

The Developmental Phases of a Church Plant

An Overview

Much like human life and the life of nearly every organism or institution, church plants progress through reasonably predictable developmental phases. These phases reflect a fluid process rather than being clearly defined separate steps. Yet understanding the developmental phases and their characteristics is important to identifying the particular needs, challenges, and opportunities that face a church plant. Failure to give attention to the changing needs of a church plant as it develops can lead to unnecessary difficulties or stagnation.

Developmental Models of Church Planting Numerous models for describing the development of a church plant have been proposed. Each tends to focus on a particular aspect of a church plant's development, and each has its own particular strengths and weaknesses. For example, David Hesselgrave (1980, 58–63) formulated the “Pauline Cycle,” a framework based on the church-planting ministry of the apostle Paul as described in the book of Acts. Hesselgrave's model focuses more on the tasks of a missionary church planter and less on the development of the church itself. This model has the

strength of drawing from a biblical example and of being well suited for pioneer missionary church planting. However, it gives little attention to church development and multiplication.

One of the most common ways of delineating the development of a church plant uses the analogy of a biological life cycle, popularized by Robert Logan[1] and expanded upon by many others.[2] The church plant progresses from conception to prenatal development, birth, growth (childhood and adulthood), and reproduction. This approach focuses mainly on the church plant itself and the planning process, with particular attention given to the prenatal phase leading up to the birth of the church, that is, the first public worship services. The organic imagery of this model is easy to communicate and conceptualize. Logan has produced very practical step-by-step materials and workbooks to implement the concept.

The limitation of this approach lies in its emphasis on the birth of the church in terms of the first public worship services. In many cultures public worship services are not possible or are not as central to the life of the church as in Western cultures. House churches rarely have a public launch. Also, from a biblical point of view the real birth of a church has little to do with the commencement of public worship. Nevertheless, as long as the metaphor is not pressed too far this model is very helpful, especially in Western cultures, where planting conventional churches usually emphasizes well-planned and attractive public worship services.

Tom Steffen describes yet another approach in his book *Passing the Baton* (1997). As the title suggests, his concern is that the church planter should seek from the very outset to intentionally work himself or herself out of a job—increasingly equipping and entrusting leadership to local believers. As discussed in chapter 5, Steffen maps out a process of phase-out, whereby the role of the church planter progressively changes from learner to evangelist, to teacher, to resident adviser, to itinerant adviser, and finally to absent adviser (see figure 5.1). Though his model was developed for tribal church planting, it has much to commend it to church planters anywhere.

The developmental model that we propose focuses on the goal of church reproduction and multiplication in the context of pioneer cross-cultural church planting. We affirm Steffen's emphasis on the need for church planters (or the church-planting team) to adapt their role with the objective of phase-out and leaving behind a multiplying movement. Attention must also be given to planning and structural matters, as emphasized in Logan and Malphur's approach. But in contrast to them, we describe church planting in various cultural settings, with various forms of the church (such as house churches), and where resources are usually more limited. We also develop the model with the goal of a lay-driven church reproduction that is less dependent on vocational church planters or pastors. The model suggested here is in keeping with the apostolic approach to church planting described in chapter 5.

Table 8.1
Comparison of Developmental Models of Church Planting

Hesselgrave The Pauline Cycle	Logan and others Church-Planting Life Cycle	Steffen Church Planter Phase-Out
Missionaries commissioned		<i>Preentry:</i> Learner (the church planter remains a learner in all phases)
Audience contacted		<i>Preevangelism:</i> Evangelist
Gospel communicated	Conception	<i>Evangelism:</i> Evangelist/Teacher
Hearers converted	Prenatal	<i>Postevangelism:</i> Resident adviser/Itinerant adviser
Believers congregated	Birth	<i>Phase-out:</i> Absent adviser
Faith confirmed	Childhood	
Leadership consecrated	Adulthood	
Believers commended	Reproduction	
Relationships continued		
Sending churches convened		

Overview of the Phases

Table 8.2 gives an overview of the phases of a pioneer church plant with the goal of multiplication and church planter phase-out. The following chapters will explain these phases in detail and with specific examples. Note that the upper part of the diagram describes the broad features of the phases through which a church plant progresses: *preparing*, *launching*, *establishing*, *structuring*, and *reproducing*. In the middle section we unfold the various tasks important to healthy

development during these phases. The lower part of the diagram reflects the changing roles of a cross-cultural or itinerant church-planting team from entrance to exit. After the preparatory roles of team building and learning, the church planters begin the “6-M” roles discussed in chapter 5: *motor*, *model*, *mobilizer*, *mentor*, *multiplier*, and *memory*.

The transition from one phase or role to the next is more fluid than the diagram indicates.

Preparing

Preparing is the time of great anticipation! The groundwork is laid so that when the church plant is actually launched, it will be built by a crew of artisans who possess both the necessary skills and an accurate understanding of the task. Or to switch metaphors, players are recruited, drilled, and honed into a team. Then a game plan is forged, so that on game day the team hits the field poised for victory. Necessary support systems and resources are also arranged.

Table 8.2
Developmental Phases of Pioneer Church Planting

<i>Phase</i>	PREPARING		LAUNCHING
	Targeting and Commissioning	Understanding and Strategizing	Evangelizing and Discipling

Tasks

- Define vision and CP* model
- Determine location and ministry focus people
- Select leader and recruit team
- Consult with others
- Secure prayer and financial support
- Commission team

* = church planting

- Language and culture learning (as necessary)
- Research the demographic, social, religious, and cultural context
- Determine evangelistic and CP strategy
- Build relationships and consult with others
- Strengthen team, clarify roles, obtain training
- Draft a CP proposal

- Develop relationships and initiate evangelism
- Combine diverse methods and compassion ministry
- Baptize and teach obedience
- Disciple new believers and train to do the same
- Form a foundational community
- Wisely assimilate transfer growth
- Begin training servant leaders

	Team Builder	Learner	Motor and Model
<i>Role of Apostolic Church Planter</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the general vision • Develop a spiritual and financial support system • Recruit and build CP team based on calling, gifts and chemistry • Make prayer a priority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain insight for an effective and culturally appropriate ministry • Learn the local language • Develop love for and ability to work with focus people • Internship, if possible under a national worker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate & model ministry • Outside resources may be necessary to “jump start” the CP, but avoid creating long-term dependency • Involve local believers in basic ministry

Preparing for the church plant includes two subphases: *targeting and commissioning* and *understanding and strategizing*. Neither should be neglected. During the targeting phase the church planter determines the location and ministry focus people of the church plant. A team is formed and commissioned by a local church or sending agency. Prayer, financial, and other necessary support is sought. Essentially this involves defining the goal, assembling the players, and securing support systems. The primary focus of the church planters in this subphase is to be *team builders*. This team-building process includes not only relationships among church-planting team members but also the building of strategic alliances with other partners, such as sending churches, national fellowships of believers, and parachurch groups.

The second subphase, *understanding and strategizing*, involves careful and prayerful planning. The focus people and location are researched, and initial networking may begin. Normally the team visits the target location or lives among the focus people during this phase to obtain accurate information. On the basis of information gathered from a wide variety of sources, appropriate evangelistic and discipleship strategies are formulated. Various roles for the team members are determined, and specialized training or preparation may be acquired as necessary. This brings the team up to the point of actually launching the church-planting effort.

During this second subphase of preparation, the church planters' primary role is to be *learners*. Experienced church planters may be tempted to assume that they know more than

they really do and to move forward too hastily. But contextually appropriate approaches to ministry must be reconsidered with each new church plant or focus people. Even within the same country or region, local differences can be significant. Most of all, a deep love and appreciation of the focus people should be growing as the church planters learn more about them and embrace them in prayer.

Launching

Launching is the most exciting phase. At last the church-planting effort lifts off. Ground is broken. The team runs onto the playing field! This phase consists primarily of the pioneering ministries of *evangelizing and discipling*. Relationships are developed with the focus people, and evangelistic efforts are initiated. Hopefully the first new believers will soon be ready for baptism. They are then disciplined in small groups, usually meeting in homes. Even at this very early stage it is essential that the new believers are trained to minister in the most basic ways and are mobilized to share their faith and disciple others. Thus it is important for the church planters from the very outset to use methods that are easily imitated and reproduced by the local people. The church planter shares leadership with the local people even at this most basic level. For example, the first generation of cell group leaders is trained.

During this phase initial ministries of compassion and service may be developed to demonstrate the love of Christ, build relationships, and be signs of the kingdom of God. However, church planters must carefully apportion their

energies and capabilities so as not to begin moving in too many directions at once, inviting burnout or initiating ministries that cannot be sustained over the long term.

In pioneering situations where there are few or no local believers in the church-planting team, the apostolic church planters function as *motors*. Because there are no local believers to train and mobilize, virtually everything in the launching phase is initially done by the missionary or itinerant team. As local people become believers the planter *models* ministry that is easily reproducible by local believers.

Establishing

During the establishing phase the first fruits of progress are experienced as the local believers are formed into a functioning congregation of worshipers increasingly living out kingdom purposes. This phase focuses on *congregating and maturing* the budding church. Small groups may combine for celebration meetings or public worship, perhaps initially on a quarterly or monthly basis and progressing to weekly services later. Ministry, however, advances only as local leaders demonstrate ownership and the ability to lead new ministries. Though budgets may be formed and a regular meeting place secured, buildings and budgets should not be the central focus of the budding church.

A preliminary local leadership team of the church or emerging movement of house churches may be formed. As ministries expand and as the local believers assume increasing responsibility for leading those ministries, their spiritual maturity and equipping for ministry become increasingly the

focus of the church planters' ministry. Typically, at the point when regular public services begin, the congregation looks to the church planter or missionary to provide pastoral leadership. Under the apostolic model this must be resisted. Rather, church planters place emphasis on equipping the local believers for such leadership. New ministries are initiated only as local believers are able to at least share responsibility.

From this it is evident that the church planter has now moved from being a motor and model to being a *mobilizer and mentor*. The local believers are mobilized to take ownership of the ministry as the ministry that God has entrusted to *them*, not the church planter. They must be motivated to invest their time, talents, energy, and finances in advancing and expanding the work of the kingdom community. As mobilizer and mentor, the church planter finds that his or her most important work lies increasingly behind the scenes, equipping, counseling, and encouraging others who will have the more visible ministries and ultimately bear full leadership responsibility.

In some ways this is the most critical phase, because so many precedents are set in the life of the church. The DNA of the church is determined. Patterns for ministry are formed that will guide the church in its future and will be difficult to change later.

Structuring

As the church matures, the structuring phase becomes a time of great satisfaction as the hard labor begins to pay off. Whether the new body is a movement of informal house churches or a more traditional church, structure must be

provided to sustain growth, meet expanding needs, and promote discipleship. The organization of the church takes shape with the formal calling of the first leaders, the legal incorporation of the church (where appropriate), and new ministries to take advantage of new opportunities. This phase is characterized by the *expanding* of ministry and *empowering* of local believers for full responsibility, autonomy in ministry, and leadership.

For additional ministries to be developed, several things must happen: First and foremost, new persons must be fully integrated into the life of the church, trained, and mobilized for service. Second, teaching on stewardship cannot be overlooked if the growing ministries are to be adequately resourced. A growing church must overcome the temptation to continue to act like a small family church, unless of course it chooses to multiply into additional small family-sized churches. Leadership structures can no longer function on the simple family-like basis but must be expanded and the workload borne on many shoulders. If the church plant has been receiving subsidies or other significant forms of outside assistance, these must be reduced at this time so the church avoids long-term dependencies.

By this point in the development, apostolic church planters prepare for full withdrawal, entering the last stages of phase-out. This is especially difficult as the church planters are enjoying the fruit of their labors and there is seemingly so much opportunity for ministry. But local believers should bear the major responsibility for the leadership and expanding ministries of the church in this phase.

The primary role of the mission team members at this point is to be *multipliers*, as they equip local leaders to become equippers of others. Not only are local believers bearing the responsibility for ministry, with the church planter increasingly behind the scenes, but these leaders must learn to become equippers of others if true multiplication of the church is to occur. New local leaders for the first daughter churches are now in view.

Reproducing

A church planter's joy, not unlike the joy of becoming a grandparent, comes when the church plant has reproduced itself by planting another church. In addition to equipping local believers with the ministry skills and vision for multiplication, the young church must reassess and evaluate its continued development: is it still faithful to biblical purposes for the church, or has it perhaps become comfortable with its more established existence? Its salt-and-light kingdom impact should be reaching new levels. This phase can be characterized by the dual tasks of *strengthening* and *sending*.

By reproduction we have in mind not only the multiplication of daughter churches planted locally but also the church's becoming a missionary sending agent, facilitating the planting of churches among more distant unreached peoples. The church is also committed to cooperation with others, be it through a denomination or other forms of networking. It knows that churches can accomplish more together in synergy for the kingdom than it can alone.

Apostolic church planters may remain for a time, continuing

as multipliers, coaching the movement as it reproduces itself, or becoming regional equippers and facilitators. But ultimately the apostolic team should move on to pioneer new locations and unreached groups. They become in essence a *memory*.

Equipping and Shared Responsibility—the Method behind the Methods With the apostolic approach presented in chapter 5, the goal is a church that will grow and reproduce itself apart from continued outside assistance. At every phase, apostolic church planters must equip local believers to assume responsibility for the emerging ministries of the church. They resist the temptation to move the ministries and programs of the church ahead of the local believers' willingness and readiness to participate in, support, and ultimately give leadership to the given ministry or program.

After the launching phases of the church plant, every ministry or program must from inception be led or co-led by a local believer who will be equipped and eventually bear responsibility for that ministry. In this way the challenge of handing off a ministry from the leadership of a church planter to the leadership of a local believer is not an issue. After an initial time of equipping, the church planters should be able to withdraw at any time without threatening the ministry's existence. Furthermore, because equipping is included at the inception of every new ministry, an ethos of equipping and multiplication is modeled and instilled in the new church. *This is a key to long-term multiplication.* The principles of

indigenous reproduction and multiplication delineated in chapter 4 must be implemented and kept in mind at every step of the developmental process.

Critical Spiritual Gifts for Each Developmental Phase

Though all spiritual gifts are important to the healthy function of the body of Christ, at each of the various phases certain gifts are critically important to facilitate the developmental process (see figure 8.1). Many church plants stall and fail to move forward because the planter emphasizes ministry based on his or her gifts alone. For example, many church planters are high-energy “doers” with little patience for equipping others—they are good motors but poor mentors. Or they may be strong in evangelism but weak in administration. In such a case the church plant may plateau and never move much past the establishing phase. The best way to overcome this challenge is to identify local believers with the critical gifts and help them develop and employ those gifts. Even if the gift mix of the apostolic church-planting team has all the necessary gifts, the key will be mobilizing local believers.

During the launch phase of a pioneer church plant, the gift of evangelism is clearly essential to win the first believers. We think of Philip the evangelist in the New Testament, whose ministry in Samaria led to the conversion of the first Samaritan believers and the establishment of a church there (Acts 8:5–13). However, the gift of apostleship is also essential so as to

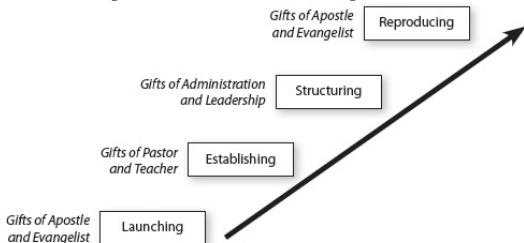
give the church-planting effort adequate strategic leadership for the multiplication of churches through a whole region.[3] The apostle Paul is the clearest New Testament example of such a gifted person.

As the church moves into the establishing phase, the needs of new believers for strong biblical teaching, personal counsel, and spiritual nurture increase. They also must be equipped to take on greater ministry responsibility. Thus pastoral and teaching gifts are particularly important during this phase. Barnabas comes to mind as an encourager of new believers in Antioch (Acts 11:22–24). But Barnabas was also an outstanding mentor, as in the case of his relationship with Paul (Acts 9:27; 11:25–26; etc.). Apollos, a man with great biblical knowledge (Acts 18:24), instructed the church in Corinth in Paul's absence (Acts 19:1; 1 Cor. 3:4–6; 16:12). If these gifts are lacking, then the new believers will likely remain immature.

As the church enters the structuring phase, new structures are created, new ministry teams are organized, and the church grows in financial stewardship; thus administrative gifts are important. James, the brother of Jesus and elder in the Jerusalem church, is perhaps an example, as he played a leading role in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and is frequently named as the key representative of the Jerusalem church elders (Acts 12:17; 21:18). The deacons who administered aid for the widows in the Jerusalem church most likely had administrative gifts (Acts 6:1–6). Often churches that have grown swiftly plateau simply because the church planter or congregation has not adapted methods and created new structures to deal with the changed situation and growth of the

church.

Figure 8.1
Critical Spiritual Gifts for the Developmental Phases



Finally, as the church is poised to reproduce, once again apostolic and evangelistic gifts will be essential so as to launch the new church-planting effort. However, this time it should be local believers, recruited from the harvest for the harvest, who become the next generation of church planters. Epaphras was perhaps such a second-generation evangelist and church planter. He was originally from Colossae (Col. 4:12), probably became a believer in Ephesus under Paul's ministry, and then returned to Colossae to preach the gospel and plant the church there (Col. 1:7).

Wise church planters will be alert to their own limitations and realize that they tend to gravitate to their own place of giftedness and hold the church with them at that spot. In worst-case scenarios, painful conflict between the planter and

the congregation can erupt. Thus it is essential that as the church grows and develops, all the spiritual gifts are valued and brought to bear at the critical time and occasion.

Avoiding Sequential Thinking David Garrison and other advocates of church multiplication have warned against an overly sequential approach to church planting—that is, the view that a church cannot mature or reproduce without first passing through certain linear, step-by-step phases (Garrison 2004a, 243–45). Though the developmental phases of church planting may appear strictly sequential, in fact reproduction and multiplication should be built into each phase, as explained in chapter 4. As new believers are won, they are disciplined and taught to evangelize others. As they grow in discipleship, they in turn learn to disciple others. As they participate in a cell group, they learn to lead cell groups and eventually train other new cell-group leaders. As a cell group is formed, the vision for multiplying new cells is born from the outset. In this way multiplication becomes part of the ethos of the church in *every* aspect of its ministry.

When the church progresses to the next phase, it does not cease to carry out the ministry functions of the previous phase. For example, even though the church plant may progress from launching to establishing, it should never cease to evangelize. As the church moves from congregating and maturing to expanding and empowering, it should not cease to multiply cell

groups and cell leaders. In a sense ministry is cumulative, not sequential, with each phase continuing to reproduce ministries from the previous phase.

A church needn't be fully mature and operating a wide array of ministries before it can reproduce. Churches with that mindset rarely reproduce, because they never perceive themselves as quite mature enough! But if the ethos of multiplication is instilled in the life of the church from the beginning, multiplying evangelists, disciples, cells, and cell leaders, then reproduction will be experienced not as a monumental task but as a natural outgrowth of the multiplication process already under way.