

Forests, Lighthouses, and Jellyfish: Reimagining the Relationship between Movemental and Traditional Churches

By Scott Breslin

Scott Breslin is originally from the Virginia suburbs of Washington DC. He and his wife Katarina worked for 22 years in Turkey with Frontiers serving as tentmakers, team leaders, and regional leaders. Currently Scott serves with Operation Mobilization as the Nordic regional leader and oversees several church planting teams working among Muslim diaspora in Europe. He and Katarina have four adult children and live in Örebro, Sweden.

////////////////////////////////////

Many of us in the church planting space are, unfortunately, too quick to disparage those who have different principles, priorities, and practices. This happens not only between champions of movemental¹ and traditional ecclesiology but also from those who reject the validity of mission groups as legitimate expressions of the Church. While it is important to engage in discussion and debate on these subjects, we need to get better at debating in a way that does not delegitimize and dishonor those who are part of Christ's body and thus sow seeds of disunity.

In this article, I use an analogy of the forest ecosystem to demonstrate how things which appear antithetical or incompatible can be harmonious when viewed from different lenses. Without discussing the biblical merits or deficiencies of these ecclesiological views, I present several simple

1 Farah, W and Hirsch, A, 2021, Movemental Ecclesiology: Recalibrating Church for the Next Frontier, <https://abtslebanon.org/2021/04/15/movemental-ecclesiology-recalibrating-church-for-the-next-frontier/>

analogies that I hope promote the notion that just as in the natural world, different expressions of ecclesiology can be legitimate despite being dissimilar in principle and practice. I hope this article fosters unity in our diversity as we work to see *“the whole Church taking the whole Gospel to the whole world.”*²

My Experience

I am enthusiastic about the potential of movemental ecclesiology to help facilitate disciple making in Europe and the rest of the world. I promote, encourage, and teach about CPM.³ I find it hard to imagine a scenario anywhere, including Europe, where traditional expressions of church alone will ever fulfill the Great Commission. At the same time, I cannot imagine a scenario where non-traditional expressions of church alone will fulfill the Great Commission. We need everything in the arsenal, including traditional expressions of church, movemental expressions of church, and missionary teams. I have not yet witnessed explosive multiplying church growth in my own work. For me, it has been a long slog with many peaks and valleys. In the 1990s, I was one of the early adopters of CPM thinking in Turkey. Convinced of its potential for multiplication, my team endeavored for years to identify people of peace and establish networks of house churches. Our efforts never led to multiplication in the way we dreamed, even though we worked at it for more than twenty years. The people in the house churches we did start were eventually absorbed into more traditional, Muslim-background believer (MBB) churches. One might think that in a country like Turkey, where visible expressions of church are few and far between, movemental ecclesiology would find a home and maybe they will one day, but in my day, CPM models were not embraced by the emerging Turkish MBB church leaders as most did not want new fellowships to appear as sects.

2 Motto of the Lausanne Movement, <https://lausanne.org/content/twg-three-wholes>

3 Church planting movements (CPM) is used as a generic term for movemental ecclesiology.

Some Islamic groups met in homes, and most were viewed with strong misgiving by both Turkish authorities and the Turkish public. If a newly formed MBB fellowship met in a house or store front, it was normally only as a stepping stone towards the goal of eventually meeting in a dedicated church building. It was the consensus of most mature Turkish MBBs that it was better to adopt traditional church models that have a building and clear public presence so as to establish a public and legal identity. The Turkish constitution guaranteed religious freedom and more often than not, when tested in court, the Turkish justice systems provided legal protection for new Protestant churches in Turkey, especially in the major cities. This is similar to the situation in France today, where the Conseil National des Evangeliques de France (CNEF), the French member of the World Evangelical Alliance, continues its work to be accepted by the state as an official Christian church (rather than being viewed and treated like a sect as in the recent past). The notion of promoting multiplying, self-propagating groups of new believers meeting in homes outside the structures of traditional church buildings would seem counterproductive to what most Christians in the French evangelical church had strove for over the last two decades. My experience has led me, therefore, to seek ways to conceptualize movemental and traditional church models in a way which gives honor to both and thinks of them as complementary rather than in competition. One helpful way to do this is to explore various analogies which help us better understand and reconcile different models of church.

The Use of Analogies for Understanding the Church

An analogy is a comparison between two things, typically for the purpose of explanation or clarification. Analogies point to a corresponding or partial similarity in some significant respect. Usually an analogy has one main clarification or teaching point, but sometimes more. Jesus was the master of using analogies and compared himself to bread, a shepherd, light, and a vine. When he taught, he loved to use parables, which are a form of analogy.

In 1 Cor. 12:12–31, Eph. 1:22–23 and Col. 1:8, Paul uses an analogy of the body to teach about the Church. He points out that the body of Christ is one unified whole even though it is made up of many parts. My key takeaway from Paul’s analogy is that all parts of the body need each other and cannot function apart from the body any more than a branch can function apart from the vine. Each member has a dependent relationship to the body and an interdependent relationship with each other.

Besides the analogy of the body, at least five other New Testament analogies exist and explain different aspects of the Church:

- Family/household (1 Tim. 3:14–15, 2 Cor. 6:18, Matt. 12:49–50)
- Bride (Eph. 5:23)
- Flock (Acts 20:28, 1 Pet. 5:3)
- House (1 Pet. 2:3)
- Branches (John 15)

I don’t offer the following analogies as supplements to what we already have in the New Testament. Rather, I present them as further evidence that things which may initially appear antithetical or incompatible (like traditional and movemental ecclesiology) can be synergetic when viewed from different perspectives. Analogies provide perspective.

Lighthouse & Flint

In a very interesting series of articles, Robert Blincoe offers eight great analogies that describe how Christians seem to always organize themselves into two kinds of structures, local congregations (“modalities”) and missionary bands (“sodalities”).⁴ Blincoe puts it like this:



4 Blincoe, Robert, 2022, <https://robertblincoe.blog/lighthouse-and-flint-index/>

I am comparing the church to a lighthouse. God bless our churches. A lighthouse can be seen from a long way off, and all who turn toward it can get their bearings. However, “*There is another,*” as Yoda said. Missionaries carry a flint in their backpacks in order to start new fires, “where there is no lighthouse,” in “the regions beyond” (2 Cor. 10:16). God will show them the way. They will strike the flint on a stone or a piece of steel that God will show them. A small fire begins. All the lighthouses began this way. The origin of all lighthouses, we might say, were simple missionaries carrying their flint into the regions beyond.⁵

The planting of new “missionary bands” (i.e. sodalities) is an under-discussed dimension of church planting which I believe needs to be included in the conversation about ecclesiology. My experiences as a member of “lighthouses” have been good. However, I did not come to Jesus via a lighthouse. Even though I attended church from childhood and participated regularly in Sunday school, I came to Christ when I was 17 through Young Life, a “flint” or mission group for youth. At university I went to church every Sunday and participated in all the activities offered to me, but I was discipled and anchored in my faith by people in the Navigators, another missionary band who carried ‘flint’ in their backpacks and encouraged me to do the same. In the past 35 years, I have been greatly blessed and encouraged by my participation and partnerships with local churches, but my primary accountability, camaraderie, and mentoring has come through my participation with Frontiers and Operation Mobilization, also missionary bands. It was in these so-called parachurch structures where I discovered colleagues who were willing to die for one another... and some did. So while my experience in local congregations has been great, my experience in missionary bands has been crucial. These different structures have been like complementary layers of armor to protect and equip me my entire adult life.

5 Blincoe, Robert, 2022, Understanding the Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission, <https://robertblincoe.blog/lighthouse-and-flint-an-illustration-first-of-six/>

When Ralph Winter, Robert Blincoe, and many others write about how God has always used two structures of “ekklesia” for his redemptive mission, it fits my lived experience. Winter labeled these expressions of church as modality (local church) and sodality (mission organization), not as parachurch (1974, 121-39). I too am persuaded that these two structures are God’s idea and not a failure of modalities or traditional church ecclesiology. These different structures serve different purposes and have many ways of being organized, yet they are complementary and symbiotic by God’s design. They are different expressions of church.

If sodalities are illegitimate, then I suppose I am one happy, illegitimate son for Jesus. Paul Pierson put it this way:

Some say that if the Church were completely healthy it would not need such mission structures. That is clearly wrong. A healthy church will constantly form teams that are called to specific projects, whether at the local level, focusing on special groups in its own area; or at the international level, focusing on distant culture. In the latter case, it will probably cooperate with other congregations of the same heritage in a denominational mission board, or with a multi-denominational mission structure. Both are legitimate...

I do not want to denigrate the institutional churches. We need them. They often provide stability, continuity and a system of checks and balances needed in every enterprise. However, even while we recognize their importance, we must also be open to the Holy Spirit, who constantly surprises us and works outside these structures.⁶

Blincoe and others make a compelling case arguing that sodalities are not parachurch (beside or outside the church) but fundamental and instrumental structures within the Church. For a thoughtful discussion on why sodalities (mission groups) should be considered legitimate and

6 Paul Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History through a Missiological Perspective*. 33..

historic expressions of church, I recommend the reader take a look at Blincoe's impressive series of articles [here](#).

If one can accept that both modalities and sodalities are part of God's redemptive plan, even though they are diverse in structure and form, perhaps it is a smaller step to think the same could be true for movemental and traditional expressions of church structure. But even for those not yet convinced about sodalities, the synergistic relationship between movemental and traditional churches can be pictured using other analogies. What if we used the ecosystem of a forest as an analogy to help us consider the legitimacy and necessity of having diverse structures, modes, and expressions within the Church?

Forest Analogy

I married into a family that owns a forest in southwest Sweden. Occasionally, I have had the opportunity to spend time cutting, clearing, and planting trees. Forests in northern Europe go through different stages of life and each stage has its own distinctive features. Faster growing grasses and shrubs eventually give way to the more stable and sturdy trees. Both have a time and place. Even when unmanaged, the healthiest of native Swedish tree species rarely surpass 150 years before succumbing to rot, disease, insects, storms, or fire.⁷ Forests provide different benefits at different stages of their life cycle (Helander 2015).

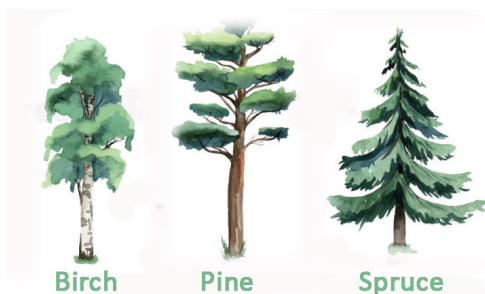


7 However, the world's oldest spruce tree (*Picea abies*) known as Old Tjikko is found in Sweden's Fulufjällets National Park. Carbon dating estimates that its root system is over 9,550 years.

Young forests generally capture more carbon than mature forests (Kieran 2022). Some wildlife thrive in old-growth forests (reindeer, lynx, and trolls) and others do better in younger forests (moose, fox, and grouse). Some animals even prefer areas that were recently cut or burned (bear, deer, and boar). A key to maximize flourishing is to maintain a balance of different tree species and ages across a large region. The forest is an ecosystem of a biological community of interacting organisms within their physical environment.

When a section of forest is cut for timber or destroyed by storms or fire, a process of natural reforestation takes place in the following year or two. Grasses and shrubs are the first plant species to take hold in the new clearing. If left to natural regeneration, after a few years the birch tree (*Betula*) is usually the first to start growing among the grass and shrubs. It is considered a 'pioneering' species because it is typically the first tree to dominate a newly deforested space in the Nordic countries.

Birch are shallow rooted, adaptable trees and are generally tolerant of sunny and windy sites and dry or wet conditions. Also, the seeds of birch trees are small and can easily be blown by the wind 5 km (3 miles) from the tree. These characteristics allow birch trees to compete successfully with the grass and shrubs. A birch forest is a young forest and most species of birch trees typically mature and start to die when they are thirty to sixty years old. Over time, pine (*Pinus*) trees succeed the birch trees and begin to dominate the forest. They typically live longer than birch but not by much.



Meanwhile, spruce (*Picea*) are growing underneath the pine canopy and eventually grow to be the dominant tree in a mature Swedish forest with a life expectancy of seventy to ninety years depending on the condi-

tions. In Sweden, spruce are the most common tree used in replanting in order to short-cut the normal cycle.

I liken the universal Church to a vast Nordic forest, one ecosystem with multitudes of member organisms, subsystems, and structures operating simultaneously and symbiotically. Expressions of Christian community may be as varied and different from one another as grass is to shrubs or birch is to spruce, yet all are legitimate members of the ecosystem. Like the forest, the Church is never static even if changes are not obvious to the casual observer. Growth and change are happening at different levels. All the members are authentic expressions of the Church even though they play different functions. If I am a grass or shrub, I take pleasure in being first to cover the barren ground. If I am a birch tree I rejoice that I am the first tree to establish myself in the new space even if my time in that space is limited. If I am a spruce tree, I rejoice that I bring stability and maturity to the forest.

I am persuaded that movemental ecclesiology (and missionary bands) are God's idea and not a failure or aberration of traditional church ecclesiology. In the same way, I am persuaded that churches that practice a traditional ecclesiology have an important role to play. Each expression of ekklesia has strengths and vulnerabilities, and we should celebrate each expression. We can only fully collaborate if we see each other as legitimate (although different) members of the same ecosystem. Being different in structure and purpose does not in itself delegitimize anyone.

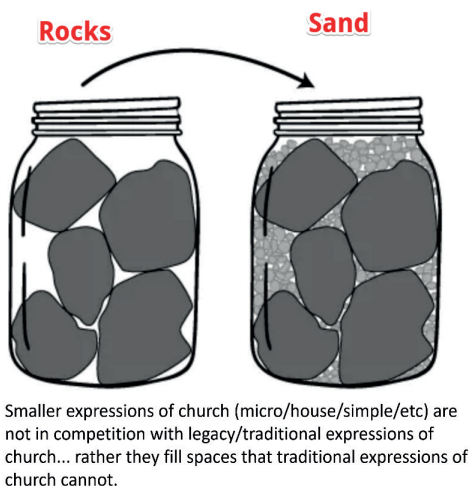
In addition to the forest ecosystem, a second analogy adds further perspective on how we might conceptualize movemental and traditional churches in a more helpful, less adversarial, way.

Rocks and Sand Analogy

A classic time management analogy involves filling a five liter mason jar with rocks or golf balls. The jar appears full. However, because of gaps between the rocks, it is possible to pour an additional two liters of sand

into the jar. Sometimes an additional liter of water can be poured into the rock and sand filling all the gaps between the grains of sand.

Most of us who live in urban western Europe live in cities and towns where there are multiple expressions of traditional churches. The rocks represent the traditional churches in a city or region. The gaps between the rocks represents the population in a city that is unreachable—or possibly unreachable—by traditional expressions of church. The sand represents CPM model churches, filling the unreachable space. The main point this analogy illustrates is that these two expressions of church are not in competition with each other nor trying to replace each other.



The CPM churches attempt to reach the spaces that are otherwise not being reached by traditional churches. In urban areas these empty spaces are typically affinity groups that have few or no followers of Jesus. These may be communities of Muslim diaspora, atheists, spiritualists, or the unchurched. This rock and sand analogy is not good in showing the potential mutually beneficial relationship between movement and traditional expressions of church.⁸ Paul's analogy of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 does that best. Exploring multiple analogies helps to further stimulate our imagination for multiple expressions of church in God's mission.

8 S.T. Antonio made the interesting alternative observation that if you put the rocks in first, you could then fit the sand in afterwards. However, if you put the sand in first, you may have a hard time fitting in all the rocks. Similarly, if movemental churches seek to prioritize their churches as first, primary, or almost exclusive ways of viewing ecclesiology, then there will be friction little "space" for peaceful co-existence. But if movement people acknowledge and respect the presence of traditional churches, then they can seek to find ways to "fit" their own newer ecclesial models into the spaces that are not met by traditional churches (editorial correspondence, January 30, 2023).

Hybrid Cars, Subways, Apples, and Jellyfish: A Few More Analogies

Through a recent conversation with [the Motus Dei Network](#), movement practitioners and researchers suggest four further analogies for reimagining the relationship between traditional and movemental churches.

Roy Moran uses the analogy of hybrid cars to describe the relationship between traditional and movement methodologies.⁹ The hybrid car has two different power plants that work in tandem with one another for the same purpose. The gas engine is well known and pervasive, while the electric engine is rather new to the auto. Each requires different tools, training, and mindsets to work on and diagnose problems. (Read more in Roy's book, [Spent Matches](#).)

Trevor Larsen uses the following two-rail model.

Living in densely populated Asia where trains and subways are prevalent, but conflict is avoided, we use a 2 Rail Model as an analogy when talking with conventional churches and organizations. This pictures a conventional church as a train above ground, and from the same station (under the same leadership) a model of multiplying small house churches without walls which is the 2nd rail below ground. This reduces resistance from the conventional church because we tell them they can continue with their above ground church (and its finances), while encouraging them to start a second church of a very different type—which aligns with Scripture. In all of the first 20 churches, the size of the underground church exceeded the size of the above ground church in 4 years, because it was growing... but it was distributed and formed into linked clusters under elders.¹⁰

Read more from Trevor [here](#).

9 Roy Moran, personal correspondence, May 16, 2022.

10 Trevor Larson, personal correspondence, May 17, 2022.

Mark Naylor uses an analogy from modern apple production.¹¹

One day, when I drove by an apple orchard in the Okanagan region of BC, I was astounded to see fruitful apple orchards that looked different from what I was used to. What surprised me was that these were not large trees spaced far apart taking up vast areas of ground. Rather, the “trees” looked like short, skinny branches stuck in the ground close to each other. Yet, they were full of large, delicious looking apples. Modern apple production has benefited from the development of more fruitful ways to grow apples. A traditional orchard has about 36 trees per acre. In recent years “high-density” orchards have been replacing classic rows of fully-grown trees... Because “high-density” orchards have more apple trees per acre, the result is a greater crop yield on the same amount of land. They also produce fruit more quickly after planting – from three as opposed to eight years – and, while being more labor intensive, in some ways these trees are easier to manage as well as harvest. These insights into productivity and fruitfulness of apple farming can be helpful in understanding the principles and practices promoted by Disciple Making Movements (DMM).¹²

Read more [here](#).

Wes Watkins uses the analogy of the immortal jellyfish.¹³

When this organism is in a certain environment, it is able to go through a reverse metamorphosis, return to a larva state, and begin to reproduce a polyp colony which then multiplies again into dozens of more jellyfish. In this way it is really one connected (or networked) organism that can live forever. The DNA of the immortal jellyfish is the same throughout when it's in

11 <https://impact.nbseminary.com/how-dmm-is-like-a-high-density-apple-orchard/>

12 Mark Naylor, personal correspondence, May 30, 2022.

13 <https://youtu.be/GrluEWZWg>

its larvae state or its adult state. But it adapts in order to thrive and reproduce. The adult state and the larva state each play a specific purpose.¹⁴

Hear more [here](#).

Conclusion

I think it is best not to try and change traditional expressions of church here in Europe or elsewhere whom we partner/interact with to adopt movement ecclesiology. To do so is a bit like marrying a person whom you hope to change after you marry them. Isn't it a better strategy to humbly love and respect traditional expressions of church, faults and all, and request the same towards movemental expressions of church. Maybe in time, they will change, maybe they won't, but in any case, we love and respect one another and by doing so, we all end up changing and improving.

In our excitement for the new things God is doing in CPMs, we should still celebrate the many things traditional churches do well. Here in Europe (and elsewhere) we press on, working to fill the spaces where traditional churches have little reach or none. In Europe, I believe this space is getting larger over time. Rather than try to change traditional expressions of church into movemental expressions, I think it wiser to come alongside to encourage and perhaps even experiment together. Church planting is a difficult and demanding task no matter the ecclesiology, so let's together continue to work the soil, plant the seeds, and water the ground. If it is true that it will take the whole church to reach the whole world, then perhaps CPMs are more like grass which covers barren land quickly or the pioneering birch tree. The traditional churches are more like the trees of a mature Nordic forest such as the spruce. They are all in one forest ecosystem, tended by one master Forester who seems to love diversity in form and structures.

14 Wes Watkins, personal correspondence, May 19, 2022.

Questions for Conversation

1. What is your experience and perspective with regard to “movemental” and “traditional” churches? How are they similar or dissimilar to the author’s?
2. Which analogies, if any, do you find helpful for reimagining the relationship between “movemental” churches and “traditional” churches? What might be the practical implications of some of these analogies?
3. Which of the author’s insights is most helpful for your own church-planting practice? Are there any points which you would push back against and contribute an alternative perspective?

Bibliography

- Blincoe, Robert. 2022. “Understanding the Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission.” <https://robertblincoe.blog/lighthouse-and-flint-an-illustration-first-of-six/>
- Helander, Carl-Anders. 2015. “Forests and Forestry in Sweden.” https://www.skogsstyrelsen.se/globalassets/in-english/forests-and-forestry-in-sweden_2015.pdf
- Kieran, J. 2022. “Are young trees or old forests more important for slowing climate change?” July 30. <https://theconversation.com/are-young-trees-or-old-forests-more-important-for-slowing-climate-change-139813>
- Larsen, Trevor, and a Band of Fruitful Brothers. 2018. *Focus on Fruit! Movement Case Studies and Fruitful Practices*. A Toolkit for Movement Activists, Book 2. <https://focusonfruit.org/store/foundations-of-movements/>
- Moran, Ray. 2015. *Spent Matches: Igniting the Signal Fire for the Spiritually Dissatisfied*. Thomas Nelson, Nashville.
- Naylor, Mark. 2022. “How DMM is like a High-Density Apple Orchard.” <https://impact.nbseminary.com/how-dmm-is-like-a-high-density-apple-orchard/>
- Pierson, Paul. 2009. *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History through a Missiological Perspective*. William Carey International University Press.

- Watkins, Wes. 2020. "Rethinking Missions during Pandemic: Considerations from the Middle East." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrluEWZWg&t=1187s>
- Winter, Ralph. 1974. "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission." *Missiology* II, no.1: 121-139.