

Four Stages of a Movement

BY **STEVE SMITH**

Steve Smith (March 11, 1962–March 13, 2019) served overseas with the International Mission Board (SBC) for 18 years, helping initiate a Church Planting Movement (CPM) among an unreached people group in East Asia, and then coaching, training, and leading others to do the same throughout the world. Upon his retirement from IMB in 2016 until his death, Steve served simultaneously as the Vice President of Multiplication for East-West Ministries, as a Global Movement Catalyst for Beyond, and as a co-leader of the 24:14 Coalition, a global effort to engage every unreached place and people with a movement strategy by 2025. His heart and passion was to lead God's people to be completely, lovingly obedient to all of God's Word, and to hasten the coming of the Day of the Lord.

I stood in front of the American congregation and urged them to send short-term teams to my Asian people group. “On a two-week trip, you can win a household or two to faith and begin a church with them.” They were tracking with me until the word “church.” At that 400 sets of eyes glassed over.

I was stymied to figure out what had created doubt. When I saw some of them looking at the building overhead, I realized the problem. They thought I was asking them to plant a large-building church with the programs, equipment and full-time staff.

I rephrased my admonition. “How many of you have started a small group in your home?” Dozens of hands went up. “I would like to invite you to start similar groups in Asia. We will help those become churches that meet in homes.” Looks of relief spread around the room. Many nodded. This was something they could attempt.

What I encountered that day is a common stumbling block when we transport believers from a Phase 4 movement and insert them into a Phase 1 situation. Throughout history, most movements have gone through four phases or stages (and sometimes back again through grass-roots movements). Failure to understand these can create unreal expectations that are inappropriate for a given stage of a movement.



Years ago mission practitioners Don Dent and Nik Ripken spoke of similar stages. Mark Stevens, a CPM trainer in Southeast Asia, has then summarized these as four phases

of a movement. Neill Mims, another trainer in Southeast Asia, has crafted this into a simple drawing. The drawing I present here is a slight modification of the work these men have done.

This paradigm tool has proven so helpful that many CPM (church planting movement) trainers now draw a simple diagram on a poster depicting this at the beginning of a training. We leave this up on the wall throughout the training to avert misunderstandings. What follows is an oversimplification but simplifying it clarifies the progression and why tensions arise at times. This historical progression from the Unreached Phase to Institutional Phase can take years, decades or centuries.

This tool is not aimed at criticizing believers and churches in any of the phases. I am a product of a stage four movement. Rather the goal is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each stage and what we must navigate when we move from one to the other.

Stage One—Unreached Phase

In the beginning of a new mission work, the people group is unreached. Few believers or churches exist. Outsiders enter the context and lead people to faith. Persons of Peace are discovered and networks of relationships are opened up through those who accept Christ. It is not uncommon to find some who may multiply gospel acceptance 30 times, 60 times and 100 times in their circle of influence.

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In this early stage of what might become a movement of God, usually all forms and methods are rather simple.

If they are not, then this mission work never becomes a movement.

- The number of Christians (represented by dots) is relatively small. The budding movement may be growing (represented by a line moving higher on the graph.) But most of the evangelism and church planting is being done by evangelists from outside the people group. Growth is still incremental.
- The few churches meet in informal places—homes, under trees or in other places already built (storefronts, offices, etc.). This is symbolized by a house. Again, most churches are being started by outsiders.
- An important step that must be taken is development of the concept of the priesthood of every believer (represented by “P”s). In this stage, though outsiders are initiating the evangelism and church planting, this budding work can become a movement if they instill in believers a strong concept of the priesthood of the believer. They must help believers not only to go directly to God but also to live out the priestly service of evangelizing and ministering to others. If they do not catch this concept, then the missionary work can remain in the unreached phase indefinitely—outside missionary experts doing all of the evangelism, discipleship, church planting and leading.
- Leadership development of local believers is very informal, usually happening in the churches or local context, just in time, mainly in the form of mentoring.
- All of the forms are so simple at this stage, that with the right empowering and vision, the early stages may be fanned into a Church Planting Movement.

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Stage Two—Movement Phase

At this stage, multiplication of disciples and churches is occurring primarily because indigenous believers are captivated by the vision to reach their own people group and beyond. The number of believers begins to increase dramatically because the concept of the priesthood of every believer takes off (the line begins to rise more rapidly).

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Churches continue to meet in informal places such as homes, and multiplication is the norm for most churches as they live with these simple forms. Leadership development usually occurs in the context of churches. Locally connected leadership networks develop where leaders with more responsibility gain additional training in context.

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Indigenous believers do not wait for outsiders to initiate evangelism, baptism, discipleship, church planting or leadership of churches. The movement grows because of their confidence that they are commissioned and empowered to do the work of ministry. Most believers and leaders do not see a great “clergy/laity” divide. A movement can remain in this stage for years or decades.

Stage Three—Formalizing (or Established) Phase

As the movement progresses, the number of believers continues to increase rapidly. A desire develops to standardize or formalize certain aspects of the movement (e.g. church formation, leadership development, etc.). Leadership development existed in the earlier phases but it was done intentionally in context – essentially theological education by extension.

As the movement formalizes, some churches begin to meet in purpose-built structures while some continue to meet in homes. Brick and mortar (or bamboo and tin) buildings emerge. (This is represented by a building with a cross on top.) Some of these brick and mortar churches become much larger than the average church meeting in a home.

Leadership development becomes more formalized as well. Dedicated institutions (represented by a colonnaded structure) begin to emerge to train more leaders and to do it in a more systematic manner. Certificates and credentials begin to emerge in the process. Some very gifted leaders begin to stand out amidst the leaders (represented by stars on the drawing). They are highly gifted evangelists, preachers, teachers and administrators. Lay pastoral leadership becomes less common and a professional leadership becomes more common.

The result is that normal disciples can be intimidated from doing the work of the ministry. They do not have the abilities or specialized training/credentials of the professional leaders. Therefore, the concept of the priesthood of the believer (in terms of “every member a minister”) wanes. A smaller percentage of disciples continues in ministering to others. No one intends for this to occur, and many pastors will do their best in stages three and four to build up their church members as ministers and leaders, but the “clergy/laity” divide becomes more profound.

Stage Four—Institutional Phase

As the movement becomes more formalized, it inevitably moves to an institutional phase. Overall the movement may grow for a while due to the sheer number of churches and believers bearing witness. However, it is not uncommon for the movement to plateau, unable to keep pace with the birth rate.

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At this stage, multitudes of believers exist. Churches are very common and accepted in society. The majority of churches meet in purpose-built structures and the requirements for what constitutes a church become more rigid. For a church to meet in a home is seen as odd and “not real church.” Some churches become larger and some mega-churches emerge, though in many denominations, the vast majority of churches still average under a hundred in attendance.

Extremely gifted leaders emerge (represented by even larger stars on the diagram). Virtually all leadership development is now done in institutions – seminaries or Bible schools – and credentials are expected. A majority of leaders serve in full- or part-time capacities. Lay leadership is less common, or at least less visible. The upshot is that the concept of priesthood of the believer wanes drastically. Believers bring their lost friends to church rather than lead them to faith themselves. Professional leaders do the work of ministry and find it difficult to motivate the average person in the pew to serve in lay ministry.

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Institutions by the church become common (seminaries, publishing houses, hospitals, mission organizations, etc.) and often effect great impact through the manpower and budgets they wield.

Stage Four Workers in Stage One

This whole process can take years, decades or centuries to develop. The early church does not appear to have entered this final stage until the Fourth Century A.D. Most movements progress through these stages. The difficulty comes when we lack this historical perspective and try to make sense of movements at earlier stages.

What happens when a missionary leaves a stage four church and tries to do evangelism and church planting in stage one? Inadvertently he tries to plant stage four disciples and churches because that is all he knows. One missionary in Sub-Saharan Africa expressed revelation upon seeing this diagram. He realized that when his organization pioneered work in his tribal people group, they attempted to start stage four churches from the beginning (complete with brick and mortar). He discovered that on average it took 22 years to plant a stage four church in stage one.

As Neill Mims was teaching a group of Korean missionaries, this question sparked an intense counseling session. Though a result of a mighty movement, Korean church culture is now extremely institutional. This chart gave these missionaries some understanding as to why their home churches and pastors expected them to start large churches or other institutions very quickly or be considered failures.

Leadership development also becomes a challenge. Local partners that I mobilized to reach an unreached people group in Asia needed one year of training-doing-retraining-doing-retraining before they understood basic reproducible patterns for evangelism, discipleship and church planting. After one year they finally were following a stage one and two pattern.

But when it came time to choose leaders, they naturally reverted to seeing through stage four eyes. They could not find any believers from the harvest to appoint as pastors. The reason was not the lack of biblical qualifications. The problem was that they were envisioning leaders from back home (stage four) – extremely gifted, exceptional teachers, highly mature spiritual life, administrative abilities, etc. It was not until they grasped the basics of Scripture and abandoned stage four expectations that they could develop local leaders appropriately at stage one. These indigenous leaders would continue to grow and mature as they were trained in the years to come.

Stage Two Workers in Stage Four

What happens with believers from stage one or two who visit leaders and churches in stage four? A not-uncommon consequence is death of the movement phase and immediately entering the formalizing and institutional phase.

Leaders from an emerging CPM left their mountain homes and descended into the plains where stage four churches and institution had existed for decades. When the leaders saw the marvelous buildings, institutions and gifted leaders, they longed to have the same thing. They returned to their mountain churches and immediately instituted stage four requirements for what constituted a church and who could lead. This effectively killed the progress of their movement.

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Stage Four Leaders Watching a Stage Two Movement

When our whole frame of reference is stage four, it is easy to criticize what we see in stage two. We can easily label the house churches as “not real churches.” Or, we can require that leaders meet certain credentialing requirements before they can perform the ordinances. Or, as we feel compassion for pastors that are bi-vocational, we may dedicate money to fund them full-time, thereby creating a benchmark that is no longer reproducible. In all, we can kill a movement when we implement extra-biblical requirements that are a yoke too heavy into these early stages.

It is easy to ridicule such movements because we have no frame of reference for them. Recently, as I spoke to 400 pastors, seminary professors and mission leaders about launching Church Planting Movements in the American context, I encountered many such questions. The idea of every believer being trained to make disciples and potentially start churches was a foreign concept.

I read them an account of the number of believers and churches multiplying almost ten-fold over the course of twenty years in the States. Many in the group began to ask where this movement was occurring. I shared that this occurred in the American frontier among Baptists from 1790-1810.

I read the following quote from Baptist historian Robert Baker:

Baptist ecclesiology and doctrine were particularly suited to the democratic atmosphere of the developing western frontier. The Baptist gospel was simple, minimizing complex theological formulations, and emphasizing a life-changing confrontation with Jesus Christ. Like Paul, most of the frontier Baptist preachers were tentmakers in the sense that they provided for their own livelihood. The distinction between “laity” and “clergy” existed only in the fact that the latter had fire in their bones to preach the gospel in response to a divine summons.

The Baptist preachers lived and worked exactly as did their flocks; their dwellings were little cabins with dirt floor and, instead of bedspreads, skin-covered pole-bunks: they cleared the ground, split rails, planted corn, and raised hogs on equal terms with their parishioners.

The fact that each Baptist church was completely independent appealed to frontier democracy and eliminated problems of ministerial appointment and ecclesiastical authority. It is no wonder, then, that the Baptists played a large part in the significant frontier movement and made great gains from their ministry among the people on the growing edge of American life.

I announced to the group, “This is our heritage! This is the way we lived just 200 years ago. Let us embrace our heritage and ask God for a renewal movement.” Heads began to nod in the audience.

History is filled with this general story occurring over and over, nation by nation. It is also filled with stories of plateaued denominations in which fresh grass roots movements emerged by going back to principles of stage two.

The challenge is to keep a movement at the movement stage as long as possible and to not let the formalizing impede the progress of the kingdom. But when it does begin to slow down, going back to simple biblical processes and methods of earlier stages can spark a new movement.

Why not today? Why not in your context? MF