

The Rise and Fall of Movements: A Roadmap for Leaders

By Steve Addison.

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Reviewed by William Jackson

William Jackson (pseudonym) has been engaged in church planting among Muslims in South Asia since 2012. He and his family live in a restrictive access country. William taught English to college-age students and is now pursuing another creative access business. William is passionate about evangelism, church formation, vision, strategy, and the development of people around him.



In many missions agencies, it is common for “movement(s)” to be stated in the vision, mission, or core values. However, the word “movement” can seem removed from our seemingly small sphere of influence. Thankfully, Steve Addison sheds light on this concept, discusses how to play a role in catalyzing one, and advises how to avoid decay and death within churches or organizations.

Addison writes with a wealth of experience as a church planter—he and his wife began planting a church in Melbourne, Australia, three decades ago (12). However, he realized his focus was too small and egotistical, as God taught him that movements are on God’s heart—the desire to expand disciples of Jesus and churches everywhere (12). His family has planted churches in the inner city, currently trains church

planters, and advises denominations on church planting strategies (12). Addison is a part of NoPlaceLeft, an international coalition of people seeking to multiply churches globally (128).

Addison defines a movement as a group of people committed to a common cause (17). History records the rise and fall of many movements. Some areas where Christianity once flourished are now home to various unreached people groups, which Addison would say occurred because those movements decayed.

Addison uses examples from Christian history to detail the phases of movements in order to give practical tools for today's church planter (cross-cultural or national). Throughout the book he utilizes Ichak Adizes' material on organizational lifecycles with application to church planting, which enables an assessment of their group's lifecycle (Adizes 1979).¹ Addison's book aids those serious about church planting within a movement to seek Word-centered, Spirit-led churches that reproduce new disciples and church leaders.

Addison describes seven characteristics of multiplying movements. The first three relate to "identity" at the heart of movements. (1) **Word**—we must place ourselves under the Bible's authority and obey it (31). (2) **Spirit**—Spirit-filled believers bear witness to Jesus, appoint church leaders, and are guided by the Spirit in decisions (34). (3) **Mission**—Christianity is a missionary movement, focused on glorifying God (35), with gospel preaching and disciple making being the most important application of missions (39).

The final four relate to "strategy" of movements. (4) **Pioneering Leaders**—church planting should focus on those gifted with an apostolic orientation and apostolic teams, which launch into unreached fields (41). (5) **Contagious Relationships**—pre-existing social networks allow for

1 Adizes primarily wrote for business, and his seminal article on Organizational Passages serves those interested in this topic well.

rapid growth in movements (42). (6) **Rapid Mobilization**—Jesus bypassed religious professionals to build the church, a pattern which continued in Acts. Every disciple is responsible to make disciples (43). (7) **Adaptive Methods**—approaches should vary with contexts and be simple, reproducible, sustainable, and scalable (43).

In the remaining chapters, Addison discusses movement lifecycles and common dangers leading to decline and decay in churches and organizations.

1. *Birth*. A founder or visionary will “wrestle with God” and find their identity in Him (50), “fuel discontentment,” and refuse to accept the world as it is (51, 53). As people follow and a team gathers, action begins as they “dare to dream” and “commit to action” (53-54). Dangers in this stage include founders losing heart of seeing a movement begin. Founders should make sure they have accurately heard from God, since discouragement, conflict, and the enemy will seek to derail their forward progress.
2. *Growth*. As work begins, the founder stays deeply connected and focuses on strategy and methods, with appropriate tension between systems and flexibility. Systems reduce flexibility, while flexibility without structure results in chaos and fragmentation (63). A danger to avoid is being either too flexible or too rigid in structure. As the movement grows, the founder needs to slowly release and avoid the “Founder’s Trap,” where they retain control to the detriment of the organization (67). If the founder desires to control everything, the movement will suffocate and not move beyond them.
3. *Prime*. All movements want to achieve this phase and remain in it as long as possible, in which the movement is not static, but dynamic, as it listens to and follows the Word, Spirit and Mission (70). These movements know why they exist, where they are going, and how to get there (69).
4. *Maturity*. When a movement chooses security over identity, and

desires formality, order and predictability more than getting results, it leads to this stage (74). An example given is the Quakers, whose growth in influence and wealth ironically led their movement to decline (77). At this life stage, movements can begin to split towards being more progressive (socially acceptable) or traditional (guarding the past), either of which can cripple forward movement (79). Relevant dangers include pride—believing you have achieved success because of who you are.

5. *Decline*. Movements begin to decline when they live off the legacy of the past and assume they will continue forever (90). Power and control are centralized, and leaders are rewarded for serving the organization rather than the cause (91). A possible gain is the rise of new movements in response to decline (94). A danger to avoid is placing the institution ahead of the mission, which makes decline imminent (or indicates it is already occurring).
6. *Decay*. Movements decay when they experience complete breakdown and collapse, or when they drift from and eventually deny basic gospel tenets. An example of this is the Student Christian Movement from the early twentieth century, which later became so progressive that today they hold no doctrinal basis and its membership is open to people of all faiths (104–05).
7. *Rebirth*. A journey from death to life where a movement returns to the Word, Spirit and the Mission through the crucible of learning from and responding to divine rebuke and training (114; Heb. 12:11). Movements that reject institution-building and abide in Christ will be able to turn around a declining and decaying movement towards rebirth.

Evaluation

This book has many strengths to guide a church planting team to discern its current lifecycle and possible pitfalls. Addison's main goal is noble: to help guide movements towards greater fruitfulness by being

grounded in the Word, Spirit and Mission. I appreciate that he longs for movements to have leaders that spend significant time with God and are guided by Him instead of their own egos.

Another strength of the book is the inspiring movement terminology. The majority of church planters want to be a part of something beyond themselves that glorifies God. Addison's passionate reminders to see churches extend beyond themselves as they reproduce is contagious and exemplary. This book gives language to that concept and practical steps towards this goal.

Another strength is the discussion on the necessity of altering church metrics. Addison wants church planters to avoid the danger of just making sure attendance is up and the offering plate full. Church is defined by more than numerical figures; it must be centered in fulfilling the Great Commission. I found the adaptation of Adizes' organizational lifecycles to be helpful to church planters who are seeking, with God's help, to build something beyond themselves. Avoiding common organizational pitfalls is something all church planters should seek.

One final strength is the way Addison notes "apostolic gifting" as often unappreciated in churches (Eph. 4:11-13). It is unfortunate we don't recognize those who are pioneers and visionaries within many existing churches, primarily because most churches don't know what to do with those with an apostolic orientation (121). Addison encourages the use of this gift and recognizes that movements will rise and fall with these people.

There are also several weaknesses to address. Movement language, while inspiring to some, can also have the effect of making others feel overwhelmed and skeptical. For those of us working as cross-cultural church planters who deal with various stressors, it can sometimes feel our work is incapable of becoming a movement. Perhaps a movement will happen in the future, but God wants us to be content with being faithful with the people He has given to us. Movement and rapid reproduction terminology can make some feel they are not doing ministry correctly if

they are not seeing results, which can lead them to try ever harder and harder. I assume Addison doesn't want people to feel this way, but it is one possible impact of movement terminology.

Another potential weakness is that Addison's case study and appendices create confusion regarding his views on strategy. In an earlier point (Adaptive Methods), Addison demonstrates willingness for a variety of strategies within church planting. However, in the case study he says that, within NoPlaceLeft (NPL), different strategies are not possible (142). That statement lingers on the page and intrigues me. Why is it not possible? I think his argument would be strengthened if he provided examples from different church planting strategies. At times it feels that he promotes one at the expense of others. The "one size fits all" approach seems potentially unhelpful. One should consider other missiological positions on church planting and ask the Spirit for guidance in their particular context (Esler 2013, 72).

A final weakness (particularly applicable to contemporary Western Christianity) is Addison's use of the contested term "progressive," which he discusses in depth in the decay lifecycle of a movement (104-108). The word "progressive" as it relates to Christianity means different things to different people. In today's supercharged political world, this term must have healthy balance and contextual definition, since it can sometimes be weaponized in unhealthy, destructive ways.

Relevance for the Practitioner

I benefitted from the way this book built upon Adizes' classic material on organizational lifecycles. I believe a church planting team or denomination that is serious about church planting should work through both this book and Ichak Adizes' material. Established local churches would benefit by remembering the kingdom of God is much bigger than their church and that they have a role in reproducing themselves. Church-planting teams in areas where there is no established church

should figure out ways to avoid the Founder's Trap and plan for reproduction from the beginning of their ministry.

During our team's eighth year of ministry, I read Adizes' material for the first time and saw that our church planting team had been through many of the phases he described. We were currently retreating from one phase to another. It was helpful to have a new vocabulary to describe our team's lifecycle as well as warnings to keep us away from the stated dangers. There were several ways that I, as team leader, had failed to avoid the Founder's Trap. As a younger leader, I wrongly assumed I needed to have the answers to every issue of our team. After some team conflict and personal development, I saw it was acceptable and godly to lean upon my teammates and the Spirit for change. According to Adizes and Addison, I needed to release control and let the movement run with or without me.

Church leaders and planters are strongly recommended to consider Addison's seven characteristics of multiplying movements in their context. There are some great practical concepts and discussions that teams can have, and our team has wrestled with many, such as being Word-centered and compassionate to fellow church members. Addison helpfully reminds us of the need to preach the gospel regularly, disciple believers, and affirm apostolic leaders as we seek to fulfill the Great Commission. Teams seriously interested in church planting should prayerfully bring this material before God and ask Him if they ought to change anything so that they can be swept into the broader, more robust movement of the kingdom of God.

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Acknowledgments

Also from Steve Addison

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