

Success, Failure, and the Mind of Christ: How Collective Intelligence Turns our Losses into Victory

By A.K. Amberg

A. K. Amberg has been a church planter in South Asia and the Indian Ocean for 10 years. He is a husband and father to a wife and sons who remind him every day of the goodness of God, as well as an avid birdwatcher and board-gamer. He is currently researching the role of missiological theology in disciple-making movements and can be followed at akamberg.substack.com.



“God, I’m willing to do the right thing here. I just don’t know what it is.”

The words above are a prayer I recorded in my journal during what felt like my worst failure as a missionary. I sensed there was a right answer to my dilemma which would result either in success or failure, and I was not alone in this thinking. An ocean of ink has been spilled across mission journals just like mine to clarify the line between failure and success in church planting. But, I have come to believe that—with the right epistemological framework—it might be beneficial to blur that line.

The Mind of Christ vs. an Individual’s Wisdom

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he describes the differences in ways of “knowing” between two different cultures. The Jews, he says, rely on signs, while the Greeks look for wisdom (1:22). The church, meanwhile, enjoys a different way of knowing, based on the death and resurrection of Christ. In the following chapter, he says this new way of knowing is imparted by the Spirit and allows us access to the *Mind of Christ*.

Missiologists Alan Hirsch and Rob Kelley describe the Mind of Christ as a “sacramental” way of seeing reality (Hirsch and Kelly 2023, 98). Since the sacraments are fundamentally an impartation of grace administered by the Church, this places the Mind of Christ theologically within the realm of church practice. Paul’s prime metaphor for the church, meanwhile, is the human body, with Christ as its head (Ephesians 5:23). So, we can read the Holy Spirit spoken of in 1 Corinthians 2 as the animating spirit of the body, and the Mind of Christ as the thoughts emanating from within the body’s head which travel throughout its central nervous system to deliver knowledge and direction to its various members: us.

But what happens if those body parts are not united? Suppose the spinal cord has suffered trauma, and the messages traveling across its synapses are unable to reach the limbs attached to it. Many cross-cultural ministers can be forgiven for feeling such a sense of paralysis when confronted with the challenging questions involved in church planting!

Quick Success Leads to Quick Failure: A Personal Experience

When my wife and I first moved overseas, we spent a year in South Asia, learning from a vibrant disciple-making movement of over 800 house churches in rural areas. We were inspired by their electric zeal which was so contagious they couldn’t help but multiply churches and disciples. But it was the singing that struck us the most. Hearing their indigenous music and the unique ways they talked about Jesus helped me see Christ in a new way. We became enthralled with the idea of beholding Christ in the light cast on him by a culture not our own. So, naturally, we made it our mission to replicate exactly what this movement was doing.

After that year, we moved to an island nation in the Indian Ocean and experienced what some might consider early success. We worked as equal partners with local believers to catalyze a disciple-making

movement.¹ House churches were multiplying and planting other house churches. In 2018, we counted about 43 churches and 16 discovery groups, representing around 300 people, 215 of whom had been baptized. But our definition for success was *two fourth-generation streams*. In other words, two instances of a church that had planted a church, that had planted a church, which in turn, had also planted a church. It had almost happened too. There were two instances of a group that had planted a fourth generation, but these new groups were seekers who had not yet been baptized. That's when everything fell apart for us.

In hindsight, we should have seen it coming. For years, everything on the outside looked good, but we had a sense of uneasiness about the network. The movement we had witnessed in South Asia had a life of its own. It was organic and dynamic, and it grew in unexpected ways, as if carried by the wind of the Holy Spirit. By contrast, our island network felt mechanical and forced. Multiplication only happened with copious training and encouragement. Our interactions with local leaders felt relationally flat. What troubled us most of all was that *every group looked the same*. We felt the indigenous element was lacking and were missing that sense of beholding Christ in a new light. Then one day, one of the leaders invited me to a coffee shop and fired me.

"We just don't trust you anymore," he said.

His reasoning felt foggy. He assured me there was no accusation of sin, just a general sense of mistrust. Of course, cultural issues were at play; gossip is known to thrive in postcolonial island settings. But, even after clearing up a misunderstanding that had been passed around the rumor mill, it was still clear that the leaders no longer felt comfortable with me and my wife's involvement. He clicked a pen and prepared to draw up a chart, splitting leadership of the network between him and myself. I told him not to bother. We had come to the island to empower locals to lead

1 For more on disciple-making movements (DMM) see "The Waha Disciple Making Course," Waha, accessed April 30, 2025 [<https://web.waha.app/eng/03.009>]

out, so if that's what he wanted, we would leave everything to him and back out entirely.

What followed was a painful season. For years, we tried and failed to start something new, but nothing ever took off. Not only had we missed out on that vision of Christ in a new culture, but we also lost all our local friends. We were lonely. Eventually, I retreated into more education. As a former teacher and self-professed nerd, learning was always a safe space for me.

My studies eventually led to the topic of religious epistemology (essentially the study of knowing) which can seem abstract, but is actually important as it affects everything we do. Our values are based on what we believe we know, and our actions are determined by what we value. I thought of my friends in South Asia where the church had grown so organically and Spirit-led. How did they know what they knew?

Collective Intelligence, the Mind of Christ, and the Epistemology of a Movement

MIT has been studying an epistemological phenomenon it calls "collective intelligence." Defined as, "the way in which [agents] can be connected so that—collectively—they act more intelligently than any other [agent] has ever done before" (MIT Center for Collective Intelligence 2025), it basically means that groups of people "are often smarter than the smartest people in them" (Surowiecki 2004, chap 2). This framework reminded me of the disciple-making movement I witnessed in South Asia. Nobody in that network was an accomplished scholar or a formally trained theologian. But, when these faithful villagers came together, they innovated brilliant new ways of doing church that felt at-home in their culture and multiplied virally. It felt as if their ideas came from Christ himself, and they were distributed throughout their body of believers.

Obviously, collective intelligence does not happen simply when believers gather. We have all seen how the connectedness of social media has failed to bring about the wisdom of Christ. Instead, it has “deepened societal polarization” by enmeshing users in echo chambers made in their own image (Herbert and Fisher-Høyrem 2022). This happens when a group lacks diversity, which limits its access to possible solutions and hinders the emergence of novel ideas. It then becomes easy for dominant personalities to take over and assume monarchical control (Surowiecki 2004, chap 2).

In the American church, it is easy to see how the most egregious abuses of pastoral authority begin with a lack of diversity. All of us involved in ministry of any kind would do well to remember this. Even leadership structures involving a council of elders meant to hold a senior pastor accountable may be insufficient if such councils are not diverse. And, when we place a single leader upon a stage every Sunday like an infallible celebrity, it is easy to see why pastoral abuse and moral failure among clergy has become so common.

Of course, diversity is not easy; it can lead to friction, as we see in the Corinthian Church. New Testament scholarship ensures us that the body of believers in Corinth was diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Meeks 2003, 348). But, it is also clear from Scripture that they were theologically diverse. Their difference of opinion over the use of tongues during worship led to a sharp division, which Paul attempted to pacify:

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgement by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor. 14:23-25)

Paul restores unity to the Corinthians by appealing to a common, missiological purpose: their participation in the mission of God. Collective intelligence only emerges when a group is both diverse and united by a purpose clear and compelling enough to “galvanize connection, learning, and action” (Ehrlichman 2021, 90). For the body of Christ, which has been called to adopt a *sent* identity, just as the Son of God was sent by the Father (John 20:21), that purpose is the *Missio Dei*.

However, diversity unified by a common purpose is at best cooperation, not collective intelligence; it only shows how a group can work together. To be considered the Mind of Christ, the group still must achieve an intelligence greater than any individual within it. After all, it stands to reason that group efforts should only *dumb it down*. Why not simply determine who in the group is best equipped to deal with a challenge and give authority to that person? A team of researchers at MIT set out to answer precisely this question.

An Algorithm for the Body of Christ

In the MIT study, multiple groups of volunteers were given several rounds of cognitive tasks to complete. They were then rated according to their percentage of error in completing them. One group was a control group, but others were altered in various ways.

Some groups were given access to *feedback*. They were allowed to see their error percentage between rounds to get an idea of how they were doing. Others were allowed to “follow” another member of their group, upon seeing a superior score. They called this *network plasticity*, referring to a group’s ability to restructure itself when presented with new information. The researchers then compared the groups according to how much their standard percentages of error decreased after each subsequent round.

It is perhaps not surprising that the group with access to both feedback and network plasticity performed the best. But what is

surprising was that the best performing member of this group performed better than he or she had done in previous control groups. In other words, this individual's performance actually *increased* when participating in a group with feedback and network plasticity (Almaatouq et al. 2020).

Algorithms are repetitive processes that learn from themselves (Hirsch and Kelly 2023, 176). They perform an action, collect feedback on the effects of that action, and then restructure themselves according to what that feedback suggests will improve it. In this way, diverse groups united around a common purpose can achieve collective intelligence by gathering feedback on their actions and changing themselves and their methods according to what they learn.

I see a direct correlation between the concept of collective intelligence and the Mind of Christ which imparts its wisdom by the power of the Holy Spirit when the group is sanctified:

1. It is a sufficiently diverse representation of the body of Christ in a given locality.
2. It is unified by its desire to participate in the mission of God.
3. It pays prayerful attention to its actions and shares feedback honestly.
4. It is humbly committed to change according to what it learns.

The Mind of Christ at Work in Scripture

We see the Mind of Christ in action during the events of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. In response to a disagreement over whether Gentile converts should be made to follow Jewish law, the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. These two men represented the interests of the Gentile believers, while James and Peter represented the Jewish church in Jerusalem. Both sides were committed to diversity. During the council, Paul and Barnabas shared feedback about how people had come to know the Lord when released from Jewish customs, and Peter reported similar feedback from Cornelius' house.

Finally, James reminded the council of their commitment to God's mission by applying a missiological hermeneutic to a passage from the book of Amos. It was thus decided that obeying Jewish law would not be required. Messengers were sent out to encourage churches across the Mediterranean to restructure their methods accordingly (Acts 15:1-23). This unsuspecting decision led to the church separating itself from the ritual laws of Second Temple Judaism and multiplying throughout the Roman Empire. Though no one at the Jerusalem Council argued in favor of this highly strategic idea, it seemed to come from the Mind of Christ, and because His church acted like a unified, organic body of believers, it was put into practice, and a movement was born.

Beginning the Algorithm Anew

Sadly, the church where I live is known for its disunity. But, a few years ago, God began stirring something up in peoples' hearts. Other local ministry leaders, who had been through similar conflicts, wanted to see the churches put aside their differences and work together to reach the island. My wife and I began to invite locals over for dinner and consider with them what this could look like.

We recognized rich, ethnic diversity to be a strength of the country we live in, so we made sure to include Hindu-background believers, Creole believers, and Chinese believers. We included men and women, young and old. We didn't just invite them; we tried our best to make space for them. We held our tongues and asked the quiet ones to speak up. Eventually, two groups formed, and different ideas emerged. One group organized a pastor's prayer breakfast to encourage unity, and the other planned to map the island for church planting. One day our old ministry partner who had fired me asked me to get coffee again. I sat across from him as he fidgeted with his mug and stammered,

"I want to make things right for what happened, years ago."

It wasn't easy, but we worked through our differences and reconciled. It took many nights sharing honestly and responding in humility, but

eventually we got there. One weekend, my family and his went to stay in a cabin by the beach to celebrate our wives' birthdays. We grilled meat and played with his kids and laughed for the first time in years.

I wish I could say all our initiatives took off after that. Unfortunately, these collaborative groups lost steam when the members got too busy with their own ministries and stopped responding. The lifeblood of the Mind of Christ, it seems, is open lines of communication. But, the line between success and failure had become blurred.

Our goal had become to engage the Mind of Christ, and failure became an opportunity for continued learning and growth. After our initial groups failed, we pursued the members of the groups who seemed the hungriest for relationship, and the algorithm started over again. We had dinner with them and considered new possibilities. Eventually one of the families from the pastor's prayer group asked if we could meet.

"We've been wanting to share something with you," they said. "We have an idea for an outreach!"

We helped our new friends put on a concert playing indigenous music. They shared an exhortation with the crowd, and we cast vision for a new kind of "Jesus community" on the island. Many people responded that day wanting to join the new church network. We needed to plan how to do church with all these new believers and seekers. I offered my thoughts based on years of training and of practicing DMM methods, but then one of the local leaders did the godliest thing he could possibly have done:

He disagreed with me.

It felt like a holy moment as he explained his reasoning. There was much about his culture I still didn't understand – even after living there for a decade. Many cultural issues made my strategy problematic, but I appealed to our shared vision. We want to see people form life-giving "Jesus communities" that multiply throughout the island, so how could we get this done?

The wisdom that emerged that day led to an idea I would never have come up with on my own. It was a way to structure church life around the cultural patterns of family life on the island. It had that spark of Christ-through-someone-else's-eyes I had so longed to see since living in South Asia.

Suggestions for Implementing the Mind of Christ

We are still working to implement those plans, but they feel promising. It would be nice to end this case study with a wild story of success, but like an algorithm, it simply continues on and on, creating new iterations of itself as we go. For this reason, I encourage the reader to make use of the simple and Biblical framework of collective intelligence as the Mind of Christ.

1. **Make room for diverse teams.** It is not enough to simply invite different people to the table. Space needs to be held for those who may not know if their perspective is welcome. Ask them to speak up, even if you must quiet the more confident members of the team. Celebrate differences. Be curious about the things that make your teammates unique.
2. **Cast a missiological vision and repeat it often.** People are more likely to take seriously a purpose that unites them when it is vocalized often. This helps them see past the friction caused by disagreements in favor of a shared goal. But, it cannot be just any goal. Jesus must be central, and Jesus is the Son of God sent to the earth to redeem a lost world. Any vision that does not include this missional aspect of His identity has sidelined Him, even if it has done so ever so slightly.
3. **Be realistic.** At times, some of us can be overly optimistic. It is good to celebrate the things the Lord leads us to accomplish, but we do ourselves a disservice when we spiritualize problems and explain them away. At best we deprive ourselves of precious feedback that may lead

us to discover God's wisdom, and at worst, we risk hurting people by failing to pay attention to the effects our actions have on them.

4. **Be willing to go against your training.** Most missionaries just want to be good workers. Whether it is a movement approach, a church-planting approach, or a church-growth approach, we all want to apply our strategies according to what we've been taught. Even if we don't have a favored missions strategy, we are most likely to resort to the church and ministry structures we grew up with because we're most comfortable with them. The difference between missionaries who innovate and those who don't is often found in their willingness to adapt.

So, what does success and failure look like on the mission field? There are likely as many ways to answer that question as there are missionaries. But, the question is a false dichotomy; it assumes there is a clear distinction between the two, and it assumes that one is desirable over the other. Scripture tells us to avoid sin, not failure. God loves failure; it is how He rescued us on the cross.

When collective intelligence becomes the Mind of Christ within the church, it blurs the line between success and failure. It becomes an epistemological framework that reinterprets failure as just another step toward success, and success as just another step toward the next success. It is not just failing forward; it is living from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18, NKJV). It is important that we follow this wisdom, not only for the sake of those we are trying to reach, but for ourselves as well. When we begin defining success as anything other than obedience to the Holy Spirit, we set ourselves up for disappointment. We are not on our own mission. Rather, we are merely participating with God in his. When we humble ourselves and work toward collective intelligence as a member of his body, we place the Mind of Christ in its rightful place, calling all the shots.

That makes it easy to do the right thing.

Questions for Conversation

1. The author compares CP teams to a body with Christ as its head, and yet whose spinal cord can suffer trauma such that messages from the brain are not able to reach its limbs. Does this resonate with any of your experiences with CP teams or partnerships? What comes to mind when applying this imagery to your experience?
2. The author describes how Paul restores unity to the Corinthian church despite their theological differences of opinion. How might ministry coworkers of differing perspectives find common purposes in their diverse theological understandings in order to work together in unity?
3. As a team, consider the four suggestions for implementing the Mind of Christ in your CP efforts. What do you like about these suggestions? What would you change about them? What will you do in response to this article?

Bibliography

- Almaatouq, Abdullah, Alejandro Noriega-Campero, Abdulrahman Alotaibi, P. M. Krafft, Mehdi Moussaid, and Alex Pentland. 2020. "Adaptive Social Networks Promote the Wisdom of Crowds." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117 (21): 11379–86. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1917687117>.
- Ehrlichman, David. 2021. *Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration, and Catalyze Systemic Change*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.
- Herbert, David, and Stefan Fisher-Høyrem. 2022. *Social Media and Social Order*. Warsaw, Poland: De Gruyter Open. <https://doi.org/10.2478/9788366675612>.
- Hirsch, Alan, with Rob Kelly. 2023. *Metanoia: How God Radically Transforms People, Churches, and Organizations from the Inside Out*. 100 Movements Publishing.
- Meeks, Wayne A. 2003. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

MIT Center for Collective Intelligence. 2025. "Center for Collective Intelligence."
Accessed May 5, 2025. <https://cci.mit.edu>.

Surowiecki, James. 2004. *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*. New York: Doubleday.

Waha. 2025. *The Waha Disciple Making Course*. Accessed April 30, 2025. <https://web.waha.app/eng/03.009>.