biblical normativity made in scripture. These arguments are explained in greater detail by L. Råmunddal (2009) and Jenssen (2018).

Content

The discussion is organized as follows: In the next section, I introduce the methodological approach of this literature-based article. Next, I introduce and discuss the life cycle approach to organizational development. After that, I present the main conclusions on the growth constraints from the church growth literature. In the following section, I review the life cycle literature that outlines the main points important for the continued growth of the organization through the various stages. At the end, I conclude and offer some suggestions for further research.

Methodological approach

This article is based on a systematic review performed with a narrative synthesis approach aimed at finding relevant evidence to summarize and build an extensive body of knowledge (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). Both quantitative and qualitative studies are included in this review. The bias is minimized through an extensive search of literature and a transparent presentation of the researchers' decisions, procedures, and conclusions (Bryman, 2008, p. 85). In the narrative approach, the review relies on using wording to summarize and explain the findings.

The inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative studies in research projects is not trivial. Somehow, this implies the generalization of qualitative research, and this is problematic. The results of a systematic review of this type can be interpreted in ways that do not reflect the types of studies. However, in this study, we review literature in a context that, along some dimensions, is different from that of churches. Therefore, our aim is *not to* make final generalized conclusions but to build suppositions for further investigations in the context of churches. This makes the inclusion of different types of studies legitimate. We do not use them to generalize but to inspire future studies.

I will apply this method and follow this process:

1. Clarifying the purpose of the research to have a clear basis for making decisions that concern the method and selection of literature (Bryman, 2008) (see the purpose above).

2. Defining the search method (the search method, the inclusion or exclusion of certain publications, the choice of databases, etc.):
   a. For practical reasons, articles published before 1970 were excluded;
   b. I used reference lists and meta-analysis as performed by Muhos (2015);
   c. I searched EBSCO-host using relevant search words (such as the type linked to the phrase "life cycle");
   d. I searched amazon.com using the phrase "growth barriers and church".
3. Reading articles and including or excluding them based on their purpose and quality.
4. Selecting and referring to the main points/conclusions of the articles closely related to the original text and how they relate to the various phases. This is summarized in Table 2 (Popay et al., 2006).

In the field of business, there are many studies where the life cycle approach is applied. There are many articles that more or less draw on the life cycle theory. Using the process above, I found and reviewed more than 120 articles. The relevant studies I found can be categorized as follows:

	Literature-based*	Survey**	Cases	Number
Type of studies	25	20	5	50
Quality (DBH level 1/2/U)***	6/12/7	5/14/1	1/3/1	50

*Articles in this literature group are a mix of theoretical discussions and traditional reviews.
** This survey includes a few longitudinal studies. *** The number of articles on DBH level 1/level 2/and articles not in the DBH-list (U: books)
Table 1: Overview of the reviewed articles

There is always the possibility of overlooking certain articles while conducting searches in this manner. However, through this search, I gradually did not find any further new ideas. This is an indication that there was probably little to be gained by further expanding the search by expanding the selected search criteria.

The life cycle theory has a normative intention to help an organization overcome growth constraints during its developmental process. This article has the same intention. However, due to the different organizational context of churches, I propose *assumptions* of the type of action that may be appropriate for churches to take to overcome these constraints. In many cases, it will be shown that the contextual differences make much of the advice from the life cycle literature relevant.

Life Cycle Theory

Introduction

The theory of life cycles in organizations is based on the development from "birth" to "final form", also known as "stagnation" or "closing down". Life cycle research was started in the '60s (f.eks. Chandler, 1962; Downs, 1967; Lippitt & Schmidt, 1967; Steinmetz, 1969). It is suggested that organizations go through several different predictable stages as they grow

(Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001). The idea is that changes in organizations follow a certain pattern and that they are expected to go through a set of phases over their lifetime. To move from one phase to the next, the organization must go through a challenging process of change that has to be (more or less) properly resolved (Kazanjian, 1988).

Life cycles are defined by Hanks (1990, p. 9) as "*a unique configuration of variables related to organization context, strategy, and structure. Stages of development can be verified by clustering organizations along these dimensions. If we define a growth stage in terms of configuration, the transition between stages can be characterized as a reconfiguration along these dimensions*".

As mentioned earlier, according to the life cycle theory, there are several different descriptions of the stages that organizations go through (Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001). Greiner (1972, 1998), who was one of the early and leading developers of the life cycle theory, describes a six-phase process. He believes that going from one phase to another is always a big challenge. One crucial point is that organizations run the risk of failing during these transitions. It is often assumed that a successful course in one phase creates better conditions for the transition to the next stage. In addition, as changes come from within, the life cycle processes. The processes are externally influenced, but the inner logic or driving forces of the organization are the central elements in the change processes.

Greiner (1972, 1998) distinguishes between growth through creativity (phase 1 (P1)), direction (P2), delegation (P3), coordination (P4), collaboration (P5), and alliances (P6). One key point is that the challenges in each phase create a crisis in leadership, autonomy, control, confidence and identity. Failure to resolve these crises will hinder the organization from advancing to the next phase, and the organization will cease to grow.

There are different ways to understand the transitions between phases. Greiner (1972) viewed the growth of organizations as a series of evolutions and revolutions precipitated by crises. On the other hand, Chandler (1962) viewed stages of growth as responses to a firm's search for new growth opportunities (Kazanjian, 1988). While Greiner's (1972) view seems to be the most common way of thinking in life cycle research, both mechanisms are still possible.

Tipping points

The life cycle perspective is criticized for being too linear and having a deterministic understanding of the development of organizations. Organizations do not follow the same developmental process (Huy, 2001). They probably go through different stages of a growth process, and the sequence does not necessarily follow the same order or pattern. In addition, they do not experience the same challenges at different stages (Phelps, Adams, & Bessant, 2007). Levie and Hay (1998) and Phelps et al. (2007) concluded that organizations do not evolve through predictable sequences but through their own unique series of stable and unstable states that relate to leadership challenges. Nicholls-Nixon (2005, p. 79) seems more cautious in her conclusion. She points out that "*Firms evolve through a predictable life cycle, but these stages are not always linear. The time spent in each phase varies considerably among firms.*" She points out, like Greiner (1972), that crises often occur in organizations to promote necessary changes. Stubbart and Smalley (1999) believe that the life cycle model, with its stages, can help us in discussing possible emerging patterns in organizations.

As organizations grow, it is necessary to make significant changes to them. Nicholls-Nixon (2005) believe: "[although it is not the] *best management approach, it is clear that major changes in systems, structures, and capabilities are required in order to cope with the increased complexity that accompanies fast growth."* Phelps et al. (2007, p. 1717) put it this way: *"there is no standard linear sequence of stages or problems, but there is a basic set of key issues that all growing firms can expect to encounter at some point."* This is called the "tipping point", which indicates a critical point where relatively stable organizations enter into a rapid development process, and significant changes can then be observed. Researchers look at the ability to absorb knowledge and solutions on how to maneuver in terms of these "tipping points" as the key to further growth. In the research referred to here, growth is measured differently, but it often relates to size (sales, employees, etc.).

Since the development of growing organizations is not the same and is path-dependent (Phelps et al., 2007), it is crucial to create a good understanding of the organization to implement customized changes at the right time. Phelps et al. (2007) emphasize that the ability to absorb the knowledge of the situation and possible solutions determines whether firms pass the "tipping points" well.

There are several different descriptions of challenges that are encountered at various "tipping points." Greiner (1972) described the managerial challenges. Scott and Bruce (1987) stated that as the organization grows, managers need to think about the following key areas: the role of the top manager, leadership style, organizational structure, product and market research, systems and control, vital financial sources, cash generation, major investments, and product-market challenges. Phelps et al. (2007) mentioned people management, formal systems, strategy, operational improvements, entry into new markets, and financing. Nicholls-Nixon (2005) mentioned business logic, gathering and distributing information, building relationships, and leadership style.

This article's approach

As organizations move over their life cycle, they sometimes skip phases, or return to previous phases., The journey contains irregularities (Miller & Friesen, 1984). Organizational development is also largely influenced by factors other than the internal processes from the life cycle perspective, such as competitive conditions (Dodge, Fullerton, & Robbins, 1994). Hanks (1990) asked whether organizations change significantly in different and specific phases as life cycle thinking implies, or through a gradual process of change. Hanks (1990) and Nicholls-Nixon (2005) believe that the consensus in literature is a combination of gradual changes and changes through phases. This view underscores this article.

Drawing from several studies, I use numbers from 1 to 4 to classify the stages (Gurianova et al., 2014; Sirmon, Hitt, Ireland, & Gilbert, 2011; Tam & Gray, 2016a): 1=start-up, 2=growth, 3=maturity, and 4=saturation. As this classification shows, I am not focusing on recession. In a few cases, I use the number 0 to reflect the prestart "phase." I assume that stage transitions may happen at different growth levels depending on the type of organization and on certain characteristics of the individual organization. Not all organizations have to go through all the phases.

This classification is not meant as a conclusion about stages in churches. It is meant to help present and discuss the life cycle studies as summarized in Table 3. In Table 4, I argue for a less stringent classification of stages.

Main points from literature on life cycle and growth constraints in churches

Life cycle is seldom mentioned in the popular scientific literature as a concept for churches. This discussion is about growth barriers. Firms and other organizations indicate growth by an increase in sales, the number of employees, etc. In church literature, the number of regular attendees at services is often used as an indication of church size. In published literature, the following authors identify barriers at different levels. George and Bird (2017) state that populations of 200, 400, and 800 as barriers that are difficult to break. They emphasize that barrier levels vary between churches. Searcy (2012) argues that growth barriers are at 65, 125, 250, 500, and 1000. The argument for these levels is based on tendencies to plateau. In a more recent study, the social brain hypothesis is applied (Dunbar, 1993). Bretherton and Dunbar (2020) used this hypothesis to argue that single-leader churches face challenges of dropping engagement when the number of members exceeds 150. Tensions are created in a restructuring process and may stop or slow down the growth.

Although, the authors try to show that churches seem to plateau at certain levels, the choice of levels is not sufficiently substantiated from a theoretical or empirical point of view. Moreover, there is neither a start-up phase nor a maturity phase. The measures of growth are complicated for both churches and other organizations. This will be commented later in this article.

As pointed out above, there are good reasons to carefully set clear boundaries for the developmental stages. Churches are theological-spiritual entities but are also organizational units with leaders and staff (Lars Råmunddal, 2011). However, churches are different from other organizations in other dimensions (Jenssen, 2018). We know little about what these differences mean in terms of whether and when they go from one stage to another. A relatively small proportion of churches are large. E.g. 57 percent of all churches in the United States have less than 100 attendees during worship, and this number is growing (Roozen, 2015).

George and Bird (2017) argue that for a church to grow beyond 200-350 adults, it must develop planning, administrative and delegation routines. According to these authors, the church board should entrust the staff with developing vision, planning, managing and implementing their plans. The problem is that many church boards perceive themselves as leaders and the staff as servants (George & Bird, 2017). The board wants to work out plans, budgets and vision for the church. This is believed to cause the governing structure to become a bottleneck and that the pastor and his staff are not given sufficient "space" to act and create change. It is important to add that the staff can conceivably oppose the necessary changes that the church government wants to make.

George and Bird (2017) further argue that church boards should increasingly concentrate on overall and principled issues. The board should be responsible for designing and proposing frameworks and policies for congregational activities, i.e., rules and procedures for how significant investments should be made, when and how to submit budgets, accounts and

plans, and how the hiring process should be organized. The board should be responsible for nominating persons to various boards and committees. It should also be responsible for proposing the appointment of and the termination of the senior pastor. As the staff grows, the senior pastor can take on greater responsibilities for the recruitment of new employees. George and Bird (2017) also believe that the board should have the responsibility for resolving any conflicts among its employees.

They also point out that the need for leadership training increases as the congregation grows. The most crucial requirement for recruiting new pastors should, therefore, be their ability to train new leaders. A metaphor highlighted in the Bible to describe the pastor's function is "a shepherd". Being a shepherd means leading the flock while showing great care for the individual (Luke 15: 3-6). The result of this thinking may be that the pastor is generally only responsible for preaching and counseling.

As the herd grows, a problem arises. It becomes impossible for the pastor to be involved in direct care for individual members. To perform this vital pastoral function, they must perform the service through others. Training of new employees who can perform direct pastoral functions must become an increasingly important part of the manager's responsibility. If not, the pastor will neglect his shepherd service. This has led some to use the word "rancher" as a metaphor for the senior pastor (Wagner, 1984). The "rancher" must lead the ranch through others. The main task is to recruit employees, train them, and then manage them.

The church barrier literature also points out that when a "one-cell congregation" reaches 100 to 150 members, it is difficult to establish a tight knit community that ensures spiritual growth and follows-up with newcomers. Without the church having some form of smaller groups, individuals will feel alienated. The church growth literature suggests that smaller groups of 5 to 15 should be developed (Cominskey & Peter, 2002; Surrat, 2019). Some also believe that larger groups of up to 35 to 80 people may be suitable (Wagner, 1984).

The growth barrier research points out that for a congregation to grow beyond a certain level, the buildings must be large enough and functionally furnished. This argument applies to the sanctuary, and the various rooms where different ministries of the church meet. When assessing the premises, one must keep in mind that the rooms are rarely full. Studies indicate that when 80 percent of the seats in the room are full, a newcomer perceives the church as crowded. Multiple worship services may be an alternative (George & Bird, 2017).

Finally, the church must have a staff that is large enough for growth. Church members have become accustomed to staffing that is sufficient for maintenance but not for growth. Some have suggested that there should be one employee per 100 active members until the congregation number passes 500. Others have proposed one per 150. At 200 to 300 hundred active members, the administrative duties become so time-consuming that the pastor or volunteers cannot or should not do this work. The appointment of a part-time or full-time administrative secretary should be considered. This will free the pastor to concentrate on other tasks.

The literature on growth barriers in churches does not always use references properly. However, when the church literature on barriers was initially developed, the concepts that were used to explain growth stages and change strategies to overcome growth barriers were closely related to the life cycle literature. It must have been more than a source of inspiration. The following tables and discussion clearly reveal this similarity.

In the leadership literature, it is common to use several theories to explain organizational behavior. Some behavior explained within the life cycle perspectives may also be explained by other theories. From a planned change perspective, growth can be hampered by a lack of vision and goals, good plans, and implementation capacity. In addition, it is crucial to have a degree of delegation, the ability to build management systems and have established procedures for a coordinated and collaborative climate according to the life cycle perspective. However, in this article we apply the life cycle perspective because it aims to explain the long-term development of organizations.

Some researchers emphasize the challenges of not being able to find a single list of problems and solutions that need to be addressed for organizations to grow (f.eks. Phelps et al., 2007). In summary, in the church literature, one should be concerned with the conditions listed in the following table.

Strategy
Develop a vision and goals
Improve the planning, administration, and management system
Senior pastor and leadership style
Role of top executives and leadership style
Transition from providing care to recruiting and training employees and managers
Organizational Structure
Delegate duties and divide the church into several departments
Delegate tasks from the board to the pastor and on to staff and volunteers
Coordination and governance
Develop the physical conditions (sanctuary, parking, etc.) before it is full

Table 2: Overview of growth barrier issues in church literature

Several of these elements coincide with factors described in general management literature; strategy, systems and routines, control, function of senior management, and leadership style, and organizational structure are all mentioned as conditions that should change as organizations grow (e.g. Cacioppe & Edwards, 2004; Lester, Parnell, & Carraher, 2003; Scott & Bruce, 1987; Shim, Eastlick, & Lotz, 2000).

Life cycle and growth in firms

The findings in the life cycle literature may be categorized in several ways. Drawing on Phelps et al. (2007), Nicholls-Nixon (2005), Scott and Bruce (1987), and analyzing the finding of the studies I have reviewed, the results were grouped into the following categories: strategy-related issues, leadership issues, organizational structure, organizational culture, external relations/network development, and management systems.

Table 3 below provides an overview of the main findings in the literature on the life cycle theory regarding what changes with growth. Some of this literature is normative and argue that certain conditions need to be changed. Others have a more descriptive approach and say something about what is changing. The idea behind the discussion in this article is, argued to be normative. I have tried to come up with what inhibits growth in churches and what can

be done about it. The problem of doing so is not only related to the limitations of the studies being different (review, case studies, cross-sectional studies, and longitudinal studies in different business contexts) but also that I use them in a new context (church). As pointed out in the methodological section, I argue in several respects below that the context is similar enough to claim that the assumptions in the life cycle are also relevant for churches.

In addition, the referenced literature on growth constraints assumes that the life cycle studies on growth barriers performed on other types of organizations may substantiate and complement the church literature. For example, the research on information gathering related to strategy in firms may support the collection of information in a church context (Jenssen, 2019b). The emphasis on commitment and involvement in the growth process of organizations outside the church context (e.g., participation in decision making) might also inform the effort in the context of churches.

The assumptions made for churches in the right column in Table 3 below are drawn from the conclusions of the life cycle literature as referred to in the left column. When there is support for similar ideas elsewhere in the church development literature, a reference is also given in the right column.

Arguments from the life cycle literature for firm development	Ph-ase	References	Relevance for churches (assumptions)
Strategy			
Prebirth strategy/planning with a focus on resource gathering.	0	(Beverland & Lockshin, 2001)	Developing a human resource base before public planting increases the chance for start-up success.
The perception of opportunities and the initial choice of sector, technology, products and markets are vital for further development because it creates some path dependency. Therefore, early phase analysis is important.		(Garnsey, 1998)	Investigating the environment, its demography, needs and cultural composition might help to choose the right place for starting a new church, and designing the ministries around their profile (Jenssen, 1995, 2019b).
Create ideology, a clear vision and orientation during the earliest phase.	1	(Abernathy, 1976; Hanks, 1990; Kimberly, 1979)	Creating vision in the early stage of the church development might attract people that want to work within the selected direction (Jenssen, 1995, 2019b).
Often focus on a niche during the early phases.	1,2	(Gudmundsson, 1998; Miller & Friesen, 1984)	The focus on reaching a specific group within the local population might give the church (in its early phase) a more significant impact. Once in focus, it may become more resource-efficient.
Do not underestimate the time needed for the start-up process.		(Parks, 1977a)	Church planters may struggle for a longer time than expected, especially with the establishment of the church (Jenssen, 1995).
Creativity and innovation/product development are essential during the early phase.	1,2	(Abernathy, 1976; Galbraith & Vesper, 1982; Hanks, 1990; Hanks & Chandler, 1994)	Being innovative in the early stages of church development is probably crucial in order to find resource-effective ways to reach the population.
In the earlier stages, an incremental short-term innovation strategy is conducive to growth.		(McCann, 1991)	In the early phases of church creation, an incremental strategy may fit the resource situation and add to "short-term wins" .
The importance of process innovation grows through the phases.	3,4	(Abernathy, 1976; Hanks, 1990)	As a church grows and adds members and activities, the need for efficiency in the "production" of the activities will require process innovation to stimulate further growth.
It is vital to develop further by expanding the vision and to apply goals to provide direction for further growth.	3,4	(Abernathy, 1976; Kroeger, 1974; Phelps et al., 2007, p. 10; Torbert, 1974)	To remain relevant and to have more to strive for, a vision may need to be developed further and then expanded. This is valid also in a church setting.
As organizations grow, they need to increase the environment, deal with its heterogeneity (different groups), diversify and define their position. A strategic position includes a firm's place in a new product-market segment and the development of a new product or technology application.	3,4	(Abernathy, 1976; Dodge & Robbins, 1992; Hanks, 1990; Kazanjian, 1988; Lester et al., 2003; Miller & Friesen, 1984; Phelps et al., 2007)	Increasing the number of ministries and growing targeted group in later life cycle phases may contribute to continuing growth. However, if the scope of ministries increases too quickly, it can require too many resources and lead to a reduction in the quality of the existing ministries (Rainer & Geiger, 2011).
An increasing need for standardization to achieve rationalization, scale economies and capacity to stimulate further growth in new areas.	3,4	(Abernathy, 1976)	The expansion into new ministries and target groups often creates resource scarcity –especially in volunteer organizations such as churches. Developing efficiency in "production" to gain scale economies is crucial to create expansion.

The absorptive capacity of the organization and its network is essential for making changes required by growth. Organizational learning increases this capacity. Gradually, along with growth, learning begins to happen within the organization through internal communication between members and continues through a more formalized learning processes.	2,3, 4	(Phelps et al., 2007; Tam & Gray, 2016a)	To make experiences a source of learning within the church, processes must be formalized to secure continuing growth. Such processes may include regular meetings, databases, information gathering and sharing.
Policies and rules must be established along with growth.	2,3, 4	(Hanks, 1990; Tam & Gray, 2016b)	A growing church requires more policies and rules to be well-coordinated, follows external regulations, and treats people fairly (e.g., procedures for meeting, the use of money, the interaction between people in general and between gender).
As the firm grows, the need for funding increases.	2,3, 4	(Phelps et al., 2007)	At certain stages of growth, a church needs to invest in building and staff. This investment and an increase in operating expenses requires an increase in funding (George & Bird, 2017).
Leadership issues			
The entrepreneur's qualities are essential in the beginning (e.g., innovation, self-confidence, risk-taking, and strong will) and the decision-making process is centralized.	1,2	(Abernathy, 1976; Galbraith & Vesper, 1982; Hanks, Watson, Jansen, & Chandler, 1993; Kimberly, 1979; Kroeger, 1974; Mintzberg, 1973)	Planting a church requires entrepreneurial qualities such as innovation, self-confidence, risk-taking, strong will, but more importantly, a strong sense of calling (Stetzer & Im, 2011).
In the early stages, the entrepreneur often organizes the daily work through direct supervision and very little planning.	1,2	(Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Galbraith & Vesper, 1982; Gudmundsson, 1998; Hanks, 1990; Hanks et al., 1993; Lester et al., 2003)	In the early stage of church development, the focus of the entrepreneur is on supervising volunteers and on the necessary church planting tasks. The size of the church does not require much planning, and the tasks required to get the church on its feet is very acute.
In the early stages, flexibility in the organization is necessary to adapt to the surroundings.	1,2	(Hanks, 1990; Hanks et al., 1993; Quinn & Cameron, 1983)	In the early stages of church development, the church should have an organic and flexible form of organization to be able to adapt to its environment quickly.
As organizations grow there is a need to go from solving tasks to leading the work through others and training middle management.	2,3, 4	(Kroeger, 1974)	A need for delegation and training of middle managers (e.g., ministry leaders) and coworkers is necessary to maintain the growth in later phases of the church development (George & Bird, 2017; Wagner, 1984).
Some firms that receive an acceptable return on investment early avoid further growth and prefer to stay in the "comfort zone." Additionally, at the end of the growth process and in the beginning maturity stage, it is tempting to slow down, lose focus and try to prolong the growth. Change in leadership or leadership style might be necessary for both situations to continuing growth.	2,3, 4	(Garnsey, 1998; Parks, 1977b)	Many churches seem to plateau at certain size levels (George & Bird, 2017). The reasons for this are not well known, but it is reasonable to assume (also in churches) that after a period with growth, complacency, less effort, and less risk-willingness might reduce the will to change. Such a situation calls for a refocus and change in leadership style.

Organizational power systems tend to become more diffused, more complex, more ambiguous, and at some point, less functional. This is the case even though, ironically, results in more stability. Such a development may lead to a conflict of interests in the organization.	3,4	(Mintzberg, 1984)	As a church grows, the power spreads to several middle managers (e.g., ministry leaders). If not managed wisely, it can create conflicts, ambiguity, and reduce cohesion and direction of the effort. It can create stability at the expense of progress.
The need for political support from subordinates increases in later phases and is most significant in the last phase.	2,3, 4	(Smith, Mitchell, & Summer, 1985)	As a church grows, the need for support for the senior pastor from middle managers (e.g., ministry leaders) increases to maintain continuous growth.
Management awareness of HRM increases from a simple needs driven focus, to HR-considerations integrated into all management decisions.		(Baird & Meshoulam, 1988)	As a church grows, the need for developing human resources of employees and volunteers increases. The church needs to increase skills in this area through the development process of the church.
Organizational structure			
As the organization grows, it becomes more necessary to divide it into multiple departments to achieve increased specialization (horizontal differentiation) and economies of scale.	3,4	(Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Galbraith & Vesper, 1982; Kazanjian & Drazin, 1990; Kimberly, 1979; Kroeger, 1974; Lester et al., 2003) (Abernathy, 1976; Hanks, 1990; Hanks et al., 1993)	As a church grows, it becomes more important to divide it into multiple departments (ministries) to achieve increased specialization (horizontal differentiation) and economies of scale. This process makes it possible to do more for less.
As the organizations grow, it becomes necessary to delegate decisions and tasks from the board to the top manager, and further down from the CEO to middle managers to ensure that decisions are made close to the task completion. The delegation also may prevent the governing board or the top manager from becoming bottlenecks (vertical differentiation).	3,4	(Abernathy, 1976; Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Greiner, 1972; Gurianova et al., 2014; Hanks, 1990; Kazanjian & Drazin, 1990; Kroeger, 1974; Parks, 1977a)	As the church grows, it becomes crucial to delegate decisions and tasks from the board to the senior pastor, and from the senior pastor down to the middle manager (ministry leaders) to ensure that decisions are made close to the task completion. This ensures that the board or the pastor do not become bottlenecks. If not, the growth may not continue. (George & Bird, 2017; Wagner, 1984).
The need to supplement the line with staff functions and functional specialization increases in later phases.	3,4	(Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Kazanjian & Drazin, 1990)	As a church grows, in later phases, the need to supplement the line with staff functions and functional specialization increases (e.g., related to finances, catering, multimedia support).
Divisionalization may be appropriate when the organization becomes very large.	4	(Hanks et al., 1993; Lester et al., 2003)	When the churches become very large (megachurches), divisionalization can become relevant, especially when churches are located at several different places (multicampus churches).
Organizational culture			
Forming an identity, developing a sense of a collective commitment and involvement is of vital importance in the early stages of the firm.	1,2	(Quinn & Cameron, 1983)	In the start-up process and early growth of a church, it may be especially important to form an identity, develop collective commitment and involvement to stimulate further growth.
As the organization grows, there is an increasing need to focus on building culture and transmitting culture to different parts of the organization to maintain the participation and direction.	4	(Flamholtz, 1995)	As the church grows, there is a growing need to build the culture to stimulate participation, cooperation, and continue church growth.

It is vital to develop uniform practices using systems and standards in later stages to influence the cultural development in the desired way.	3,4	(Katz & Kahn, 1978)	Systems and practices may help the church in later phases to create and maintain a culture that supports church growth.
It is essential to develop better team cultures for better collaborations in later stages.	3,4	(Katz & Kahn, 1978)	Nurturing a culture that supports teamwork grows with the size of the church.
External relations and network development		(Kroeger, 1974)	
Networks and alliances are especially important in the early phase and are linked to resource access and a breadth of opportunities.	1,2	(Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Katz & Kahn, 1978; McCann, 1991; Parks, 1977a; Sirmon et al., 2011)	Especially in the start-up process and early growth of a church, it is essential to be in a network or alliance with other churches to gain resources, such as motivation, advice, money, expertise, and legitimacy (Jenssen, 2001). The worldwide web may also provide insights into new opportunities for ministry.
Convincing funding sources to be involved in the start-up may increase the access to vital resources for the firm in its early phase.	0,1	(Garnsey, 1998)	Convincing a large church to be involved in a church plant may increase access to vital resources supporting the plant's growth.
In the early phase, organizations will have a proactive or accommodative behavior in its relation to critical stakeholders such as creditors, customers, suppliers, and employees. The later phase important stakeholders could be creditors, suppliers, customers, and the government.	1,2,3	(Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001; Kazanjian, 1988)	In the early phase of church development, it may be essential to have a proactive or accommodative approach to maintain important relationships that can support church growth (e.g. to the mother church and selected members in a target group).
In the mature phase, networking will be used proactively or accommodative towards all stakeholders.	3, 4	(Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001)	In the mature phase of the church, networking will be used proactively or accommodative towards all stakeholders (e.g. to the mother church, financial institution, to other volunteer organizations, or to the municipality).
Management systems			
As the organization grows, it is necessary to go from informal processes in the early phases of development to increasing formalization. Some examples include formalizing decision-making processes, improve coordination and control systems.	3,4	(Adizes, 1979, 1988, 1999; Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Flamholtz, 1995; Galbraith & Vesper, 1982; Greiner, 1972; Gurianova et al., 2014; Hanks, 1990; Hanks et al., 1993; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kazanjian, 1988; Kazanjian & Drazin, 1990; Kimberly, 1979; Lester et al., 2003; Mintzberg, 1973; Nicholls-Nixon, 2005; Parks, 1977a; Phelps et al., 2007; Quinn & Cameron, 1983; Torbert, 1974)	As the organization grows (degree of formalization), informal processes in the early phases of a church's development cycle have to be replaced with increased formalization. For example, in areas such as (see e.g. Jenssen, 2018, 2019b): decision making, planning, and control, ensuring coordination of activities, ensuring direction and profile of the church, financial management (e.g., analysis and control of cost, investment, surplus/loss and liquidity), ensure and develop practices to satisfy legal and qualitative requirements, and handling external relationships.

Systems to manage finances, cost control, investment analysis, and profit and liquidity management have to be improved as the organization grows.		(Hanks et al., 1993; Kazanjian, 1988)	As the church and its economy grow, the need for financing, investment analysis, accounting and liquidity management increases.
It is necessary to improve strategy and planning routines/processes (strategy development, budgeting, evaluation and the implementation plan) to keep the organization growing.	3,4	(Abernathy, 1976; Galbraith & Vesper, 1982; Greiner, 1972; Gudmundsson, 1998; Hanks et al., 1993; Kroeger, 1974; Mintzberg, 1973)	As the church grows, it has to improve its strategy and planning routines/processes (strategy development, budgeting and implementation plan) to keep direction, proper coordination and continuing growth (Jenssen, 2019b).
There is an increasing need for formal communication processes as the firm grows.	3,4	(Galbraith & Vesper, 1982; Quinn & Cameron, 1983)	It is important to create proper processes for communicating to individuals (members and volunteers), groups (e.g., leadership teams) and the whole congregation that fit the size of the church. The need for formalization in this area grows with church size.
Performance measurement systems (PMS) may improve managerial development and should increase with growth.	3,4	(Garengo & Bernardi, 2007)	As the church grows, methods for measuring and evaluating performance must increase to keep track of quantitative and qualitative growth (Gibbs, 1992; Jenssen, 2019a).
It is necessary to improve HRM as the organization grows. The HRM function develops from being loose or nonexistent to a systematic, well-structured, and strategic aligned system. Examples of this development include methods for rewards, training programs for leaders and employees, and policies for recruiting and relationships.	2,3,4	(Adizes, 1979, 1988, 1999; Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Flamholtz, 1995; Kazanjian, 1988; Phelps et al., 2007; Shim et al., 2000; Sirmon et al., 2011)	As the church grows, leadership training and HRM for employees and volunteers needs to keep improving. The HRM routines have to develop from being loose to a systematic, well-structured and strategic aligned system. Examples of this development includes methods for rewards (e.g., praise and rice), training programs for leaders, employees and volunteers, policies for recruitment, and how to relate to each other in the church.
There is a need for increasing HRM skills as the organization grows.	2,3,4	(Baird & Meshoulam, 1988)	To develop HRM, including leadership training, the church needs to increase HRM skilled personnel.
As the firm grows, innovation to further develop the business must go hand in hand with the ability to create greater work efficiency.	4	(Adizes, 1979; Sirmon et al., 2011)	As a church grows closer to maturity, increasing the efficiency of existing ministries is vital. This will create the capacity for developing new and different ministries to better reach the existing and new groups of people (innovation).
As growth continues, there is an increasing need for IKT skills and systems in the form of routines.	2,3,4	(Baird & Meshoulam, 1988)	As the church grows, there is an increasing need to recruit and develop IKT skills for the various operating systems (e.g., training volunteers, managing meetings, computers and networks, accounting, emergency system) as the church are growing.
It is essential during the start-up phase to, at a minimum, develop systems related to cash flow and accounting procedures. The time and resources needed for this process should not be underestimated.	1	(Parks, 1977a)	In the early phase of church development, it is crucial to create, at a minimum, systems for cash flow and accounting to be able to pay bills, to build necessary equity and to understand the financial development of the church.
In a rapid growth process, if the organization loses control, the need for cash might be higher than what is accessible.	2,3	(Parks, 1977a)	In a rapid church growth process, the need for cash might be higher than what is accessible. It is, therefore, necessary to develop good financial prognoses.

Creating systems for procurement and disposal is essential in later stages.	3,4	(Hanks et al., 1993; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Sirmon et al., 2011)	Creating systems for purchase is vital in the later stages of churches. This creation ensures that the goods arrive when needed and may allow for discounts.
It is necessary to improve the production and distribution system as the firm grows.	2,3, 4	(Kimberly, 1979; Sirmon et al., 2011; Torbert, 1974)	As the church grows, it is necessary to implement systems for the "production" of different activities, such as services, board and leadership meetings, maintaining the property, cafeteria, distribution of info videos, and social media.
As the firm grows, it is necessary to improve the collection, analysis and distribution of the information to better understand and adapt to the environment.	3,4	(Ghemawat, 2002)	As the church grows, it is vital to improve the collection, analysis and distribution of the information to better understand and adapt to the environment where it wants to reach with its ministry
Learning varies with life cycle stages. Individual learning is most important during the inception period. Group learning is most important in the high growth stage, and organizational learning is highest in the high growth and maturity stage.	2,3, 4	(Tam & Gray, 2016a)	As the church grows, the learning related to leadership and organization has to develop from mostly individual to collective learning.

Table 3: Overview of the main literature findings on the life cycle theory and assumptions made concerning life cycles for churches.

Stages in church development

The research on firms applies several indicators to determine the stages of organizational development or life cycles (turnover, number of employees, etc.). Some researchers suggest that factors such as the number of locations of the church, the complexity of the value creation pipeline, and the rate of change of services/products and technology should also be among the criteria used for the breakdown of developmental stages (Churchill & Lewis, 1983). Park's statement (1977a) still holds that there is no numerical scale for growth and stages on which there is a consensus, which also seems to be the case for the church literature on growth barriers.

What type of criteria is essential in a church? As shown above in the church literature, the researchers use only numerical size to separate the growth stages. As argued above, I assume that the stages are fluid, and there is an overlap between them. The second and third row in the table below illustrates this point. The fluidness can be caused, for example, by factors such as differences in leadership capabilities, and previous structural forms of the church. Additionally, all churches do not go through all the phases when they grow. For example, some churches start new churches at another location while they are still relatively small (down to 200 active members).

In table 4 below, I suggest a breakdown into phases based mainly on size. This is based on my discussion of organizational life cycle theory and church growth barriers. However, I also think that the number of locations creates some challenges (Churchill & Lewis, 1983) related to the need for coordination and direction. An increase in the black area shows which of the different factors named in the left column are the most important to develop.

For both churches and other organizations, there are other important issues rather than numerical growth. For churches, attendance is an indication of numerical growth and discipleship. However, it must be supplemented with other quality growth measures, such as sanctification. This important question is not a part of this analysis.

Regarding the discussion concerning phases in firms and churches above, researchers believe that there are similarities in the factors that influence growth constraints. Additionally, in the growth barrier literature, there is little discussion about how the church differs from firms and other organizations. The only different element is that the church literature accentuates the need for being proactive with the development of the physical infrastructure such as the sanctuary and parking.

The following are the assumptions concerning the development process and the actions that may be required to reduce growth constraints at different phases of a church development process. The basis for these assumptions is the abovementioned reasoning obtained from other organizational contexts. However, as shown earlier, empirical data from churches that support the conclusions are limited.

	The start-up church	Medium-sized church	The big church	Megachurch	Multicampus church
Size (active)	20 to 70-80	60-70 to 200-250	200-250 to 600-800	600-800+	400-500+
Fluid boundaries					

Strategy related issues

Creating vision in the early development stage of the church. *

Further dev. and exp. vision

Incr. communicating of vision

From a focused to a more di-versified strategy

Efficiency by improv. produc-tion through innovate.

Basic direction toward more policies

Informal individual learning to formal collective learning

Senior pastor and leadership style

Entrepreneurial leadership-style

Change mgmt. to avoid plat-eau

Task orientation & supervi-sion

Organic and flexible structure

Delegation and training

HRM focus and skills

Tying church together

Support for the senior pastor

Organizational structure

Horizontal differentiation (one to several departments)

Vertical differentiation (one to several levels)

Adding staff personnel

Divisional structure

Organizational culture

Norms: create identity dev. commitment and coopera-tion

Stimulating and transferring culture

Practices, systems, habits to culture

Networks	
From access to imp. resources to diversity of relations for legitimacy & opportunities	

Management systems	
Increasing formalization	
Financial management	
Strategy development	
Efficiency and innovation	
Communication routines	
Performance measures	
HRM systems	
HRM skills	
IKT skills	
Liquidity planning	
Improving syst. procurement	
Improving syst. for "production" of ministries	
Improving information/data handling	
Formalizing learning processes	

Buldings, etc.	
Physical infrastructure	

Table 4: Factors related to life cycles in a church context and how they may develop.

Conclusions

In the life cycle perspective, organizations go through phases. They can be established, growing, or maturing, while some may be stagnating and shutting down. In the early research, it seemed to be argued that many of the changes occur after predictable crises along with large multidimensional phase transitions. Recent research indicates that changes are taking place both gradually and through major upheavals. Challenges or crises in the organization can be triggers for necessary changes and phase transitions. Not all organizations follow the same path of development because they are different along several dimensions (such as organization type, management qualifications, and structures). Additionally, as the table above illustrates, some changes happen gradually. An organization enters a new stage when several factors change at the same time.

The literature on growth barriers in church growth research is based on the life cycle perspective. *The reasoning in this literature supports the notion that key elements of the life cycle perspective can also be used in the church.* In this article, as in much of the life cycle research and in all church-related literature on barriers to growth, there is a notion that an organization can be *proactive in making the necessary changes* to reduce the growth constraints.

Little empirical research has been performed in the church with the life cycle approach. In this article, I assume that churches encounter barriers to growth as they increase in size. These barriers can be reduced if one makes changes to the way churches are led and organized. The changes that I assume may be necessary are highlighted in the two tables in this article.

Future research

The research on changes in organizations is largely carried out by private companies, public institutions and a few voluntary organizations. However, very few studies are performed by churches. I assume that several of the elements highlighted in the life cycle perspective are also important in churches. In any case, it is quite easy to find illustrative examples, as I show in Table 3. At the same time, I emphasize that there is a need for studies of change processes in churches.

The important questions are whether there are significant differences between organizations that mainly use paid labor and organizations that have many volunteer workers. Furthermore, it is reasonable to inquire into how the theological and spiritual dimensions of the church may influence the life cycle process. For instance, in the early phases of a church, access to spiritual and natural talents is often scarce. In later phases, there may be more gifts and talent than the church is able to use. Systems for developing gifts and talent, distributing them to different ministries, and building new ministries around gifts and talent that the church did not have previously, are important when the church grows larger.

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