

PHASES of Church Planting and Development

By Bob Young

The dynamics of church planting are complex. Many different factors must be considered and lengthy books have been written to describe the task. On the other hand, the process can be simplified. Churches grow numerically, spiritually, and organically. Spiritual growth is concerned with spiritual maturity or discipleship. Organic growth refers to the capacity of the church to organize itself and function independently. The temptation in church planting is to evaluate only the numerical growth.

There are three basic phases of church planting and development. Some books and articles list as many as twelve phases, but this article does not include initial steps such as evaluating opportunities, site selection, visioning, pre-entry and pre-start up, nor concluding steps such as withdrawing financial support and the exit of the planting minister or team. My purpose is to help supporting churches, those that are providing funds for new or developing churches, understand the basic phases of church development so they can understand the progress, needs, and correct time and strategy for exiting. What are the dynamics and actions that are characteristic of the phases of church planting, church development, and establishment of a mature congregation?

I divide the task of planting and establishing a new congregation into three phases. I designate these phases one, two and three, but they are descriptions of the new church, the developing church, and the established church. Using three phases rather than eight or ten phases simplifies understanding. These three phases can be further divided into specific steps if desired, but one should note that the dynamics and actions identified in each of the three phases are usually not sequential but are interactive.

Phase One: The “New” Church

In its beginning, a new church depends on finding and developing members for the church. While there may be a membership core present through a church planting team, a group of Christians who transfer from another church, or Christians who already live in an area and want to be a part of the new church, the membership of the new church usually develops through a carefully thought out evangelism strategy. The process of developing a strong, healthy church begins in evangelism or conversions to Christ, but from the outset there must be also a focus on developing mature disciples. In phase one, evangelism usually depends on a few and is not yet part of the DNA of the church and its members.

From the beginning, the new church should focus on maturing the members so that a core or nucleus of mature disciples develops. This focus on faithful, committed discipleship is an essential step toward natural leadership development.

Leadership development often begins with a full-time minister or mission team already involved. The presence of such persons provides leadership in the new church phase. Sometimes that leadership is provided or helped by the proximity of the sponsoring or planting congregation. The initial leadership (minister or mission team) will spend an inordinate amount of time in interpersonal relationships, either in evangelism or with the members as they are

mentored, taught, and strengthened as disciples. This is a part of the task of leadership in the new church phase.

In summary, the new church is characterized by limited and specialized leadership, by imposed leadership as compared with selected leadership, and by leaders who have to do and continue to do almost everything. Evangelism is done primarily by the leaders. The new church must actively seek methods to develop faithful disciples and spiritual teachers and leaders if it is ever to move to the next phase.

Defining the “new” church phase does not depend on the number of years the church has existed, but depends rather on identifying the characteristics of the “new” phase. Most new churches stay in this phase until they reach an average attendance of about 50. (The actual number in total attendance may be 35-65, for it will vary depending on the mix of adults and children and several other dynamics). The exact number is less important than the existence of a mature core of believers who are ready to participate in the church as it moves into the next phase.

Phase Two: The “Developing” Church

The developing church is able to identify and initiate evangelism efforts that involve the members, or at least the core of mature members. Evangelism continues in phase two, but is less dependent on the minister or mission team and more dependent on the maturing of the members.

In this phase, the church begins to experience or exhibit less dependence on the minister or mission team. Much of the work of the local congregation can operate smoothly without the minister or evangelist. Classes and worship and evangelism occur because of the initiative and organization of the members. The minister or evangelist does not have to “run” every aspect of the church because internal teachers and informal leaders are being developed and are stepping up. In this phase, the initiating minister or mission team facilitates the work of the church but functions primarily in continuing evangelism and strengthening the members, equipping them for various ministry tasks. This is an essential task of ministerial leadership in this phase since there are not yet elders and deacons selected.

The developing church is able to begin self-sustenance spiritually, most often in the form of informal fellowship in home groups or other organizational structures—ladies’ classes, men’s activities, etc. These depend less and less on the minister.

Characteristics of the developing church include some initial level of self-sustenance spiritually, evangelism which is the function of the body and includes and involves the membership core, careful plans for discipleship and member development, internally developing teachers and informal leaders, less and less dependence on the initiating minister or mission team, more and more dependence on internally developing leaders. Again, whether a church is in the developing stage is not the result of a specific number of years, but rather is to be measured by the dynamics and characteristics of this phase. As a practical matter, most churches cannot escape this phase until they reach an average attendance of about 100 (the actual number is usually 75-125, again dependent on the development of those qualified and ready to serve as leaders and teachers).

Two practical matters deserve attention. First, because churches often tend divide when they reach an attendance of 100-150, a shared commitment to move to the next phase is

essential. It is important to establish shared, plural leadership before the church reaches the dividing point. Second, the church must be allowed to go through the process of natural leadership development to become an established church. This should occur before considering additional church plants which would potentially remove members, especially the core members on which the developing church depends and those who will become the teachers and leaders.

Phase Three: The “Established” Church

The established church has developed spiritually mature members, teachers, and leaders. It is self-sustaining spiritually, self-governing through a group of chosen leaders, self-supporting fiscally, and capable of self-reproduction. (By the time a church reaches this point, any continuing financial support from a supporting church should be sent to the local church rather than directly to the minister.)

The established church can meet its own needs internally. If the established church desires to continue with a full-time minister as the supporting church is withdrawing financial support, the established church should be prepared to pay that cost for itself as a self-sustaining congregation. When the established church is able to meet its own needs and seeks a continuing full-time minister, another question that arises is whether the initiating minister will serve as the minister in the established church. This is an important question because the two tasks require two different skill sets. (In some cases, an established church may continue to have the services of an evangelist whose salary is paid by another church, especially if the evangelist has responsibilities in several congregations.)

Conclusion

Understanding these three phases of church planting, development, and establishment should help supporting congregations, as well as missionaries and church planting teams, understand the importance of helping the new church move through the stages of development and establishment. A non-negotiable part of this process should be the development of local leaders before exiting. Paul left Titus on Crete to correct the things deficient and establish leaders sometime around 60 A.D. but it is likely that the church began with those who returned from Jerusalem after the Day of Pentecost. After almost 30 years of history, in the absence of leaders, the church was having trouble meeting the challenges and difficulties before it.

Understanding the characteristics of churches during these developmental phases can help sponsoring churches understand that a new church may remain in the initial new church phase for a long time (5-7 years), especially if there is not a strong evangelistic focus in the beginning. Churches can get stuck in the development phase if there is not a strong program of discipleship with mentoring and increasing involvement of the members. Exit strategies should be based on these phases of healthy church development and not solely on a set number of years the church has existed.