

Getting From Here to There: The Journey from Sending Churches to Church Planting Movements

By Don Dent

There are many people today who want to impact the nations for Christ, but have few handles on how to do so. Some have studied missiology and talk about church planting movements. Within mission circles it is certainly a buzzword and it rightfully should be. However, I have met a number of missionaries, from both older and newer sending countries, who only know the sound bites about CPMs. They have little understanding about how to get from “here” to “there.”

One primary problem we face is that so many of us did not come from a CPM setting. Our own church and ministry experience was in an established church environment which, if it had a CPM foundation, has largely lost awareness of it. When I first studied church history, I had a general understanding that there were ages in global church history. At least, that is how I perceived what was taught. There was a time when there were not many Christians, and then there was a great movement to Christ. Since that time we have had numerous generations of established church history.

Perhaps the most important change in my thinking has come from the realization that those phases of Christian history must be repeated within every people group. What benefit is it to an unreached people group if the church is well developed among another people group far away? The church within that people group needs to develop through some of the same stages the church has already experienced in other places. I certainly realize that these are not distinct phases with distinguishable lines separating them. They are more accurately perceived as three snapshots taken from a long continuum, but they are helpful as we consider what missionaries should be doing to create an environment that is conducive to a CPM.

Phases of Church Life Within a People Group

Overview of the Unreached Phase:

I think we can all recognize the first phase of history, which is **the unreached phase**. This could be seen as church “pre-history”. There are examples of this phase in Scripture (Rom. 15:20) as well as the thousands of unreached people groups around the world today. The church has existed for thousands of years in some places, but an unreached people group is untouched by that development (or possibly even negatively impacted). If there are any believers, they are small in number and often have not formed into an indigenous Christian community.

Phase 1 – UNREACHED

GOSPEL WITNESS – the message has not been communicated broadly. Most people are ignorant and unaware of the gospel.

BELIEVERS – there are none or only a few scattered believers. Believers may be unaware of each other.

CHURCH – there is usually no indigenous church. Few people have seen the Body of Christ incarnated in their society and culture. There is little ministry taking place.

PERSECUTION – can easily wipe out the few believers at this point.

MIRACLES – numerically rare, but a large percentage of believers may have witnessed one.

**SUMMARY – Unless someone successfully brings the gospel from outside, the status quo is assured.

Overview of the Movement Phase:

The second phase is also familiar to us, even if we have never experienced it ourselves. This phase is the setting found described in the book of Acts and the Epistles. It is **the rapid spread of the gospel and the multiplication of the church**. During this phase we see the Holy Spirit working in obvious ways, the gospel message spreading rapidly, and churches reproducing themselves. Almost all the believers in this phase are first-generation Christians and they know the power of the gospel to change lives. Church structure is flexible and simple . . . and easily reproducible.

Phase 2 – MOVEMENT

GOSPEL WITNESS – the message is spreading “without hindrance.” There is growing awareness of Jesus in society.

BELIEVERS – many new Christians with vibrant faith and miraculously changed lives.

CHURCH – simple, indigenous, reproducible. Mostly unpaid or bi-vocational leadership. Meet in available space – homes, courtyards, etc. New churches begin from preaching and changed lives. Ministry is done by all believers in the community. Primary role/gift is apostle.

PERSECUTION – is seen as normal and cleanses the church. Often results in further growth.

MIRACLES – signs and wonders are common in most movements. The greatest miracle is the number of radically changed lives.

****SUMMARY** – The longer this phase continues, the greater the number of churches and believers. Without this phase, a transplanted church will likely remain small and weak.

Overview of the Established Phase:

The third phase represents a time when **the church is well-established**. It has developed traditions, some of which are positive and some of which are not. The church is usually very structured by this time. Leadership is formalized and often “professional.” Most Christians were probably born into Christian families.

Phase 3 – ESTABLISHED

GOSPEL WITNESS – there is broad awareness of gospel concepts. The gospel should influence culture and policy in society.

BELIEVERS – most believers are from Christian families. Early discipleship is possible. Many lack awareness of the gospel’s power to impact lostness. Nominal faith may develop.

CHURCH – structured and organized. Mostly paid clergy leadership. The church is identified with buildings. Denominations and institutions are likely. New church starts are limited by finances. Ministry is done by professionals within the church. Primary role/gift is pastor-teacher.

PERSECUTION – surprises the unprepared church. Often results in the church seeking protection of its rights.

MIRACLES – signs and wonders are relatively rare. Many changed lives can still be a powerful testimony.

****SUMMARY** – The church will eventually begin to decline unless it experiences renewal/revival/reformation.

Common Mistakes Made by Established Phase Senders

Most missionaries today, including those from old and new sending countries, have come from the “established” phase of church development within their people group. Mission agencies are also very much influenced by the established church phase from which they administer their work. This has led to several tendencies among mission agencies and missionaries:

1. There has been a tendency to place missionaries in other locations that were also in the “established” church phase. Ralph Winter and others pointed this out years ago, but the tendency is still there especially among churches. I think the primary reason is that we are most at home in and can most easily point to our experience and skills for assignments in established settings. It is sad that just at the time that many mission agencies have rectified this issue, that churches send thousands of

- volunteers to “support” churches in other lands. There is nothing wrong with church to church ministry, as long as they keep it in perspective that it is not missions in the New Testament sense.
2. Mission agencies may overlook the differences between the calling and gifting of workers needed for missions (phase 1 and 2) and the calling and gifting of those working in the established church (phase 3). The gifting and perspective of an apostolic church planter like Paul is vastly different from that of most pastors and church workers in established areas. Even evangelists and church planters, who are desperately needed in phase 1 and 2, often bring with them phase 3 models and assumptions.
 3. In mission strategy there is a tendency to transplant methodology and definitions from the established stage in places where it may be counter-productive. *Transplanting small pieces of stage 3 models into stage 1 settings will rarely lead to stage 2 results.* In many places it may result in a small church or Christian community, but it will usually be alien in its environment and unable to reproduce itself because it is dependent on outside resources. This may be the quickest way to start the first church in a new area, but can be a dead-end that inoculates against an indigenous movement.
 4. A large percentage of missionaries who quit their ministry do so because of unfulfilled expectations from the established church phase. For instance, they are frustrated that there are so few opportunities to “preach”, because that means sermonizing within the four walls of a church building. They may leave a place where millions have never heard the gospel proclaimed...but they want to “preach”. Many of these expectations are unspoken and sub-conscious, but they have a negative impact on large numbers of missionaries.
 5. Missionaries face a quandary when they target an unreached people group that already has a tiny transplanted church based on an established church model or work among a people group whose neighbors have a strong established church. Some choose to focus on the lost and ignore the established church though perhaps missing out on the most significant resource for evangelization. Others focus on the alien established church but are frustrated by the unexpected barriers to growth. In many places the best strategy will be to develop relationships within the established church in order to find local apostles who can make the cultural and methodological shift required to start a CPM.

In other words, *we are Phase 3 people who are sent to Phase 1 environments, but want to move into a Phase 2 ministry.* Because of this problem, mission agencies and individual missionaries should constantly evaluate whether their methodologies are appropriate for the phase in which they are ministering. No one can tell you how to get to a church planting movement in 10 easy steps. However, I can share with you 10 patterns of work that are consistent with how God is working to initiate church planting movements.

Ten Patterns of Ministry Consistent with Movements

1. LIVE INCARNATIONALLY.

Yes, this old fashioned expectation is still relevant today. I believe that new missionaries should focus on “words, worldview, and witness” because learning the language, understanding the worldview, and sharing Jesus appropriately are at the heart of the task. Though there are specialized roles that may not require living incarnation, (see article on Non-residential Missionaries in this edition) most missionaries need to live and work in community. From my observation, the best strategy coordinators speak the language and understand the culture of their focus people, even though they are not exclusively front-liners themselves. When we consider the methods and especially the ministry tools that are making the greatest impact, it is even clearer that they were developed by someone who lived incarnationally.

2. PRAY INTENSELY.

Movements do not happen without focused, fervent prayer. They are a movement of God’s Spirit and nothing eternally significant will take place without the battle being fought through prayer. Strongholds of Satan’s deception in the culture and society must be identified and torn down through prayer and proclamation. We often think that missionaries do the work while prayer supporters uphold them from a distance. I believe that the front-line of prayer must be the missionary and his local partners. Prayer should be considered a part of the missionary’s workday schedule, not just an issue of personal devotions. I suspect that the most common missionary failure is the lack of prayer.

3. SOW IMMENSELY.

Though the principle was originally applied to another issue, I believe this principle is applicable to the gospel, “He who sows sparingly, reaps sparingly” (2 Cor 9:6). Though intensive cultivation of a private garden is good, we may never get to the broad casting of seed that can identify where the best soil is. Personal evangelism should be characteristic of every missionary. However, we need to develop methodologies that get the gospel to far more people than our personal witness can impact. Media can be a useful tool in raising gospel awareness, however, the multiplication of witnesses seems to be even more critical to beginning a movement. The two most exciting church planting movements of which I am aware are largely resulting from a rapid multiplication of witnesses. New believers are sharing their faith aggressively and their converts follow the same pattern. The gospel is spreading spontaneously as the number of believers who are sharing their faith has increased.

4. HARVEST INTENTIONALLY.

Sowing the seed is not enough to get to a church planting movement. Spreading message is important, but we must respond to response once the seed is scattered. The seed may be cast out on the whole field, but our concentration should then be on the parts of the field with the best germination. Our sowing methodology needs appropriate response mechanisms so we can do precision harvesting. In persecution-laden environments this can be a huge challenge. For example, in several countries missionaries have used text messaging as an immediate and secure form of initial response to gospel seeds that have been scattered.

5. DISCIPLE INFECTIOUSLY.

A disciple who doesn't disciple, is not a disciple. Models of discipleship from the established phase will rarely lead to a church planting movement. One reason is that they are too knowledge-oriented as opposed to obedience-based. The key to Christian living is not understanding great complexities, but rather doing great simplicities. Another reason that our established discipling methods will not lead to a movement is that we assume a gradual slow process that fits our phase 3 experience of working with new believers from Christian families. However, for those coming out of the darkness of the unreached phase, we often see an immediate and radical transformation. If these new disciples are taught to obey the few things they know to do, then they can start witnessing and discipling others immediately.

6. CONGREGATE IMMEDIATELY.

When people are won to Christ, gather them into new churches. Our "established" tendency is to take new believers to an existing church. In a movement phase, every new believer, and especially every family head, is viewed as the first stone in a new church. New groups need to be taught immediately how to worship, do Bible study, pray, etc. as quickly and simply as possible. Again, our assumptions of what is required based on our "established" background often complicates this far more than necessary. In some CPMs, there is even a pattern of seekers gathering into groups before they believe and some will make a group decision to follow Christ. It is then a relatively easy task to equip them to function as a house church.

7. FUNCTION INDIGENOUSLY.

A healthy, reproducible church will not be dependent on outside resources for leadership, finances, or meeting place. All of these needs can be met from local resources, though the temptation is great to "help". Locally supported pastors and church buildings are fine where the church is well developed. However, "established" church patterns will prevent a church planting movement if they become the norm in a phase 1 or 2 setting. If new churches cannot be started primarily because there is not enough money or leadership with a certain kind of degree, then it is clear that counter-productive unbiblical expectations are hindering the work.

8. EQUIP INFORMALLY.

Providing, appropriate, practical, on-the-job, just-in-time training for leaders of house churches is absolutely essential. Education is good, but our primary focus must be on training a leader for every church needed to reach a people. If the people group has a high educational level and strong economy, then higher forms of education may be appropriate. However, much of the unreached world is composed of functionally illiterate audio learners, so training based on storying will be necessary in many places. House church leaders do not need a broad education, they need practical skills for meeting needs this week. All effort must be made to keep them in their society and not require them to come out for long periods of equipping. That model will limit who can become a leader as well as make him less effective.

9. LEAD INCONSPICUOUSLY.

It is a difficult task to lead strongly while not calling attention to ourselves or causing dependence. One of the greatest leaps that must be made to initiate a movement is the jump from paid leaders to unpaid leaders, whether the paid leader is a foreigner or national. Church planting movements by definition have to be indigenous movements, led by people within the people group. No other model is reproducible enough to get to a movement. Missionary leadership must be behind the scenes empowering local leadership to develop.

10. REPRODUCE INFINITELY.

Our focus is to plant new churches with an innate ability to reproduce themselves. This means the churches have to be healthy and simply structured. There should be no reason that a few members of a healthy church cannot go to other villages or neighborhoods, share the gospel, disciple the believers, and show them how to be a church. Church planting movements occur when we multiply believers, disciples, leaders, and churches. One role of the missionary is to identify anything that is hampering this type of reproduction and to do whatever it takes to overcome it.

About a year ago I had the opportunity to share with and listen to seventeen men and women who are both the fruit and workers in a ministry that reflects this pattern. They are being used by God to touch thousands of their people group with the gospel. Each comes from a Muslim background; all had come to faith in Jesus in the previous five years. There is a missionary working with them, but not on a daily basis because that would undermine their work. The missionary originally worked to focus prayer on this unreached people group and then led a team of local believers to begin sharing the gospel quite boldly. Within a few months dozens of heads of households had come to faith and caused some political reaction because they were trained to share the gospel with family, friends, and village. The missionary continues to encourage and counsel, but he does not direct. At this point, no one is in charge of this work, except God. Redeemed men and women are working to redeem even more men and women. It is possible, in God's grace and power, to get from "here" to "there."

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