

Miracles in the Middle East: Ekklésia-Formation Insights from Muslim-Background Churches

By S.T. Antonio

S.T. Antonio (pseudonym) is a church planter with Pioneers in the Middle East, where he and his wife have served since 2015. He is a graduate of Biola University and a perpetual member of its Torrey Honors College, and he holds MDiv and ThM degrees from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Antonio is author of Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm (2020, William Carey Publishers) and editor-in-chief of Seedbed. He is an American with a Hispanic mother and an Asian wife.



Disciple makers face many challenges in helping new disciples embrace and live out their inheritance as the people of God in and for their Muslim community. Fear, persecution, and confusion about biblical *ekklésia* (“church”) are a few of the many obstacles preventing believers from fully enjoying their “body of Christ” identity. Furthermore, the great fellowship of harvest laborers among Muslims come from diverse ecclesial backgrounds, which naturally results in a cacophony of perspectives on what counts as a biblical church, what is essential to biblical *ekklésia*, and what is culturally flexible and secondary. The steady, increasing stream of new disciples and groups in our day is received into a multiplicity of church-planting models, raising questions of both ecclesiology (theology of church) and “*ekklésia* formation” (practical church formation) in least-reached, Muslim communities.¹

1 Some believers do the hard work of integrating into a culturally distant evangelical church, though research has shown it to be more fruitful to form new, distinctively Muslim-background churches or groups (Little 2015, 202–205; Prinz and Coles 2021, 44).

To prepare for a training on church formation, I interviewed practitioners personally involved in the formation of at least one church among believers of Muslim background (BMBs) in the Middle East. These recent breakthroughs suggest that fruitful church formation involves a convergence of biblical practice, Spirit intervention and empowerment, and divine-human creative collaboration to discover unique ways of forming sustainable churches amidst threats in frontier environments. To flesh out this picture, I reflect on several themes which emerged from five case studies of practitioners involved in *ekklésia* formation in the Middle East. Before turning to the research, a brief word is in order about definition of terms.

Defining “Church”

Diverse perspectives on “church” create challenges for constructive conversations about *ekklésia* formation, and dialogue is helped when speakers clarify the different ways they understand and use “church”-related terms.² The understanding of “church” which I use in this paper is based on the dynamic, multi-referential usage of *ekklésia* in Scripture, as well as the developmental nature of the church over time.

Not a technical term with fixed meaning, “*ekklésia*” is an ordinary word for a “gathering” or “assembly” picked up by New Testament authors to refer to the new covenant people of God in various ways. Sometimes it refers to the gathering of the church (cf. 1 Cor. 14:19) and other times to its people (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9). Additionally, Larsen points out three different ways *ekklésia* is used in the New Testament (2021, 230–34), to which I would add a fourth:

1. a church that meets in someone’s house (cf. Rom. 16:5)
2. a cluster of house groups in a city or locale (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2)

2 I asked the practitioners in my study for their definition of “church,” offering various thoughtful perspectives and definitions with significant overlap and complementary insights.

3. a network of house churches/clusters in a larger region (cf. Acts 9:31)
4. the global communion of believers and churches (cf. Eph. 1:22)

These four expressions of *ekklésia* underscore the flexible biblical usage of the word “church” and the dynamic, multi-layered nature of its community.

Although all believers are joined to the global body of Christ, the formation of local communities the Bible calls “churches” is a process that takes time.³ For this reason, it is helpful to supplement our understanding with a developmental perspective, distinguishing between four general signposts in this journey of church formation: (1) believing group/fellowship, (2) embryonic church, (3) church, and (4) mature church.

A major milestone in the journey toward church begins when two or three believers gather in the presence and name of Jesus (Matt. 18:20). While such a *believing group* does not yet reflect all essential characteristics of the New Testament “church,” it bears the presence of Christ and possesses the potential to develop into a local church. Some believing groups are content to remain as such (e.g., small groups, a mission team).

Others, however, develop further toward communities which begin to progressively resemble aspects of New Testament churches. It is thus helpful to acknowledge an intermediate period in church formation called *embryonic church*, which can be understood as a believing community in the process of developing into a church but lacking one

3 One participant expressed the developmental nature of the church as follows: We often struggle to define ‘church’ because it reflects God’s Kingdom which is present with us, but not yet in fullness. So it is with the church. Most churches do not match the description that we see in the Scriptures of a fully healthy church. And yet, they do reflect the churches that Paul addressed and corrected in his letters. So, I believe that our goal for any church is that they include the elements of worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, sharing the gospel, and giving—along with a sense of commitment and identified leadership. However, I feel that we can use the term ‘church’ to describe a group of believers who is on a journey towards reaching this ideal. (Interview 5)

or more essential elements of New Testament churches (Waterman 2011; Antonio 2020, 176).⁴

While a full-orbed biblical ecclesiology ought to draw upon the rich array of images and metaphors of the body of Christ, I use the word “church” to refer, straightforwardly, to the kinds of communities the New Testament calls “church” (ekklésia). One way to clearly communicate about and delineate such communities is to clarify the essential characteristics which distinguish churches from other (non-church) communities, excluding characteristics which, however positive, are secondary or non-essential for *being* a church (e.g., a seminary-trained preacher, coffee and donuts, etc.).⁵ One possible example of such a list is (1) baptized believers, (2) solidarity and identity as “ekklésia,” (3) regular gathering as “ekklésia,” (4) biblical patterns of community (worship, the Word, fellowship, and mutual edification), and (5) biblical elders⁶ (Antonio 2020, 34; cf. Waterman 2011; 467).

Finally, it is helpful to distinguish elements of “church” from qualities of a “mature church.”⁷ The biblical vision is for fullness and maturity of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12, 15; Col. 1:28), which puts every church in tension between “church as it is” and “church as it should be,” between the triumphant Bride of the Lamb (Rev. 21:2) and the struggling, embattled churches in the present (Rev. 2:1–3:22). Maturity is not a requirement for *being* a church—immature communities are still churches

4 One participant in the study referred to this as a “nascent church” in distinction from a “maturing/healthy church” (interview 2).

5 Such a list of essential elements should not be turned into a performance “standard” or “test” a group must “pass” in order to achieve “church status”; they are simply intended to be descriptive of the communities in essential continuity with the communities referred to as “churches” by the New Testament.

6 The appointment of elders is a clear biblical and apostolic priority for churches (Titus 1:5), but this did not always happen immediately, and groups which do not yet have elders are referred to as “churches” in the New Testament (Acts 14:23).

7 Examples of qualities not essential for *being* a church but as qualities of maturity to seek after include things like unity, holiness, mission, etc.

(cf. 1 Cor. 1:2, 3:16, 12:27)—but rather a goal toward which every church should strive and grow.⁸

<i>Signposts in Ekklesia Formation</i>	<i>Levels of Ekklesia Community</i>
<i>Believing Group/Fellowship</i>	<i>House Church</i>
<i>“Embryonic” Church</i>	<i>House–Church Cluster in a City/Locale</i>
<i>Church</i>	<i>Regional Network of Churches</i>
<i>Mature Church</i>	<i>Global Church</i>

Table 1. Categories for Defining Ekklesia.

The church is not a static, one-dimensional society, but a dynamic, fluid, multi-layered community. Some groups of believers are united in the global church but themselves only function as believing groups. A cluster of house groups might function together as a “city church” overseen collectively by a group of elders. A reproducing network throughout a region might include a mixture of believing groups, embryonic churches, and mature churches at varying stages of development. Keeping these distinctions in mind helps us fruitfully and constructively name, describe, and learn from the various manifestations of church we observe and experience, including those in my study. To better appreciate the particular themes of church formation outlined below, it is helpful to know something about the contours of my study.

Overview of Research

To glean insights on church formation, I was introduced to ten practitioners personally involved in the formation of at least one church among BMBs in the Middle East, five of whom agreed to participate. Conducted in fall 2022, the research consisted of a written interview with 14 questions, clarified by follow-up questions via email, Signal, or Zoom

8 Three of the five participants in the study made a similar point by drawing a clear distinction between a “church” and a “healthy church.”

(which I transcribed). The participants were asked about the nature of the churches they were connected to, the process of church formation, obstacles faced, and lessons learned.

The cases come from five different countries in the Middle East and represent practitioners from several organizations. One of the five interviews was co-answered by a Western female and an Arab male BMB. Another interview was with a Christian-background believer (CBB) native Arabic speaker who answered the written questions in Arabic and follow-up questions in English. The rest of the participants were Western church planters and native English speakers.

Two of the participants are each involved in two separate streams of church formation, and thus these five cases reflect a total of seven expressions of church or embryonic church. Two of the seven cases are individual congregations, while the other five involve a network of believers or house churches. Church identity varies across the case studies, with most having a clear “church” identity, while two of them are closer to “embryonic churches.”

I did not restrict this study to any particular church-planting model. The five cases (and seven church streams) reflect a variety of models of church planting, though all broadly reflect indigenous church principles. Two of the participants clearly adhered to approaches thoroughly shaped by “movement” principles of church multiplication, while two of the participants employed some combination of such principles with other methods depending on time and context. The final case represents a unique example of a mixed local and expat group which intentionally transformed into a house church.

All cases represent some fresh breakthrough of church in places or people groups which were previously unchurched. All started in urban environments, though some later transitioned into rural areas. Most are in relatively conservative communities, though some are in places in varying degrees of proximity to more Westernized, tolerant sectors of society. Some represent church expressions less than a year old, others

10+ years old, all of which remain in existence to the time of writing. Each reflects a unique church formation story:

1. A BMB national and a Western female worker, together with two other BMBs from the same tribe, helped a group of believing relatives transition from a friendship group into the first known church in their transnational tribe, co-led by three BMBs and the Western female.
2. A national CBB and his wife started a Discovery Bible Study in a church with refugees, which grew and then split into three geographically-based house groups. Through tangible service and mobilizing and mentoring refugees as leaders, these groups multiplied into a growing network of believer groups and embryonic churches.
3. A Western church planter and his wife, utilizing simple ways of equipping and empowering new believers to share their faith with their relational network and to baptize and disciple people into house churches, have helped form and coach two growing networks of house churches and embryonic churches in two Shi'ite communities.
4. A Western church planter in partnership with other workers over many years helped to disciple and network together different believers in an urban city, who later scattered throughout the country due to instability. They then began to grow and reproduce along familial and tribal lines while remaining networked together as a result of their long-time relationships from the original city.
5. A Western church planter and his wife, along with cross-cultural and near-cultural teammates, have seen two streams of church develop as a result of media ministry. One stream is an embryonic church which developed and spread organically in a single extended family. The second stream is a church which began as a baptism class for various believers from multiple Arab nationalities that continued to meet and then developed into an indigenously led church.

Each church-formation story contains a wealth of insight and deserves an article in its own right. In what follows, I selectively highlight six observations on church formation which are particularly significant for my own understanding and practice of church formation in my context and similar environments. Together, these paint a picture of fruitful church formation as a convergence of biblical practice, Spirit-empowerment, and divine-human creative collaboration to form sustainable churches in the midst of the threats of frontier settings.

A Vision for Transformed Households

Besides picturing the church itself as “family” (Matt. 12:48–50), the New Testament presents redeemed, transformed families as an important part of its vision for the church (Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1). While Western evangelicalism has emphasized evangelism and church membership individualistically, the New Testament describes the gospel announcement as originally intended to be an offer to “you and your household” (Acts 2:39; 16:31–32).

Several of the case studies highlighted the centrality of believing households to forming strong churches.⁹ Six of the seven expressions of church included households or familial groups (and sometimes tribal relationships) as an integral part of their church-formation journey. Some of the research participants explicitly highlighted this principle in describing their approach or advising other church planters.

9 This theme has also been recognized by other studies and reflections as well (Evans 1985, 2; Becker et al. 2019, 15–16).

	Church Formation Advice
Case 1	<i>I would advise [workers] to have a vision for families rather than groups of men or women. This often requires a strategic focus on the female members of a male believer’s household. The strength of societal structures is based on families. (Interview 1)</i>
Case 2	<i>–Establish a very good relationship with the people first, which opens the door to very good conversation.</i> <i>–Try to meet the needs of the people in a practical way. –Focus on the family, not the individual.</i> <i>–From day one, encourage them to share what they are learning with others.</i> <i>–Prayer is the key.</i> <i>–In Bible studies, put the Bible in their hands, and let them read the passage for themselves. (Interview 2)</i>

Table 2. Church Formation from Cases 1 and 2.

The importance of believing families takes shape differently in the various churches. One case involved a focus on leading individuals to faith and then immediately equipping them to share the gospel and their testimony with people in their relational network. Through bold sharing and simple follow-up studies for new disciples, two streams of house (and embryonic) churches developed among two different Shi’ite tribal communities.

In another example, a female media contact led several of her relatives to faith, who led other relatives to faith, who evangelized yet *other* family members, leading to a network of 50+ believing relatives who identify as a “family of faith.” This embryonic church meets together regularly on Zoom, while the female disciple maker regularly mentors the leader in person.

In another case, a group of close relatives within a particular tribe had been believers for some time but did not have access to a suitable church in their community. After adopting a Western female worker as

an honorary tribal and family member, they engaged in a several month process to become a small house church composed (presently) of relatives in a particular tribe.

A final example involves a church network which began through connecting unrelated believers together in men's and women's discipleship groups. At one point, the workers began to cast a vision for meeting in homes and believing households, and after a season of persecution and instability, the believers scattered throughout the country. They met other believers and led some others to faith, eventually transitioning into being organized primarily along familial and tribal lines. This coincided with a societal move away from urbanized interactions toward stronger familial and tribal solidarity.

Mirroring the biblical vision for redeemed, transformed households, these Middle East churches reflect the importance of believing households and familial groups in church formation. The New Testament also includes a larger "household," which reflects a second theme in the research.

"Trans-Oikos" Connections in the "Household of God"

In addition to the transformation of the household and natural family, the gospel incorporates believers into the "household (*oikos*) of God" (Eph. 2:19), the new "Jesus family" which transcends and relativizes the natural family (Matt. 12:48–50). A holistic ecclesiology will hold both strands together, recognizing that the gospel is intended to both *redeem* the "oikos" and *expand* it through the family of Jesus.

All five case studies reflected some relational connections which transcended their specific household, tribe, or church network.¹⁰ This

10 Fruitful Practice Research, likewise, supplements its principle of working within existing social networks by also highlighting that fruitful church-planters among Muslims will also network churches together (Becker et al. 2019, 25).

finds expression in various ways, including attending local trainings with other BMBs, attending a nearby evangelical or international church, interacting with other believers on social media, or maintaining cordial ties with believers in other networks.

In two cases, church formation began through such “trans-oikos” connections as believers from different relational networks were brought together and trust was gradually built in an aggregate community. One of these cases eventually transitioned into house churches organized along familial lines, but the “trans-oikos” connections made previously remain intact and connect the network together.

In another example, church formation began through a strict focus on believing households and “oikos” groups from the very beginning, leading to two house-church networks in two different regions, the majority from the same national background and Muslim sect. Because of geographical proximity and relational connection with diverse people, and through the hand of God, some churches branched out to incorporate people from another national background and Muslim sect. Additionally, the disciple maker has intentionally sought to cultivate trans-oikos connections between these two networks at the leadership level, bringing together the two leaders of these networks for fellowship, prayer, and mutual sharpening, while their networks remain separate and independent of one another.

There is variation in how churches relate to isolated believers outside the church network. On one side of the spectrum is the aggregate church in a Westernizing urban space, which prefers to integrate such believers into their congregation. On another side of the spectrum is a church network which, for security reasons, does not bring isolated believers into existing house churches, instead seeking to visit, cast vision, and resource them to witness to their relational network with the hope of starting a new house church.

Some churches are somewhere in the middle, such as one church which encourages new believers to start their own house churches, but

also occasionally invites individuals who lack capacity and social skills to join an existing house church. Similarly, the refugee network which focuses on families also gradually introduces and builds trust between people, integrating them into an existing Discovery Bible Study with fellow refugee compatriots.

The variation in desire, capacity, and timing of “trans-oikos” connections may be impacted by societal context, country stability, and level of urbanization. Some urban and globalizing contexts reflect movements in society toward more natural intermingling (sometimes anti-sectarianism), while conservative rural contexts (particularly in unstable times) reflect a societal climate more suspicious of the “other” and sticking closely with their family and tribe.

Whatever the expression, all case studies reflected some connection with the broader household of God which transcended the building block of the believing household or tribe, reflecting both strands of “oikos” in biblical ecclesiology. These variegated relationships and the “household” theme raise the question of the biblical and social identity of the church, which is the next theme which emerged from the research.

Viable Internal and External “Ekklésia” Identity

Scripture gifts us with a dynamic, multi-faceted depiction of the identity of the church. This begins with the identity-defining narrative of the people of God from Abraham to the New Jerusalem, supplemented by a rich array of images and metaphors for church which shapes the church’s self-concept. The identity formation of the early church is seen in Acts as it negotiates a distinct, emerging identity (Acts 24:14), both internally (how they viewed themselves) and externally (how others viewed them).

Internal Ekklesia Identity

The churches in my research highlighted the importance of developing a viable identity both internally and externally. First, the case studies illustrated the importance of biblical clarity among members for internal

identity and formation as a church. In the two house-church networks among Shi'ites, the practitioner follows a process which equips new believers to discover, identify, and grow into church identity. This takes the shape of nine to ten simple studies on the commands of Christ, each of which reflects a characteristic of a healthy church, culminating with a lesson on "healthy church" in Acts 2. A tool called "Healthy Church Circles" is then used to map out and identify gaps to be addressed to increase church health across the house-church network.

	Church Formation Advice
Case 3	<i>There are many traditions of man that we have unknowingly adopted into our definition of what a church is. An effective cross-cultural movement worker has to be willing to "unlearn" these traditions and embrace the New Testament as our guide for both right theology and right practice.</i> <i>When it comes to new believers from unreached backgrounds, they have relatively little to "unlearn" in terms of long-standing Christian tradition. What they need is to cling to the New Testament as their guide for all things in this new life in Christ. In the words of [one of our leaders], "The Injeel is the constitution of our Lord. There is no person on earth who is above the Injil; all of us are under it and must submit to it."</i> <i>If you want to help new believers gather as church, you have to think: "What is the minimum biblical requirement in order for a group of people to become a church?" And then deliver that minimum in a simple, reproducing way to new believers with the expectation that they will apply it and re-teach it to others as they grow into maturity and a fuller understanding of what it means to be church. (Interview 3)</i>

Table 3. Church Formation from Case 3.

The importance of biblical clarity for identity as church can also be seen in the house church formed by the three nationals and the Western female. Critical to the transformation of this group of family members and friends into a committed church were dozens of informal and formal conversations over the course of many months. These meetings clarified the biblical teaching on church, the nature of their commitment as a

church, and the shape that their meetings and community would take. This took significant time due to members’ lack of biblical background and church experience, as well as the fact that many were reticent to commit to weekly meetings due to a reaction against any form of strict religious obligation.

	Church Formation Advice
Case 4	<i>There is an absolute need to have full commitment by all in attendance. We went through so, so many discussions regarding the foundations of what a church would be. We discussed it “too much” from the [local] perspective. But these foundational talks are what makes us a strong church now. (Interview 4)</i>

Table 4. Church Formation Advice from Case 4.

By contrast, two of the “embryonic church” expressions in the research reflect, to some degree, a lack of clarity on the biblical nature of the church, particularly regarding how biblical ekklesia relates to mainstream church expressions. As of writing, these two cases do not yet see themselves as “church,” in part due to assumptions that “church” requires a certain kind of pastor or a particular kind of meeting in a building.¹¹

External Identity in the Community

In addition to internal identity, the churches express a variety of creative ways of negotiating a viable identity externally in their community. In many cases, the familial or tribal nature of the church plays a role in enabling the churches to meet regularly without drawing undue attention, since their meetings are perceived by the community as normal gatherings of relatives or tribal members. In one embryonic

11 One of these two embryonic church networks encourages members to attend local mainstream churches and has considered starting a new mainstream church (with a pastor and a building) in an area that lacks one.

church network, they answer inquiring neighbors, relatives, or landlords that they are meeting to study the Injeel (the Bible) or to discuss matters of national interest with their compatriots.

One of the case studies is in proximity to a historic, nominal Christian community with past tensions with the Muslim community, thus the house church networks have negotiated an identity distinct from both communities. Drawing upon Isaiah 43:19, these believers believe God is “doing a new thing” in birthing the church in their tribe and sect for the first time, which leads them to carve out a space for a new identity. One network identifies themselves as “Companions of the Book” (i.e., the Bible). A local leader of another network says, “We are not Christian, Sunni, or Shi’ite—we’re starting a new denomination/sect called ‘Disciples of the Messiah.’ Our sect is for everyone—you can be of Catholic, Christian, Sunni, or Shi’ite background. Anyone is welcome in our group” (Interview 3).¹²

Identity-formation is an ongoing journey, and these churches in various ways underscore the importance of developing a viable identity, both internally as a church and externally in the community. It is a process which takes time as a community studies the Scripture and seeks to live them out in their context, a process which involves multiple actors and influences, including locals, outsiders, and the Holy Spirit.

Divine-Human and Local-Outsider Synergy

The formation and growth of the biblical church is a divine work of the Father (1 Cor. 3:6–7), Son (Matt. 16:18), and Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), in collaboration with divine image-bearers (1 Cor. 3:9). Thus, church formation is a divine-human work involving initiative from at least three

12 See Tim Green and Pat Brittenden for analysis on the way BMBs often negotiate hybrid identities as followers of Jesus in the “liminal space” in between their Muslim heritage and the Christian community (Green 2013, 373; Brittenden 2018, ch.11, sec.5).

angles: (1) God's intervention, (2) disciple makers' initiative and input (Matt. 28:19–20), and (3) local disciples' initiative and empowerment (Acts 8:4; Acts 10:33; Col. 1:7).

In all five cases, divine intervention played a role in church formation, explicitly or implicitly. In two cases, healing was instrumental in bringing the initial person in the network to faith. In one case, the church network began through a divine appointment in which a foreigner serendipitously bumped into a local and shared the gospel with him. In another case, divine activity manifested itself through a group of four friends collectively discerning God's clear leading for their group to start a house church in an unexpected way. In another case, God's fingerprints are evident in the expansion and reproduction of the church network through a season of significant trial and societal upheaval.

Alongside divine involvement, we also see the empowerment and initiative of local disciples playing a role in the formation of the churches. In a few cases, the disciple makers partnered with same-culture or near-culture believers. In several cases, equipping local disciples was an intentional and integral part of the disciple-making approach from the beginning. In a couple cases, security or instability forced greater local empowerment through the exit of foreign disciple makers from that context, leading to distance mentoring which required increased local initiative.

This local empowerment and initiative, however, exists in a symbiotic relationship to outside input and involvement of disciple makers. The intercultural team of three nationals and the Western female is a good example. The Western female highlighted that she listened to her national partners more than she spoke, and she allowed them to shape the church and its leadership structure in ways she did not expect or prefer. At the same time, she herself also played a guiding and facilitative role at times, particularly in helping the group clearly confront the biblical teaching on the nature of the church and in mentoring an indigenous leader to eventually step into the main teaching role.

Another example of this indigenous-outsider interplay is the “baptism class”-turned-church. Though the outside disciple maker initially cast the vision for the class to be a training time which they could reproduce in their families, the group exercised initiative by requesting the group to continue meeting when the training concluded. The disciple maker was receptive to this local initiative, continuing to meet and host these meetings, while intentionally guiding the group in the direction of indigenously-led and indigenously-hosted church. Significantly, the locals resisted this direction throughout, but the disciple maker persisted, such that the group did eventually shift to an indigenously-led and organized church, with the original disciple maker now playing only an outside mentoring role.

A final example of indigenous-outsider synergy is the way several locals approached the disciple makers to request help with discipling their children who were forced to attend Islamic classes every day. The disciple makers were receptive to this request, but they did so in an intentional way that sought to direct it towards a goal of local sustainability and fruitful church formation. They agreed to hold a regular “Sunday School” type of gathering for the families, requiring at least one parent to be present, casting vision for the believers to learn a model of home-based discipleship in the future. The combination of listening to (and involving) local disciples with intentional direction and input from disciple makers led to an important breakthrough in their church-formation efforts, leading to a bonding of the community which helped lay the groundwork for a strong house-church network.

These examples suggest that church formation involves a combination of divine intervention, outside input and intentionality from disciple makers, and the initiative and empowerment of local disciples. This collaborative synergy results in the formation and reproduction of churches, one which might also be described as a kind of collective improvisation.

Spirit-Led, Principled Improvisation of Ekklésia

While not a biblical term, improvisation is a concept which theologians and missiologists have used to express the way biblical faith is designed to be enacted, applied, and creatively adapted by disciples and churches in different times and places. Vanhoozer argues that disciples are to creatively interpret and “perform” the biblical script, participating in and extending the drama of redemption in their context (2005, 31–32). Corrie applies this to intercultural mission, in which disciples from multiple cultural backgrounds creatively collaborate in a “third space” not fully identified with either culture to enact a fresh “reading” and “improvisation” of the biblical script (2014, 299).

Improvisation is also related to experimentation, innovation, and adaptability, which are critical for planting churches in least-reached contexts (Larsen 2022, Esler 2021, Farah 2018). But whether in music or in sports, improvisation is not a free-for-all with zero structure. Rather, it is spontaneous, creative activity within a framework; musicians, artists, and athletes improvise their activity within a broad set of principles.¹³

Creative and adaptable improvisation of biblical ekklésia is evident in the church case studies.¹⁴ No two church-formation stories were the same, and a variety of approaches and combinations were reflected in the seven churches.¹⁵ Rather than rigid implementation of a detailed formula, several of the cases exhibited a kind of creative improvisational collaboration between disciple makers and local disciples, not chaotically, but within a broad framework of key principles.

13 I was first introduced to this idea by Dr. Matt Jensen of the Torrey Honors College at Biola University. I cannot recall if it was from a talk or from an essay he wrote.

14 Farah likewise advocates the importance of an “adaptive ecclesiology” for non-Christian, frontier settings as part of his missiology of movements (Farah 2021, ch.1, sec.8).

15 This observation coheres with the method diversity and fluidity in the more extensive and academic study of Prinz on effective movement catalysts (Prinz and Coles 2021).

All cases represented some degree of flexibility and creative adaptability. In two cases, the practitioners themselves used multiple approaches, in one case simultaneously with two different groups—one aggregate-group model and one relational-network (oikos) model. However, in both cases, the practitioner worked within a very clearly defined set of principles of robust definition and vision of an indigenous church, with a goal of building toward (eventual) multiplication among multiple streams.

	Church Formation Advice
Case 5	<i>- It is not an either/or on affinity or aggregate.</i> <i>-Workers can play a catalytic role if your intention from the beginning is indigenous churches. You have to start with that vision and rigorously work toward it, even to the discomfort of the newly planted church.</i> <i>-Model courage and risk, do NOT model fear. So much of what we call "wisdom" is just code for fear or self-preservation.</i> <i>-Don't buy into the current stress on speed or discovery. Much of DMM is good, but the Bible is clear that we should teach, so do the both/and of didactic teaching AND teaching them to discover. Go deep and realize that church planting and leadership development take time.</i> <i>-Don't exit relationally even when you disengage from leading or an active participatory role.</i> <i>-Bathe everything in prayer; rely always on the Holy Spirit.</i> <i>-Model to believers and leaders how to abide with Jesus and how to commune with Him always and on all things.</i> <i>-Keep close to Jesus yourself. The most important thing to pass on is love and intimacy with Him. Don't over-rely on idealistic strategy.</i> <i>(Interview 5)</i>

Table 5. Church Formation from Case 5.

One of the more poignant illustrations of this theme is found in the older, larger network of house churches in a volatile, constantly-changing

context. A key lesson emphasized by the research participant was the importance of being willing to adapt approaches to changing circumstances. While more rigid, methodical approaches in country have borne less fruit, this practitioner (who admits to being methodical himself) attributed the effectiveness of their church network, in part, to the willingness to try new things. Rather than getting discouraged when things were not working or when circumstances changed, he and his apostolically-gifted partner were willing to adapt to the shifting environment, sometimes significantly. Examples include the “Sunday School” family meetings as well as a major shift in roles in the community and with the church network after a significant societal change in the country.

A willingness to adapt and improvise, within a set of biblical and practical principles, seems significant for effective church formation. This adaptability is particularly relevant in navigating the obstacles which threaten to derail church formation.

Resilient Creativity for Internal and External Threats

Kingdom breakthroughs are accompanied by “many adversaries” (1 Cor. 16:9). Externally, persecution is to be expected, prepared for, and persevered through (2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:12–13). Internally, conflict and disunity are perennial threats which are imperative to overcome (Eph. 4:1–6; Phil. 2:1–5).

All case studies were in high-persecution environments, with many participants explicitly mentioning persecution as an obstacle to church formation.¹⁶ In two cases, persecution led to churches scattering, which later led to an expansion of the church network to new areas. In some cases, actual or possible persecution led to fearfulness and lack of

16 This coincides with a recent study of effective church-planting catalysts which found that “persecution by society” was the single largest inhibiting factor to a movement starting (Prinz and Goldhor 2022, 44).

sharing faith; in other cases, fear was conquered, and bold witnessing continued in spite of persecution. One practitioner highlighted the importance of preparing disciples for persecution, and the benefit of persecution-tested believers guiding new believers through this issue.

	Obstacles to Church Formation Identified by Participants
Case 1	• <i>Persecution</i>
Case 2	• <i>Lack of priority members placed on meeting together weekly</i> • <i>High level of security needed</i>
Case 3	• <i>Lack of trust</i> • <i>Pride and differing opinions of how the vision should be implemented</i> • <i>Fear and persecution</i> • <i>Money</i>
Case 4	• <i>Uncertainty of the believers regarding their ability to lead</i> • <i>Instability, emotional health, immaturity of the believers</i> • <i>Fear of one another</i> • <i>Internal squabbling and fighting</i>
Case 5	• <i>Busyness of people at their jobs</i> • <i>Fear of persecution from relatives</i> • <i>Many physical needs make it difficult to distinguish authentic believers</i> • <i>Continuous travel (of refugees)</i> • <i>Low educational level</i>

Table 6. Obstacles to Church Formation.

Several of the case studies provided creative ways to navigate and minimize persecution. One example is encouraging new believers to postpone open declaration of their faith to their family until the relatives see their changed life. Another way is teaching new believers to specifically focus on sharing with one or two people in their relational network who are more open. Other creative ways include varying meeting times

and places, as well as meeting in venues and at times which would be viewed as normal by the community.

In addition to persecution, four of the five practitioners mentioned conflict in some form or another. Several practitioners noted the internal threat of conflict as costly and important to walk through in church formation, two of whom highlighted it in their advice they gave to church planters.

	Church Formation Advice
Case 4	<i>We had to expect and be ready to deal with conflict. We faced it head on, even starting several of the meetings with "Does anyone have a grievance they need to work out with another individual here before we start?" One of the more memorable church meetings consisted of three male church members hashing out some deep grievances with each other in a rather loud and intense manner for over an hour. And then we prayed together! (Of note, the Westerner interpreted that meeting as an utter failure, while the [locals] interpreted that meeting as a breakthrough.) But that experience truly strengthened the church and encouraged a future attitude of being open and honest. (Interview 4)</i>
Case 1	<i>Recognize that some will fall away over time – whether from the cares of the world, persecution, disagreements, or sin. Keep pressing on with those that remain and encourage them to guard their hearts from bitterness as they see others fall away. Prepare them for the betrayal that will ultimately come. Remind them to focus on their own faithfulness and on reaching the lost. (Interview 1)</i>

Table 7. Church Formation from Cases 1 and 4.

The case studies suggest that the twin threats of persecution and conflict require creativity and resilience for effective church formation, rounding out our picture of the multiple factors and practices at play when biblical ekklesia takes shape in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Church formation is a dynamic, complex reality. More insights can be mined from these case studies, as well as other BMB churches in the Middle East not yet researched. I highlighted six factors which arose from these seven expressions of biblical *ekklesia*, which together paint a picture of church formation as a convergence of biblical practice, Spirit intervention and empowerment, divine-human creative collaboration, and the discovery of unique ways of forming sustainable churches in the midst of various threats.

We give God the glory for these bodies of believers in the Middle East. Their stories are not finished, and we pray that each of them will continue to grow, mature, and multiply, even as we pray that the lessons learned from their stories will illumine, inform, and invigorate our own disciple-making efforts in our corner of the harvest.

Questions for Conversation

1. Which of the church formation examples is most surprising to you? Which is most relevant to your context?
2. What is your assessment of the author's approach to defining church? What do you find most helpful about his approach? Do you have anything to add or push back against it?
3. What are your thoughts on the six themes the author highlighted? How much do they resonate with your experience in your context? What additional questions and insights would you add?

Bibliography

Antonio, S.T. 2020. *Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm*. Pasadena: William Carey Publishing.

Corrie, John. 2014. "The Promise of Intercultural Mission." *Transformation* 31 (4): 291–302.

- Becker, John, Laura and Eric Adams, and Gene Daniels, et al. 2019. "Fruitful Practices: A Guide for Learning from the Best Practices of Church Planters in the Muslim World." Fruitful Practice Research. Vision 5:9. Unpublished.
- Brittenden, Pat. 2018. "Liberating Liminality: Mission in the North African Berber Context." Ch.11 in *Margins of Islam: Ministry in Diverse Muslim Contexts*. Edited by Gene Daniels and Warrick Farah. Pasadena: William Carey Publishing. Kindle.
- Esler, Ted. 2022. "Innovation and the Field Missionary." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 57(4): 6–8.
- Evans, Wendell. 1985. "Church Planting in the Arab Muslim World." Unpublished pamphlet for Arab World Ministries.
- Farah, Warrick. 2018. "Adaptive Missiological Engagement with Islamic Contexts." Ch.17 in *Margins of Islam*. Edited by Gene Daniels and Warrick Farah. Pasadena: William Carey Publishing.
- _____. 2021. "Movements Today: A Primer from Multiple Perspectives." Ch.1 in *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*. Edited by Warrick Farah. Pasadena: William Carey Publishing. Epub.
- Green, Tim. 2013. "Beyond the C-Spectrum? A Search for New Models." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37(4): 361–80.
- Larsen, Trevor. 2021. "God's Expanding Family: The Social Architecture of Ekklesia Movements." Ch.8 in *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*. Edited by Warrick Farah. Pasadena: William Carey Publishing. Epub.
- _____. 2022. "Learning Fruitful Practices Through Experimentation." *Mission Frontiers* (March/April): 18–20.
- Little, Don. 2015. *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History, and Seasoned Practices*. Westmont, IL: IVP Academic.
- Prinz, Emanuel, and Dave Coles. 2021. "The Person not the Method: An Essential Ingredient in Catalyzing a Movement." *Mission Frontiers* (July/August): 42–45.
- Prinz, Emanuel, and Alison Goldhor. 2022. "The Effective Catalyst: An Analysis of the Traits and Competencies of Pioneers Who Have Catalyzed a Movement." *Global Missiology* 19(1): 37–52.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 2005. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Waterman, L.D. 2011. "What is Church? From Surveying in Scripture to Applying in Culture." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 47(4): 460–67.