Motus Dei

The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations

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Foreword by **David Garrison** | Afterword by **Alan Hirsch**

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Movements Today: A Primer from Multiple Perspectives

Warrick Farah

The population of the world quadrupled in the twentieth century. Overall, Christianity kept pace with this growth, staying steady at around 30 percent of the global population. It is well known that the church has declined in the Global North and risen sharply in the Global South (Robert 2000; Johnson and Chung 2009). Yet, while tens of thousands of Muslims come to faith in Christ each year, another 35.5 million Muslims are born (Pew Research Center 2017). Tens of thousands compared to *millions*.

The situation is similar among Hindus, and even more problematic among Buddhists. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates that the world's unevangelized population grows by around seventy thousand people every day (Johnson and Zurlo 2019). The harsh reality for those dedicated to seeing Jesus worshiped among all nations is that the world continues to become increasingly "unreached" each year (Parks 2017).

At the same time, the "movement" paradigm has become a significant trend in the evangelical missions community. Articles, books, and training events continue to appear in various mission circles. Mission agencies are dreaming big: An initiative was launched in 2018 to get people to pray that 10 percent of the Muslim world would become "reached" in the following ten years.[1] Sometimes it seems that *everyone* is talking about movements. Researchers have documented

1 See https://1010prayerandfasting.com/. Practically speaking, this means that around 19 million Muslims need to come to faith in Christ per year over the course of ten years. Consciously realized or not, such a bold prayer request presupposes an orientation toward movements.

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the existence of over one thousand movements to Christ that comprise more than 77 million believers (Long 2020), the vast majority happening in places where there previously was no church. We are in the midst of a "movement" movement (Higgins 2018, 21).

Yet we do well to pause and reflect in the midst of all this action. What actually are these movements? How can we better understand movements, both as they occur in all their complexity, and yet also as a specific approach to ministry? Missiologists, theologians, movement practitioners, and even those new to the topic could benefit from a concise introduction to movements, written from a view that neither sensationalizes their emergence nor criticizes their existence.

I have outlined a missiology of movements, variously labelled church planting movements (CPM) or disciple making movements (DMM),[2] in a previous article (Farah 2020b).[3] In this initial chapter, I would like to go deeper. I want to briefly introduce movements from the perspectives of church history, ecclesiology, sociology, and mission practice. My intent is to develop a missiological framework for critical thinking about movements today.

A Historical Perspective

While it can be described in several ways, Christianity is *by nature* a movement. As a transglobal movement, it is the largest and most successful movement in history. Jesus started with twelve (Luke 6:12–16), sent out seventy (Luke 10:1–24), at Pentecost three thousand were added (Acts 2:41), and the numbers continued to grow daily (Acts 2:47). What began as a Messianic Jewish movement soon flowed into Gentile contexts as the apostles innovated their approaches to ministry (Acts 15; 1 Cor 9:21). In Acts 19:10, we read that "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" while Paul was in Ephesus for two years. As Andrew Walls states, "Crossing cultural boundaries has been the life blood of historic Christianity" (2002, 32). In all its diversity, including the various transitions it has gone through, the calling "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) has crossed more barriers and become "home" for more cultures than any other movement.

Multiplication in the Early Church

In the parable of the soils, Jesus himself teaches that the exponential growth of the "word of God" would occur in *some* contexts up to a "hundredfold" (Luke 8:4–8, 11–15). In the book of Acts, Luke often uses modifiers such as

2 Some use the label CPM as a result of a strategy like DMM or T4T (Coles and Parks 2019, 314–15). In this chapter, I hesitantly use the umbrella term "discipleship movements" to include CPM (and strategies that lead to CPM) as well as other movements like the Wesleyan Revival (Bevins 2019), which focused on discipleship but did not employ DMM or T4T. However, the term "discipleship" can indeed carry unhealthy baggage when associated with a passive process or with religiously consumeristic ecclesiologies.

3 Available here: http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/2309/5306

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"greatly" (6:7), "daily" (16:5), and "mightily" (19:20) to highlight the dramatic nature of the growth of the early church. "Luke clearly makes a conscious effort to record the remarkable and pervasive spread of the gospel in fulfilment of the kingdom-growth motif in the Gospels" (Ott 2019, 112).

Michael Cooper believes that the book of Acts, along with Paul's epistles, records indigenous movements of Christ-followers that resulted in the multiplication of disciples who gathered in house churches: "Rather than a strategy for the expansion of the gospel, however, the CPMs in Acts were the result of faithful followers of Christ empowered by movement leaders to make more disciples, who assembled together in the homes of believers" (2020, 19). In other words, movements are not a *strategy*, but the *result* of a passion for Jesus demonstrated by making disciples.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul claimed that there was "no more place for me to work" (15:23) in the region from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Albania today), and that he desired to pass through Rome on his way to Spain (15:24). Craig Ott comments that Paul can confidently affirm that he had "fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ" (15:19 ESV) only if he assumed that the churches he had planted in the region would continue to multiply and complete the work he had launched: "There is simply no other way to explain the dramatic numeric growth and spread of Christianity during the first centuries" (2019, 114).

Rodney Stark estimates that by the year AD 300 there were 6.3 million Christians in the Roman Empire (1996a, 7), while Cooper estimates there were around 5.5 million (2020, 32). Both estimate that this was around 10 percent of the total population, which is theorized by some as enough to create the tipping point in influencing the greater society (Xie et al. 2011; Cooper 2020, 29). The focus was not rapidity but more leaders equipping more believers for more works of service (Eph 4:11–12). As Paul seems to indicate in the prayer request of 2 Thessalonians 3:1, the "running ahead" *and* honoring of the "message of the Lord" is a biblical pattern for New Testament Christianity. Growth without health is not. "There must be a balance between evangelistic urgency and healthy maturational growth" (Ott and Wilson 2010, 77).

Yet we may also recognize that the early Christian movement was not necessarily a "CPM" as described by some CPM theorists today. It is anachronistic to read contemporary CPM/DMM strategies back into the Bible (Wu 2014). Historian Philip Jenkins remarks that the early Jesus movement did not coalesce into what we would consider the Christian church until around the year AD 200 (2018). The movements in the second century were still quite diverse (including many "Christian" groups that were later condemned as heretical by early church councils) and fluctuated with the ebb and flow of the times, including the sporadic persecutions and epidemics in the Roman Empire.

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While faithful house churches read the biblical Gospels and Epistles (early Christianity was a distinctly "bookish" movement for its prolific use and study of texts [Hurtado 2016, 105]), the twenty-seven-book New Testament was not officially canonized until the end of the fourth century. This "movement" progressed in the second and third centuries, not primarily through organized evangelism and church multiplication strategies, but through a Christlike, countercultural lifestyle that was patient in the face of suffering and persecution (Kreider 2016, 9). Christian movements have not always remained in some places; they often decline and sometimes even die. The overall movement of Christianity is one of serial, not progressive, expansion (Walls 2002, 67).

Movement Ethos in Contemporary Missiology

In light of this, how did movement missiology begin to be incorporated into modern missionary strategy and goals? A generation after William Carey set off for India in 1793, mission societies struggled with the governance of new churches in many non-Christian contexts that had been established outside of "Christendom." As an administrative principle, mission leaders Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn are generally credited with the "three-self" formula, which meant that autonomous indigenous churches, *not foreign mission societies*, would themselves "become the means of missionary advance in the world" (Shenk 1981, 171). This three-self "formula" taught that churches should be self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing—in other words, free from colonial influence and dependency.

John Nevius adopted and taught this radically different approach to ministry in Korea in 1890, and added principles that Christians should be encouraged to remain in their pre-conversion social networks and that there be a discipleship program based on systematic Bible study (Handy 2012, 6–7). After this teaching, which catalyzed the Christian movement in Korea, the three-self formula came to be known as the Nevius Method (Ro 2000, 677). However, the traditional "mission station approach" persisted in many contexts (McGavran 1955, 68).

In the early twentieth century, Roland Allen further developed the Nevius method in his famous book *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (1912). Allen pleaded with his contemporaries to break out of traditional approaches and to refocus explicitly on biblical principles that led to indigenous churches. At the same time, large numbers of peoples were coming to faith in some contexts, documented, for example, in the influential book by Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (1933).

In evaluating this book, mission anthropologist Paul Hiebert comments that these movements of multi-individual conversions had lasting results in both church formation and community transformation: "Pickett found that not only were people's lives transformed, but also their decisions were reinforced by their new Christian community. Individuals were not torn out of their social networks. Rather, whole communities were changed" (2008, 328).

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Donald McGavran, father of the so-called "Church Growth Movement,"[4] was also strongly influenced by Pickett (Gallagher 2016, 66). McGavran took Pickett's ideas a step further toward a theory he called "people movements" (Hibbert 2012, 190), which was also based on phenomenological observation (McGavran 1955, 76). Alan Tippett also credits McGavran with coining the term "People Movement" and highlighting the significance that group ties play in initiating or constraining movements (1987, 253). In his book entitled *The Bridges of God*, McGavran sought to answer, "How do peoples, not just individuals, but clans, tribes, and castes, become Christian?" (1955, 1). He also coined the controversial "homogeneous unit principle" (HUP), which states that "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" ([1970] 1990, 163).

As a strategy, René Padilla criticized the HUP as counter to the example of Jesus and the apostles, because it fails to take seriously the ministry of reconciliation and has "no biblical foundation" (1982, 29). Contrary to Padilla, however, the issue seems to be rather that people should be able to worship God in their own culture and not be forced into foreign expressions of the faith. Indigenous responses to the gospel will produce different cultural expressions of church that are both legitimate and necessary for the maturity of world Christianity. In other words, the pluriform nature of the church is a not a threat to biblical faith but embodies Christianity's very nature of continuity (Flett 2016, 19). McGavran's phenomenological observation is further balanced by the fact that while movements may begin in the same ethno-linguistic unit, they "rarely stop there" (Garrison 2004, 23). As noted earlier, Christianity as a movement is known for crossing boundaries and uniting diversity (Acts 11:20; 13:1; Gal 3:28).

In recent years, leaders like Bill Smith, Victor John (2019), David Watson (2014), and Ying and Grace Kai and Steve Smith (2011), among others, built upon these strategies for movements which yielded incredible numbers of churches planted and communities transformed. Today researchers, such as David Garrison, through his books *Church Planting Movements* (2004) and *A Wind in the House of Islam* (2014), have documented the rise of movements in the Global South. According to Garrison, "No one recalls who first coined the term 'Church Planting Movements,' though it appears to be a modification of Donald McGavran's landmark 'People Movements' adapted to emphasize the distinctive of generating multiplying indigenous churches" (2011, 9).

4 McGavran's original purpose of "church growth" within social networks led by unpaid leaders in house churches was later adapted for the goals of "church enlargement" for attractional and seeker-sensitive churches in the West. Lamenting this fact later in life, McGavran preferred the term "church multiplication" over "church growth" (Fitts 1993, 12). The Church Growth Movement eventually came to represent multiple schools of thought. Valid criticisms include the tendency towards pragmatic marketing programs, spreading religious consumerism, and an obsession with formulas and numbers.

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