

Introducing the Pioneer Church Planting Phases

The Phases are a broad description of the process of planting churches in a pioneer (unreached people group) context. They can be a guide in planting one such church, though the emphasis is on planting multiple churches and reproducing churches. They outline the general stages church planting teams go through to win people to Christ, gather them together as His Body in that locale, and develop them into a functioning, biblical *ekklesia* or *church*, leaving them both with indigenous leaders and a vision for spreading the gospel and reproducing daughter churches. These phases identify key *milestones* along the way. While these things might apply anywhere—even in the West—the intent is that it be a tool for “where Christ is not named”. This generally means there is an ignorance of the gospel, misconceptions about Christ, special difficulties for the church-planters, hostility toward the message, and special persecution for believers who determine to follow Christ. As a result, in particularly resistant environments it can often take quite some time before the church-planting team will reach Phase 7 (having appointed elders at the end of Phase 6). The tool takes a team all the way from pre-field work and initial “landing”—when they do not yet know the language or culture—to the planting of reproducing churches. The Phases are a unique sketch of how something that is humanly impossible is actually possible, in the Lord. Here is an overview:

PHASE 1: Forming, Preparing and Launching the Team

Preparing the team and initial church-planting plans. All that stuff before you get on the plane, like recruiting, planning, support-raising, pre-field training, the team working out relational issues, etc.

PHASE 2: Learning the Language and Culture

Learning the language, adjusting to the culture, becoming “belongers” in society. Starts when the team first “lands”. Pioneer workers typically spend the first 2-3 years in fulltime language learning. Of course, during this time they are building relationships and sharing Christ as opportunities arise. Workers must not wait for perfect language proficiency before bearing witness of Christ.

PHASE 3: Preaching the Gospel to Groups and Individuals

The noble work of evangelism. To be fully in this phase means the team has reached a good functional level of proficiency in the language, so most of your time is now in evangelism rather than in language work, but there are no believers to disciple yet. Some teams skip over this phase if a number of local people come to faith while the church planting team is still learning the language. But, of course, no team really “skips over” evangelism, which should remain a priority throughout the church planting process. Other teams may spend ten years or longer in Phase 3, if people are especially unreceptive to the gospel message.

PHASE 4: Discipling Believers and Working Toward Gathering

Discipling one or more believers from the people group. But where gathering does not yet take place. Like Phase 3, sometimes this is skipped over, if gathering takes place early. Having a distinct phase for this does NOT mean that we advocate keeping believers isolated for a period of time. Quite the opposite, as we encourage church planters to bring believers together in Christ as soon as feasible. But it is not uncommon for church planting workers to be in this discipling-but-not-gathering phase for awhile.

PHASE 5: Developing the Body of Believers

The ministry of gathering believers together and leading that fellowship toward maturity. Begins once three or more believers want to meet together regularly for fellowship in Christ, and begin to do so.

PHASE 6: Empowering and Installing Leaders, and the Beginnings of Reproduction

Preparing the fellowship for being on their own as a church. Developing leaders, and specifically a plurality of leaders who can soon assume eldership. Strongly laying the groundwork for church reproduction. This is similar to Phase 5, but now the group is further along. The focus is on leadership development and reproduction.

PHASE 7: Reproduction & Movement

Begins once elders are appointed. Focus is now fully on helping the church(es) become reproductive in planting daughter churches and working toward a church planting movement.

The Church Planting Phases are based on New Testament examples and on the personal experience of field teams, mixed with common sense. For example, you don't yet have a group of believers until there are believers. Even if a team's strategy is to bring together a group of seekers who regularly study Jesus together, and even pray and worship together, they are not yet the Body of Christ until some of them are born again. Likewise, if the church-planters are going to become fluent in the language—a high priority among most pioneer workers—it makes sense that they would make this a priority from the beginning on the field. Pre-field preparation for a team comes even before that. At the other end, it makes sense that the church-planter will invest heavily in developing potential elders *after* a fellowship had begun to meet. And we see these same kinds of steps—except for language-learning—in the New Testament (see biblical examples below). We are also grateful to David Hesselgrave for his “The Pauline Cycle”¹.

It really helps to break up the overwhelming Task into smaller chunks. As Nido Qubein said, “One of the greatest reasons people cannot mobilize themselves is that they try to do great things. Most worthwhile achievements are a result of many little things done in a single direction.”²

Apostolic teams oftentimes envision planting large churches, an expanding network of smaller house churches, or even a full-blown church planting movement. As mentioned, planting churches that reproduce is crucial. Some teams operate in regions where the gospel has not yet made any inroads at all, and perhaps appropriately have smaller visions. But there is always a certain minimum objective for all teams, even in the most resistant and unresponsive environment. This minimum is to establish a group of believers, of a minimum “critical mass” of size and diversity, committed together to being the Body of Christ, under the eldership of at least two or three local elders, where those elders are installed and operating, giving indigenous shepherding to the church. The point is, whether a team has huge goals or more modest goals, the goal is always church planting. That is a narrow aim. And that narrowness is intentional in the CP Phases.

The Church Planting Phases are a combination of two tools in one:

1. A MEASURE or *yardstick*. Seven clear phases, with definitions that endeavor to make as clear as possible what phase a team is at, and precisely when they will pass into the next phase.
2. A GUIDEBOOK. This is mainly the specific, numbered activities under each phase. While this is certainly not meant to be a cookbook, nor a list of mandatory steps that all teams must do, it does seek to comprehensively identify most of the activities you should be focused on in each phase, and it gets you thinking ahead into the next phase. Regardless of what phase you are in as a team, the priorities for you at that time ought to be clear, and

¹ Hesselgrave, David J. *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally, North America and Beyond*. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000.

² <http://www.greatest-quotations.com/>

the CP Phases try to make that possible. We have found having a large number of possible activities under each phase especially helpful for teams in resistant soils who tend to try a few activities over and over again, often losing hope and creativity.

Here is the basic structure. Each phase has these components:

- **Title.**
- **Definition.** A short description of what is to be accomplished in this phase.
- **“Crestpoint”.** We did not want to use a term such as “end point” because oftentimes the primary activity of that phase does not in fact end (e.g. language learning, evangelism or discipling). The *crestpoint*, however, is meant to mark the target point of that phase and when a team essentially moves from that phase onto the next phase. For example, a team in Phase 4 is discipling one or more believers. Once three or more believers begin meeting together in fellowship as the Body of Christ, the team is regarded as being in Phase 5. But that certainly does not mean individual discipling or mentoring stops. The crestpoint is a clear intermediate goal that should be out in front of the team in a given phase.
- Various **activities** that the team should consider undertaking for that phase.

The phases as a measuring tool for team progress are also a useful for describing new fellowships and churches as to their growth and progress. Note the specific criteria for a fellowship’s development in the crestpoint of Phase 5 and Phase 6. When a fellowship meets the specific criteria for GROUP COMMITMENT, SIZE, BREADTH, LEADERSHIP, and STRENGTH at the end of Phase 5, it is said to be “a Phase 6 church”. When such a church has installed a plurality of elders per the crestpoint of Phase 6, it is said to be “a Phase 7 church”.

Again, the Titles, Definitions and Crestpoints comprise the “measuring tool” of the Church Planting Phases. The aim is to be as unambiguous as possible with regard to what phase a team is in at any given time, just like the lines on a ruler are not fuzzy but sharp. One of those transition points may be more subjective than exact: the “shifting of gears” between Phase 2 (language learning) and Phase 3 (evangelism). I suggest to team leaders that it is sort of when the team switches from spending 80% of their ministry energies in language-learning and 20% in evangelism, to visa versa.

As mentioned, even though a team will be at one particular phase, it is very common for ministry activities to be going on at various phases at the same time. For instance language learning will certainly carry through all the remaining phases as vocabulary will need to be developed and refined as the team goes deeper into ministry required by the later phases. A team may be in Phase 5 (a new group having gathered), but newer team members would be at Phases 2 and 3, and there may also be pre-field team members Phase 1. But the team in the church planting arena is seen as operating at Phase 5 when some of them are giving leadership to a group of believers who regularly gather. There may be a few Phase 6 activities going on (leadership development), even before the work is fully at Phase 6. Again, the phase of the team is the highest one that is completely attained according to the Definition and Crestpoint criteria.

It is very common for a work to go backwards in the CP Phases. For example, a team can bring believers together in fellowship, hence going into Phase 5. That group might eventually attain the maturity criteria at the end of Phase 5, hence going into Phase 6. Then suddenly persecution hits, or serious division and strife occur, and the whole thing falls apart. The work

would then be back to Phase 4 or possibly earlier. Again, this is not unusual and should not surprise us.

The ministry activities under each phase form the “guidebook” tool for church planting. These suggested activities are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, they are suggestions. No team is going to do all of them, nor should they. The team should look them over together and discuss which ones are applicable, which ones are not, and how to proceed. They are especially helpful when the team is stuck at a phase and not making any forward progress.

The question often arises: What should the apostolic workers do once local elders are installed? Many have discovered that after having planted one or more churches, including the appointing of local elders, they still felt that the Lord wanted them to stay on and minister in church planting and reproduction. At first this seemed to go against the grain a bit. Once you appoint elders, the last thing you want to do is hang around in way that undermines their leadership. Also, pioneer church planting is by nature *itinerant*. In the New Testament the apostles planted the church and then generally moved on. But clearly in some cases it really does make sense to stay, especially to be a catalyst for reproducing daughter churches, especially in surrounding cities and towns. After all, Paul did stay in Ephesus three years after the Ephesian church was planted, and during this time he seems to have had a broader church planting ministry in the region, while based in Ephesus. This Phase 7 ministry generally falls into two spheres:

- A. Working with the newly planted church or churches to help them reproduce and work toward a CP movement. AND/OR
- B. Mobilizing, training, facilitating and possibly overseeing local CPers. This option may eventually mean creating a national sending structure.

HOW THE CHURCH PLANTING PHASES CAN HELP YOU AND YOUR TEAM

The alternative to having and using a tool like this is to have no tool at all: No measuring rod to mark progress, no guidebook to suggest key activities. One of the most debilitating things in this business is when you can't see any progress. If a team has only a vague sense of where they are, where they're going, and of movement—relying just on anecdotes or feelings—that is pretty demotivating.

To Clarify The Goal

“You cannot manage what you cannot measure” the saying goes. Vision-casting, goal-setting, planning and accountability have no place if a team does not have a clear sense of where they are going and how they are going to get there. Of course, if you don't have a goal, then there is no possibility of failure. But in view of the 2 billion souls in unreached people groups in desperate need of Christ, that is not something we should take comfort in. We embrace Jesus' exhortation in the parable of the ten minas³ where He urges risk-taking and *going for it*, for His sake. It is likewise true that “you cannot motivate what you cannot manage”. In the absence of a tool like the CP Phases, it is very hard for leaders to encourage and motivate church-planters in the task. When you can see a step or two ahead, you gain confidence. Faith is enhanced. As C.T. Studd said about faith endeavors in the Kingdom of God, ““Things first look impossible. Then difficult. Then done.”

To Motivate

³ Luke 19:11-27

I have heard of some teams who repeat together—almost mantra-like—at the beginning of every team meeting: “Where are we? Where are we heading?” After awhile team members roll their eyes and it sounds a bit like a broken record. But the very positive message is driven home each week: We’re here for a purpose. We are going in this direction. God is going to use us to accomplish something concrete and amazing for Christ’s glory. The CP Phases become the vehicle for bringing this hope out into the open.

To Keep Focus

This paper isn’t long enough to enumerate all the distractions on the field that workers can get into OTHER THAN evangelism, discipling and church planting. These are interesting things, satisfying things; they are sometimes good things, and occasionally even necessary things. But much of the time they have the effect of causing the team to go in circles, to run in place; they create a kind of centrifugal inertia to just keep doing what they’re doing. An apostolic team does not want to become like a spinning top: lots of motion, but no forward progress. A friend of mine wrote to me, “There are millions of dollars being spent on good projects in our country but one wonders how many of them are really distractions from the real task which we use to make ourselves feel useful because the real task is so hard and sometimes goes so slowly.” While on the field I spent thousands of hours in tentmaking pursuits. Some of that was necessary and very positive in helping my role in society make sense to my friends; some of it was not. It is said that there are three ways to waste our years: Do nothing. Do the wrong thing. Or do so many things that none of them have sustained impact. We are all in desperate need of focus, to be on-task with regard to whatever is the most important thing at that stage in our ministry. The CP Phases can be like the person who comes alongside those in the valley, points up to the crest of the mountain and says, “Remember, that’s where we’re headed. And here’s the way forward!”

A friend of mine talks about the “Curse of the So-Thats”. We’re going to do this, *so that* this happens, *so that* that comes about, *so that* it helps cause this, all of which will ultimately help people come to faith, *so that* the church gets established. Isn’t it interesting that in the New Testament the apostles didn’t have so many *so-thats*?

To Equalize Expectations

So, a team can frequently review its aim and progress together using the Church Planting Phases. When it’s clear to the whole team where the work is at and where it needs to go, then it’s also easier for people to see how they personally fit in and what their particular contribution is according to their gifts. Conflicts are reduced. Expectations are equalized. Individual team members are not left behind wondering if they fit in. And there is at least a starting point for healthy discussion and debate about the way forward.

To Clearly Communicate

Finally, the phases provide a common language to communicate easily with others about the work. E.g. “We were at Phase 5, but that fell apart, so we’re back to Phase 4, following up the believers...” People know exactly what you mean.

SOME MISUNDERSTANDINGS

As the CP Phases have been around for several years now, a variety of misunderstandings have cropped up. So let us try to clear the air on some of these.

1. “They claim it to be a cookbook, a guaranteed recipe for success. A magic bullet.”
ANSWER: Of course, it is not. CP is more like an art, rather a science.

2. “Those using the CP Phases feel less of a need to depend on God”. ANSWER: The team’s need for creativity and ingenuity from the Spirit to find the keys that will unlock the doors in their particular context are not diminished in the slightest.
3. “The Phases promote a kind of homogeneity, or *cookie-cutter* approach to pioneer church planting”. ANSWER: Diversity and experimentation are still very much alive and well among teams using the CP Phases! They are simply broad categories. They are *descriptive* of where you are heading, rather than *prescriptive* of an exact method of getting there.
4. “They are rigidly sequential, and therefore prevent the laying of a groundwork for *movement*.” ANSWER: On the contrary, an thoughtful and flexible usage of the CP Phases can help facilitate church planting movements. See FAQ #6 below.
It should be noted that while experienced church planters can more easily work in a multi-phase, non-sequential approach, younger teams are likely to really benefit from the simplicity of the Church Planting Phases. This is perhaps analogous to an master chef doing many things all at once in the kitchen in preparing a fancy meal, whereas a less experienced cook will carefully follow a recipe’s steps.
5. “The CP Phases emphasize working with individuals, and this can slow down getting to groups and movements.” This used to be true. But the new version, having been informed by more years of field data, now emphasizes going after groups early on, as well as helping an individual believer to bring the message of Christ to his or her family and friends.
6. “The tool is specifically bound to the *house church* approach to church planting.” ANSWER: New fellowships in unreached people group contexts are almost always *underground* fellowships, at least at first. This influences toward a house church approach. However, the CP Phases are intended to be model-neutral, i.e. not tied to any particular model. They are currently used by teams employing the cell model, as well as those developing larger, central churches.

SOME EXAMPLES

Titus 1:5 [Paul to Titus] “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you...” This is a good example of the team having multiple Phase 5 and 6 church plants, with all of them hopefully moving toward Phase 7.

2 Corinthians 2:12-13 “Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.” A promising Phase 3 that got aborted.

Acts 16 & Philippians 1:1 (Luke’s exciting narrative of how the church in Philippi got started, and then Paul’s later letter to all the believers there) This is a delightful portrayal of Phases 1-7 (minus Phase 2, language learning). Includes pre-field preparations, evangelism, discipling, gathering, developing leaders and the eventual appointment of elders.

Another example of Phases 1-7, except for language learning, would be Paul’s First Journey in Acts 13-14.

Acts 19:1-20. The Lord had previously prevented Paul and Silas from going toward Ephesus. But now in this third journey God's timing was right. Paul had learned valuable lessons about working with urbanized Greeks, especially during his year and a half in Corinth. God had now linked Paul up with Aquila and Priscilla, and they had done valuable groundwork in Ephesus. At this time the church became well planted through Phase 7 (as we learn from Acts 20:13-38). We also learn from Acts 19 and other passages how Paul based here for three years, and trained a variety of other church planters "so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (19:10), i.e. an extended Phase 7. One example of mobilizing "nationals" was probably Epaphras' successful church planting venture to Colossae, a hundred miles down the valley.

Some Contemporary Examples

Previously I described our first team on the field, in Egypt. Phase 1 for us was in Pasadena, California, where most of the team planned together, prayed, and even did the Myers-Briggs personality test as a way of getting to know each other. We all landed on the field more or less at the same time, got places to live, and jumped into concerted Arabic learning. That's Phase 2, though none of us reached fluency before we had to leave the country. During this time all of us were able to share Christ with Egyptian friends, and over time three or four came to faith. Individuals on the team began discipling these new believers, which is Phase 4, though of course, hard work in Arabic continued. After around a year and a half a small gathering of believers was formed, which is Phase 5. The Lord brought about this fruit, and surely knowing where we were going helped accelerate the pace.

One of our teams in Central Asia consisted of a couple and Ted, a single man. Ted got to be friends with Aref, a Muslim father of three, who was an engineer at a factory. Ted gave him a New Testament, but Aref literally threw it aside, saying he wasn't interested in reading that book. All of this took place during Phase 2, as all three team members were working hard on the language. One day the Lord pricked Aref's heart or his curiosity or something, and he wound up reading a large part of the New Testament. He got down on his knees, and right there surrendered his life to this new Lord, Jesus. Immediately they were thus into Phase 4, as they helped Aref along in his new found faith, especially in the midst of severe harassment at work, in the neighborhood, and from his wife and children. Fast forward. After a year or so, Aref's family came to faith, as well as a handful of neighbors, and they began to meet regularly under Aref's spiritual leadership. Phase 5. Then the group grew quite a bit, including a number of heads of households. They were meeting in the church building of the local Russian Baptists. Clearly the threshold to Phase 6 had been crossed (see Phase 5 Crestpoint criteria). When a summer of persecution broke against the church, they broke up into underground house groups, which led to even more growth, including the further development of leaders. Finally the team leader took six elder candidates through three months of study, culminating in the appointing of four elders, who assumed overall leadership of this network of house churches. That is the crossing over from Phase 6 to Phase 7. Today the expatriate workers there are few, and only in an advisory or catalytic role vis-a-vis the churches. Aref and his family have been sent by the planted church to another city as apostolic workers.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Is it possible to skip phases?
Yes, as described above.
2. If you've jumped quickly ahead, does that mean you can now just skip certain previous things, like language?

No. While the phases are broadly sequential for the overall work, the specific activities for individuals are not necessarily so. Those whose church planting jumps ahead still need to learn the language and culture well, as well as develop good patterns of evangelism.

3. Is evangelism just one phase: you do it for awhile, then leave it?
I wouldn't recommend that. The new church needs to see how boldly spreading the Good News is a vital part of following Christ, whatever 'phase' one is in. New churches that don't have this in their 'DNA' become stale and stagnant. This is an example of the fact this is a "phase list", in that evangelism is something that ought to be continued, and not just confined to one particular period of time. We need to be evangelizing until we exit, serving as examples to the flock, even if it is a minor part of what we might be doing at Phase 5, 6, 7. Also certain members of the team may be exceptional evangelists and highly effective in training national evangelists. We do not want to shackle them to Phase 5 and 6 activities that they may be very poor at. Others on the team will have gifts in the areas that can cause groups to blossom and deepen.
4. How can the Church Planting Phases be compatible with going after a church planting movement?
As mentioned, the Phases can be misunderstood to be at odds with 'CPMs', but it doesn't have to be that way. There is a strong emphasis on working with the end in view, and the groundwork for leadership development and reproduction can be laid as early as possible, even in Phase 3. David Garrison describes an intriguing example of this kind of thing from a Buddhist field: "In Church Planting Movements prospective converts often begin serving Christ even before they become his follower. A Southeast Asia missionary began meeting regularly with a group of Vietnamese physicians. Though the physicians were not yet Christian, they met weekly for prayer, Bible study and sharing a vision of what they perceived to be God's desire for them and their people. After a few months, one of the doctors said, 'I am not yet a Christian. But when I do become a Christian, I think I want to be the kind of Christian who brings a Church Planting Movement to my people both in this country and across the border.'"⁴ George Patterson says "begin with the end in view"⁵. The Phase list keeps the overall process and thus the end in view.
5. Does the phase mark where the team is at or where the fellowship or church is at?
Both. It is the highest point at which the team's work is at, and is also very useful in describing groups. Let's say a team has three church-plants: a Phase 5, a 6 and a 7. You would say the team is at Phase 7.
6. Are the CP Phases just a tool for expatriate CPers?
No. Some national church-planters are also using them.
7. Does this tool foster a fleshly sense of competition between teams?
The leaders of our agency's 140 teams get together every other year, and it's very common for them to use the CP Phases to describe to each other where the ministries are at. In general it just helps to build mutual understanding. The result is a supportive fraternity of church planters rather than a competition.

Dick Scoggins summarizes well: "Anytime a tracking device such as the Seven Phases is developed it can be misused. We do not want to see it used as a slavish, sequential, discreet formula that guarantees the planting of a church. Only Jesus can truly plant a church (Mt. 16:18) through His Holy Spirit and by His grace. We church planters are but midwives. But it

⁴ Garrison, David. *Church Planting Movements. How God is Redeeming a Lost World.* WIGTake Resources, 2004. P.230.

⁵ Patterson, George & Scoggins, Richard. *Church Multiplication Guide.* Revised edition. William Carey Library, 2001.

is helpful to understand the patterns that God uses so that we can be co-operative as midwives.”⁶

SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THE CP PHASES AS A TEAM

1. The team leader and whoever oversees him should know this tool well, and review it often as a basis for looking ahead.
2. All team members could read this paper and the CP Phases, in order to be prepared as a team for group discussions.
3. All on the team should know what phase the work is at, and what activities are most strategic at the present time.
4. The team can discuss their particular philosophy of ministry and approach to church planting and how that fits into the Phases. For example, are you mostly pursuing groups or individuals? How does that affect evangelism, or even language learning? Do you foresee a house church model, a cell model, or a larger, central church? How does that affect your discipling of individuals?

James Rockford
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⁶ Scoggins, Dick. Non-Sequential Phases. Unpublished article.