

SEEDBED

Practitioners in Conversation



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**Forming and Envisioning
Biblical Ekklesia**

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Forming and Envisioning Biblical Ekklesia

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Editorial



Editorial – A Bird’s-Eye View of the Issue

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.



Church planting among unreached peoples inevitably generates questions about the identity and practice of biblical church. Many books and theological resources on ecclesiology are tailored to the challenges and issues facing the Western church, failing to address the baffling questions practitioners face in least-reached areas. Conversely, some missional resources engaging practical issues lack theological depth and nuance on occasion.

What might it look like to combine a robust theology of the church with the best practical wisdom for fruitful church formation? This edition of Seedbed seeks to bring these two sources of wisdom into synergistic dialogue. The goal is to stimulate crucial conversations which yield fresh perspectives and practices for forming biblical, reproducing, transformational churches among unreached peoples.

- I begin the issue by [reflecting on key themes](#) which emerged from personal research on real-life examples of church formation in Muslim communities in the Middle East.

- Two fruitful practitioners share their distinctive [journeys](#) and [approaches](#) in helping groups form into churches, including how church identity relates to church health.
- An experienced leader with decades of experience [summarizes his experience and research](#) on helping church networks train pastors and thereby grow in both breadth and depth in church-planting movements.
- Another practitioner and leader currently based in Europe with experience in Muslim-majority contexts [suggests we reimagine](#) the way that legacy churches and “movemental” churches relate to and interact with one another.
- A practitioner and leader of teams in Africa [proposes sprinkling](#) as a more accessible, biblically-permissible mode of baptism for initiating believers into the body of Christ in challenging contexts.

In addition to these articles some practitioners [offer their summaries and analyses](#) of the practical relevance of several books, most of which look at the theology or practice of “church” in frontier contexts.

The conversations we cultivate in Seedbed are wide and deep—multi-organizational, multi-confessional, and multi-perspectival. The articles and reviews in Seedbed do not represent the views of the editorial team nor of Pioneers; we publish diverse perspectives to stimulate dialogue and healthy debate among practitioners on high-stakes issues in frontier church-planting.

Please share this resource freely with friends and colleagues. Feel free to reach out and to [connect with us](#), and to send us any [questions and feedback](#). For those interested in historical Seedbed conversations, archives from the year 2000 onward are [now available](#), easily browsable and searchable on the Seedbed website (with more to come).

May our conversations and reflections be honoring to the Lord and one another, deepen our love for and understanding of Christ's church, and lead to the formation and multiplication of vibrant, biblical churches among all peoples.

It is an honor to co-labor with you in the Lord's harvest.

Yours in Christ,

S.T. Antonio, with the Seedbed editorial team

Articles



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?

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A SEEDBED CONVERSATION**Church Identity
and Health: Two
Perspectives**

The following two articles represent two fruitful church-planting practitioners describing their particular approach to helping groups form into and identify as churches. The first offers his approach and key principles, and the second responds to the first piece with an overlapping, yet unique, perspective and practice of church formation.

"Does Jesus Think This Group is a Church?": Defining and Pursuing Church Identity and Health

By Howard Bell

Howard Bell (pseudonym) has worked as a church planter among Muslim unreached people groups since 2010 and as a Church-Planting Movements coach since 2012. He and his family currently live in South Asia where they focus on multiplying churches among one specific people group and location.

Helping groups of believers identify and function as churches is a key milestone in church planting among the least reached. In my experience, asking certain key questions is the simplest and most reproducible way to fruitfully facilitate this transition and growth process. One question in particular provokes fruitful discussion, a question I have asked dozens of times to people from various backgrounds: Syrians, Yemenis, Bosnians, Albanians, African Americans, suburban whites, and South Asians. "Does Jesus think this group is a church?" I ask with genuine curiosity and a desire to help them explore their own understanding and move forward as a group. Will they commit to growing into a healthy church? Or will they remain a Bible study, a seekers group, a cell group, a missional community, or one of the many other types of gatherings that are not explicitly "church"?

About 10 years ago on a video call, my mentor Chuck asked me this question for the first time, launching me into a deeper understanding of what church is and of my own discipleship community. After much discussion and reading several passages of Scripture including Matthew

18:20 and Acts 2:42–47, Chuck asked a follow-up question: “Are you willing to commit to being a healthy church together?”

Through years of coaching emerging groups and seeing many grow into healthy churches, I have grown to see the genius behind the question, “Does Jesus think this group is a church?” The question is not about what we think, but about what Jesus thinks. It puts the emphasis not on our opinions, but on our authorities—the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, through whom we have the mind of the Messiah. “Does Jesus think this group is a church?” moves a group towards the right discussion—a discussion about what our authorities say and who we are as a corporate body.

It is okay to respond “Yes” or “No” to the question; the discussion that follows is more important than the simple one-word answer. That discussion, if fruitful, can lead to the next question: “*Are we willing to make the commitment to be church together?*” If a group discussed giving, then they know that giving is part of that commitment in the future, if not now. If they discussed elders or leadership, then elders and leadership are part of that commitment in the future, if not now. These questions are more than just about our practice and discipleship; these questions get into our ecclesiology and our definitions of what church is and should be.

Identity in Christ Applied Corporately

If I ask a believer from the Global North how important our identity in Christ is, I can almost guarantee that they will affirm its importance, perhaps citing key Scriptures like 1 Pet. 2:9. Most of our discussions and resources about identity in Christ are primarily about individual identity, but 1 Pet. 2:9 and many other passages are actually about God’s people, the church, and our *corporate* identity in Christ: “But you (*plural*) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Discussing the term “church” (*ekklesia* in Greek) is beyond the scope of this article, but it is noncontroversial to note that the term meant a gathering, and in the New Testament it usually refers to the gathering or community of God’s people (Bauer 2001, 303–304). We need to rightly apply many of the verses and practical lessons we have learned about individual identity in Christ to our corporate identity in Christ as the church, the people of God.

When I teach about church planting, I like to get a volunteer (let’s call her “Shelly”) and place them in the middle of the room. I explain to my class: “Shelly is a new believer. But is she a ‘saint,’ one of God’s holy ones as defined by Paul in Ephesians 1:1?” The audience will unanimously nod. “But wait,” I say teasingly, “to be a healthy believer, she needs to read her Bible regularly. She is not really a saint yet. First, she must read her Bible regularly. And wait,” I continue, “she does not give regularly. Every saint should give, so she is not *really* a saint yet.” People naturally squirm at such claims.

We would never publicly speak of someone’s individual identity in Christ in this way because we know that identity is not earned; it is given. Forcing a new believer to perform to attain their identity and acceptance is wrong. It is so wrong that some would call it false teaching, a false gospel, or even spiritual abuse. Most of us have felt the sting of that error. Yet we often struggle to recognize when we make the same error about corporate identity in Christ.

Some coaches tell emerging gatherings of believers that first they must attain certain marks of maturity or health before they can be called a church. Some tell them that church is defined by adherence to certain standards or having certain elements present in a gathering. Doing this would be approaching sanctification backwards. It would be telling people to earn their health, maturity, or holiness.

In individual discipleship and counseling, we affirm what God has done in individuals’ lives, the gifts he has given, and the work he has

accomplished. We encourage new believers to grow into all the fullness of Christ because they are already children of God. In corporate discipleship and in working toward healthy churches, we must do the same. We must affirm what God has done in the life of the body, the gifts he has given the body of Christ, and the work He has accomplished. We should encourage them to grow into all the fullness of Christ because they are already the family of God.

Identity comes first, and part of that identity is that we are part of a whole, a member of the body of Christ, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation that is God's church.

Corporate Identity in Action

If identity comes first, then we are better able to activate these truths by encouraging the community of believers to fully engage in who God has called them to be. God has made us a holy priesthood, so we should act like it, living as priests in the kingdom of God. God made us His church, so we should act like his church, doing what the Bible teaches churches to do.

But church identity comes before church activity. If a gathering of believers thinks of themselves as a church, they will have greater motivation to "live out" and "live up to" to their identity as the church. If a gathering of believers thinks of themselves merely as a Bible study or missional community, they may not feel obligated to live out all that the Scriptures teach about the identity and functions of the church.

I am not making an argument about words or nomenclature per se. It does not matter so much what word you use but what your practice is and what it communicates about church identity. Whatever word your translation consistently uses for *ekklesia* is the word you should ask gatherings of believers about, as that is the word they will encounter in the Bible and can identify with.

The Scriptures do not refer to "Bible studies" or "prayer meetings" or "cell groups" or "missional communities," as such. I am sure that the

things those words describe were practiced in the New Testament, but they were done as functions of a local “church.” The church met for varied reasons, but it was always as the church—the body of Christ.

Every believer is a member of the universal church and ideally a part of a local church. Not every gathering needs to develop into a healthy church, but some of the Scriptures’ commands are unlikely to be fulfilled outside of local church participation. Do we give? Do we submit to leaders (Heb. 13:17)? Do we gather with believers regularly (Heb. 10:25)? Do we partake in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–24)? There is no discipleship outside of community, and the Bible calls God’s community of faith “church” (Addison 2012, 51). Most will find it necessary to gather with local believers in a gathering that functions as church to fulfill these commands; and the best way to get a group started in functioning as a church is to call it a church.

Without church identity there may not be much motivation to grow into full health and maturity. If our gathering is just a Bible study, why do the work it takes to become church? If our gathering is merely a “missional community,” why have Scriptural leadership that meets the qualification for biblical elders? But if our gathering is a church, we have clear prescriptions from Scripture on those decisions.

Committing to Healthy Church

A co-worker and I were going out together to share the good news about Jesus with our friends and neighbors when we met Melanie. Melanie was recovering from drug and alcohol abuse and came from a non-evangelical background but had some familiarity with Jesus. She loved the stories about Jesus that we verbally shared with her, and we asked if we could come to her house to study the Scriptures more. She agreed and introduced us to Stephan, the man she was living with and the father of her son. Stephan was also recovering from drugs but still abusing alcohol. We began to read the Bible together using an inductive Bible study method (Discovery Bible Study).

Then Arnold, who had recently been released from prison, joined the Bible study. He had a transforming spiritual experience with Jesus in prison but was struggling with relapse into drugs and alcohol. He was still full of zeal to share the gospel though, and he and Melanie continued to share with friends and neighbors. A few months into our study, I got a phone call that the neighbor had come over high on cocaine, and they needed help with him. The neighbor, Pedro, was a follower of a different world religion and had recently been released from prison. A few months later he repented and confessed his faith in the good news of Jesus.

We asked this group of believers, many of whom were still struggling with besetting sins, whether they believed the group that gathered in their house was a church. I do not know if I have ever seen a group affirm church identity more quickly than they did. This was their community of faith, full of people like them, in a building that was theirs, and Jesus met with them. Why couldn't it be church?

We asked them if they would commit to growing into a healthy church. They said yes, agreeing to do their best to obey Jesus' commands for church as they encountered them. In the months ahead we confessed our sins to one another, ate together, took the Lord's Supper together, and baptized new believers. It was both a thrilling season and a difficult one as different people came in and out of the church, and different people fell back into drugs.

I tell this story because it is one of the stories that is closest to my heart and mind. For me as a believer, it was one of the most transforming church experiences I have ever had. The story does not necessarily end well though. We never got to healthy leadership and appointing elders. Like many churches, our church had believers who struggled with sins and addictions, though perhaps in more open ways than some. We buried one of our members who died because of an overdose. Another member went back to prison. Stephan and Melanie still want to follow Jesus, but the church went in different directions, some people falling away for a season and some joining other churches.

Some people view such churches as lacking longevity in contrast to traditional churches. However, it is important to recognize that traditional churches that meet in buildings are also subject to turnover and change. Because the building stays the same everyone thinks it is the same church, but, in reality, people come and go, and pastors come and go. In many cases, it is the same building with different people. House churches may be affected by turnover in more visible ways, but both traditional churches and house churches are subject to change and turnover with the passing of time.

Often, I think there is another question hiding beneath the surface. Are these churches good enough, healthy enough to be “real” churches? Were Stephan, Melanie, Arnold, Pedro, Laija, Neil, and I meeting together good enough to be a “real” church? To me that is like asking if they were good enough to be “real” believers. No, they were not. Jesus died to make them so.

Apostolic Example

Often, I try to turn these questions around. Was the church in Corinth good enough, healthy enough to be a “real” church? What about the church in Galatia? They had sexual immorality, false teaching, greed, favoritism, inappropriate use of spiritual gifts, legalism, and many other sins in their congregations. Yet Paul writes beautiful things about their identity in Christ even as he warns them. He then uses the truth about their identity in Christ as leverage for teaching that will bring them to maturity. Paul did not use many of the methods Westerners use to try to prevent false teaching, such as demanding certain levels of education from leaders, or taking much more time to identify church. I suggest we dive back into the Scriptures to discover why, but one of my own conclusions is that Paul valued corporate identity in Christ and the priesthood of all believers more than many modern church cultures do.

A good question to ask of all our methods is, “Does this fit apostolic example?” Principles are eternal, but methods vary according to context.

While I see the apostles constantly talking about church identity and corporate identity of Christ in the epistles, we do not get a clear picture in Acts of when exactly the apostles decided to call a gathering a church.

One helpful example is the church in Thessalonica. Acts 17:1-9 records Paul's visit there, which is estimated to have been in 49-52 AD (Fee 2009, 38). Acts states that Paul stayed in Thessalonica for three sabbaths before fleeing by night, which meant that he spent about three to four weeks there proclaiming the gospel and discipling new believers. When he reached Athens, he sent Timothy to check on the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 3:1-2). First Thessalonians is widely considered the earliest of Paul's epistles, being commonly dated to the same year of his visit and before he returned to the area during his second missionary journey (ibid). First Thessalonians 1:1 and the rest of the epistle are not bashful about identifying the believers in Thessalonica as an *ekklesia* or church. It is possible that Paul calls them a church after only being with them for a few weeks, or that they were identified as a church at some point during Timothy's several months of ministry to them.

In contrast, while Paul spent just a few weeks in Thessalonica, he spent around three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). It seems unlikely to me that he waited for three years to ascribe church identity to the believers in Ephesus, because of his significant ministry partnership there and the fact that it was one of the few places where he met pre-existing disciples (Acts 19:1). It seems likely to me that Paul stayed in Ephesus as long as he did because it became a hub through which the gospel spread throughout all of Asia (Acts 19:10). While we might say it took Paul anywhere from three weeks to three years to plant a church, we should recognize that Paul was not hesitant to give church identity to gatherings of new believers.

What Counts and is Counted?

In my current context in South Asia, church identity is less of a struggle than it has been in Western contexts. The people group I work with has fewer church traditions, less education, and more input from

workers with a multiplication and outreach mindset. When the question “Does Jesus think this group is a church?” arises, they assess it simply with the information they have from the New Testament. They have less cultural baggage to bring to the table. On the other hand, “Will we commit together to being a healthy church?” seems to be as hard a question here as it is in the West. People take it seriously. Some believers do not want to commit to meeting together regularly. Some want a separate meeting space that seems more permanent and more secure. Others must travel a long distance to come. However, these challenges exist with most methods of church planting. For me and my colleagues in South Asia, this shift from thinking “Are we a church or not?” to “Will we commit to healthy church or not?” has been consistently fruitful both in planting more churches and planting churches with an intention to grow into healthy church.

In this context, cross-cultural laborers are much more likely to worry about the definition of church and what counts as church. I have heard some laborers who want certain marks of maturity before they will count it as a church regardless of what the church members or leaders say. I have heard others count every group that meets at least once a month with more than three people as a church regardless of what the participants say. My own method is to count groups that identify as church as “church.” Do they call themselves a church? If so, I do too. It is possible that I would find out more information that would lead me to believe they were actually not a church, such as a commitment to false teaching, but I take their claim in good faith unless I have a reason not to.

There are difficult cases where it is hard to know whether Jesus thinks a gathering is a church or not. A friend recently asked me, “What if only two people were meeting together calling themselves a church?” That seems unlikely to happen, but if they call themselves a church, I would not contradict them. I would say that it is unhealthy, and I would want to help them grow in health as soon as possible. I see no clear Scripture that says two people gathering cannot be a church, and walking

with such believers and encouraging them toward healthy church can be more effective than splitting hairs and imposing a uniform church definition. I want to encourage believers to find the answers from the Scriptures for themselves, and I do think our intention to be a church matters for church identity in practice. If people are a church in the eyes of Jesus, but do not know it and believe it, they will struggle to be a healthy church. My goal is to move the conversation on from “Are we a church, or aren’t we?” to “Are we a healthy church?” It is this latter question which is more important and more fruitful in helping groups commit to and pursue healthy church.

Will This Work?

Many will wonder if these questions would work for them in their context. I cannot answer for certain, and methods need to be adapted to specific contexts. However, corporate identity in Christ and the priesthood of all believers are principles drawn from Scripture, and whatever method we use must be consistent with those truths and values.

A friend of mine, Andrew, once told a story from his hockey-playing days. He was one of the best skaters on his team, so he was surprised when the coach called him over and told him, “I have a problem with the way you skate.”

“Okay,” he said. “What’s the problem?”

“You never fall down,” his coach said. “If you never fall, it means you aren’t trying hard enough. You are trying to be perfect.”

The coach’s lesson has a lot to teach us about ministry and church planting. We need to fail more. We need to be willing to try more things and be biased towards action. Failing in ministry can produce bad fruit, and it can hurt people. But “failures” in ministry and church planting can also produce great fruit. That is part of why I told the story about the church at Melanie and Stephan’s house. That church does not meet

anymore. It folded or “failed” by traditional human standards. But the lessons learned in that church live on in the people who were a part of it because God was at work. They did not come away from that experience burned or hurt. They came away from it as better disciples of Jesus, and even though they are parts of different communities of faith now, I do not regret that church plant or its failure.

If you want to know if these questions will work, you must ask them. Not once, but many times. When it comes to sharing the good news about Jesus, we should know by now that it requires many shares to see fruit. Sharing once without visible fruit is not proof that it does not work. The same is true for church planting. We must throw many seeds and plant many times to see lasting fruit, and perfectionism does not help us. We must start with the people we have at the degree of health that they have, and we must give them the identity that Christ has purchased for them, not just as individuals, but also as the community of faith the Scriptures call church.

Questions for Conversation

1. Do you agree with the author that church identity comes before church activity?
2. How do you define church? How do you distinguish biblical essentials from secondary, cultural aspects of church?
3. What do you think of the author’s two questions for helping groups transition into churches? Are there other ideas or tools you have found helpful in this area?

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Further Reflections on Church Formation, Identity, and Health: A Response to “Does Jesus Think This Group is a Church?”

By Neil Van Hyderstadt

Neil Van Hyderstadt (pseudonym) currently resides in the MENA region where he focuses on an expansion of movements across the region. Since the late 1990s, the Lord has taken him to over 30 countries and has given him the incredible privilege of working with some remarkable brothers and sisters whom God is using to do amazing movement work in the world today.

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It is encouraging to see a desire among many CPM practitioners for an authentic expression of biblical community. There is no singular cookie-cutter approach in all movements, but rather a beautiful diversity of expressions among different practitioners wrestling with the process and journey of believers being reborn, coming into the family of Christ, and becoming a body. The commonalities and uniquenesses among movement practitioners gives us great opportunity to learn together in a spirit of “iron-sharpening-iron.”

My Journey with Church Formation

I have been wrestling with biblical church formation for many years in various contexts. Shortly after coming to faith as a young adult in the United States, I helped get others into groups to read the Word of God.

Over a few years, our community saw these groups multiply into dozens of groups, some reproducing up to the third and fourth generation.¹ We experimented a lot. Our model of group went through about nine different iterations in the process of learning how to reach more lost people and equip more leaders. It was so much fun seeing people become believers and get baptized.

I next moved to Asia, and it was there that God began to help me understand group multiplication at a much deeper level. It felt like I was living in the book of Acts. Working with local brothers and sisters from different backgrounds, we saw multi-generational group reproduction with multiple people groups across the country. The resulting new churches were sometimes an eclectic mixture of traditional church and house church, with varying expressions in different regions across the country.

When I left Asia, I worked as a global ministries pastor in a mega-church trying to mobilize and train people to start movements. After some time, God finally opened the door for my family to relocate to the MENA region, where I am based currently. I personally work in an active coaching role with multiple different networks that are at fourth-generation reproduction or greater. I also have connections with dozens of other movements through peer relationships.

All along this journey in the United States, Asia, and the MENA region, we have been wrestling with Scripture and how to develop the best expression of biblical church in each local context we are in. In all these places, we have seen multi-generational groups becoming churches and multiplying. It has not looked the same in each place, and we ourselves have been on a journey of learning.

1 I do not recall now exactly how many groups reached to this level. We were learning and experimenting so much at this time. I remember one time when one of our groups somehow started a new group in India and realizing it was a fourth generation group. These types of experiences helped me see how much things were expanding, but even the idea of drawing a generational tree chart was still novel for us at that time.

Who are We? The Identity Question

There is a lot I appreciated about the article, “Does Jesus Think This Group is a Church?” This is such a beautiful question, and I look forward to using it myself in the future. I would add that it is good to recognize that there are at least two questions involved in defining a group’s identity: “What does *Jesus* say we are?” and “What do we say we are?” Ideally, we should answer the second question *through* the first question. When we say, “We are the church,” the hope is that we have a biblically accurate understanding of what it means to be a biblical community or *ekklesia*.

In our experience, these identity questions arise naturally in the process a group goes through as they journey toward Jesus. When a group of seekers studying the Word begins to believe the message of the gospel, the question of personal identity naturally arises: “Now that I believe in this message, what does that make me?” Some begin identifying as “followers of Jesus” or “followers of the Messiah” or “the Way” or “Christians” (or whatever term they may use).

However, this personal identity question quite naturally gives way to a *corporate* identity question: “Now that we are followers of Jesus, what are we? What does this make our community that meets with regularity?” These questions come up organically (and the process is helped by the group members seeing *church* in their regular study of the Word of God).

No two groups are the same. Some start asking the question, “Who are we?” concurrently with, or immediately following, the question, “What do we believe?” Others do so later, but it is a natural question that groups begin asking as a part of their wrestling with their new identity as believers. In my experience, I can often anticipate when a group will start wrestling with this corporate identity question. All groups are different, and there might be variation of weeks, and possibly months, but not

years. I can safely say that in any given group studying the Word the issue *will* come up, and often soon after (or around) the time they become believers.²

As they begin to wrestle with their identity, we point them to the Scriptures (as we do from the beginning of their faith journey). In the networks I am connected with, the dominant passage we look at is Acts 2:37–47. As they study this passage, something happens. They start to recognize expressions of their group experience in the biblical story. They say, “Wait, that’s kind of like *us*! We are like them. What’s that called? That’s the early church.” And they start to see themselves like the early church in *their* area. Thus, a new corporate identity realization emerges (“We are a body”), *usually following* the personal identity realization (“We are followers of the Message”).

Bringing Church Health and Identity Together

I would argue that we do not want unhealthy, unbiblical groups calling themselves churches. We do not want groups saying, “Hey, we’re a church!” but then when you look at them, they do not reflect the biblical church.

Some initial unhealthiness is normal and should be expected. We learn from Paul’s epistles that new churches usually have issues. But if some core pieces of church are missing, it is a different story. We do not want a group claiming to be a church that is not even reading the Word of God, for example, or that is not praying, or that is not baptized yet. Ideally if a group is not yet meeting the basic descriptors of a biblical church, they would not be calling themselves churches yet. I would argue that such a

2 Among the millions of groups in movements around the world, there will always be some outliers. There will be some groups that never ask the question, “Who are we” and you must prompt it, and there will be others who might ask the question before they are even baptized believers. But I am describing here what are the most common, normal processes that many other movement practitioners and I are seeing.

situation is not helpful for anyone—not for them and not for lost people on the outside looking in.

Group health and church identity should go hand-in-hand. In a healthy process, we are not saying, “Do these things and become healthy, so that you can qualify as a church.” Nor are we saying, “You’re a church now, so go and start doing these things.” Rather than one driving the other, these two legs walk together in the groups we work with, and we end up with healthy communities that are deriving their identity and their practice from the Scriptures. That is what we are aiming for, and it is what we often see being practiced in the networks I am associated with.

How does this work? We build towards church formation early, and then we fill in the gaps.

Healthy Church Formation From Day One

Our approach is not to build towards church health only after they start asking the identity questions. If we want them to arrive at becoming a healthy biblical church (e.g., the picture we find in Acts 2), then we should prepare them for that from the beginning.

To help them develop all the functions of a healthy church, we seek to build these aspects into the “DNA” of the discovery groups (or Bible study groups) from the beginning. That way, when they arrive at the “who are we?” question, they have already been practicing several of the things we want to see a biblical church do.

We do not want to get to the point of identifying as a church and only then say, “we’re a church, so we should start praying now,” or, “we should start getting everyone baptized,” or, “we should start getting into the Word of God now.” Instead, we want to build towards all those practices from the beginning of their faith journey. Then, once they arrive at the “who are we?” question and wrestle with the Scriptures, they see they match the biblical community we know of as “church” and can begin to identify themselves as such.

Thus, when they start asking these corporate questions, they will already have many of the characteristics of a good, healthy, biblical church, because we have built them into the “DNA” of the discovery groups in which they have been participating.

Church Circles: Filling in the Gaps

Not every piece of the puzzle needs to be perfectly aligned for a group to be a church. Rarely would we say that a new church is biblically perfect. As groups benchmark themselves to the scriptural examples of biblical church and community, sometimes there will be gaps.

Because of those gaps, we often do something we call “Church Circles.” When they are asking the corporate identity question, “Who are we?”, we will have them study Acts 2:37–47. From their observations, the group members will list all the characteristics of the early church in the passage. Then we will have them compare their group to the biblical community in Acts. We have them draw a circle, and inside the circle they will write all the characteristics from their Acts 2 list that are already reflected in their group. Outside of the circle, they will write the things that are not reflected in their group. In the process, the Word and the Spirit shine a light on their community through the lens of the early church.

In places where they have gaps (those items that are outside of their circle), we can do additional studies as needed, looking at other passages which give more in-depth teaching on those gaps. For example, if the Lord’s Supper is something they are lacking, we may focus on 1 Corinthians 11. Because they are already using a discovery-based, application-based study pattern which includes putting into practice what they are learning, they will likely say, “Let’s obey this as a community. Let’s practice the Lord’s Supper.”

After they have worked through any gaps, then they will usually say something like, “We’re doing what they were doing; we believe what they believed. We’re like *this biblical community*, but 2,000 years later. We’re the early church in *our* location, in *our* generation.”

Putting the Pieces Together

The formation of church health and identity involves a process with multiple strands coming together. It is like the way biblical saving faith involves not just one belief but many layers of belief that come together gradually over time: the existence of a Creator God, our need for forgiveness, God's provision of a sacrifice, Jesus as Messiah, Jesus as risen Lord, etc. Saving faith involves all these strands coming together for people. For some, all these aspects come together quickly; for others, it takes more time. It is a process of all these little faith steps leading up to what we hope is a well-rounded, biblical faith. It does not happen overnight; it takes time.

The same process is happening in a communal sense as well. Some groups put all the pieces together more quickly, and for some it takes a little bit longer. But they gradually put these practices and faith ideas into place. Maybe they start by meeting regularly and seeing each other as a community. Then they come to identify as believers, and as they continue to mature, they take the major step of identifying as a church. In other words, just because a group recognizes they are all believers and even gathers regularly or serves together, this does not inherently make them a local church—the corporate self-identity as church also needs to be in place.

A group of believers might even recognize they are part of the “global church,” but they do not function or identify as a local church. Being a church is more than just doing all the church functions (meeting together, being believers, being baptized, etc.). There is an added element that the group is joining together *as a body*, fulfilling the one-anothers and seeing themselves as a biblical unit.

For example, there may be a ministry team that does many of the “church functions” together but they do not identify themselves as a church. They simply identify themselves as a *team*. On the other hand, a different team might say, “We are some of the only believers in our city,

we regularly fellowship together, pray together, and serve together; let's identify and function as a church here." There is an additional commitment involved, sort of like a marriage, when two people come together and commit to forming a family together.

A group must make a commitment to be the body together. It is this self-identifying commitment that makes the difference. A group becomes a church when they say and acknowledge, "We are a church." They do that when they read the Word and commit to living out "biblical church" together.

It is an iterative, step-by-step process, like putting the pieces of a puzzle together. Once they cross that line and become a church, even if they are fulfilling all the foundational tasks of church, we still want them to become progressively more healthy as a biblical community.

In our process, we often have a "Creation to Christ" study series, a "Decision" study series which culminates in a decision to follow Christ, and then a "Church Formation" study series (or sometimes these two series are combined, but all the concepts are still there). After this, we often move to two series called "Healthy Church" and "Healthy Disciples." They are two separate series, but we often go back and forth, because we want both healthy disciples and churches, not just one or the other. We want both to happen concurrently, so believers are growing individually and corporately, in healthy practice and identity.

Identity at Multiple Levels

Also, in the New Testament, "church" happens at multiple levels. It can be expressed at the "house church" level, at the level of a *cluster* of house churches, at the "city" level, and finally at the "global" level. In light of this, it is important for groups to understand, not only that they are the church in the local sense in their home, but that they are also part of the city-level church and the global church. These are part of the many biblical pieces that come together as groups become churches.

All of these factors contribute to a growing corporate understanding of “who are we?” as they discover biblical truths. This helps them not only to take the step of identifying as church, but also to continue to understand in increasing depth what that means as they grow as a church.

Elders and Church Formation

The issue of elders is also important. We want elders overseeing the churches, but how this happens can vary some. In larger house churches, each church might have elders, but in many of the environments where movements are occurring, the average group size is somewhat smaller. So, often elders will be appointed at the cluster level. Thus, a couple of elders might oversee a cluster of four to six home groups/churches. Whatever the case, elders should be overseeing the groups, so that in the third, fourth, and fifth generations, there are elders spread throughout the network, helping to ensure group health and “DNA”.

Ideally, churches have elders at either the cluster or city level. But what about for a first-generation group? Are they ready to put forward elders right away? When Paul sent Titus to Crete, it seems there were some churches that did not have elders yet (Titus 1:5). It appears that sometimes there is a delay in appointing elders (see also Acts 14:23). When first generation groups take the step of identifying as a church community, they might not yet be ready to have leaders—particularly a plurality of leaders—that meet the full definition of elder. Just like the church-formation journey, this is a process by which the group, over time, studies and applies the biblical teachings on eldership, so that when someone is appointed elder, they fit the biblical definition.

When does this need to happen? After one month, a few months, or six months? Our approach is to pay attention to when we see the Spirit working, the timing seems right, people are asking about these topics, and elder-quality leaders are emerging. The important focus is not the precise timing, but the principle that we want to see biblical elders in place, and we do not want that to take longer than it needs to.

A Critical Part of the Journey

When a group takes the step of identifying as a church, they've entered a new level in their journey. Many practitioners would agree that something special happens then. They have this sense that *we are the local expression of the body of Christ, we are the church*. It is a powerful thing, a deepening of their identity, individually and corporately. It reflects the ongoing work that Christ does in our lives.

They are of course still growing in their spiritual gifts, their leadership gifts, and their serving of one another. Furthermore, we want them to become even healthier than what they are—churches which are more impactful, more godly, and more Christlike. So, they will continue along that journey, even as we celebrate this step of identifying as a church as a powerful, critical milestone.

This step can also help them grow their vision for creating more communities like themselves. Now that they are a church, they do not want to be the only one. Who wants that? They desire other groups like themselves as well. Furthermore, when churches multiply and help start other churches, this too expresses their identity. As the body of Christ, they are joining with the Lord in doing the work of Christ here on earth.

Throughout all these steps, there is a healthy process in which piece by piece, brick by brick, transformation by transformation, conviction by conviction, the Scripture and the Holy Spirit are working within people, both individually and corporately, to increasingly renew them from the brokenness in the world to beautifully-redeemed communities that are multiplying and spreading the goodness of Christ and his message as they make disciples. It is a journey that has important transitions along the way. Christ teaches us both through the journey and the transitions. We can see Jesus doing that with his disciples; they were a work-in-progress. We are a work-in-progress also, as are these new churches. It is an exciting journey to be on! It is encouraging to see fruitful movement practitioners

like Howard Bell graciously sharing his experiences of how God is using him and his team to be a part of God's great work. I hope that the sharing of our experiences is also helpful.

Questions for Conversation

1. Compare this article to the previous article by Howard Bell. What are the similarities and differences in approach to understanding church formation and identity?
2. What are the most helpful insights from these two articles? In what ways could you apply and adapt these insights in your current context?
3. When do you think a group should begin calling itself a "church"? Unpack the reasons for your perspective.

Sustaining Healthy Churches in Movements: Leveraging the Five Roles of Ephesians 4 for Multiplying Leaders in CPMs

By Todd Lafferty

Dr. Todd Lafferty has served with the International Mission Board (IMB) for 32 years. His first assignment was in Scotland from 1983–85 and beginning in 1991, he and his wife served in Thailand, Pakistan, Indonesia, Singapore, India, and Malaysia. They currently live in Richmond, VA, where Todd serves as the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the IMB.



The subject of Church-Planting Movements (CPMs) has proven to be polarizing among missiologists and church planters over the past 25 years. Some embrace CPM strategies, while others hold a more critical assessment. This polarization is especially true in Asia, where many CPMs have been reported and where we served for 27 years.

Unfortunately, critics and proponents have drawn up sides in this debate, resulting in an untold number of journal articles and books advocating for one approach or the other, and even attacking the other. Even worse, the polarization has brought division between colleagues on the field.

One question raised in this conversation relates to long-term health and leadership training in CPMs. Is it possible to train pastors and teachers within movements in such a way that the number of leaders keeps pace with the multiplication of churches? If churches begin

multiplying, how might the missionary find ways to strengthen movement health without slowing the movement of people coming to faith and churches being formed?

Not a New Debate

It is good to remember this is no recent area of disagreement in the mission community. In the 1890s, a disagreement arose among the missionaries in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India, regarding whether to slow a movement down to adequately teach all those who had been baptized or continue to facilitate the growth of the movements (Stock and Stock 1975). As the UP Mission struggled over this issue as it developed strategy, Robert Stewart argued:

some express the conviction that they ought not to baptize any more applicants for baptism than they are able to afterwards train properly or care for—in other words, keep Christ’s lambs out of the fold until that fold is enlarged and put in order, so that every member of the flock can be systematically fed and nicely housed—as if these lambs would not do better in the church than in the world anyhow, however imperfect the former might be, or as if the Lord would make a mistake in regenerating people too fast and would not, in His providence and by His grace, make abundant provision for the spiritual nourishment and the highest welfare of all His new-born children. (Stewart 1896)

Fred Stock, in his book *People Movements in the Punjab*, asserts that “quantity, rather than reducing quality, was used by God’s Spirit to create a vital growing fellowship so essential to spiritual depth” (Stock and Stock 1975). He affirms that God is definitely interested in numerical growth and that “we are called not just to be faithful, but to win people” (ibid.). The goal, according to Stock, should be both quality and quantity. He argues that “God is not content with a few highly polished ‘quality’ Christians, but opens His arms to gather in all who will come” (Obrien 2012).

My Personal Interest in the Topic

Throughout our ministry in Pakistan, I served as the pastor of the International Church of Karachi and as an evangelist among Muslims. We only saw a few Muslims come to faith in Christ during that time, but we made progress with a small house-church plant in the city. In our final two years in Karachi, my secondary role transitioned to IMB Strategy Coordinator, with the goal of planting churches among every people group in the city of Karachi. In that role, we mobilized, trained, and partnered with local believers and missionaries in Karachi to plant churches among Muslims from various people groups.

During the late 1990s, missionaries working in East Asia and South Asia developed strategies based on *Garrison's Ten Universals of CPMs* (Garrison 2004). Leaders and missionaries with the IMB working in areas that were experiencing CPMs introduced those new strategies throughout the IMB in trainings and workshops. Leaders expressed the expectation that field workers should experience CPMs within a couple of years of implementing the new strategies.

Although we implemented CPM strategies in Karachi, we did not experience a CPM in our work. Despite the fact that movements did not emerge wherever CPM methodologies were implemented, leaders considered CPM strategies the best way to initiate movements (ibid.). The IMB home office and field-based leadership held that if one implemented methodologies that led to CPMs in some places, then the implementation of those methods in other places would likely lead to CPMs.

After serving in Karachi for eight years, I transitioned to the IMB home office. While serving there, I interacted with field leaders from around the world and continued to hear stories of CPMs that were emerging in East Asia and Cuba. No CPMs had yet been reported among Muslim people groups.

Three years later, in 2003, we transitioned back to the field, this time as an IMB field leader (Strategy Associate) for the Muslim work

in Southeast Asia. The large movement in Asia led by Ying and Grace Kai continually received attention as a rapidly growing CPM, but other movements also began to emerge (Smith and Kai 2011; Watson 2008; Greeson 2010). Our leadership team, working among Muslims in Southeast Asia, started praying for similar breakthroughs.

Shortly after attending Strategy Coordinator training in Indonesia, an IMB seminary professor serving in Indonesia started working among an unengaged, unreached people group on the island of Java. Through the efforts of his team, 150 Muslims came to faith in Christ within the first six months of starting that work (Shipman 2015). As the movement of new believers continued to grow, several missionaries in Indonesia met to discuss how to move forward with planting reproducing churches and develop a training package for new believers and emerging leaders that could be used among all Muslims in Southeast Asia when they started coming to faith in Christ.

In July 2009, after being appointed to lead the Affinity of South Asian Peoples, I selected a leadership team and together we developed an overall strategy to begin reaching the 598 unengaged, unreached people groups, 345 of which were over one hundred thousand in population (International Mission Board 2010). In eight years, over three hundred unengaged, unreached people groups were engaged with the gospel, and several CPMs emerged among unreached people groups in South Asia as a result of implementing our overall strategy plan (International Mission Board 2016).

The rest of this article outlines the contours of this simple strategy plan, easily drawn on a piece of paper, which provided field leaders with a tool to evaluate strategy plans developed by new team leaders. When a God-ordained movement begins among a people group, we must do all we can to keep pace with how the Lord is moving among formerly lost peoples. One important aspect is to make certain that leaders are being trained within emerging churches. To do that, we must tap into the gifts and roles given to the church that the apostle Paul clearly articulates in Eph. 4:11–13.

The Five Roles (Eph. 4:11)

Several scholars affirm the ongoing role of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers in our day. A body of literature has emerged in recent years advocating a focus on the *fivefold* gift mix of Eph. 4:11. Some call it APEST (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd, Teacher), and others the “fivefold” ministry, or “5Q.” For the purposes of this article, *five roles* will be used. All five gifts need to be present in both local churches and church-planting teams, especially once a CPM emerges among a people group.

In *The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions*, missiologist-practitioner Don Dent focuses on God’s ongoing gift of the apostle in the initial stages of church planting as the initiator for spreading the gospel and planting multiple reproducing churches among unreached people groups (Dent 2019). However, the apostolically-gifted worker desiring to see sustainable churches within an emerging CPM must focus on developing a team of missionaries with other gifts to nurture the young churches within movements. For example, missionaries with giftings such as shepherding and teaching are needed to train local pastors and teachers to lead the new churches.

As a CPM grows, the number of pastors and teachers must also grow to keep pace with the churches being planted. In South Asia, we recognized that we needed a new role to solve the church leadership development problem.

Movement-Strengthening Strategist

In 2009, we were seeing many movements emerging among Hindu peoples, but only limited attention was being given to training pastors and teachers. As a result, churches did not continue to multiply, and movements were not sustained over time. More attention needed to be directed toward the equipping role (Eph. 4:12), so that those gifted as pastors and teachers would multiply others in the movement with those gifts.

To address this problem, the Movement-Strengthening Strategist (MSS) role was created. The core aspect of the MSS role is to equip pastors and teachers within movements of multiplying disciples and churches. Sometimes the MSS ensured that training was passed on from generation to generation by the pastors and teachers who received training, who in turn trained the next generation of leaders, and so on. At other times, the MSS found that they needed to train pastors and teachers down through the generations of churches themselves. Often, the MSSs mentored national partners gifted in shepherding and teaching into these MSS roles. Many national MSSs have been empowered to do this work across South Asia by IMB leaders.

One concrete example is a South Asian missionary who has taken leadership training materials for pastors and teachers and distributed it out across nine networks of multiplying churches. Each of those networks now have national MSSs that have been developed. This year, those MSSs jointly held the first “North India MSS Team” meeting, led by two mature Indian leaders, where they crosspollinated across their networks and discussed key issues. Those nine networks are training more than two thousand pastors annually, not including the pastors and teachers who are repeating this teaching and training by those MSSs.¹

The Movement-Strengthening Strategist must have a mindset of urgency in order to multiply the training of pastors and teachers who serve as elders in the emerging churches. Elders must be appointed and trained at the same pace new churches are multiplying within the movement, such that the health and sustainability of the churches are more likely to be maintained. Through all five roles working in concert, a movement of healthy churches is more likely to be sustained over time.

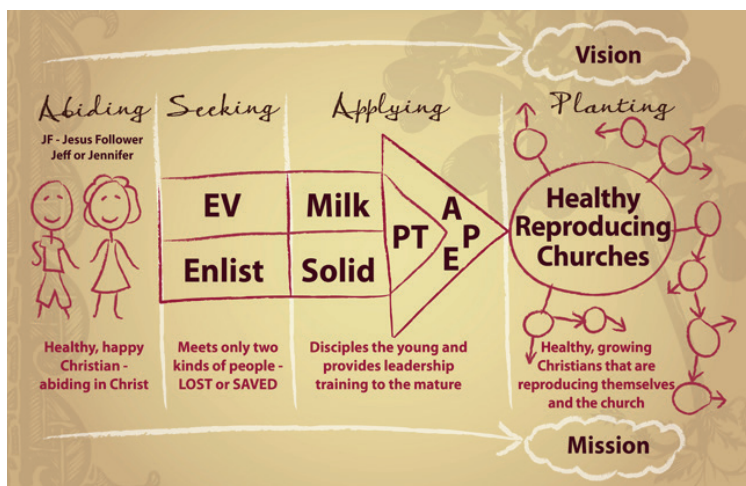
1 J.H., email correspondence with author, April 21, 2022. J.H. has served over fifteen years in South Asia and currently serves as an IMB Cluster Leader in South Asia.

The Five Roles in CPMs

The five roles in Eph. 4:11 (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor/shepherd, and teacher) need to be examined more closely to determine the part they play in the growth and health of churches and the CPMs in which they are involved. In order to keep this in the forefront of our thinking, we developed a simple strategy that took into account all five roles, easily drawn on a piece of paper. This diagram provided field leaders with a tool to evaluate strategy plans developed by new team leaders.

The plan, known as the ASAP (Abiding, Seeking, Applying, and Planting) Plan, included Eph. 4:11 in the diagram, affirming the need to identify and develop people in every church and movement around the five roles found in the verse: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

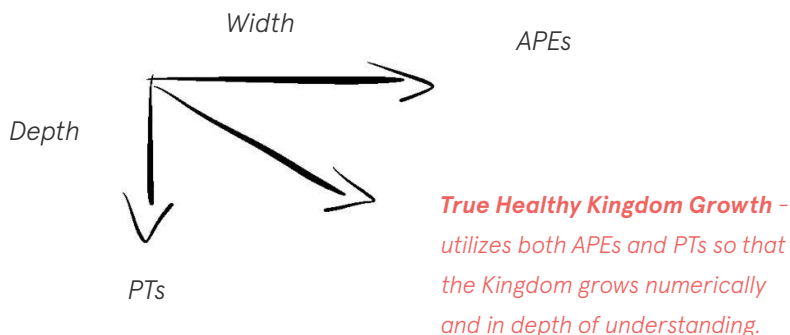
ASAP Strategy Plan—Abiding, Seeking, Applying, Planting!



Through our work in the field, we found that apostles, prophets, and evangelists (APEs) keep pushing the movement further and wider while pastors and teachers (PTs) continue to deepen the health of the churches within the movement (Roderick 2019). The key is getting buy-in from expat and national workers with all five giftings with the goal of

holding both perspectives in tension so that one does not overpower the other. What do those five roles look like on the field serving in concert with one another? (Wilson and Houk 2017)

Kingdom Growth



The Role of the Apostle

The function of modern-day apostles is to establish churches in areas that have not been reached by others. Modern-day apostles are not to be equated with “the Twelve” but are closer to what many Christians refer to as pioneer church planters or church-planting missionaries. Hirsch describes the apostle as the architect. The biblical word is “master builder” (Greek *archetekton* in 1 Cor. 3:10; Hirsch and Catchim 2012). *Arche* refers to origin or first and *tekton* refers to a craftsman or someone who plans out a design.

Architects in the first century not only designed the building but directed the process of construction. Jens Kaldeway asserts that if there is no apostle involved in the work, the building supplies will not be utilized since no one else will initiate the work and oversee the church-planting efforts (Kaldeway 2007). A “master builder,” or modern-day apostle, refers to a hands-on leader directing the process of planting new churches in a city, region, or people-group cluster.

In the midst of a CPM, the “master builder” keeps the breadth and depth of the church-planting task in view. The “master builder” knows

that new believers need to be disciplined and leaders need to be trained; they know where the work needs to move forward into new territory. These apostles pay attention to the overall health of the churches that are emerging in CPMs. They know when to focus on the work among people groups where disciples and churches are already multiplying and when to expand toward new pioneering efforts among new people groups.

The Role of the Prophet

What is the role of the modern-day prophet in the midst of a CPM? In no way should we affirm a modern-day prophet speaking a word from the Lord at the same level of inspiration as an Old Testament prophet (Stott 1979). This gift provides encouragement in the churches being planted, especially in areas of intense opposition. Although the work of the prophet is primarily to encourage believers (1 Cor. 14:22), Paul also explains that God can reveal the secrets of the heart of an unbeliever to a prophet, which results in that person turning and following Christ (1 Cor. 14:24–25).

The role of the prophet within a CPM might serve multiple purposes. As new disciples are made from people who come to Christ from non-Christian backgrounds, they may need someone who can speak truth to them regarding their old way of life. For example, someone might be hanging on to an idol in their home that ought to be cast out. The gap between the mature man of God as mentioned in Eph. 4:13 and the childish believer who is tossed back and forth by the waves in Eph. 4:14 can be pointed out by a prophet. In so doing, the prophet helps new believers and churches grow and mature so that they, in turn, can make disciples in their community and beyond.

The Role of the Evangelist

Even though all Christians are enjoined to share the gospel, there is a special gift endowed upon some in the area of evangelism. It may be expressed in several different ways such as being a gifted evangelistic

preacher, explaining the gospel clearly to unbelievers, helping timorous people place their faith in Christ, or engaging in personal evangelism in an effective way (Stott 1979).

Evangelists are not limited to itinerant preaching. Many are working within established congregations. Paul served as an evangelist and encouraged Timothy to do the work of an evangelist in Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:5). In addition to personally proclaiming the gospel, evangelists equip others to share their faith so that they might grow in the Lord and in turn share the gospel with lost people (Eph. 4:12). The work of the evangelist covers a wide range of activities such as primary evangelism, planting churches, and training Christians to share their faith. Sustained evangelistic outreach is a characteristic of CPMs.

The Role of the Pastor/Shepherd

The term pastor is rare in the New Testament. In fact, Eph. 4:11 is the only place *poimen* (pastor/shepherd) is used to describe the work of a church leader. Thielman states that “in Eph. 4:11 the pastors were probably leaders within the Christian communities who held positions of authority and were charged with the community’s well-being” (2010, 276).

The model for the shepherding role is Jesus the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18). Some characteristics of shepherding that Jesus displayed are (1) knowing people personally and intimately (John 10:3, 14), (2) leading them well (John 10:4), (3) protecting them from thieves, robbers, and wolves (John 10:7–13), and (4) loving them so much that one would sacrifice their life for them, unlike the hired hand who runs away when trouble comes (John 10:11–13, 15).

In the midst of a CPM, it is vital to have shepherds caring for the many new sheep who are entering the kingdom. The outside missionary should shepherd the shepherds, not the sheep. Otherwise, the movement may grow dependent on outsiders and thus cripple the long-term health of the emerging churches. The Movement-Strengthening Strategist raises up and equips local shepherds to do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:12).

The Role of the Teacher

By the time Jesus was born, the role of the teaching Rabbi was well established in Jewish life and culture (Hirsch 2017). There seems to have been a group who specialized in teaching (1 Thess. 5:12; Gal. 6:6; 1 Cor. 12:28–29; Rom. 12:7; Acts 13:1; James 3:1), who instructed the church in “the teaching” (1 Tim. 6:1). “The teaching” refers to the message, including the doctrine, that the church received as instruction (Thielman 2010). Paul points out the problem of false teaching in Eph. 4:14 and makes it clear that teachers play a key role to help mature the body of Christ.

As the churches in Asia Minor continued to reach many Gentiles with the gospel, the need for the multiplication of teachers continued to be great (Schnabel 2012). The Gentiles did not have the foundation of the Old Testament that the Jewish believers had, so the need to multiply teachers to provide ample training for the Gentiles continued to be critical. Furthermore, the teachers exhorted hearers to live out the teaching in their lives (Arnold 2010).

In the same way, the role of the teacher is crucial in a CPM among an unreached people group who have little to no previous exposure to the gospel. Transmission of biblical teaching and training must be instilled in the first generation, then passed on to the next. Therefore, the teaching function must take into account the prevailing way a people group thinks on various issues and be able to pass on a biblical worldview. In order to incorporate this type of training at the grassroots level, elders must be chosen to lead the churches.

Multiplying Pastors/Shepherds and Teachers in CPMs

Choosing elders with the gifts of pastoring and teaching is one of the most important decisions for local churches. The members of the local church, often in consultation with the church planter, need to choose who will teach and shepherd the local church. In Acts, elders are

chosen to lead those new churches after a period has elapsed and their character is known. When Paul and Barnabas returned several months later to those churches that they had planted, they appointed elders to equip the church for the work of the ministry (Acts 14:23; Eph. 4:11–12).

Appointing elders helped churches continue to grow in a healthy manner. The apostolic team knew the importance of choosing local leaders recognized by the congregation. Paul modeled how to appoint elders by praying and fasting with the local body during this process (Acts 14:23). Paul sent Titus to Crete to appoint elders in all the churches on that island because he had not appointed elders during his visit there (Titus 1:5).

Extra-biblical Requirements for Leaders in Movements

Due to long-held traditions, leaders from established churches often lay extra-biblical requirements on leaders of newly established churches among unreached people groups. New believers and leaders are often tempted to compare themselves to those long-established churches that have buildings, programs, and budgets. In South Asia, spoken and unspoken assumptions of what is required to be a leader of a church often do not follow biblical requirements.

Several extra-biblical requirements identified by field practitioners need to be considered when planting churches. Some of these requirements include formal educational requirements, building requirements, and receiving ordination to serve as a pastor. While the motivation may be to safeguard the church so that it becomes a healthy church, such requirements are extra-biblical and may tend to impede the growth of the newly planted churches.

Biblical Role and Characteristics of Elders

Paul describes several character qualities elders are expected to exhibit or avoid in 1 Tim. 3:1–7. Shepherding is another characteristic of elders (Matt. 9:37–11:1; John 21:15–17; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2–3).

Leadership qualities should be evident in the elders chosen to lead the churches; terms used to describe elders are overseers (1 Tim. 3:1), stewards (Luke 12:42), and leaders with authority to lead (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Preaching and teaching is another characteristic that ought to be evident in the ministry of the elder (1 Tim. 3:2).

The five roles ought to be represented on the leadership team in churches (Eph. 4:11), and this includes the elders. In CPMs, churches need to have such leaders so that they continue to grow in a healthy manner and focus on reaching lost people. The apostles, prophets, and evangelists (APEs) will likely engage in an itinerant ministry, and the pastors and teachers (PTs) will be more localized in their work, serving primarily as local church elders.

Phil Newton and Matt Schmucker posit that the missionary in the midst of a CPM needs to quickly implement a leadership structure that will continue on without their ongoing presence (Newton and Schmucker 2014). I contend that the local leadership team, like the missionary team, should have all five roles given to the church for the equipping of the saints (Eph. 4:11).

By developing this leadership structure, missionary teams and churches will continue to raise up and develop local leaders in larger numbers and help them grow deeper in the knowledge of the word. Newton and Schmucker argue that if the missionaries will “train the trainers in the local places ... seminary training, while advantageous, is not essential. Local leaders can be taught doctrine, pastoral skills, and contextualized ecclesiology over time” (ibid., 229).

Conclusion

For many years I have read and listened to people on both sides of the CPM debate speaking past each other, missing one another’s passion for the greater desire of seeing God’s glory come among the nations. If those on both sides of the debate would take the time to sit with someone on the other side and listen, I think we would make progress

in bringing these two sides of the missiological table closer together. My desire over the years, which continues to this day, is to see healthy, reproducing churches multiplying in such a way that does not sacrifice urgency for health or health for urgency. Instead, we should hold both priorities in tension in order to move the work forward among a people group or in a city on God's timetable and for His glory.

Questions for Conversation

1. How does church health relate to church reproduction? Does one have priority over the other, either theologically or practically?
2. What do you think about the author's proposal for developing leaders? What might this look like in practice?
3. How do you understand the five roles of Ephesians 4 (apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd/pastor, and teacher)? What would such roles look like on a church-planting team? What would they look like in a church setting?

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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).

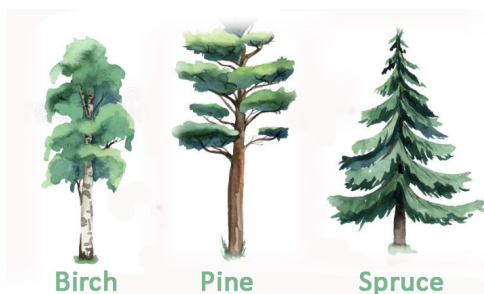


7 However, the world's oldest spruce tree (*Picea abies*) known as Old Tjikko is found in Sweden's Fulufjällets National Park. Carbon dating estimates that its root system is over 9,550 years.

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.

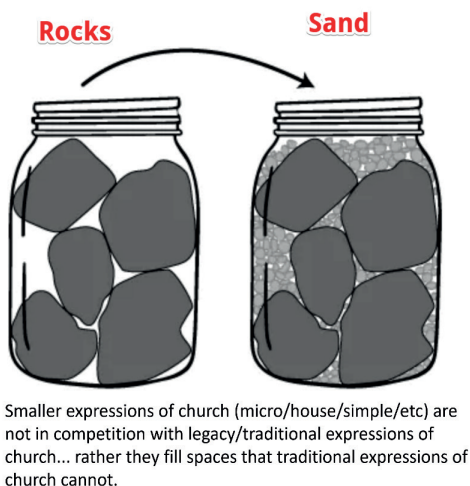
In addition to the forest ecosystem, a second analogy adds further perspective on how we might conceptualize movemental and traditional churches in a more helpful, less adversarial, way.

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?

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Baptism: Its Theological Meaning and Practical Outworking of Its Application

By Andrew Hope

Andrew Hope (pseudonym) has been on the field since 2003, and has lived in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. He and his wife have served on three different church-planting teams as well as in wider organizational leadership roles.

One of the things I love most about pioneer missionary work is that we “keep the main thing the main thing.” While we all have unique and sometimes differing convictions about secondary issues—whether baptism, spiritual gifts, or church polity—we are united by a common conviction in the inerrant word, the work of Christ on the cross, and unity through the Holy Spirit. It is a testimony to the Lord that we can disagree on the secondary matters because the primary matters are so important, life-changing, and unifying!

For most workers, the meaning and practice of baptism falls in this category of secondary convictions. However, secondary issues are still worth thinking through. The mode of baptism in particular (immersion, sprinkling, etc.) has a practical effect on our church planting strategies.

It is common church planting practice to foster reproducible discipleship. In other words, we want the way we disciple and model the kingdom to be done in a way that a new believer can emulate in their life and help others to do the same. The rubber meets the road on the issue of baptism. If one approaches the merits of baptism from merely a pragmatic perspective and viewed immersion and sprinkling to hold equal value, then it would stand to reason to conclude that sprinkling is

a simpler, more reproducible mode of baptism than immersion. Since many parts of the Muslim world are short on bodies of water, baptisms, and water in general, using a handful of water rather than a large amount, along with not having to travel to find a pool of water, is much easier.

This was the case for a family who came to the Lord while my family and I were living on the edge of the Sahara. This Muslim-background family were living in a nearby refugee camp where water was at a premium. There were no pools of water or anything that could act like a baptismal. The husband was a large man, standing close to two meters, and weighing nearly 100 kg. The “barrel dunking” technique was a logistical impossibility for him.¹ The nearest baptismal was at least a five-hour drive away. Sometime later, the husband’s best friend also began to profess belief in Christ. When he was in the town with the aforementioned baptismal, he politely declined when asked if he wanted to be baptized. He was afraid of water, scared to be immersed. In both cases, the mode of immersion was a significant hurdle to new believers being baptized, as opposed to the mode of sprinkling or pouring² which would not have been a problem in either case.

My assumption in this article, though, is that most of us are coming from the conviction that immersion and sprinkling do not hold equal value, nor are we simply approaching it from a purely pragmatic perspective. At the same time, I also assume that the “main thing” we all agree on is water baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it is worth agreeing to disagree about mode so as not to allow it to become a divisive issue. Let’s keep the main thing the main thing and not divide ourselves over the secondary matters!

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- 1 Barrel dunking involves taking an old oil drum (that is clean), filling it with water, and then have the person being baptized squat into it.
 - 2 In this paper, I use sprinkling and pouring as similar terms. Some churches sprinkle in baptism. The person baptizing the other dips his or her hand into water, then sprinkles the water or places his or her hand on the person’s head who is being baptized. Pouring is when the person baptizing uses a cup or bowl of water and pours it onto the head of the person being baptized.

What is at stake in my opinion is the reproducibility of discipleship among MBBs. For example, if a person comes to the Lord in the Sahara, does that necessitate them traveling to the nearest baptismal, possibly hundreds of miles away? Or should we be making plans to build baptismals in our ministry locations (and teach MBBs to do the same)? How might a MBB woman feel about being touched by someone (possibly a man) as she is lowered underwater, then coming up wet, clothes clinging to herself, for others to see? In other circumstances, this would be shameful. Is the solution to segregate genders when baptizing?

Or what about a person who wants to be baptized but is afraid of being submerged underwater? Must they overcome this fear to be identified as a follower of Christ? If the Bible teaches us to immerse only, then we must come to terms with the challenges of this command in the driest parts of the world and among cultures whose values of modesty find it shamefully inappropriate. If it teaches something else, however, then the mode of immersion unnecessarily complicates a willing person wanting to be identified as a member of Christ's body. In short, there is much at stake in the mode of baptism.

This article is a summary of my personal understanding of the meaning and mode of baptism, particularly baptism's place in the Old Testament and its outworking in the New Testament

The Meaning of the Term "Baptism" in the Old Testament

The English word "baptism" comes directly from the Greek (*bapto*, *baptisma*, *baptismos*, *baptizo*). Different lexicons give varying definitions of these words. Biblical scholar Ernest Clark argues that *bapto*, which translates Hebrew *taval* in the Septuagint, means "to dip" in the context of the Old Testament.³ Whether referring to hyssop, a finger, or a foot being put into blood or oil, a garment into water, or a morsel into wine,

3 Clark has helped me understand relevant Greek terms and meanings in both the Septuagint and the New Testament, as well as their corresponding OT Hebrew terms.

the meaning is always the same: to dip (Ex. 12:22, Lev. 4:6, Deut. 33:24, Josh. 3:15, Ruth 2:14, 1 Sam. 14:27, 2 Kings 8:15, Job 9:31, Ps. 68:23).

The only times the Greek verb baptizo is used in the Septuagint is in 2 Kings 5:14 when Naaman dips himself seven times in the Jordan and in Isaiah 21:4 to describe being overcome by fear. The nouns “baptisma” and “baptismos,” meaning baptism or dipping, are not used in the Septuagint.

It might be tempting at this point to then assume that the word “bapto” is used in the same way in the New Testament, restricted to the same and only meaning (to dip) as it does in the Old Testament. Upon examining how the New Testament authors use the term, however, it is not that simple.

“Baptisms” and Sprinklings in Hebrews 9

The writer of Hebrews uses the term “baptismos” but does so in the plural, *baptismois* (Heb 9:10a). The intent is not to describe more than one baptism of the same kind, but rather various kinds of baptisms, related to “regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation” (9:10b).⁴ The context of this verse is the whole of chapter 9, which compares the Old Testament Levitical system—namely sacrifice, purification, and sanctification—with Christ’s sacrifice, purification, and sanctification of his people through his blood.

There are at least two possibilities to consider in understanding what the author means by baptismois in chapter 9. The first is that it is in reference to immersing things or people under liquid for purification in Levitical law. This would take the meaning to follow the meaning of baptizo in the two instances mentioned above (Naaman washing in the Jordan river, and the second reference in Isaiah to being overwhelmed by fear). In neither case is baptizo used to describe Levitical law,

4 Note: most English versions translate baptismois in Heb. 9:10 as “washings.” These washings in Ch. 9 are in reference to the temple ministry.

however, and thus this option does not seem to be supported by how the term is used in the Old Testament.

Another possible interpretation is that baptismos is a term the author of Hebrews is using as a synonym for other terms used in Levitical ritual such as sprinkling or throwing, usually in reference to blood, oil, or water. Let's consider the subsequent verses in chapter 9 with this lense of understanding for baptismos.

In verses 12–13, the author compares the earthly Old Testament tent and its covenant signs and regulations with Christ's covenant and sign. In the first covenant, blood sacrifices cannot cleanse God's people. But with Christ's new covenant, Christ enters the perfect tent of God's presence by the authority of his own blood.

The author expounds on this idea in verse 13. The term used is "sprinkling," namely blood and ashes from an animal sacrifice on defiled people for the purpose of sanctification. Specifically, it is for the purification of the flesh. Verse 14 goes on: "how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God." The author connects the Levitical law and practice of animal's blood from sacrifice to Christ's blood, and then purification of the flesh to purification of the conscience, both in the context of sprinkling. Interestingly, the author also connects Christ's offering being done through the Holy Spirit.

Then in 9:19, the author draws yet another comparison between the two covenants. Moses sprinkled blood with water on the book, the people of Israel, the tent, and "all the vessels used in worship" (9:21). Verse 22 goes on to say that "under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Reading 9:10 again in this context, baptismos is understood in reference to Levitical law, and the application of liquid in this chapter is by sprinkling blood. As the author refers to the old covenant, he compares it with Christ's new covenant: Christ entered the

tent by means of his own blood (9:12) and put away sin once for all by his sacrifice and shed blood (9:24–28).

In chapter 9, the author's examples of various baptisms (baptismois) all refer to sprinkling blood and water on people or objects. The Greek word for sprinkling used in Heb. 9:13, 19, and 21 is *rantismos*. In other words, the author of Hebrews seems to use the term sprinkling (*rantismos*) to describe what he means by baptismois (baptisms).

It seems that the writer of Hebrews' primary intent in using baptism in the plural is to describe Old Testament Jewish law and religious practice to cleanse people, places, and objects in order to make them holy. It is then compared to Christ's use of his own blood to perfect this holiness in the heavenlies. The implications for the author's uses of baptizo, which would mean "sprinkling" at least in part, is therefore very significant.

The Purpose of Sprinkling in Old Testament Law

Here are three Old Testament passages that seem to align with Hebrews 9:

1. Num. 19:17–18 (cf. Heb. 9:13). In this case, ashes from a burnt sin offering are mixed with water. Then the clean person sprinkles the water onto the tent and furnishings of the unclean person.
2. Ex. 24:6, 8 (cf. Heb. 9:19). Here, Moses takes blood and throws it on Israel to seal the covenant that God made with his people.
3. Lev. 8:19; 16:14 (cf. Heb. 9:2). Moses throws blood from a sin offering onto the altar, and takes the blood from the sin offering to the mercy seat of God's tabernacle.

There are many other cases of sprinkling in the Old Testament, and usually the Greek *perirraino* (to sprinkle) is used in the Septuagint. There is an element of repentance since the blood of the sin offering is used. Another of *perirrainos*' primary meanings is for consecration, or setting apart by making someone or something holy. This can be for the taber-

nacle and its furnishings, for priests as they enter service (Num. 8:6–7), enter a covenant, or cleanse someone who has violated God’s law.

To the writer of Hebrews, then, dipping (baptismos) is tied to sprinkling (rantismos) and has a loaded meaning. It refers to a variety of Old Testament Jewish law rituals that were used to show repentance of sin, cleansing, purification, consecration, and of God’s people entering into a covenant with their Lord. While the author of Hebrews’ understanding and definition of baptism in the Old Testament may feel foreign to many modern-day theologies of baptism, it does help the Christian better understand the biblical foundation of baptism in the New Testament.

Key Examples of Baptism in the New Testament

The first example of baptism in the New Testament is by John the Baptist. It is safe to assume that John the Baptist did not come up with baptism on his own. Doing so would have meant that he was creating a means of cleansing that was not found in Levitical law. Jesus taught that he came not to abolish the law of God, but rather to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17–20). Since Jesus did not have authority from the Father to change the law, it stands to reason that John the Baptist was also confined to ministry practices that fit within Old Testament law.

Clark explains,

Several ancient Jewish rituals converge in the practice of baptism in the New Testament. Each antecedent ritual brings with it its own particular actions, effects, and significance. Thus, while the Greek terms *baptizo* and *baptisma* refer only to dipping, the practice of baptism is multivalent. It perpetuates and alludes to several earlier themes.⁵ (2022, handout on baptism)

5 Definition of multivalent: *having or susceptible of many applications, interpretations, meanings, or values*. Thus, Clark understands baptism in the New Testament to have breadth of meaning that includes immersion, pouring, and sprinkling.

What Old Testament practice was John practicing then when he was baptizing others?

In John 1:25, people representing the Pharisees asked John the question, “Why are you baptizing people if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” From this question it seems the Jews expected one of these three people to do what John was doing. Where did the Pharisees’ expectation of baptism come from then? Looking in the Old Testament, there’s no mention either of someone immersing other people, nor of a prophecy of someone who would immerse others. The only baptizo (dipping) of a person in water in the Old Testament was done by Naaman and this was on himself seven times in the Jordan River. If we are open to a broader New Testament definition that is more comprehensive than simply immersion, then we can find prophecies in the OT that fit, namely the following.

- Isaiah 52:15. “So shall he sprinkle many nations.” This verse is found in what is commonly understood to be a Messianic prophecy, as the passage also refers to the same person being he who is, “high and lifted up,” and “pierced for our transgressions.”
- Ezekiel 36:25–26. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.”

From John’s response, he seems to indicate that he is not the fulfillment of these prophecies, as he only baptizes with water. John knows that Christ is much greater than he, and that Jesus is the one who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11).

Then, what mode was John using to baptize the multitudes in the Jordan River? That becomes less certain given the understanding of baptism from Hebrews. Perhaps it was only immersion or perhaps he sprinkled also.

Christ's Water Baptism

The baptism of Christ is the next major baptism event in the New Testament. It's worth reflecting on the question: why is Jesus being baptized? It doesn't make good sense that Jesus would undergo a baptism for the purpose of repentance of his sins. He does not need a baptism of repentance or purification—he's Holy God! Even John protested, as the baptism he was performing on others was for the repentance of sins and not for the one of whose sandals he was not worthy to untie (Luke 3:16).

What is going on here? A key to understanding the meaning of Christ's baptism is to understand that Christ did not want to be baptized to show repentance, but rather to fulfill Old Testament law. Jesus responds to John's protest by saying that he needs to be baptized, "in order to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). What righteousness then is being fulfilled by Jesus' baptism?

Looking back to Numbers, we remember how sprinkling with water, blood, and oil was a means to consecrate, or set apart, the tabernacle and all of its furnishings. As Jesus is on the cusp of kicking off his ministry, his baptism was likely a consecration to set him apart for ministry, which was immediately followed by God the Father opening the heavens, and the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus. The Father blesses his Son, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). With the consecration that is immediately approved of by the Father and Holy Spirit, Jesus begins his full-time ministry on earth.

Christ's Holy Spirit Baptism/Anointing

Jesus said, "John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4–5). This verse is worth stopping and reflecting on. The baptism that Jesus is even more concerned about is one that is performed not by man but by God himself. This is the truer baptism of the two, as anyone who is baptized by the Holy Spirit is truly a child of God, whereas water baptism can bring about no such effect in man. Water baptism is the physical representation of cleansing and sanctifi-

cation, but water cannot in itself cleanse and sanctify. The truer baptism of the Holy Spirit is the only one of the two that can accomplish the cleansing and indwelling of God's presence in a believer.

The first such baptism of the Holy Spirit takes place on Jesus. As soon as John baptized Jesus, "the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form as a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'" (Matt 3:17). This is where Jesus was anointed to begin the work of the Messiah. Peter also describes this as an anointing (Acts 10:38). Right after this event, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61, stating that he is the Christ.

Other NT writers use the term "anointing" to describe the presence of the Holy Spirit (*chrisos*, 2 Cor. 1:21; *echrisen*, Heb. 1:9; *chrisma*, 1 John 2:20, 27). The term is the same one to describe the spiritual meaning, not the literal one. By contrast, James uses the term *aleipho* to describe the physical anointing of the sick with oil (James 5:14).

Thus, in the NT, the verb *chrío* and derivative nouns have spiritual significance (the one exception being when Jesus anointed the blind man's eyes with mud). The correlation between *chrío* "anointing" and baptism "consecration" seem to be inextricably linked. They are two sides of the same coin. Namely, the anointing of the believer by the Holy Spirit consecrates him as holy and well-pleasing in God's sight.

Since this paper is primarily about the mode of baptism, it is worth noting the different modes of anointing. Whether in the Old Testament with water, oil, blood, or in the New Testament with oil, ointment, or mud, the mode is always applying something onto the person, not the person being dipped into the anointing element.

Holy-Spirit Baptism in Acts

We see Holy-Spirit baptism fulfilled more than once in Acts. At Pentecost the apostles are anointed with the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of Joel, "I will pour out my Spirit" (Joel 2:28-29). Again, this happens in Acts 10 when Peter visits Cornelius and his household. The Holy Spirit

“fell on all who heard the word” (10:44). Luke describes the event with the phrase “poured out” (10:45). In both cases, the mode of Holy-Spirit baptism was described as falling or pouring. Joel foretells this: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28).

Of course, the main point in the passages above is not to be used as a proof text for sprinkling or pouring, but rather to focus on the amazing promise given by Jesus, fulfilled in Acts and that continues to be fulfilled all over the world today, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. That said, if one were to choose which mode better symbolizes or reflects Holy Spirit baptism described in the New Testament, then sprinkling/pouring seems to be a more accurate representation than immersion.⁶

Buried and Raised with Christ: Two New Testament Verses in Debate

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col. 2:11–12)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3–4)

I cite these two passages because they are used often to explain that the mode of immersion is a visualization of being buried with Christ in

6 I am considering sprinkling and pouring to be synonymous, in that both acts are applying liquid to a person or thing. In the case of persons, both involve putting liquid onto a person's head.

baptism. Further, both passages speak of being raised from the dead like Christ. The immersion-only conviction holds that the mode of immersion visually represents the death, burial (going under the water), and resurrection (coming out of the water). It is a symbol of what the Lord has already done in the believer's life and being united with him in his death and resurrection.

The question that we need to ask, though, is which baptism does Paul refer to in both passages: is it water baptism, Holy-Spirit baptism, or both? While the two are linked, the former is an action of man, and the latter is the action of God. What is described in both passages is the action of God in a believer's life. Just as the first part of the passage in Colossians speaks about a spiritual circumcision "made without hands," so too it speaks of a spiritual baptism by the Holy Spirit. At the very least, the passage could refer to Holy-Spirit Baptism only without any reference to water baptism.

If it does speak to water baptism, let's consider the analogy. The question at hand is whether immersion is the better symbolic mode, given these passages, than sprinkling. The problem comes perhaps in how typical burials happen opposed to how Christ's burial happened. Christ's body was laid in a small room hewn from a rock face, not the ground. In the case of Christ's burial, he was put horizontally into the tomb, and then came out of the tomb. While immersion does give a symbolic impression of how most people are buried in the ground (and therefore how they might come out of the ground if resurrected), the symbolism does not hold firmly in the specific case of Christ's burial and resurrection. Also, the Romans passage speaks of being baptized into Christ's death. Since Christ died on a cross, this symbology doesn't really seem to apply well with this reference either.

Then what are these passages getting at when referring to being buried and raised with Christ? First Corinthians gives us an Old Testament example and then applies it to Christ, which will help us. In 1 Cor. 10:1-5, Paul talks about the Israelites being "baptized into Moses." In chapter 12 he then talks about the parts and gifts of the body, referencing baptism

to describe what's going on, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews and Greeks, slaves or free— and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12–13).

In the former case with Moses, the event was walking through the Red Sea on dry ground, passing through walls of water on either side. Is this kind of baptism to be understood as a water immersion? A case could certainly be made to name it as such. Is it therefore the only way to understand how Paul uses baptism in these passages? Since he may be primarily referring to Holy-Spirit baptism, and since the grave analogy isn't consistent, it seems good to understand Paul's usage as multivalent in these passages. In other words, Paul's own definition of baptism might have included immersion, sprinkling, and pouring.

Speculating On Baptisms in Acts

There are other examples of baptism in Acts. They are also more subjective, but worth giving thought to.

At Pentecost, about 3,000 people were baptized. Have we considered the logistical realities of this situation? The apostles were not planning to baptize anyone this day, as they were just meeting together in prayer. If 3,000 people were baptized, where did the baptisms come from to accommodate that many people? Where did the clean water come from to do so many baptisms? The Jordan river was over 20 miles away. The people who were baptized weren't planning to be baptized either, so it's safe to assume that there were some pretty dirty people who got baptized. How was it logistically possible for that amount of water to be changed out for all those baptisms if they were all done by immersion?

The Philippian jailor and his household were baptized in the middle of the night. Is it more likely that Paul and Silas took them to the nearby river in their physical condition and performed immersion baptism in a river in the dark, or rather sprinkled them or poured water over them?

Conclusion

At the end of the day, let us give our Lord praise that there is reason for this article being written, as we are talking about realities among the unreached and not hypotheticals. Muslims are coming to the Lord and wanting to become part of the Body of Christ through water baptism, regardless of the mode used. Praise God! It is my opinion that the function of baptism is just as much for the church as it is for the person being baptized. It is the church's way of knowing who wants to be identified as part of the Body of Christ, and who is accountable to the Body. This is "the main thing," and I pray this article will only reinforce this conviction among us. Whether we are immersing or sprinkling, may we welcome many more into the Body of Christ!

At the same time, the logistical challenges and difficulties in reproducibility for immersion in some geographical and cultural contexts are acute. It is my opinion that immersion is not the only mode described or used in the Old or the New Testaments. Immersion baptism, therefore, could be an unnecessary weight to put on believers from a Muslim background.

The implications with these two modes, immersing and sprinkling, are great enough for us to consider as church planters how we go about baptizing new believers. Might we need to change our practices if it is better for these new believers? I realize this is a big ask, especially if one comes from an immersion-only church background. I do not ask us to consider doing so half-heartedly. We all want what is best for God's church, and so it is with this in mind that I would encourage us to consider sprinkling as a possibility for the sake of Christ's body.

I thank the Lord for the privilege of serving alongside you in the name of Jesus!

Your fellow laborer in the harvest fields,

Andrew Hope

Questions for Conversation

1. What are the practical challenges to baptism in your context? Are there any theological issues raised by these practical challenges?
2. What is your perspective on the Scripture passages discussed in the article? Share any points of agreement or push-back with the biblical interpretation of the author.
3. What is your view of the meaning and mode of baptism, and what ought it look like in practice in your context?

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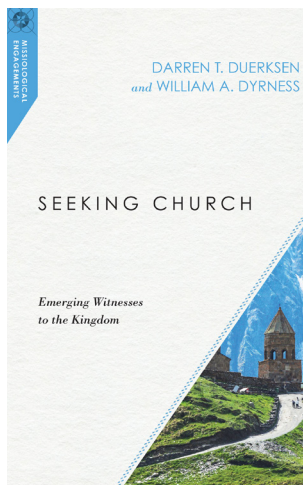
Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom

By Darren T. Duerksen and William A. Dyrness

IVP Academic, 2019. 212 pages

Reviewed by Don Little

Don, a Canadian residing in the United States, was called to minister to Muslims as a teenager and has been actively involved in this calling for 45 years. In his role as Pioneer Missiologist-at-Large, Don is networking, mentoring, teaching, and training for the purpose of equipping frontline workers for increasingly fruitful ministry among Muslims. He is a co-founder and Director of The Liliias Trotter Center and the author of Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities (IVP Academic, 2015) which arose out of his doctoral studies in mission and cross-cultural studies. Don's life focus is to disciple people to be all that they can be in God and to mobilize, train, and mentor men and women to a life of loving Muslims.



William Dyrness, a professor of theology and culture at Fuller Seminary since 1990, has written a variety of books exploring the interaction between Christian theology and non-Christian religious traditions. In his 2016 book, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflection on New Christian Movements* (IVP Academic), Dyrness made his case that Jesus can be faithfully followed in movements that remain religiously inside of Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism, etc., going further than most evangelical missionaries are comfortable with. Co-author, Darren Todd Duerksen, a

professor at Fresno Pacific University, writes on similar themes. His most recent book is *Christ-Followers in Other Religions: The Global Witness of Insider Movements* (Regnum, 2022).

With such clear indications of the perspectives of both authors, it is not surprising that, in *Seeking Church*, Duerksen and Dyrness want to provide theoretical and theological support for the acceptability of communities of people remaining within their faith communities of birth by combining belief in some sort of Jesus with continued identity as religiously faithful Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, etc. They argue that such insider believers and insider expressions of church are faithful to Christ and to the Scriptures.

It is not clear who is the intended audience for this book, but given the type of argument and points being made, it seems that Duerksen and Dyrness are primarily trying to convince theologians, missiologists, and scholars of the validity of insider churches. They do not seem to be writing for missionaries who are engaged in the work of church planting. They cite the support of prominent advocates of insider movements (ix-x).

Several years into our time in Morocco, a young worker arrived on the field full of visions of helping launch a highly contextualized insider movement to Christ. It only took about a year for him to abandon his attempts to create an Islamic-styled worship gathering. He realized that none of the new believers he had begun to disciple had any desire to preserve any sort of Muslim identity as followers of Christ, or to create meetings modeled after the once historically dominant Sufi brotherhoods that he had studied.

This experience comes to mind in reading *Seeking Church*. Duerksen and Dyrness go to great lengths to argue for the value of creating insider churches, and yet their attempt strikes me as remarkably unattuned to the reality of how things actually work in “on the ground” ministry. There are significant spiritual factors at play when people come to faith in

Christ, and these factors will inevitably lead to a break from the spiritual world within which non-Christian faiths operate. It simply does not work out in practice, or over time, for believers in Christ to stay loyal to Christ while maintaining loyalty to the spiritual system inherent in their non-Christian religious heritages.¹

Duerksen and Dyrness attempt to provide a theological and sociological framework for assessing the health of what they call insider churches. The examples which they cite are, in my opinion, radical expressions of contextualized church. The authors reflect on selected historical and contemporary developments in the church and propose an approach to thinking about the church that applies “emergent theory” as a way of accounting for the emergence of believing communities which are closely tied to their cultural and socio-religious settings. In chapter seven, they propose a set of five “normative ecclesial elements” that they believe can be found even in insider churches within non-Christian religious communities (more on these below). These five markers are proposed as a way of identifying valid expressions of the true church in ways that differ from the markers normally used to identify the true church. In welcome contrast, S.T. Antonio clearly explains and assesses the nature of insider churches using the classic historical markers in his excellent book, *Insider Church* (William Carey Publishing, 2020), which I review in this edition of *Seedbed*.

The five markers the authors propose could be helpful as a complement to the traditional markers, but they are insufficient when used as the sole criteria for identifying a church that is faithful to the apostolic

1 In some regions of the Muslim world various experiments are still being made in seeking to launch insider movements. The nature of such attempts is quite varied. From what I have seen there are two main outcomes from such attempts that occur over time. (1) Many begin as religious insider movements and over time they increasingly identify as Christian and leave behind their early attempts to retain Muslim identity, or (2) they develop an increasingly distinct Muslim identity and gradually adopt a number of Islam-influenced heretical beliefs such as the complete denial of the New Testament teaching that Jesus is himself God in the flesh. Few insider movements remain static.

tradition. Faith communities which seek to base their practice on reading and applying the Scriptures will inevitably practice some form of baptism and holy communion. A church taking its identity from the New Testament cannot but adopt such practices that are seen throughout the Scriptural accounts of the early church.

Duerksen and Dyrness believe the church has always and everywhere been significantly influenced by local, social, cultural, and religious contexts, such that Christians' interpretation of Scripture has always led to culturally conditioned religious practices. They believe that this cultural shaping of the church is both good and unavoidable. "The flaw ... is the assumption that the church somehow exists above and apart from culture. Instead, we contend that the church can never transcend its culture" (60). For Duerksen and Dyrness, any concern about the cultural captivity of the church that recurs throughout history is misplaced, since churches are always captive to and significantly conditioned by their cultures in profound ways. They believe that such captivity is a good thing!

Duerksen and Dyrness begin their argument in chapter two by trying to show how culture has always significantly shaped the church throughout history and then by critiquing contemporary evangelicals' reluctance to embrace the idea that God often works through non-Christian religions in chapter three. In chapter four, they present case studies of new non-church "expressions of church" in contexts of Shintoism (Japan), Hinduism (India), and Islam (Indonesia and the Philippines). The authors argue that the four previously-listed creative attempts to form Christian communities inside of non-Christian socio-religious contexts can point the way toward urgently-needed, new expressions of the body of Christ that are led by the Spirit and faithful to Scripture.

To cite one example, after describing a particular insider movement among Muslims in the Southern Philippines, the authors state, "For them this new identity, as those formed by the teachings of Jesus, does not cancel their Muslim identity but allows them to rise above their history

of subjugation. They are consciously creating a new space where their newly liberated voices will be welcomed within their continuing Muslim identity”(104). Duerksen and Dyrness believe that the development of more radical forms of religious insider contextualization will be the best way to penetrate religious communities that are overtly hostile to the Christian faith, which often perceive Christianity as a Western religion that could not possibly authentically attract believers from their own religious communities.

A word about the value of contextualization is in order before going further. I know of few, if any, contemporary evangelical missionary endeavors that do not seek to shape both the message of the gospel and the shape of the emerging church into the local culture so that, as much as humanly possible, Western ways of being the church and doing church are not unthinkingly exported into non-Western cultures. Appropriate contextualization is to be sought as much as possible. The discussion in *Seeking Church*, and in this review, is about healthy ways to contextualize, such that the true nature of the gospel is communicated and biblically faithful churches can be birthed in cultural and religious contexts that are often hostile to Christianity.² In my book on discipling Muslim background believers, I repeatedly argue that we must do as much as possible to enable new believers and their churches to remain within their Muslim communities, and to be seen and known as social and cultural insiders. One African friend describes his own contextualization as being a cultural insider and theological outsider at the same time. That is one who, if observed practicing his Christian faith, may be thought of as Muslim, but whose entire worldview is Christian and quite outside of the theology of Islam.

2 It was fashionable for a time to reference the C-Scale in discussions of contextualization. This six-point scale originally described by John Travis in “The C1-C6 Spectrum,” his 1998 EMQ article, was never intended as a nuanced description of ways of contextualizing churches among Muslims. The discussion and understanding of “insiderness” has moved far beyond such thumbnail descriptions. John has himself repeatedly said as much. A quick search in the IJFM archives (<https://www.ijfm.org/archives.htm>) on insiders, contextualization, etc., will yield dozens of much more helpful and nuanced discussions of the topic of contextualization.

In the fifth chapter, which is one of the better contributions of this book, Duerksen and Dyrness present three of the central images of the church found in the New Testament – the people of God, the community of the Spirit, and the body of Christ. They contend that Scripture gives us these “normative images” so that they can be creatively applied in communities that transcend particular cultural realities. They further argue that the Scriptures do not circumscribe the limits of what God is doing among the nations (in terms of giving a recognizable consistent expression to the church in all times and places), but rather that the Scriptures primarily provide us with evocative images which can inspire creative adaptations of the work that the Holy Spirit is doing in global religious contexts (121).

In the sixth chapter, Duerksen and Dyrness argue that the practices that have been agreed upon by almost all churches throughout the centuries, like baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are not required of the church. They see them as cultural expressions derived from the first century of the church era and observed in the New Testament, which fulfill the functions that Scripture places upon them in that time and place. It is fine for other “expressions of the church” to develop different practices so long as they contribute to the health of the body of Christ. “What is authoritative in the teaching of Jesus and Paul is the *theological meaning ascribed on those practices*, not the specifics of those practices, which are mostly impossible for us to recover in any case” (127, emphasis added).

They then proceed to describe some radical ways in which communion, teaching, praise, and prayer are practiced by communities of Christ-followers which are seeking to fit into non-Christian religious contexts in such a way that their religious practices make sense to their non-believing co-religionists. They argue that, “What Paul emphasizes in baptism, after all, is not a particular social practice [i.e., immersing believers in water] but the identification of the believer with Christ’s death and resurrection. The specific ritual chosen to symbolize this is left open; it is nowhere specified in the New Testament” (132).

Since Duerksen and Dyrness are setting aside the marks of the church affirmed by most branches of the church throughout history, they need to offer something to replace them. In chapter seven, they suggest five markers that can be used to identify “the emergent dynamic of the church.” The “emergent church” is present whenever:

- the story of Christ is heard and obeyed
- a community forms around this story
- this community responds to this story in prayer and praise
- this community seeks to live in peace with each other and their wider community
- an impulse drives this community to witness to Christ and the transformation the Spirit has brought about (150).

The authors take each one of these markers and attempt to show how they are better than those traditionally understood to be the marks of churches which are faithful to the historic apostolic tradition.

So, what do we make of all this? Are Duerksen and Dyrness successful in establishing compelling biblical criteria for identifying insider churches which are faithful to the Scriptures and the apostolic traditions? I believe the overall thrust of their argument is based on two dubious theoretical foundations.

First, they state explicitly they are attempting to apply the “sociological theory” of emergence to interpret church history. The historical analysis that they undertake using this theory seems to implicitly deny the centrality of God’s revelation and of God’s supervising hand looking after his church throughout history. The emergence of the church in history, which they describe in chapter two, is more of a historical process of local cultures taking and shaping Christian expression, than of the Spirit entering into new communities and transforming them by the power of the gospel, resulting in Spirit-transformed Christians.

Despite their talk of the Holy Spirit directing this process of emergence, it often felt like Duerksen and Dyrness were writing with

very little awareness of the spiritual world and of the ongoing spiritual battle between the kingdom of God and Satan and his minions, who have sought to destroy the emerging church in every age and place. There was little sense of the great army of martyrs and saints who have gone on before, who often suffered horrific persecution as they faithfully served Christ in the midst of pagan and anti-Christian societies. Churches did not just emerge from the fusion of local culture and New Testament culture as they argue. No, God himself was birthing the church through the efforts of faithful evangelists, church planters, godly theologians, and pastors, who had to push back against the central beliefs and spiritual realities of their time and local cultures.

Secondly, like many contemporary biblical scholars, and many of those who are enamored with insider thinking, Duerksen and Dyrness are convinced that though Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God, he did *not* intend to set up the church. Following in the theological footsteps of people like South African missiologist David Bosch, they refuse to identify the kingdom of God with the church. They cite Bosch, "Jesus had no intention of founding a new religion"(50). They also ap- provingly cite a pithy 1904 quotation from Alfred Loisy, "Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came" (5). (I strongly encourage you to read the brilliant refutation of this increasingly influential idea that Jesus "didn't intend to establish the church" in the first chapter of Antonio's book, *Insider Church* (2020, 10-19), which I review next, in this issue of *Seedbed*.)

Since the authors wrongly deny that the church is the primary place for the work of the kingdom of God in this present era, they look for and find something that is part of God's kingdom purposes that is outside of the existing "institutional church," an entity they seem to have very little respect for. They critique statements from Lausanne Covenant such as, "the church is at the very center of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the Gospel" (11). They disdainfully dismiss such thoroughly biblical understanding as simplistic (2).

Thus, a large part of the argument of their book rests on the flawed belief that the people whom God is gathering through faith in Christ are *not* primarily found within existing churches. Therefore, they search for expressions of the kingdom of God occurring outside of established churches. And yet the case studies of such “kingdom communities” (outside of any known form of the church globally) they describe in chapter four are fragile and tenuous attempts to creatively establish new faith practices inside non-Christian religious communities. Three of the examples the authors give describe small movements and informal communities, one of which only talks about the aspiration for the creation of a community (88–91). Their most extensive case study, from the late 19th century to the early 20th century in Indonesia, is of a movement which lasted about six decades.³ But this was not an insider movement, but rather a healthy expression of a contextualized indigenous Javanese church.

At one point, the authors suggest that the main reason most evangelicals are not willing to agree with their belief that God is at work inside non-Christian religious communities is fear:

in recent years there has not been a wide and sustained conversation among mission and ministry practitioners, particularly among evangelicals, about the ways in which other non-Christian religions may have some continuity with the church.... *In a climate generated by fear*, there is little motivation to consider if and how there is continuity between Christianity and other religions and religious communities. (16, emphasis added)

Duerksen and Dyrness dismiss time-honored, historically orthodox, Christian approaches to other religions as both simplistic and inspired by fear. In response, I suggest they themselves appear to be fearful of

3 In their description they mention that the movement led by Sadrach Surapronata began in the 1870s and was reabsorbed back into the Dutch Indonesian church in 1933, thus lasting close to six decades (97–102).

the power that non-Christian religions have to keep people in bondage. The result, it seems, is that their reinterpreted ecclesiology dangerously departs from the historic apostolic understandings of the nature and expressions of the church shared by all the great historical, orthodox churches (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) as well as by contemporary Protestant, evangelical, and Pentecostal churches.

If you would like to understand how insider paradigms are supported by theologian-sociologists such as Duerksen and Dyrness, who appear to have been more influenced by post-modernist rejection of absolute truth than they realize, then study this book carefully. But I do not think most *Seedbed* readers will find much practical or theological value in *Seeking Church*. I would, however, encourage you to read *Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm* (William Carey Publishing, 2020), the book, written by *Seedbed* editor, S.T. Antonio, which accurately describes and generously critiques all such insider ecclesiology. To the review of Antonio's excellent book, I now turn.

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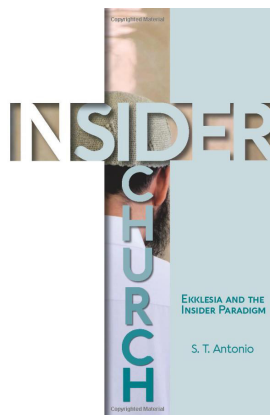
Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm

By S.T. Antonio

William Carey Publishing, 2020. 211 pages.

Reviewed by Don Little

*Don, a Canadian resident in the United States, was called to minister to Muslims as a teenager and has been actively involved in this calling for 45 years. In his role as Pioneer Missiologist-at-Large, Don is networking, mentoring, teaching, and training in order to equip frontline workers for increasingly fruitful ministry among Muslims. He is a co-founder and the Director of The Lilius Trotter Center and the author of Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities *(Little 2015), which arose out of his doctoral studies in mission and cross-cultural studies. His life-focus is to disciple people to be all that they can be in God and to mobilize, train, and mentor men and women to a life of loving Muslims.*



N.B. Please read this book review *after* you have read the review above of the book *Seeking Church*. They are written as complementary reviews and are meant to be read in the order they are published.

As I was preparing to teach a new course on discipling believers of Muslim background (BMBs) and planting churches among Muslims a couple of years ago, I reached out to my colleague S.T. Antonio to find out whether he could recommend a book to serve as the core text on church planting for the course. The book that he recommended, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* by Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, is excellent and I did assign it as the text

on church planting for the course that year. However, in re-reading S.T. Antonio's book now, which I first reviewed in pre-publication draft form before teaching my course in 2020, I am impressed afresh at the depth and quality of his own book, *Insider Church*.

Coming as it does out of his ThM thesis at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, *Insider Church* is thoroughly biblical, exegetically compelling, and irenic in both its description and critique of the ecclesiology of the insider paradigm. Antonio, in addition to being the editor of *Seedbed*, has served in cross-cultural ministry in the Middle East for almost a decade now. Though the ThM work that provides the core of this book was undertaken prior to Antonio's arrival in the Middle East, his growing experience as a pioneer church planter in the heart of the Muslim world was clearly the backdrop from which he wrote *Insider Church*. One of his primary concerns in publishing this book was to provide much-needed help to everyone engaged in pioneer church planting among unreached peoples to think through and develop a sound and biblically rooted understanding of the church. He does this by carefully and fairly describing the ecclesiology of those who minister within an insider paradigm, and then sensitively and gently offering valuable correctives. The result is that whoever reads this book will be exposed to both an excellent treatment of the biblical idea of and reality of the church, and they will have a great model of how to engage those with whom one has profound disagreement in an irenic and gentle way.

In my other book review in this edition of *Seedbed*, *Seeking Church*, I discussed the vision for insider churches which Duerksen and Dyrness sought to defend. Why is it so important that those who are engaged in pioneer church planting have good ecclesiology? Few contemporary theologians would disagree with the sentiment that evangelicals have an underdeveloped doctrine of the church (ecclesiology). There are many important issues at stake in the debate surrounding the insider paradigm,¹

1 If you are unfamiliar with these issues, a good introduction is L.D. Waterman's "Insider Movements: Current Issues in Discussion," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37, no.4 (2013): 292–307. Ecclesiology is *not* one of the eight issues described by Waterman.

but the one that evangelicals tend to be ill-equipped to handle well is in having and articulating a solid biblical ecclesiology. It might not be stretching it too much to suggest that had evangelicals had a more robust ecclesiology, it is possible that the insider paradigm would never have gotten much traction among evangelical missionaries 30 years ago.

One can only imagine a community of Christ's followers living with Muslim identity in a Muslim community if one has a seriously underdeveloped ecclesiology. Such an insider community cannot possibly be identifiable as a church, and the church is what Christ came to earth to set up following Pentecost. It is vital that we, who are called to help plant churches and facilitate movements of churches planting churches among the unreached, work from a historically grounded and biblically anchored ecclesiology. S.T. Antonio's little book *Insider Church* breaks new ground in laying the foundation for a solid ecclesiology that by its very nature undermines the often-confused practice and vision of the insider paradigm.

In Part One, Antonio masterfully describes the conversations that have been going on about the nature of the church throughout church history, and sensitively suggests a strong, biblically sound, and contextually compelling vision of the nature of the churches that we are seeking to see God birth among unreached peoples. Antonio covers much of the same ground as Duerksen and Dyrness in *Seeking Church*, but as I read Antonio's account of the church, I found myself saying "amen" over and over again. It was so refreshing to read his careful exegesis, sensitive historical analysis, and careful engagement with contemporary missiological trends. Reading Antonio's work was faith renewing and deeply encouraging, after having spent weeks trying to read and accurately understand Duerksen and Dyrness's sociological analysis and defense of insider ecclesiology. Though the books are about the same size, and display similar levels of scholarship, I found Antonio's work to be far more valuable for anyone who is actually engaged in the ministry of church planting. There are many great insights and penetrating critiques in this little

book. And it is much easier to read. Its language is straightforward and clear and avoids so much of the academic sophistication that Duerksen and Dyrness exhibit. Admittedly, it would appear that the audience for the two books is quite different. But since those reading this review in *Seedbed* are seeking help in their church-planting ministries, it is good to know that the book that presents the better ecclesiology is also the book that is easier to read.

So, what does Antonio cover in his book on the nature of the church and insider ecclesiology? The book is organized in a very straightforward way. In the first half of the book, entitled “Toward a Biblical Vision of the Church,” Antonio explores the role and nature of the church in the context of biblical history (Ch 1) and how the people of God in the First Testament are related to the new people of God who are gathered to Christ as members of his body. His insights here are rock solid. In contrast to Duerksen and Dyrness who reduce the church to a status below the kingdom of God, Antonio does an excellent job of articulating the way that the kingdom of God and the church are wholly inter-connected in Jesus’ ministry and teaching:

Proclaiming the kingdom and forming his emerging *ekklésia* were all a prelude to the climax and central purpose of Jesus’ coming—his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Contrary to all expectations, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom, not through the sword but through the cross. Receiving universal authority, *King Jesus commissioned his church* to implement his universal reign through discipleship of the nations, which involved baptizing them into the growing community of the triune God (Matt 28:19–20). And after Pentecost, that’s exactly what his disciples did.... (17, emphasis added)

Then in the second chapter, Antonio describes what he calls the “five essential elements” of a *local church*, as seen in the NT. The first two are related to the “core essence” of the church; the final three involve the activity and organization of the church. They are: (1) shared experience of

salvation, professed in baptism, (2) solidarity and identity as “ekklésia,” (3) regular gathering as “ekklésia,” (4) biblical patterns of community, and (5) appointed elders (34–45).

Then after concisely clarifying distinctions between the local and universal church and the church visible and invisible (44–54), he tackles the often-contentious question of the marks or attributes of the church, which Duerksen and Dyrness almost completely dispense with in *Seeking Church*. Antonio first describes the four classical attributes of the church conveyed in the expression: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. He then suggests that Protestants have done well to add two key marks to these classical attributes: (1) the word being faithfully taught and obeyed, and (2) two rituals that express and cultivate the core attributes of the church – baptism and the Lord’s Supper (56–63). This is in contrast to Duerksen and Dyrness who suggest that baptism and the Lord’s Supper can both be abandoned if they are offensive to a non-Christian religious context. In this chapter, he also clarifies a number of other oft-asked questions about the church. This one chapter presents a concise, balanced, and biblically informed Protestant understanding of the church that most church planters will do well to embrace and rejoice in.

In the third chapter, “Contextualizing Church,” Antonio discusses the core issues in the contextualization debate in evangelical mission circles over the past 50 years. After a nuanced and wise discussion of all the ins and outs of the conversation, he sums up authentic contextualization at the end of the chapter as:

Following the biblical patterns of contextualization of Israel and the church, authentic contextualization avoids the twin dangers of cultural foreignness and syncretism by faithfully reflecting the biblical nature and purpose of the church in ways which are meaningful to the local context; which critically engage with and transform the beliefs, practices, and symbols within the culture; and which reflect the indigenous-pilgrim character of the people of God. (88, emphasis in the original)

Having laid an excellent foundation in Part One, in Part Two Antonio undertakes a careful description (Ch 4) and then a judicious “appraisal” of Insider Church ecclesiology (Ch 5). In chapter 4, Antonio describes the primary characteristics of insider *ekklésia* using the seven dimensions below. Then he carefully assesses its strengths and weaknesses in chapter 5, using the same seven dimensions (listed on p. 126, discussed throughout pp 126–166):

- Biblical Theology of the Church
- Essential Identity of the Church
- Local and Universal Church
- Visible and Invisible Church
- Marks of the Church
- Salvation and the Church
- The Church, the World, and Contextualization

These seven dimensions arise naturally out of the earlier chapters and offer a robust and meaningful set of criteria for critiquing insider ecclesiology. Space does not allow me to present Antonio’s nuanced and careful critiques. His discussion of insider ecclesiology charitably lists the strengths, where they are evident, and then gently points out the shortcomings. In the process, he covers many of the key debates surrounding the insider paradigm. In chapter 6, he explores a number of implications that proponents of the insider paradigm need to weigh carefully. Here is a statement of the conclusions that he takes from his evaluation:

My conclusion is that the insider paradigm indeed offers a model which unleashes the yeast of the kingdom among Muslim communities, while simultaneously leaving the door open to another yeast that risks “leavening” the pure, unleavened bread of the biblical nature of the church. The insider paradigm opens our eyes to neglected aspects of the church’s identity, stimulating us toward creative ways of “implanting” the church in Muslim

contexts. However, the insider paradigm also neglects certain biblical themes and aspects of the biblical identity of the church, and it includes certain claims, concepts, and principles which potentially hinder the expression of the church's full biblical nature. (169)

He reminds us that when gathering groups of believers together for the first time in a new region, the groups will typically begin as only "embryonic churches." But, *over time*, they have the potential to develop into full-fledged churches which include all the elements of a full local church as spelled out in this book. Having a clear understanding of the end in mind helps us move in the right direction from the outset.

Antonio concludes the book with a short epilogue recommending "eight principles" to help shape our church-planting strategy among Muslims, which if adopted, will enable new churches to develop healthy biblical identities as churches (175–83). Here is a concise expression of these principles:

1. Emerging churches should be immersed in the full biblical story of the people of God and learn the full scope of biblical images of the church in both the Old and New Testaments.
2. Emerging churches should continually grow in their understanding of their salvation in Christ and of the God who saved them.
3. Emerging churches should find ways to embrace and name their identity as the people of God in their context.
4. Emerging churches should have a clear understanding of all of the elements of a healthy local church and should work at developing expressions of these elements locally.
5. Emerging churches should understand their connection to the global family of God and develop ways of connecting and identifying with the church universal.

6. Emerging churches should learn to live out and express their true identity as the people of God in ways that communicate in tangible glimpses the full glory of the church.
7. Emerging churches should develop patterns of faithful engagement with and obedience to the whole Scriptures, including the practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
8. Emerging churches should develop a holistic understanding of their role in exemplifying and declaring the King and inviting non-believers to join in the community of the King.

As you can see, this is a list of eight "shoulds." Antonio does not give much in the way of practical guidance on how to carry out these principles (one of the few shortcomings of the book). Yet, he is on to something very important here. At one point in the ministry that I was a part of in Morocco several decades ago, a struggling house church that was on the verge of collapse was re-invigorated through catching a strong vision of the church in the New Testament. Their new vision, which Antonio expresses particularly in points 1-4 and 8, led to this little house church growing, sending out church planters to several cities, and becoming one of the stronger house-church networks in the country. The little struggling "embryonic" church was invigorated as a result of gaining a full-orbed vision for the church through a study of the church in the NT. In a very real sense, seeking to apply these eight *theoretical* "shoulds" can provide *practical guidance* for all involved in pioneer church planting.

Unlike Duerksen and Dyrness's *Seeking Church*, which I found to have little value for frontline workers, I *highly* recommend *Insider Church* as a book that every church-planting team should read and discuss. Antonio focuses his analysis on insider ecclesiology as it finds expression in the *Muslim* world, but I believe that most of his critiques would apply equally as well in other kinds of religious contexts which Duerksen and Dyrness briefly explore in their book (Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist). Allow me to give the last word to Antonio, with which I heartily concur:

We should not be content with the mass conversion of Muslims or the conversion of Muslim families. Our vision must include not only biblical discipleship, but biblical churches. The apostle Paul was not satisfied with conversion and fellowships of believers; his ultimate motivation and goal was to see churches become mature and complete in Christ, which Paul could present as a pleasing offering to the Lord on the last day (Rom 15:16; Phil 2:16; Col 1:28–29). We should follow this example by praying and working tirelessly toward the goal of presenting to the Lord an offering of mature, biblical churches from every corner of the Muslim world. (183)

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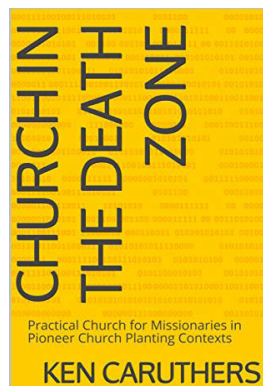
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Church in the Death Zone: Practical Church for Missionaries in Pioneer Church Planting Contexts

By Ken Caruthers

Self-Published, 2014. 198 pages.

Reviewed by J.F.



J.F. moved as a tentmaker to one of the Gulf states of the Arabian Peninsula over 15 years ago with his wife and four children, after Arabic study and ministry among Arab Muslim immigrants in the United States, his homeland. The slow responsiveness of nationals led to diverse avenues and partnerships towards their aim of church planting among locals.

Introduction

Ken Caruthers' book, "puts the church back in church planting" (144). Where did it go, you ask? How could our church planting strategies be missing the church? Caruthers seeks to correct a gap in practitioners' applied ecclesiology as a team while in the process of planting a church. He proposes "CPAC" (Church Planting as Church) as a model for teams to function themselves *as a church*, defending it as a more biblical model than "team," and promoting many benefits for the church planters, their ministry, and the sending agency.

Being a "practical" model (see the subtitle), the targeted audience of this book is everyone in missions influencing team church planting in a pioneer context. Such a context implies that it will take an extended

period of time after arrival of the missionary to plant an indigenous church because of the significant difference in language and worldview of the team's home culture. The author's concern is that many church planters neglect church for themselves during this period.

This self-published book appears to be Caruthers's dissertation for a PhD in missiology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the USA. The work's 771 footnotes (containing numerous gems) and 29-page bibliography demonstrate Caruthers's thorough research and exemplify its depth. This work lacks the polish of a book prepared for publishing ("Death Zone," from the title, is never mentioned). In spite of these drawbacks, I was drawn into the book and interacted with it extensively, having wrestled in my own life with many of the ideas of the boundaries of church, team, and the BMB (Believers from Muslim Background) church.

An American, Caruthers had previously served on a church planting team to Muslims in Central Asia, and then led teams engaging Central Asians in five countries. The author's missiology promotes a healthy contextual hermeneutic to ensure a planted church reflects the national culture and is not a mere plant from the sending culture.

Contents and Development: You Need the Church

Chapters and sections are structured and supported in a way that make it easy to follow the argument for his thesis, with effective summaries guiding the reader. His thesis "is that church planting missionaries identifying themselves as church is biblically permissible, has historical precedence, is theologically supported, and can be missiologically advantageous under certain circumstances" (4). Said in another way, "this dissertation is a call for all who are involved with missions to emphasize more explicitly the personal church experience of missionaries" (8). There are two background points for his thesis. The first is that despite going to pioneer locations with the goal of planting a thriving Christian

community among the nationals, the church life of the missionary on the field is often neglected. Some missionaries think being a member of a church in their home country suffices. The second background point is that business team theory—a prevailing influence on pioneer missions for the last 40–50 years—is biblically deficient at achieving Christian community.

CPAC is his practical solution.¹ Caruthers describes criteria for “church” biblically and theologically, both its structure and function. CPAC adequately fulfills the functional elements (worship, evangelism, serving, teaching, and fellowship). Caruthers examines Paul’s apostolic bands of fellow workers to ascertain the nature of their interrelationships, as well as his relationship with the churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Paul’s field. This section encapsulates believers’ one-another obligations into the concept of church membership, which I find to be the weakest element of the book (critiqued below). Caruthers addresses an observed reality that many missionaries function in task-oriented teams without fulfilling the one another obligations of Christian community. “There is no biblical evidence that devoting oneself to a congregation of Christians is optional for believers” (61). CPAC would resolve this.

Historical Examples of Missions as Community

Caruthers surveys monasticism in the Middle Ages and the Moravians of the 18th century for examples of missions carried out in a community which is very churchlike, even though both groups had reasons not to consider themselves churches.

More recently, he discusses the takeover of missiological relationships by American business team theory starting in the 1970s. He identifies team theory as deficient and unbiblical as a foundation for planting churches. Team theory was advanced because it promoted cooperation

1 As a solution, the author is not prescribing team as church, nor proscribing participation of teammates in other available congregations. He discusses scenarios of CPAC morphing into indigenous church or maintaining a separate identity.

and performance. However, it values task in a way that promotes individualism, pragmatism, and an arbitrary morality. Even Christian literature does not critically evaluate business team theory with the authority of Scripture.

Theological Support: God's Image and Triune Nature Necessitate Christian Community

The relevance of the image of God to church-planting teams is that the relational dimension of the image of God in redeemed persons will not be on display in lone missionaries. A community fulfilling their one another obligations reveals the love of God in a way a lone Christian loving the lost does not. Caruthers's call to send a community (as a church) to plant churches conflicts with some agencies priority of maximizing the number of numerous UPGs (Unchurched People Group) engaged by sending individual units to them. In apparent conflict with the urgency of sending someone to each UPG, sending a community ties up more missionaries for a longer time in one UPG as they overcome worldview/language challenges. Four times in the book Caruthers highlights that missionaries in pioneer locations "need even more pastoral care" (110) than many other believers. He provides convincing reasons "to send church planters in groups" (111) and not as lone rangers.

The communal nature of the Trinity strengthens his call for church planting in community as a church. Aware of the individualism of the American context, Caruthers highlights the necessity of living the Christian life in community. "However, it would be difficult for Christians to live outside of ecclesial relationships and still maintain the Christian life that is portrayed in Scripture. There seems to be an indispensable ecclesial structure to the Christian life" (119).

These theological elements of the Trinity and image of God are brought together powerfully in a section on Christian community and *koinónia* fellowship. Lone ministry (or even exclusively task-oriented team ministry) is dangerous because the believer lacks the "reciprocal giving

and receiving of *koinónia*,” which God uses to display his glory. “*Koinónia* can only be cultivated in the church and only primarily so in the local church” (129). *Koinónia* is God’s means for our own growth and provides a context for worship, a picture for evangelism, and pastoral care to reduce attrition. Caruthers noted that agency attempts to reduce missionary attrition surprisingly made no reference to involvement in a field-based local church as a solution. Attrition could be reduced if missionaries experienced such Christian community on the field.

CPAC Compatible with Church-Planting Strategy

Building upon the foundation of biblical, historical, and theological permissibility for the CPAC model, Caruthers applies the strategy to the church-planting phases. He shows CPAC to be not only compatible, but advantageous. Although the church for national believers will be significantly different from their home church experience, the CPAC model allows the team to be better prepared for challenges in the church plant as they “put their ecclesiology into practice, thereby testing its contextualization” (154). Besides mere compatibility, “the model intentionally keeps ‘church’ and ‘church planting’ tied together better than some of the other models” (158).

Wrestling with the Church on the Field

I have a unique missiological situation, ministering to a resistant, unreached people in their homeland with a significant worldview and linguistic distance from us, but surrounded by multiplying gospel-preaching expatriate churches.² Some leaders of these churches have also articulated Caruthers’s concern that many missionaries who were in the region for church planting do not seem to value the local (expat) church

2 While these churches would welcome nationals, there is no active engagement to plant indigenous fellowships. The nationals must take initiative and are required to go the cultural and linguistic distance required for exposure, comprehension and participation.

that already exists in the Arabian Peninsula (AP). At times we were in the crossfire.³

Relevant to this review, I have served as an elder in a sending church and an Arab church pastored by a BMB, both in the United States and in an international church on the AP. Some teammates and I also practiced the CPAC model (before reading this book) for a few years in a house church, wrestling with its exclusive nature of focusing on the neighbors and not welcoming other expats.

While I agree wholeheartedly with Caruthers's conclusion about the need for missionaries on the field to experience the functions of the church he described, I found one aspect of the development of his argument unhelpful. His chosen definition for church membership was very conceptual and presented without an exegetical defense of its demands.⁴ His application of it as a metric to evaluate Paul's relationships with the churches was anachronistic and a form of eisegesis. Caruthers's definition represents only a subset of his denomination, seminary, and agency, not the broader evangelical community. I have observed unintended consequences in some churches where the comprehensive application of this philosophy undermined the fulfillment of the biblical obligations of one another commands and koinónia fellowship he describes. These latter terms more effectively describe the Christian life in community than church membership. "Fellow worker" more accurately describes the relation of teammates than "church member." Paul's ministry relationships highlight that the boundaries of a local church do not limit the extent of whom we carry out one another commands with.

Finally, it is important not to overpromise the witness of *church* when

3 I encouraged involvement in an expat church in a context like ours in my article "Discipling and Church Planting through One's Church and Family" *Seedbed*, 23:2, 2009.

4 "a covenant union between a particular church and a Christian, a covenant that consists of the church's affirmation of the Christian's gospel profession, the church's promise to give oversight to the Christian, and the Christian's promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight." Jonathan Leeman. 2010, 53. Crossway. "*The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*".

one primarily has its gathering in mind. Our love for one another is not on display in a worship service but in the neighborhood and community.

Recommendation

Ken Caruthers effectively identifies a neglect of the role of *church* by those on the field for church planting and within missiological literature. It is not a commendation to our community that this book needed to be written! This topic is worth wrestling with. I recommend his book for missiologists, member care specialists, and mission leaders (from mission pastors to team leaders) who shape strategy for teams. Missionaries on the field are not exempt from the need for ongoing pastoral care and one-another discipleship. For those who fear that this is merely another team burden, I make this plea: do not envision CPAC in terms of the labor-intensive service of an American church supported by staff, programs, building, band, a choreographed meeting, and 20–30 hours of preparation for a polished sermon. The meeting-related functions of a church can be legitimately meaningful even when simple.

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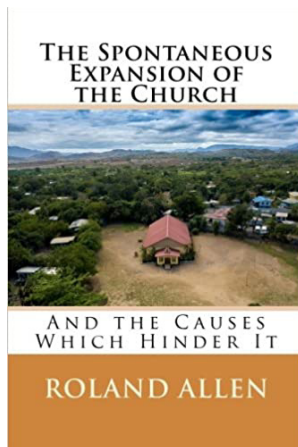
The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes that Hinder It

By Roland Allen

Jawbone Digital, 2011. 170 pages.
Kindle edition. (Originally published 1927.)

Reviewed by Howard Bell

Howard Bell (pseudonym) has worked as a church planter among Muslim unreached people groups since 2010 and as a Church-Planting Movements coach since 2012. He and his family currently live in South Asia focusing on multiplying churches among one people group and geography.



One of my favorite authors once wrote that he prays every day that God will help him write books that last beyond his generation. How many one-hundred-year-old books on church planting and frontier missions are still being widely read and recommended? Roland Allen's *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* is a seminal work in missiology and has been discussed since its original publication in 1927. Allen was a high church Anglican who served as a missionary in both China and Kenya. He is most remembered for his writing in missiology, including his earlier "*Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*" which has had ongoing relevance for around a century. His writing represented a paradigm shift in his day and still does for many today. Contexts have changed, but *The*

Spontaneous Expansion of the Church still functions as an urgent, clarion call to go back to biblical principles, release our man-made traditions, surrender control to the Holy Spirit, and believe in God's work through a self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing church.

Summary of Content

Allen writes with a prophetic urgency and frustration, giving the book a confrontational edge though many of the organizations and practices he describes are long gone. His concern and the thesis of the book is that mission organizations, missionaries, and churches restrain and prevent the spontaneous expansion of the church through western and nonbiblical practices. Allen defines "spontaneous expansion" as "expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new churches" (108).¹ As this quotation demonstrates, Allen believed that the Christian church and life has a power of its own to both attract and expand. He does not emphasize the need to promote the expansion of the church as much as to stop hindering it through bad practices and what I would describe as an insufficient recognition of the priesthood of all believers.

Allen is quick to condemn the desire to control church growth and expansion, writing, "Many of our missionaries' welcome spontaneous zeal, provided there is not too much of it for their restrictions Such missionaries pray for the wind of the Spirit but not for a rushing mighty wind. I am writing because I believe in a rushing mighty wind and desire

1 All page numbers refer to Kindle locations, as the digital edition reviewed does not include normal pagination.

its presence at all costs to our restrictions” (196). This kind of statement is difficult to disagree with, and Allen’s writing is saturated with this kind of earnest urgency. The diction is somewhat dated (few would use the word “charm” for the power of the gospel today), and the style adheres to an era when precision was valued over simplicity; but this is a very well-written book, and remains highly quotable because of its style.

Allen challenges us to ask whether our methods will accomplish the Great Commission task and vision. He argues that the methods of his day would not, but instead “would inevitably alienate native populations who would see in it the growth of the denomination of a foreign people” (298). He argues that the fear of disorder and doctrinal impurity results in a demand that new believers spend years in formal education and attain the status of professional clergy before they are allowed to participate in ministry. He emphasizes experience with the Holy Spirit as the necessary preparation for ministry and as the safeguard against both disorder and doctrinal impurity, arguing that the Holy Spirit promotes neither.

I sympathize greatly with Allen’s views. When I describe the multiplication of small, networked churches that meet in homes and discuss the Scriptures without the presence of a formally educated “pastor,” I am inevitably asked, “What about false teaching?” I have learned to respond with three questions, “Did the churches in the New Testament ever have false teaching? What did the New Testament church leaders do to deal with it? What did the New Testament church leaders do to prevent it?” I can trace this kind of thinking back to Roland Allen who may not have used the same tactics to answer his critics but was urging his readers and interlocutors in the same direction.

Perhaps the most controversial of Allen’s points in the whole book is his insistence in not imposing the requirement of any biblical or extrabiblical moral code for new believers aside from love of God and neighbor. Allen does not appear to believe that the moral law of the Old Testament is binding on New Covenant believers, a view espoused today by

adherents of “New Covenant Theology” or “Progressive Covenantalism.”² Furthermore, Allen was passionate about not applying western moral standards to local believers on the mission field or requiring adherence to any “law” in order to be admitted to the church. Using polygamy as an example, Allen argues that requiring monogamy in order to become a part of the church is a western idea and that the only moral code one must accept to enter the church is to love God and neighbor. While Allen’s broader view may be controversial, his main contention is that the reception of the gospel and grace is the requirement for entrance into the Christian community, and this comes without any lawbook or moral code (89).

Allen was passionate about self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing churches, and this passion frequently brings him into conflict with mission agency and denominational policy and use of money. He cautions against the use of foreign funded schools, hospitals, programs, and laborers, and much of the book critiques the use of foreign money and control. Allen concludes with a positive prescription for leaders to equip new believers by (1) giving them the “tradition” represented in the Apostle’s Creed, (2) training them in the Gospel in such a way that men revere it and know it, (3) training the churches to observe the sacraments, (4) ordaining ministers, and (5) making sure that new converts “understand the use of the Apostle’s Creed, the Gospels, the Sacraments and the Ministry, and then send word to the bishop” (2443).

Evaluation

Low-church readers will recognize the high church language and emphasis in the above prescription and will wonder how Allen’s Anglicanism impacted his view of church and spontaneous expansion. It’s difficult to say, and one of my few criticisms of the book is that Allen’s ecclesiol-

2 Parker, Brent E. and Richard James Lucas. 2022. Pg. 31,92-94. *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies* (Spectrum Multiview Book Series). Illinois: InterVarsity Press. Kindle.

ogy is difficult to grasp. He clearly had a high view of the sacraments and believed that Paul would not have imagined a church that did not have their observance (468). Most would agree that practicing baptism and communion would have been in the apostolic mind and example, though Allen may have been reluctant to call a gathering a church unless those elements were present. However, his own emphases on the priesthood of all believers, freedom from all law except the love of God and neighbor, and on the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture to guide new believers in right doctrine without the presence of professional clergy clashed with the denominational values of his day. Many modern readers may still struggle with these emphases, though I find myself in broad agreement with most of the more debated aspects of Allen's theology. The power of his critique comes with his own passionate appeal to Scripture and prophetic rebuke of those who disregard Scripture to maintain their own traditions or control.

The debate over church-planting movement methodology is ongoing and Allen's contribution stands the test of time. One of the great advantages of Allen's work is that while it is polemical, it is based on Scripture and principle rather than methodology. It also predates the modern shift towards church-planting movements, and he is still recommended reading and widely admired in CPM circles. I can only remember hearing Allen criticized once, and that was a church planter who believed that movements are not merely "spontaneous" but rather "inevitable" if one practiced the proper principles. I am glad that Allen refers to spontaneity instead, as it's a good reminder that this is God's work and that movement is not just a matter of doing the right things the right way.

Allen was not an advocate of Discovery Bible Study or any other specific "tool" or method. He does not critique expository preaching, traditional worship services, or meeting in a dedicated church building. I think these aspects of Allen's work make it a good introduction to CPM ideas for those from a more "proclamational" model of church planting and can help the skeptical focus on core principles rather than on any specific movement, method, or case study.

I found myself encouraged by Allen's work. Almost any passionate advocacy for self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing churches would resonate with me. I also found myself empathizing with Allen's frustrations. The issues Allen was addressing were not identical to the issues of our day, but I grieve with him when he laments the state of dependence on foreign funds and laborers. I find myself reflecting on the ministry culture and environment where I live and minister and the expectations created using foreign funding and foreign workers. Allen's book challenges me to continue to ask how we can move away from that faulty foundation and to hold firm to my own principles and not compromise my commitment to self-supporting work. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* is a seminal work precisely because it still speaks with power and persuasion today.

Recommendation

I would recommend *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* to anyone interested in classic works on missiology, the historical foundations of Church-Planting Movements methodologies, or in works on "spontaneous" multiplication of churches. While overtly about overseas missions, I learned and practiced these principles in the West as well, and I can recommend the book heartily to all contexts, though those working in more frontier work in developing nations may find it most relevant. Allen has plenty of inspiration to share even for those already familiar with the principles taught in his works. While I prefer his earlier work *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* as a book with more practical help, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* has a polemical fire that may challenge and inspire in a way that *Missionary Methods* does not. I find myself unable to read these works without great emotion, and in this season, great turmoil, as I weep and pray for self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing churches among the people group I love.

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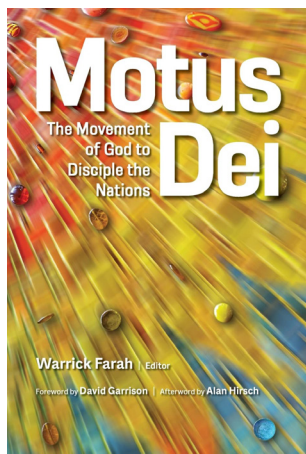
Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations

Edited by Warrick Farah

William Carey Publishing, 2021. 352 pages.

By Dave Miller

Dave Miller, an American from Oklahoma, currently engages UPGs in Oklahoma City, USA, while supporting the work through a network of small businesses. Along with his wife Ann and five children, he takes advantage of every mundane moment where they live, work and play to multiply disciples and churches. Dave has a Doctor of Ministry from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and trains young adults in graduate studies and through business and ministry residencies. He writes occasionally at sentergy.us and discusses the head, heart, and hands of the multiplying church and her leaders with his co-worker Mark Georing at h3xpodcast.com.



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Gospel movements spark conversation. Whether you are an emerging disciple maker looking for tools and mentoring, a movement practitioner with both hands to the plow in seasons of multiplication or endurance, or a skeptic of the accounts that seem to be exaggeration at best, movement practice for kingdom growth elicits strong opinion. Motus Dei introduces the conversation from the vantage point of research and academic discussion. The book draws upon the experience of practitioners, researchers, and academics from around the world in multiple contexts with multiple movement methods to form a foundation for understanding gospel movements.

Many notable and experienced academics, researchers, and practitioners contributed chapters to this book. Warrick Farah, the editor of the volume, serves with One Collective as a missiologist and theological educator in the Middle East. He holds a doctorate from Fuller Theological Seminary, and his research interests include Muslim studies, frontier missiology, integral mission, and movements. He has published in journals such as *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, and *Global Missiology*; he also coedited *Margins of Islam: Ministry in Diverse Muslim Contexts* (2018). Farah is the founder and a facilitator of the Motus Dei Network, which gave rise to the chapters of this book.

I have observed that movement proponents tend to be practitioners influenced by the church planting contexts in which they serve, while critics tend to be those whose Christian experience is focused in a highly developed, centuries-old, reformation-influenced theology and practice. The tension between what we might call frontier contexts and “legacy” contexts leads to differing fundamental church planting methodologies which are primarily based on differing experiential perspectives. *Motus Dei* fills in this perspective gap by addressing many of the issues that consistently arise within this tension. The book attempts to explain these differences while also providing nuanced conversation rather than dichotomies commonly made for rhetorical reasons which often frame conversations in unhelpful ways and inhibit collaboration. The exponential growth of population, particularly among unreached peoples, necessitates the universal church to find as many avenues of partnership and collaboration as possible. Considering this growth, multiplicative methods are the most pressing option for Great Commission progress.

As one contributor wrote, “The goal of *Motus Dei* is to encourage robust academic dialogue concerning the gospel movements being reported around the world (66).” The academic nature of the work, especially at the start, may seem too intellectual for the action-oriented tendencies of movement practitioners. However, the reader will find

the diversity of contributors to be a refreshing balance between strong academic research and field knowledge that comes through practical experience.

The book's content is arranged around several topics: Big Picture of Movements, Missional Theology of Movements, Movement Dynamics, Case Studies, and Movement Leadership and Next Steps. The big picture of movements provides the overview of the work including multiple movement methodological perspectives, a helpful list of characteristics observed among gospel movements, common theological and missiological objections, and a basic understanding of the proof and accounting of movements.

The missional theology of movements addresses some of the core arguments from Scripture that support and develop movement methodology. David Lim addresses the effect of the focus on kingdom, Craig Ott builds on the journeys of Paul and the extent to which the early Christian movement spread, and Trevor Larson frames the nature of the early church specifically as it relates to defining polity and understandings of ekklesia (church). James Lucas tackles the oft-debated house-of-peace discussion and practice. As in any discussion of theology and missiology, two people might never fully agree, and so it is with this section of the work. However, putting aside my particular differences, the larger arguments are in line with field knowledge that has developed over the last few decades and represents a solid footing for the core beliefs that drive the movement way of ministry.

Movement dynamics leads the reader through topics such as the rise and fall of movements (Steve Addison), the perspective and role of women (Pam Arlund and Regina Foard), the effect of culturally driven worship (Paul Kuivinen), the power of media to movements (Frank Preston), and the particular challenges of diaspora work (Bradley Cocanower and Joao Mordomo). Not all articles in this section were particularly relevant to my season of ministry, but each opened up ideas and missed opportunities that could be used for greater effectiveness.

Specifically, the diaspora focus was most useful considering my work among diaspora UPGs in a North American city.

As many practitioners know, culture eats strategy for breakfast, with our best strategic plans often stymied by aspects of our context. For this reason, the case studies in this book are a crucial supplement to the philosophical discussion with practical insights fleshed out in specific contexts. Then to round out the work, the book addresses the characteristics of movement leaders (Emanuel Prinz) and the shifting paradigms of organizations to movements (Eric and Laura Adams). The book concludes with a call to continue growing in maturity for clarity in our biblical understanding and practice of mission, coupled with a call to collaboration for growth, adaptation, and effectiveness for the sake of gospel expansion.

Some of the articles are exactly what the reader needs in the moment. Other articles are suitable for future reference. Still others simply add to one's thinking or fill in gaps in understanding of movements. This article approach allows *Motus Dei* to serve as an accessible resource to serve as a reference for introducing people to the work of movements.

The major misunderstandings I encounter in the North American context were addressed in this book. As movement practitioners, it often feels like there are straw men built by critics in the conversation of gospel movements. Some of these straw men are specifically addressed in chapter three by Dave Coles, which includes the shallow discipleship of rapid reproduction, inadequate ecclesiology, and leadership critiques. As just one example, Coles writes in response to the criticism that "CPMs leave a door for false teaching because of inadequate theological training for leaders:"

The leaders of movements nurture sound biblical faith through interactive study and application of God's Word. Every disciple is trained to grapple with Scripture and its application of themselves. They are also trained to ask one another, 'Where do you see that in the Bible?' This constitutes one of the best preventions for heresy (43).

During my seminary studies and early years of church planting, I asked many of the same questions often posed by movement critics. After years of engagement, however, one will recognize the leadership wisdom passed down year after year, practitioner to practitioner, mentor to disciple contained in this work as one of the best kept secrets of the movement practitioner brotherhood. *Motus Dei* engages these questions by capturing the wisdom of generations of movement learning and distilling it down into a very accessible resource.

Personally, I have observed the greatest barrier to multiplication is the gap between knowledge and practice. I discovered from personal experience that having letters behind your name does not guarantee you can actually make a disciple in the field apart from the classroom context. The failures I experienced trying to multiply disciples drove me to search out fruitful practitioners, whom I found to be, on many occasions, as biblically and theologically sharp as professors. The missing ingredient in my journey was complementing my academic learning with the experience of contextual application. I found patterns recurred among the community of movement leadership, lessons that I now pass on to every disciple and leader within my sphere of influence. These are many of the same lessons contained in *Motus Dei*.

The foundation laid by each contributor creates a wealth of launch pads for further study, thinking, and exploration. The bibliographies at the end of each article are themselves worth the cost of the book. The contributors have outlined the basic arguments and provided pathways for further study, an invaluable reference and gift to kingdom leaders in the movement world. The articles can stand alone, the sections are organized with succinct clarity, and the work in total covers a thorough portion of the crucial arguments for and against gospel movements.

To the practitioner, the brief format of the chapters is most helpful. To the academic who enjoys wordy debates, it may leave many questions unanswered. Those looking for longer treatments of the subjects should be careful to not overlook the true value of this work: the razor-sharp focus on the most pressing needs in the gospel-movement discussion for breakthrough in light of current barriers.

Motus Dei is best utilized by those sympathetic to or actively promoting and engaged in gospel movements. The contributions clearly take into account a working knowledge of movement contexts, culture, and experience. Other audiences may include those who are cautiously open to gospel movements but have reservations. These include those who are in their first years of movement practice with many questions as well as experienced practitioners looking to facilitate paradigm shifts among legacy (traditional) churches. Someone critical of gospel movements will likely find the treatment of the subjects too concise, but will also find the *Motus Dei* references valuable for further research.

Should one embrace every particular point in this book, confusion would be the result because of the diversity of viewpoints. The common thread is multiplication-oriented disciple making and the need for reproducing churches. It would not be wise to treat this work as a ready-made primer for a specific network of leaders. The perspectives are too diverse to bring the clarity needed for big picture, clear paths, and simple tools. The nuances needed for clarity and close cooperation within a network would require the ideas be discussed in order to make unified decisions on specifics. However, the diversity of the book is also a strength because it leads to cross-pollination, which is a value for movement-minded practitioners. Used in this way, the work creates collaboration which could lead to breakthroughs in common stuckages and barriers to multiplication.

We are confronted with the reality of gospel movements happening around the world today. As missiologists, theologians, and practitioners study the Scriptures to learn the message, model, and character of gospel movements, *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations* is a tremendous resource. It curates and distills years of practitioner wisdom passed down for generations. It outlines exciting insights into how God is transforming people from every, tribe, tongue and nation in miraculous ways through movements. Thank you to the contributors for sparking more conversation about the movement of God to disciple the nations.

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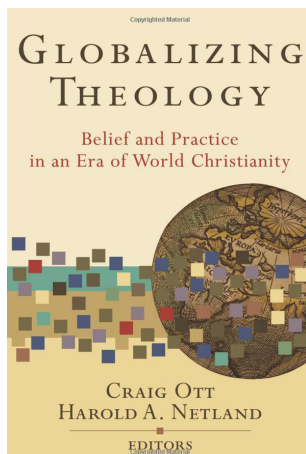
Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity

Edited by Craig Ott and Harold
Netland

Apollos: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007.
382 pages.

Review By Alex McKinnon

Alex McKinnon (pseudonym) has been living and serving with his family in the Middle East since 2015. Originally from the UK, he holds an MA in Intercultural Studies and is interested in the theological perspectives of believers from a Muslim background.



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The implications of the shifting centre of world Christianity are many and far-reaching. As practitioners from all over the world, we rejoice to partner together, and we consider how best to reflect this reality in our life and ministry. Recently, I attended our regional conference where, for the first time, colleagues sent out from a base located *within* our region were present. To meet, worship, and dream with these close-culture colleagues was a great moment of rejoicing, and the conference organisers had obviously considered ways in which these partners could be welcomed: we sang songs in not-English; conversed in not-English; welcomed speakers to the stage who didn't present in English. It was truly an exciting time!

Structural frameworks, such as conferences, can be reconsidered to reflect these global shifts in the church. We rejoice and are excited by this! Are we, however, less excited, reticent even, to reconsider our theological frameworks? The essential premise of *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* is to explore the theological implications of the shifting centre of world Christianity.

The book is comprised of papers presented at a 2004 conference titled, "Doing Theology in a Globalizing World" (12). Whilst this book could be considered as an older contribution to this subject, its strength and importance lies in the combined scholarship of the authors. We hear from a diverse selection of eminent scholars in this field, from Andrew Walls to Vinoth Ramachandra and, although still in the minority, the voices of female scholars are present. The essays address searching questions to thoroughly address this topic, "But will not self-theologizing result in the proliferation of local theologies and thus the relativization of theology?" (Netland, 29); "How are we to avoid syncretizing the gospel?" (Meneses, 244). In exploring and answering these questions, three themes are repeated between the various authors. These themes highlight significant points of overlap between the conference presenters and are summarised here.

First, the authors go to significant lengths to define both theology and global theologizing. Tite Tiénou (39), Chair of Global Theology and World Christianity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, simply expresses that theology enables Christians to "think and live Christianly." Andrew Walls (81) agrees, "Theology does not arise from the study or the library It arises from Christian life and activity, from the need to make Christian choices, to think in a Christian way." How are these Christian choices made? How can we live Christianly? The authors speak unanimously: through reflection and action based on the Word of God (e.g., Netland, 30; Vanhoozer, 106 – 107; Van Engen, 175; Hiebert, 306).

Global theologizing is a novel sounding term for something that is quite normal. If theology arises from our need to make Christian choices,

then we need to exegete the Word as well as our contemporary world, the arena of our life (Netland, 17). What happens when we pair this understanding with the realisation that the centre of gravity has shifted in the worldwide church?

The largest fields of Christian life and activity are now appearing in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and we may expect, and indeed are already beginning to see, crucial theological issues arising there. This is where acute situations requiring Christian choice will be constantly arising, and new questions will be posed as the biblical materials interact at deeper and deeper levels with the cultures of Asia and Africa (Walls, 81).

At its most basic, global theologizing is the acknowledgement that Christians must actively *do* theology as “an act of *faithfulness* in living out the gospel in a people’s unique cultural context” (Ott, 312, emphasis added). A fuller definition is provided by Netland:

Globalizing theology is theological reflection *rooted in God’s self-revelation in Scripture and informed by the historical legacy of the Christianity community through the ages, the current realities in the world, and the diverse perspectives of Christian communities throughout the world, with a view to greater holiness in living and faithfulness in fulfilling God’s mission in all the world through the church.* (27, emphases added)

Secondly, the authors unite to emphasise the fact that a globalizing theology requires the interdependence of the worldwide church. Ott (320) masterfully quotes biblical scholar Carson to highlight this:

... we will recognise that not all of God’s truth is vouchsafed to one particular interpretive community – and the result will be that we will be eager to learn from one another, to correct and to be corrected by one another... The truth may be one, but it sounds less like a single wavering note than like a symphony.

This interdependence allows us to experience the “translation and transposition” of theological concepts (Walls, 74). In his characteristic style, Walls traces how the Christian understanding of certain biblical concepts was enlarged as it crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries. Van Engen, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, agrees, commenting that “each ‘translation’ of the gospel offers the possibility of discovering something about God as revealed in the Bible that no one has previously seen” (175).

Is there a danger that this can lead to relativism? This brings us to the third point in which the authors find unity. In a particular strength of the book, the authors discuss with wisdom and nuance the tension that, “although there is one church, there are many churches, and although there is one Bible, there are many readings of Scripture” (Van Engen, 175).

Never in the book is there any disregard for Western theology simply because it is “Western.” There is, however, criticism of importing “Western” theology as normative for new context as an alternative for actively *doing* theology there. The veteran Ghanaian theologian, Bediako, is quoted as saying, “Western theology was for so long presented in all its particulars as *the* theology of the Church, when, in fact, it was geographically localised and culturally limited, European and Western, and not universal” (cited in Vanhoozer, 88, emphasis in original). Western theological formulations are affirmed as being,

no less true in Africa or Asia than they are in Europe or America. However, they are not necessarily equally relevant, understandable, or adequate in all contexts. Nor are such formulations exhaustive. Here is where theological insights from non-Western perspectives hold so much promise. They open the door not necessarily for *alternative* but rather for *fuller* theological understanding. (Ott, 315, emphasis in original)

We have arrived again at the observation that, as a worldwide Church, we are interdependent on one another and the others who have gone

before us in history to fully understand the gospel of the God who created and redeemed the cosmos (Walls, 71).

Globalizing Theology is an invitation to step out of our theological parochialism, the lingering feeling that we can “see through the glass darkly” better than others, and into the breadth and combined clarity of world Christianity. As we respond to this invitation, we are challenged as cross-cultural practitioners in several ways. Here are three.

Language

“The use of English as the de facto language for international theological scholarship can only reinforce the dialogue of the deaf” (Tiénou, 49). Are we willing to use our linguistic skills to encourage globalizing theology? For example, a new publication – من تاريخنا المنسى (‘From Our Forgotten History’) by H. Halasah (2020) is of immense importance in placing Christianity within the pre-Islamic history of the Arabs. This is a message for Christians in the Middle East primarily. However, as a worldwide Church we need this message too in order to affirm and (re)discover the true picture of *our* history and *our* legacy. This may not be published in English soon. Are we willing to be ambassadors for this research to those who don’t speak Arabic?

Discipleship

Africa is already revealing the limitations of theology as generally taught in the West. The truth is that Western models of theology are too small for Africa Since most Africans live in a larger, more populated universe, with entities that are outside the Enlightenment worldview, such models of theology cannot cope with some of the most urgent pastoral needs. They have no answers for some of the most desolating aspects of life – because they have no questions. (Walls, 75 – 76)

For many of us working with different peoples across the world, these words will resonate with power. Western theological training does not often cover the theology ('how to live Christianly') that disciples in different contexts require: "How do I honour my father (who doesn't know about my faith in the Messiah) when he summons me back home for an arranged marriage?"; "Do I remain faithful to my husband despite him taking on a second wife?" These Christians need a theology which directly asks these questions and sets forth creative answers.

We also need to resist the temptation to think that this applies only outside of the West. As contemporary Western culture becomes increasingly secular, new questions need to be asked for Christians in the West to "live Christianly" in the midst of gender redefinition, to give but one example.

Church Planting

Globalizing theology within the worldwide Church requires an interdependence, as mentioned above. Van Engen points out that this "glocal" reality (global and local) should affect our church-planting strategies: "Church planting becomes an invitation to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ to become disciples of Jesus, ambassadors of the kingdom of God, *and members of the glocal church – brothers and sisters with one and a half billion others who profess a similar faith*" (179, emphasis added).

Do our church-planting strategies allow room for this interdependence? Do they allow for conversations to take place between Christians in different contexts? Do they allow for Christians to be introduced to members of their "personal family tree" (Ramachandra cited in Ott, 334) down the centuries? Do they foster the DNA that would encourage participating within a global "theological community ... with a sense of mutual accountability" (Ott, 331)?

In conclusion, *Globalizing Theology* strongly sets forth the case for globalizing our theology while not shying away from the challenging

questions posed by would-be critics. As described above, it provides insights and challenges for cross-cultural workers in several different ministry contexts and roles. In doing all of this, *Globalizing Theology* is written in an academic and, depending on the author, sometimes dense writing style which requires time and effort. However, there is an option of selecting chapters of particular interest. For example:

In “*One Rule to Rule Them All?*” *Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity*, American theologian Kevin Vanhoozer outlines his persuasive model of “Theology as Faith Seeking Theodramatic Understanding”(109-122). He shows how “doctrine develops as the church encounters new challenges and seeks to say and do what is theodramatically fitting [to the canon of Scripture]” (120). This is essential reading for those fearful of the perceived relativism of local theologies.

The closing sections of *The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing* (Hiebert, 288 – 308) notes that “missionaries belong to two or more worlds ... they become, to some extent, insiders [in the new culture]. But they never fully become one with the people. They are *outsider-insiders*” (300, emphasis original). Do you feel disadvantaged and discouraged with never feeling really “one with the people” among whom you are ministering? This section provides an encouraging perspective of how we can utilise this as a benefit to the worldwide church.

Finally, four chapters are set “in context,” providing case studies from different locations which may be of specific interest to those living in or ministering with people from these contexts:

- *Creeds, Confessions, and Global Theologizing: A Case Study in Comparative Christologies* (Strauss, 140 – 156) looks at issues arising within the Ethiopian Coptic Church.
- *The Challenge of Economic Globalization for Theology: from Latin America to a Hermeneutics of Responsibility* (Daniel Carroll R., 199 – 212) explores the specific reasons that the “worldwide church needs Latin American and other troubled regions for its own theological health and faithfulness” (211).

- *Globalization, Nationalism, and Religious Resurgence* (Ramachandra, 213 – 230) touches on the compromise of mission in an age of colonialism, with specific reference to India.
- *Bearing Witness in Rome with Theology from the Whole Church: Globalization, Theology, and Nationalism* (Meneses, 231 – 249), discusses how “American Christians must not fail to be Christians first and Americans second” (246).

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Overflow: How the Joy of the Trinity Inspires Our Mission

By Michael Reeves

Moody Press, 2021. 102 pages.

Review By Mike Towns

Mike Towns (pseudonym) is a husband, father, and CP team leader. He and his family have lived in North Africa for 14 years. They serve the church through evangelism, discipleship, and translation.



Has your motivation to serve the Lord dried up? Are you feeling tired or frustrated in evangelism? Do you need encouragement to persevere? Michael Reeves has a solution for you, one which you may find surprising: the doctrine of the Trinity.

Through the four short chapters of *Overflow*, Michael Reeves, president of Union School of Theology in the United Kingdom, takes readers on a tour of the glory and wonder of the Trinity and what that means for mission. He wants Christians “to know a God who is not mean and pinched but overflowing with life, goodness, and beauty. For when you are full of Him, you too will overflow and be a spring of life-giving water to all around you” (10). God the Father, Son, and Spirit is in his very nature an overabundance of love, which he pours out onto his people. And as his people receive that love, they are empowered to pass it on to others as well.

Chapter one sets the foundation for God as “the fountain of all goodness.” Reeves explains, using John 14–17 and other passages, how the Father has loved the Son since the foundation of the world, and thus God is in his very nature love. “When you start with Jesus, and in Him you discover a triune God, you have found a God of infinite beauty, love and loveliness beyond compare” (25). The incomparable beauty and greatness of God is seen in the perfect love shared among the persons of the Trinity.

Chapter two builds on this theology to show how God’s overflowing love also flows out from his people to the world. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, notes Reeves, to pour out the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). And as the Spirit does so, we are filled with such a perfect, glorious love that we cannot help but pour it out to others through gospel proclamation. “Mission is the overflow of love from the enjoyment of divine fellowship. As we partake in the Father’s pleasure in His Son, and the Son’s pleasure in His Father, and the Spirit’s enlivening of their mutual love, it causes us to share their love for the world” (56).

Reeves then turns to consider what it would be like if God were not Trinity: how would that affect his character of love? Chapter three discusses two alternatives: a god who is one person (as in Islam) or a godless world. Reeves is frank in his dire assessment of both options. If Islamic theology is correct, then God cannot be love at his core, since from eternity past there would have been no one to whom he could express this love. He could not have created humans out of the overflow of his love but could only have done so to make servants for himself. “Without the Trinity, religious people in the world are condemned to a bleak system of sterile power instead of abounding love” (66). Secular atheism is no better, as this can only lead to “a despairing nihilism and meaninglessness” (13). If God is not Trinity, the world is a terrifying place indeed.

But God is Trinity, and so his people can rejoice in and rest in his overflowing, eternal, undeserved love. They can then, as chapter four

tells us, shine like lights in the universe. God's people have been adopted into his family and have been showered with his eternal, unending love. And so they shine out to the world around them. "As the Lord fills the universe with countless stars, so He will fill His creation with the sons of God. They will gather around Him and, like the true Light of the World, they will shine with sparkling radiance as well" (92).

Reeves writes as an academic and a theologian who specializes in the doctrine of the Trinity, rather than as a cross-cultural worker. Yet he writes with an eager desire to inspire workers like us not to be ashamed of nor confused by the Trinity. Reeves calls us to love our triune God and, despite the objections we know we will face, to boldly proclaim that a triune God is our only hope in this world. So, this book is eminently practical.

In my own gospel conversations with North Africans, I have tended to avoid discussing the Trinity. It is certainly a point of massive contention and confusion for Muslims, and in many cases should not be the doctrine we address immediately. Yet the more we delight in the Trinity, the less we will be shy or reticent to talk about this glorious doctrine. For example, in a recent conversation with a friend, discussion about the meaning of life ("to glorify God and enjoy him forever")¹ quickly moved to the fact that God is love and can only be love because he is triune. *Overflow* inspired and equipped me to explain and exult in the Trinity in my evangelism.

In addition, recognizing the love that exists between the persons of the Trinity and how that flows out to God's people produces in us a heartfelt, uncontrived, unforced evangelism. I have found this vision of God's trinitarian love to be inspiring, a truth I want to meditate on regularly in order to strengthen my resolve, boldness, and joy.

1 Cf. The Westminster Short Catechism.

As a short appeal to love the doctrine of the Trinity, *Overflow* is limited in its scope. It does not teach believers how to explain the doctrine, nor does it lay out a full trinitarian theology. Readers will need to go elsewhere for those things. Yet for anyone taking the gospel to others, especially those on the front lines of missions, this book will be a sweet encouragement to open their eyes to the glory and importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Whether you are working with Muslims, secular agnostics, Hindus, or anyone else, you will be helped and motivated.

Overflow is a gentle yet inspiring invitation to serve God out of the overflow of his trinitarian love. The gospel, which is meaningless without the Trinity, calls forth not a begrudging service to a master, but a satisfied, eager service to a loving Father. Reeves's sweet, devotional tone is especially appropriate for workers who may be running on empty. And his brevity only makes the book more accessible. I personally was inspired by his awe-filled vision of our triune God and encouraged to press on in mission out of the overflow of His love. I imagine any other worker, especially the weary among us, would find similar inspiration from this short meditation.

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Seedbed exists to sharpen and enhance our witness and church-planting efforts among the unreached by stimulating fresh insight and constructive conversation among mission practitioners around high-stakes theological, contextual, and spiritual issues in frontier church-planting and discipleship.

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