

The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements in our Time

By Alan Hirsch

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We are living in an unprecedented moment in history. Never before has the global church held so much potential to finish what it began at Pentecost—the planting of the Jesus story (the gospel) in every people, tongue, and tribe. The missional challenge, however, is not simply one of geography or access. It is fundamentally one of apostolic (missionary) imagination. The challenge is to awaken within the global Christian body, and specifically within those pioneering spirits laboring among the unreached, a "lost imagination" concerning the church's innate design and purpose.

Our existing approaches to mission, church organization, and leadership are still shaped by outdated assumptions that haven't adapted to the current scale and complexity of the task. I believe we have, through centuries of institutional drift, lost contact with the memory of what we can, and ought, to be as God's people. We need a thorough re-evaluation of what it means to be God's people in unreached areas. This requires us to rediscover the powerful, movement-oriented nature of early Christianity—what I refer to as "The Forgotten Ways" (Hirsch 2016).

It would be a big mistake to see this call to the recovery of apostolic movements simply as an application of a new methodology. It is a call to recover the buried instincts of the people of God—the original energies which once drove small bands of marginalized believers to ignite movements that would reshape the world. And make no mistake: the very same latent potencies still reside in the Body of Christ in our day, as it has through all eras. They are embedded deep in the life of Jesus, in the patterns of the New Testament church, and in every Spirit-baptized community of disciples. But these latent capacities must be reactivated, especially among those who feel called to pioneer among unreached peoples. That is the purpose of this article—to help us reimagine church as an apostolic movement capable of viral reproduction in the hardest and most resistant places on earth.

This quest, to unearth the latent capacities that lie dormant at the heart of every true believer and every authentic Jesus community, is not some mere fantasy. It is a tangible phenomenon, clearly identifiable in the historical currents of faith, a primal force that has energized the most outstanding Jesus movements throughout history. Consider the startling trajectory of the early Christian movement: from a mere 25,000 adherents in AD 100 to an astounding 20,000,000 by AD 310, blossoming into the Roman Empire's most significant religious force within two centuries (Hirsch 2016, 4–6). How, one must ask, did they achieve such hyperbolic growth against overwhelming odds?

The query echoes through the annals of more recent history as well. The vibrant and undeniably powerful Chinese underground church, despite facing systematic persecution and the forced removal of all institutional reference points—no Bibles, no professional clergy, no official structures, no mass meetings—grew from an estimated 2 million to as many as 120 million in just seventy years (ibid). What hidden force propelled such an extraordinary, world-transforming movement? This potent, self-replicating energy, the very life force and guiding mechanism of God's people, is what I call Apostolic Genius.

For too long, the discourse around global mission and church planting, particularly in the realm of Disciple-Making Movements (DMMs), has often focused on specific techniques or singular elements, as if one silver bullet could solve the multifaceted challenge of reaching unreached people groups. While DMMs correctly emphasize the indispensable role of disciple making, our understanding of Apostolic Genius reveals that it is about activating a complex, systemic interplay of six irreducible components, which I call mDNA (missional DNA). It is the full constellation of these elements, each dynamically interrelated and mutually informing the others, that unlocks the true, world-changing power of movemental thinking and leads to spontaneous expansion.

So, let us delve into these six primal forces, insights which emerged in our efforts at missional revitalization in the West, reinterpreting their profound significance for those committed to reaching the very ends of the earth.¹

The Six Elements of mDNA: A Systemic Unveiling

1. Jesus Is Lord: The Epistemological Ground of All Mission

At its spiritual core, every genuine Christian movement, whether the early church under Roman persecution or the contemporary underground church in China, involves an unshakeable encounter with the One True God, and an all-pervasive consciousness of the absolute centrality of Christ. This is far more than one element among others; it is the very ground zero, the epicenter, around which all other elements of Apostolic Genius coalesce and are guided. In contexts striving to reach unreached people groups, where diverse worldviews and complex belief systems prevail, the distillation of the message to its utter simplicity—"Jesus is Lord"—becomes profoundly transformative and "sneezable."²

1. The content in this article is drawn largely from my book, *The Forgotten Ways* (2016), adapted here for global frontier mission practitioners.

2. I mean by this term that the idea can spread rapidly—like a virus.

Persecution, paradoxically, often clarifies this core message, stripping away the cumbersome theological clutter and dogmas that can inadvertently obscure the essential gospel. In these challenging environments, the faith must travel light, unburdened by unnecessary complexities, allowing the raw power of a simple Christology to rapidly transfer along relational lines, becoming easily grasped even by the illiterate. This radical realignment of every aspect of individual and collective life around Jesus, his ways and purposes, is what deposes dualism and creates a seamless experience between faith and life for new converts. For those engaging unreached peoples, this means asking, "Is what we are doing a genuine expression of the way of Jesus?" "Is our movement consistent with his person and his teaching?" "Is this how Jesus would go about incarnating the kingdom in this area?" These are critical exercises for recalibrating communal life around Him. This absolute and ongoing centrality of Jesus is the sustaining and guiding center that enables movements to negotiate massive adaptive challenges.

2. Disciple Making: The Conspiracy of "Little Jesuses"

While all mDNA elements are critical, disciple making holds a preeminent position alongside "Jesus is Lord." It is the irreplaceable and lifelong task of becoming like Jesus by embodying His message, fulfilling the destiny to be conformed to the image of Christ. Any movement that seeks to change the world operates, at its most fundamental level, as a disciple-making system, where everyone is involved at all levels of the community. The success of the Wesleyan, Franciscan, or Chinese phenomena hinged on leaders and participants who were absolutely committed to reproducing disciples.³ In the context of unreached people groups, where inherited ecclesial structures are absent, disciple-making cannot be reduced to an intellectual assimilation of theological ideas, which often characterizes cultural Christianity in the West. Rather, it must be the vigorous kind of discipleship that marked early Christianity,

3. For instance, the Methodists were called by this name because they were so committed to discipling methodology of classes and bands. Francis invited his followers to join him on the road and experience life and mission together, etc.

emphasizing embodiment, action, and radical commitment. The aim is to make the Christian life a "radical minimum standard" for all believers, a "normal Christian life" that is, in fact, extraordinary in its commitment.

The strategy of Jesus was to get many little versions of him infiltrating every nook and cranny of society by reproducing himself in and through his people in every place throughout the world. This is what I like to call the "conspiracy of little Jesuses." For those reaching the unreached, this means that the essence of discipleship is to become a living, breathing representation of Jesus's mission and message within the host culture. Discipleship must be forged in the everyday context of life, integrating faith into normal experiences rather than confining it to separate religious activities. Critically, mission must be a non-negotiable part of what it means to be a disciple, not an optional extra. Just as Jesus formed His disciples thoroughly around the call to mission, involving them in proclaiming the kingdom, serving, healing, and casting out demons from the start (Matt. 10:5–16), so too, new believers among unreached peoples should be engaged in mission from their very genesis. This "action-learning discipleship" fosters a profound unity between thinking and acting, ensuring that spiritual growth is intrinsically tied to participation in God's redemptive purposes.

3. Missional-Incarnational Impulse: Going Out and Going Deep

This element describes the twin movements essential for remarkable missional movements: (1) the dynamic outward thrust, and (2) the related deepening impulse. It draws its inspiration directly from the incarnation of Jesus, who "moved into the neighborhood" and lived with humanity. For unreached people groups, this means transcending the "attractional" model – where people are expected to come to the church—to embrace a "sent" or "go-to-them" approach. The early church and the Chinese church exemplify this centrifugal movement, scattering like seeds in the wind rather than being confined to ecclesial storehouses (Hirsch 2016, chap. 6).

Incarnational mission demands deep identification and affinity with the people being reached. This includes *proximity* (physical closeness), *presence* (God in the flesh among them), *powerlessness* (servanthood and humility), and *proclamation* (sharing the gospel story). For unreached peoples, this translates to missionaries and teams living within their host communities, engaging in their daily rhythms, understanding their cultural forms, and becoming a functioning part of the existing culture while seeking to transform it. This means taking the church to people rather than bringing people to church. Key practices include:

- Proximity and Meaningful Engagement: Spending significant time "hanging out," building friendships, sharing meals, and engaging in shared projects with those outside the faith. This is how gospel conversations naturally unfold.
- Proclamation as Conversation: Recognizing that evangelism in these contexts is more conversation, less presentation; exciting curiosity through storytelling, provoking wonder, and being extraordinarily loving. It's about uncovering the God who is already present in their lives.
- Contextualizing Community: Allowing the natural lifestyle patterns of the host community to shape the new faith community's life and worship which ensures the gospel integrates without damaging the innate cultural framework. This requires "missionary listening" to understand the people from the inside.
- Sending: Continually sending out small groups from within the community to seed and embed the gospel in new contexts which ensures the inherent reproductive capacity of the church is unleashed.⁴

4. APEST Culture: The Fivefold Ministry as Movement Engine

If missional movements are to flourish, they require a specific kind of leadership and ministry. I am totally convinced that there has never been a genuine missional movement with exponential growth and transformational impact that did not have APEST ministry—it does not happen. APEST refers

4. Please note these bullet point summaries here and in the rest of the article summarize material I previously wrote about in *The Forgotten Ways*.

to the active presence of apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding (pastoral), and teaching functions, as delineated in Ephesians 4. As can be seen from just the terms associated here, all the functions of ministry are contained in the five. For this reason, in order to be a genuine apostolic movement, we will need both generative (APE) and operative (ST) forms of ministry. These are functions of the Body of Christ and not titles or “offices” (a word that never appears in Scripture). Essentially,

- Apostles pioneer and extend.
- Prophets listen and speak truth.
- Evangelists proclaim and gather.
- Shepherds nurture and heal.
- Teachers ground and guide.

While all five are essential, the apostolic is uniquely catalytic and often the most excluded or delegitimized in institutional settings. It is the “sent one” responsible for designing and leading the “sentness” of the church, pioneering new ground for the gospel, and safeguarding its DNA across time and distance.⁵

For those working among unreached peoples, understanding APEST is vital. Traditional structures, often weighted towards pastor-teacher modes, sideline the very ministries (apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic) needed for pioneering and extension. The adaptive challenge of reaching new cultures demands pioneering, innovative leadership. Apostolic leaders, like the Chinese underground church leaders, often operate without formal titles or centralized institutions, wielding authority rooted in calling, character, suffering, and spiritual influence, rather than positional power.⁶ Their task is to embed “mDNA” and ensure the new churches “do not mutate into something other than God intended them to be.”⁷ A fully functioning APEST

5. See for example, *The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions: The Forgotten Foundation* by Don Dent (2019), previously [reviewed](#) in *Seedbed* (Jackson 2022).

6. Cf. my book with Tim Catchim (2012), *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church*.

7. Hirsch 2016, 193.

system provides a ministry ecology that makes it hard not to be missional. This means empowering all believers to discover and use their gifts, recognizing that every participant in the Jesus movement is a player, someone who can change the world.⁸

5. Organic Systems: From Monument to Movement

Movements tend to organize very differently to the prevailing forms of organization and leadership. Standard structure tends to centralize power and function and lead from a hierarchical structure. Movements decentralize power and function so that the edges are productive. Remarkable Jesus movements have the feel (vibe) of a movement, the structure of an organic network, and spread like viruses. This element emphasizes moving beyond rigid, mechanistic institutional structures, which often become "movement killers," to embrace decentralized, reproducible, and adaptable forms of organization that support life and multiplication. In unreached contexts, where external resources are scarce, simplicity is a vital key to multiplication and spontaneous expansion. The complex attractional approaches that demand professional ministry and extensive resources have a contraceptive effect on the church's reproductive capacities.

Instead, movements should focus on the following:

- Movement Ethos: Changing how we think about the church – as a "sneeze-like" movement of disciples, and not a centralized organization.
- Organic Structure: Building around networks of meaningful relationships, where power and responsibility are diffused, and decisions are made by key stakeholders.
- Virus-like Growth (Simplexity): Distilling the gospel and the church's ethos to their core, making them "simple to get, simple to spread." This is about unleashing the "ideavirus" of the gospel through relational networks.

8. For more on APEST in unreached ministry contexts, see the *Seedbed* article, *Sustaining Healthy Churches in Movements: Leveraging the Five Roles of Ephesians 4 for Multiplying Leaders in CPMs* (Lafferty 2023).

- Multiplication Ethos: Consciously embedding a "go forth and multiply" commitment into the community's fabric from the beginning, encouraging every person to be a "church planter" and every church a "church-planting church." This "pay-it-forward" principle is how movements achieve hyperbolic growth.

6. Liminality-Communitas: Forged in the Crucible of Shared Ordeal

The deepest forms of human connection and solidarity, what some call "communitas," emerge in the context of shared ordeal, danger, or an overwhelming task. This is intrinsically linked to liminality, a state of marginality, disorientation, or risk. The early church and the Chinese underground church, forged in persecution and on the fringes of society, exemplify this profound bond. For those reaching unreached people groups, this is not a theoretical concept, but a lived reality. The challenges of cross-cultural engagement, potential hostility, and breaking new ground inherently create conditions of liminality, which, when embraced, foster deep communitas.

This element means:

- Daring Vision: Cultivating a daring vision that propels the community out of their comfort zone and into a "risky journey." For unreached contexts, this is the vision of the kingdom infiltrating new territories, confronting the status quo, and challenging deeply ingrained cultural norms.
- Positioning in the Hub of Life: Rejecting sacred-secular dualism and intentionally locating the faith community "in the midst of life," where people gather and interact naturally (e.g., marketplaces, homes, "third places"). This deliberate immersion fosters authentic engagement and communitas.
- Embracing Shared Ordeal: Actively engaging in joint community projects that bring believers and non-believers together, shoulder-to-shoulder, in meaningful endeavors. The common struggle or purpose creates profound camaraderie.
- Taking Risks and Experimenting: Fostering a culture of experimentation and risk-taking, recognizing that without risk, it is

highly unlikely that there will be any missional movement at all. This pioneering spirit, born from confronting the adaptive challenges of the unreached world, is the birthplace of deep togetherness and new encounters with God.

Beyond Disciple-Making Movement Methodology: The Full Tapestry of Apostolic Jesus Movements

While Disciple-Making Movements are a vital and absolutely indispensable part of God's global mission, focusing solely on them can inadvertently obscure the full power of Apostolic Genius. DMMs brilliantly emphasize the multiplication of disciples, which aligns directly with the "Disciple Making" mDNA and the "Organic Systems" (reproducibility) mDNA. However, a fully-fledged apostolic movement, capable of the hyperbolic growth and transformational impact witnessed in the early church and China, requires all six mDNA elements to be present and in dynamic synergy.

The distinction lies in understanding the system as a whole. Disciple making, while necessary, is not sufficient on its own to produce a movement. It must be deeply rooted in the lordship of Jesus, propelled by a missional-incarnational impulse that actively embeds the gospel into new cultures, guided by a comprehensive APEST culture that ensures holistic leadership and activation of all gifts, organized through organic systems that facilitate decentralized, viral multiplication, and forged in the crucible of liminality-communitas that builds profound relational bonds through shared mission and adversity. When all these elements "cook" together, informed by the pervasive work of the Holy Spirit, something fundamentally different is activated: a truly authentic, world-transforming apostolic movement is born.

For those called to reach unreached people groups, this means embracing a broader, more integrated understanding of movement. It's not just about forming disciples, but about forming disciples who are "Little Jesuses", imbued with a missional-incarnational impulse, empowered by the full APEST gifting, operating within organic,

reproducible systems, and bound together in *communitas* forged by the very challenges of their frontier mission. The insights we have gleaned in "missions to the West" that energizes the missional movement in that context—the need to break from outmoded paradigms, to understand cultural distance (m0-4 scale),⁹ and to adopt adaptive leadership—are universally applicable to any challenging missional frontier.

The hope of the church in this critical century, and especially for the vast regions of the unreached, rests not in re-applying tired formulas or isolated techniques, but in remembering and reactivating the Apostolic Genius that lies latent within God's people. It is a call to recalibrate our entire approach, to move beyond merely adding to the church's numbers, to unleash the exponential, viral power of a fully integrated, Spirit-empowered movement that will truly transform the world in Jesus's name. The path ahead is one of adventure and risk, but it is the path of our Founder, and the destiny of God's people.

Questions for Conversation

1. Do you agree that our existing mission and church organizations are shaped by outdated assumptions? What aspects do you think need to be re-evaluated?
2. In a church-planting ministry, what would be the difference between applying a new methodology and applying the six mDNA elements?
3. Which of the six mDNA elements do you see in your ministry or church? What elements are missing?

Bibliography

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9. This is similar to Ralph Winter's E1-E3 scale which distinguishes various levels of cultural distance in evangelism. The "m" in my scale stands for missionary / missional encounter.

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