

**LEADING YOUR MINISTRY THROUGH  
ORGANIZATIONAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE**

**MISSION**

**DESIGN**

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# ONE

## THE LIFE CYCLE OF AN ORGANIZATION

**IN 2006**, I presented a report to the Jews for Jesus board of directors and senior leadership on the aging demographics of our staff. This report could have been titled, “Where did all the young people go?” The average age of our mission staff was forty-two years old. Simply put, we were struggling to engage the next generation. Recruitment for our programs was in freefall, and the people who were signing up tended to be older adults. For an organization that had built its reputation on street evangelism and campus ministry for over thirty years, these findings were concerning.

There was general agreement among the leadership team that something needed to be done. We met, prayed, discussed, prayed more, and eventually came up with a mission-wide goal to recruit fifty new mission staff in five years. At the time, we were recruiting somewhere between three and five new missionaries each year. Onboarding ten missionaries a year was going to be a tall order. As director of recruitment at the time, I was tasked with leading the charge. I had no idea where to start. I realized very quickly that there was no blueprint or operating manual I could use to solve our recruitment problem.

In the organization’s beginning, Jews for Jesus experienced a season of rapid growth fueled by activism, innovation, and youth. Our founder, Moishe Rosen, had been serving with a well-established mission called the American Board of Missions to the



Jews (ABMJ). His desire to see Jewish people come to know Jesus would lead him to venture out of New York City, the hub of American Jewish life, to the California frontier. In the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, the United States was going through a season of immense change. America was being reshaped by cultural shifts stemming from things including, but not limited to, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the emerging role of women in society.

A passionate, idealistic generation was coming of age, and they saw the world in a radically different way than their parents did. These so-called hippies were leaving home in droves, and California was their destination of choice. Initially Moishe saw them as an irrelevant fringe movement, but he was challenged to rethink his view after speaking at an InterVarsity event at Columbia University. He had told a joke about hippies smelling bad and was challenged by a Jewish social worker named Bob Berk, who asked if Moishe had been close enough to a hippie to smell them. Moishe realized that a significant portion of these hippies were Jewish and quite open to the gospel. He knew his approach to reaching these Jewish people would need to be unorthodox. He wasn't going to be able to reach them with the older, tried-and-true approaches of the ABMJ. This meant his suit and tie had to go, his crew cut and clean-shaven appearance would need to change, and the look and content of tracts and booklets would need to speak the language of youth. Ultimately, this led to his parting ways with the ABMJ and pioneering a new mission organization in the early 1970s called Hineni Ministries.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase “Jews for Jesus” was an early slogan of the organization, but it was so catchy that by 1973 it had become the name. Riding the wave of the Jesus Movement, a counterculture Christian youth revolution that emerged in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>2</sup> Jews for Jesus, like many other North American ministries, saw a relatively high response rate to the gospel in those days. The startup culture of the new ministry made them extremely agile and adaptable to their

cultural surroundings. Jews for Jesus was able to capitalize on the moment with the innovation, activism, and youth that characterized the early days of the movement. Everybody but Moishe was in their early twenties and came ready to change the world. They knew how to talk to their peers. They were already contextualizing the message of the gospel for their audience. Armed with billboards, slogans, and a spirit of activism, they took their new message to the streets where the people they wanted to reach were already gathered. The impact was immediate. Our small team was having thousands of gospel-centered interactions in a year with fellow Jewish hippies, and a multitude of them were coming to the Lord. *Time* magazine even published an article about the growing number of Jewish believers coming to faith in the Messiah during the Jesus Movement.<sup>3</sup>

Fast-forward to 2006. We found ourselves dealing with what many organizations face after the initial launch and growth stages. The momentum of the 1970s had carried us through the '80s and into the '90s, but by the 2010s, we were dealing with the symptoms of decline. We found ourselves trying to deal with the problem of how to recruit young people. We were back at the drawing board asking ourselves, "Where do we go from here?"

In retrospect, I don't believe we were asking the real questions yet. But we were about to discover why we weren't attracting younger people.

## **LIFE CYCLE STAGES**

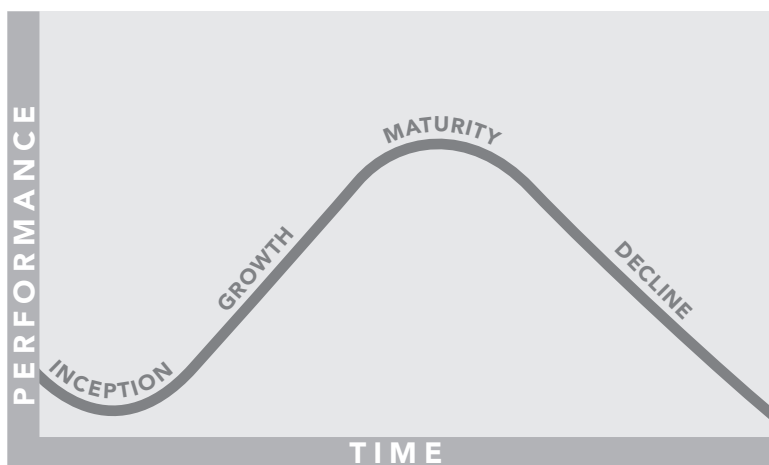
All organizations have a life cycle, whether they're big or small, new or long-established. Initially in 2006, I hadn't given much thought to where our organization was in its life cycle. I just sensed Jews for Jesus was struggling to find its way forward.

While all organizations are unique, most follow a similar growth trajectory with common phases or stages. Understanding these stages can help leaders gain greater awareness of where their organization is and what it needs to move forward. It can also be helpful

in anticipating changes that naturally come with growth. The Georgia Center for Nonprofits offers this list of six common stages in an organization's life cycle:

- **Idea:** A small yet committed team identifies a need (or needs) for a specific constituency and envisions a solution to meet that need.
- **Startup:** Programs and services are developed and launched to address the needs of its constituents. Starting to develop organizational capacity and experimenting with program design.
- **Growth:** As the organization hits its stride, it focuses on standardizing and broadening its programs while formalizing structures and processes to ensure organizational vitality.
- **Maturity:** The organization has an established reputation. It is well managed by an executive leader and a board of directors. Structures and processes are aligned with its strategic plan. A mature organization has streamlined its programs and is highly efficient.
- **Decline:** The organization has become rigid and slow to change. It is more institutionalized with an increasingly hierarchical leadership structure. It is out of touch with the needs of its constituents and change is slow. The systems and structures act as a barrier hindering growth.
- **Crisis:** The organization is experiencing rapid decline. If nothing is done to address it, the organization will hit a point of no return. Leadership is struggling, attrition is high, and funding is waning. The organization has several options: close down, merge with another organization, or do the difficult work of a complete overhaul.<sup>4</sup>

The energy and vision of the early days of an organization can't last forever. We all age. Fatigue sets in, staff leave, new staff join, programs get stale, and the world keeps moving forward. Over time, even small, incremental shifts create misalignment. Without intervention, it's easy to slip into this rut—and all organizations and ministries are

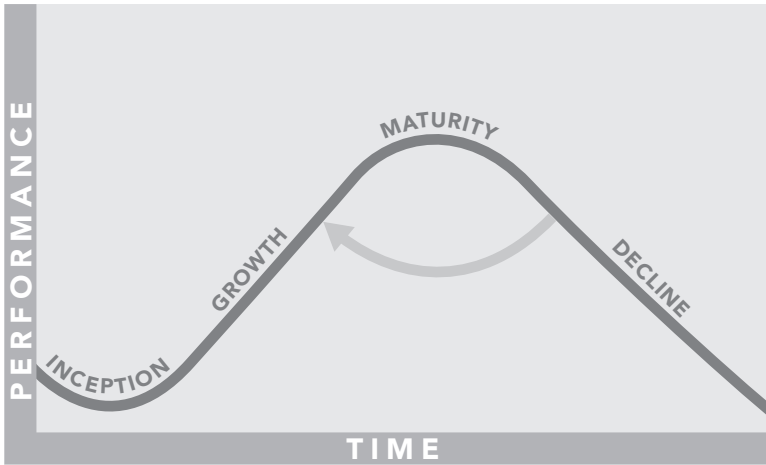


**Figure 1.1.** Business performance over time<sup>5</sup>

vulnerable to this struggle. The church up the street from where we lived in Manhattan once packed over a thousand into its sanctuary each week, but today they rent out the building on Sunday to keep the doors open for a handful of remaining members.

Various denominational studies have been done on this trend. The Redeemer City to City church planting network compared the effectiveness of new church plants over long-term churches: “The average new congregation will bring six to eight times more new people into the life of the body of Christ than an older congregation of the same size.”<sup>6</sup> One key reason points to the life cycle of an organization. Young ministries tend to be adaptable, agile, and experimental in nature. That innovative spirit leads to greater ministry effectiveness.

Jews for Jesus was no exception. The innovation that characterized our early years was wearing off, and we were slipping into a pattern of slow decline. But was it inevitable? Must all organizations cycle into decline? Both startups and well-established organizations can experience stagnation, but it often takes years to get to the Crisis Stage. Susan Kenny Stevens, founder of the Nonprofit Lifecycles Institute, describes a turnaround point where organizations can avoid the Crisis Stage through strong leadership and a committed board of



**Figure 1.2.** Turnaround point for businesses in decline<sup>7</sup>

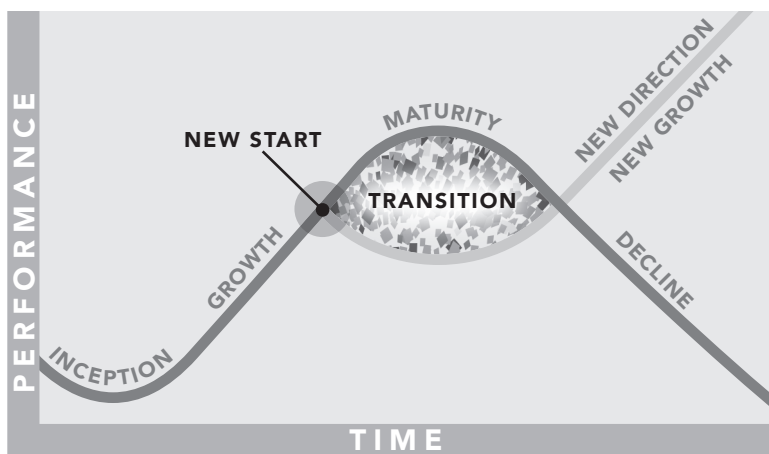
directors willing to do what it takes to reposition the organization for growth.<sup>8</sup>

This process is painful, and it requires strong leadership willing to make tough, uncomfortable decisions. These decisions will likely involve a combination of financial cuts, staff cuts, and programming changes.

This kind of chart is often referred to as a sigmoid curve or bell curve. For an organization to thrive and avoid long-term decline, it needs to launch another sigmoid curve. This means bringing new vitality back into the organization. This is far easier to do when momentum is on the upswing.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, change may lead to a decline in performance, as it takes time to adapt and build momentum again. But the result is a revitalized organization with a new growth plan.

A startup organization is like a new movement. Team members are highly committed and invested in the cause. They are willing to commit personal time and resources for the greater good. The structure tends to be fluid, and leadership is typically shared. But over time, even the most dynamic movements naturally begin to shift toward becoming institutions. This is because every organization



**Figure 1.3.** Relaunching a sigmoid curve<sup>10</sup>

needs stability and structure in order to survive. Without things like 401(k)s, HR departments, and long-term plans, movements lack consistency and eventually peter out.

That is why the ideal organization falls somewhere between a movement and an institution. Turning an organization around is about bringing the movement back into an institution.<sup>11</sup> Tim Keller put it like this: “A strong movement, then, occupies the difficult space between being a free-wheeling organism and a disciplined organization. A movement that refuses to take on some organizational characteristics—authority, tradition, unity of belief, and quality control—will fragment and dissipate.”<sup>12</sup>

We all long to experience movement in our ministries. Being part of a movement is exciting and life-giving. It brings enthusiastic, motivated people together around a common vision. But once that energy is gone, building it back into your organization takes a lot of work. If that is where your ministry is at, don't despair. It is possible to inject movement back into your mission! I saw it happen in Jews for Jesus. That isn't to say it was easy. It wasn't. But change is possible.

An essential part of navigating change is understanding the moment we're in and discerning the need for change both within

our organization and in the world. If we hope to turn things around, we need to develop an awareness of what is happening. We need a grasp of the cultural and spiritual climate in which we serve so we can better assess the context in which our organization's change is taking place. This means listening and interacting with those in our own organizations and those we seek to reach. The insights and reflections we glean should be tempered with spiritual discernment and a broader view of God's movement in the world around us.

If we hope to see movement in the right direction, we will need to count the cost and take the necessary steps to see this process through. And it is important for us to begin to understand how our staff, no matter how successful they have been in the past, may react to change.

Even desired change.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Where is your church or organization in its life cycle? Where would you prefer to be? Why?
- Is there agreement among your leadership about where your organization is at in its life cycle?
- What has changed in your ministry context that necessitates a new approach to ministry?

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