

Movements in Every Peoples¹

HOW PEOPLES BECOME REACHED

BY ROBBY BUTLER—DISCIPLE OF DONALD MCGAVRAN AND RALPH WINTER²

¹ In movements, disciples and *ekklesia* multiply faster than population growth. Indigenous movements retain local culture, not the culture of the missionary.

² I worked as Ralph Winter's personal assistant for eight years, then on his leadership team and institutional boards another eight.

When Dr. McGavran could no longer read, I had the privilege of reading to him and interacting with him privately.

By 1975, McGavran and Winter had guided 1,000 experienced missionaries in studying, globally and in their own fields, how are peoples reached? The answer: indigenous movements.

Few outside their direct influence saw either:

- the biblical model and mandate for indigenous movements, or
- the historic significance of indigenous movements.

Yet McGavran, Winter and their colleagues concluded:

We cannot say we have evangelized a person until that person can join an indigenous movement in their own society.¹

Furthermore, this era of collaborative study revealed that:

- The Bible (Mt. 28, etc.) calls us to disciple peoples (*ethne*).
- Peoples are disciplined only through indigenous movements.

The World Consultation on Frontier Missions (Edinburgh '80) birthed the watchword “A Church for Every People . . .” (meaning “a church movement in every people”).

In 1981 McGavran clarified this intention, explaining that:²

- Peoples are only reached by movements, never one-by-one.
- Yet 90% of work among the unreached is being done one-by-one.

In what follows I adapt McGavran's outline with biblical references³ and fresh insights from hundreds of new movements.⁴

What follows is adapted from McGavran's article.

Introduction

What is the most fruitful way to reach the unreached? Shall we work toward just one or more growing congregations? Should we aim for a minimal percentage to become believers? Or shall we seek an indigenous movement of multiplying *ekklesia*?⁵

This goal—indigenous movements—must shape our methods.

The One-by-One Method

Starting A congregation where none existed is simple enough.

Missionaries arrive, pray, worship together, learn the language, preach the gospel, and pray. They love Jesus, talk about Christ, help others in their troubles, and pray. They share scripture portions and practice “friendship evangelism,” and they pray. Some local individuals follow Jesus, and a church grows around the missionaries. Together they become a new family; a new social structure is formed, and a building may be erected.

Such *extraction evangelism* typically draws the marginalized from several peoples and segments of society—the elderly, youth, orphans, mission helpers, and ardent seekers. The result is a foreign, conglomerate church, alienated from the local peoples.⁶ Locals observe, “You are no longer part of us,” and they are right. This is a new social unit which, if it survives at all,⁷ becomes a new people group by the second generation.

1 “The Analysis of a Movement,” by Ralph Winter for GCOWE '95, as reprinted in *Frontiers in Mission*. This latter book is available with unrestricted reprint permission at MultMove.net/pub/Frontiers_in_Mission.pdf

2 McGavran wrote A Church in Every People: Plain Talk about a Difficult Subject for the *Perspectives Reader*. Winter added a glowing introduction to the 1997 reprint in *Mission Frontiers*. I have annotated McGavran's original at MultMove.net/articles

3 Acts details a series of indigenous movements—concluding each with a summary phrase about God's word spreading and multiplying (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-33).

4 The 24:14 Coalition formed in 2017, receiving reports of thousands of movement engagements, mostly since 2010. By the end of 2017 nearly 650 movements were counted as full movements—4+ streams of 4+ generations.

5 English Bibles typically translate *ekklesia* (Greek) as “church.” Yet New Testament *ekklesia* lacked what most think of today as “church”—buildings, programs, sermons and paid staff. The biblical *ekklesia* met privately in homes or public, shared the gospel abundantly and multiplied rapidly. A definition of *ekklesia* adapted from George Patterson is “Jesus-followers gathering in His name, often daily, to obey all His commands.” By this definition, those Jesus sent out two by two—as well as Paul and his teams—modeled and multiplied *ekklesia* wherever they went.

6 See “Extraction Groups vs. Community Groups” at DavidLWatson.org

7 With travel ever more convenient, missionaries are far less likely to spend a full lifetime on one field. And shorter field terms reduce the potential for such *extraction evangelism* to leave a sustainable new community when the missionary departs.

Such conglomerate churches usually struggle and fold. But the Bible and recent experience reveal a more fruitful approach.⁸

Extraction evangelism makes peoples more resistant.

Extraction evangelism into conglomerate congregations hinders indigenous movements. How? Must unreached peoples place high value on their group identity. Any group of individuals coming one by one from different peoples and segments of society looks to such peoples like an assembly of traitors who have left “us” to join “them.”

New believers who join such churches are thus often rejected by their relatives—sometimes thrown out or even killed. And when a new believer leaves (or is forced out of) such a tightly-knit segment of society, the Christian cause wins the individual but loses the community. The family, the people group, and even neighboring peoples may be fiercely angry at the new believer, saying: “You have abandoned us. You are no longer one of us.” *When this happens, we may win individuals but lose millions.*

Furthermore, in marriage most such “high identity” peoples insist “our people must marry only our people.” When converts join conglomerate churches one-by-one, they often feel forced to take a spouse from another group. This alienates the couple from both groups, and their children are born into a no man’s land.

Thus conglomerate congregations grow very slowly. Worse, they make the pursuit of indigenous movements doubly difficult among the people groups from which the congregation comes. “The Christians misled one of our people,” the group says. “We will make sure they do not mislead any more of us.”

McGavran wrote in 1981⁹ (emphasis mine):

Perhaps 90 out of 100 missionaries who intend church planting get only conglomerate congregations. I want to emphasize that. *Perhaps 90 out of every 100 missionaries who intend church planting get only conglomerate congregations.*

Such missionaries evangelize anyone they can. But they get only those willing to endure the disapproval of their people.

In tightly-knit unreached peoples—where converts are shunned and Christianity is seen as an invading religion—winning and gathering a congregation of strangers into a new “family” raises the barriers to the further spread of the gospel.

One-by-One can lead to movements.

Sometimes the one-by-one method does result indirectly in an indigenous movement. This can happen when a believer breaks with a conglomerate church (usually from the missionary’s influence) to “revert” (re-adopting their original identity) in order to spread their new faith within existing relationships.

When this happens the faith can spread very rapidly, but it can also lose its mooring in the Bible and become syncretistic. In past centuries, missionaries resisted such movements rather than working to ground them in Scripture. Today’s movements are started, and remain grounded in, the Bible.

Movements: The Key to Reaching the Unreached

Jesus’ disciples and Paul’s teams proclaimed God’s kingdom to whole households (*oikos*) and pre-existing relational networks, not just individuals. This blessed existing groupings rather than disrupting them, then spread to other groupings to enfold and transform whole people groups. Ralph Winter quipped, “The ‘church’ [i.e., the ‘committed community’] is already there, they just don’t know Jesus yet.”¹⁰ He elaborated:

[In Acts,] “the church that is in their house” [was] ... where family ties and church worship went together, where church ... and family authority were often indistinguishable, where church discipline and family respect were one and the same thing, where “honor thy father and thy mother” were ... spiritual accountability in the church. ... the synagogues of the New Testament period as well as the Gentile-run churches of the New Testament period mainly consisted of a cluster of extended families guided by the elders of those families.

[In] traditional societies around the world [an indigenous] movement ... reinforces, not dismantles, natural families

⁸ See “Planting Churches: Learning the Hard Way” in the Jan/Feb 2009 *Mission Frontiers*.

⁹ “A Church in Every People: Plain Talk about a Difficult Subject” at <http://MultMove.net/church-every-people>

¹⁰ Winter in “The Analysis of a Movement,” reprinted in *Frontiers in Mission*

Seven principles that lead toward movements:

1. Keep the goal clear

The goal from the beginning must be an indigenous movement of multiplying *ekklesia* through receptive *oikos*¹¹ and existing relationships that leaves existing social structures intact.

Those accustomed to winning and incorporating individuals into existing churches must pay special attention:

- Not to win individuals and gather them with relative strangers.
- To win relational networks, and help individuals win their *oikos*.

As the Holy Spirit enters existing groups, they become *ekklesia*:

- enjoying natural social cohesion,
- fulfilling the “one anothers,”
- experiencing God’s blessing, and
- modeling God’s blessing for *oikos* and groupings in their people.

In Luke 10 Jesus sends pairs of disciples to find those who will:

- welcome the message and messengers into their *oikia*, and
- gladly share what they learn with their family and community.¹²

Jesus told His disciples not to go from house to house, but to stay with the *oikos* that first welcomed them. Through the disciples witness, this household could become an *ekklesia*.

When we bring God’s blessing to *pre-existing* relationships, we are far more likely to see extraordinary fruit. And when we train new believers to join God at work in the same way, we open the door for an indigenous movement to reach that whole people.

2. Concentrate on just one people.

Work with nationals to find responsive individuals within just one people, like the Nair of Kerala. As the gospel is proclaimed to the Nair, say quite openly,

God desires that thousands of Nair follow Jesus Christ, yet remain solidly Nair. You whom God calls will become more beautiful Nair, loving your Nair neighbors better than ever.

Train new believers to bear persecution with the attitude:

I will be a better son, daughter, father or mother than I was before. I will love you more than I used to. You can hate me, but I will love you. You can exclude me, but I will include you. You can force me out of our ancestral house, but I will live on its veranda or get a house across the street. I am still one of you, more than I ever was before.

Build into new believers a consciousness of 1) God’s love for their whole people and its unique culture, and 2) God’s promise to bless all the clans of the earth—starting with theirs.

3. Encourage the movement to remain indigenous.

In indigenous movements, new believers remain one with their kinfolk in clothing, marriage, etc. They continue to eat with their people, and to eat what their people eat. If their people are vegetarian, new believers do not say, “Since I follow Jesus I can now eat meat.” Rather they become more faithfully vegetarian.

New believers cannot remain one with their people in idolatry, drunkenness, or other habitual sin. The Nair who follow Jesus will not worship their old gods; but many Nair already ridicule their old gods. All Nair can remain Nair while abandoning idolatry to follow Jesus.

Indigenous movements empower the lost to join a worshiping community of their own people without embracing western theology, traditions, culture, or individualism. For collectivistic societies this may mean an honor/shame-enhanced gospel.¹³

¹¹ Extended family networks and those dependent on them.

¹² Movement practitioners often call these “Persons of Peace”—who welcome both the messenger and the message, and introduce the messenger to their community.

¹³ See HonorShame.com or the Jan/Feb 2015 issue of *Mission Frontiers* on this topic.

4. Pursue group decisions regarding “distinctive” obedience.¹⁴

Unreached peoples are typically collectivistic—making decisions as a group rather than as individuals. When first believers in such peoples are baptized individually, their family may reject the new believer as “abandoning *us* to join *them*.”

Train first believers to love and share with their *oikos* while seeking the Holy Spirit *together* about obedience that may lead their people to see them as joining a foreign religion.

Disciple individuals to reach their family and community; discuss Bible stories for them to share and discuss with others. Say, “Let’s work to lead your *oikos* to follow Jesus, so that when you are baptized you may all be baptized together.”

Early on, and as much as possible, the gospel must involve whole families—as with Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer. Ostracism is highly effective against an individual, but weak against a dozen. And against 200 it has practically no force.

5. Aim for trusting obedience, not just theological instruction.

Leaders may think, “If our people become theologically mature they will attract others to church.” Yet Jesus commanded us to teach obedience (Mt 28:20). When our understanding does not bear fruit in obedience to Jesus, our spiritual immaturity makes us a poor witness. We must follow Jesus’ and Paul’s example in demonstrating the gospel we preach and immediately engaging new disciples in multiplying, as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman and the Gadarene demoniac.

“But,” some may argue, “won’t swift engagement of new believers in sharing the gospel yield shallow believers who don’t know the Bible? Isn’t this a recipe for creating nominal Christians?” Both Scripture and today’s movements demonstrate just the opposite.

People learn far more from teaching than from being taught.¹⁵ Those who actively share their faith and witness the power of the gospel to change lives come to a richer, deeper, and more confident experience of God’s grace than those who simply receive the best theological instruction.

Consider the brief months or even weeks Paul spent instructing the *oikos* which were becoming *ekklesia*. We must trust the Holy Spirit, and believe God still calls, equips, and sends people out of darkness into His wonderful light.¹⁶

For a movement to flourish, both its leaders and new believers must actively train others to obey the Holy Spirit as He convicts them through discussing the Bible.¹⁷ How the Holy Spirit leads may surprise us. Yet when new believers are taught obedience to what they see in scripture—and teach themselves by teaching others to obey—they often mature and reproduce quite rapidly.

6. Cultivate new believers as pioneers to reach their people.

Urge new believers to adopt this attitude:

God has given me the privilege of showing my relatives and neighbors a better way of life. This will be good for thousands of my people who have yet to believe. Look on me not as a traitor, but as a better member of my family and society—a pioneer to bring my people to the fullness of God’s blessing.

Successful indigenous movements lead whole families and communities to see the gospel as good news for their people. The movements in China spread rapidly only after the Chinese stopped seeing the Church as a competing, foreign religion.¹⁸

7. Lead those on the church fringes to reach their people.

Missionaries often look diligently outside the church for “persons of peace” through whom the gospel can spread. Yet wherever conglomerate, westernized churches have been established, such persons of peace may be right under our noses, on the fringes of churches—drawn toward God, yet still too connected to their community outside the church to fully fit in. These may become bridges to additional movements.

¹⁴ Missionaries often hinder movements in collectivistic societies by urging individual obedience to the scriptural, external marks of “Christian” identity—baptism and the Lord’s supper. Yet ninety percent of the salvations recorded in Acts involve groups. Only on three of 30 occasions does an individual come to faith or get baptized alone. And despite the strong scriptural mandate for circumcision, Paul wrote three times that this outward sign of identity is meaningless; and that the “only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Rom 2:25–29; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6).

¹⁵ See *The Overnight Student* by Dr. Michael Jones

¹⁶ Today inductive, “discovery” Bible study and storytelling is a widely recognized fruitful practice for groups of believers to 1) become “self-feeding” and grow toward maturity, while 2) actively engaging others with the gospel within their own context.

¹⁷ Believers will ideally engage with whole books of the Bible, not just brief passages.

¹⁸ See the one-hour YouTube video “The Cross In China (Chinese Revival Story),” Part 1.

Rather than fighting to break these individuals free from their community to become fully part of a new church family, let us follow Paul's example with the God-fearers in the synagogues of the Roman Empire. McGavran called these "bridges of God." Let us equip and encourage them to start indigenous movements among their own *oikos* and people.

Conclusion

As we pursue God for indigenous movements in every people, let us not assume one-by-one evangelism is a bad thing.

One-by-one is a slow approach, and usually hinders movements by increasing resistance to the gospel.

Yet extraction evangelism into conglomerate churches is still an approach God is blessing to the increase of His Church. And one precious soul willing to endure severe ostracism to follow Jesus, and even rejection by the missionary, has repeatedly been blessed by God toward starting an indigenous movement among his or her people.

Movements are another approach God is blessing.

According to McGavran, "The great advances of the Church on new ground . . . have always come by people movements, never one-by-one." Jesus modeled this approach in speaking to natural groupings—synagogues, Samaritan villages and crowds—and in sending His disciples to find *oikos* open to the gospel.

As Jesus called individuals to become His disciples, he had them work first within their own group identity, as bridges to whole families, communities, and towns where they brought the blessing of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Others, like Paul, were sent to start indigenous movements in other cultures.

McGavran commended this simile from his *Bridges of God*:

Missions start out proclaiming Christ on a desert-like plain. There, life is hard; the number of Christians remains small. A large missionary presence is required. But, here and there, the missionaries or the converts find ways to break out of that arid plain and proceed up into the verdant mountains. There, large numbers of people live; there, great churches can be founded; there, the Church grows strong; that is people movement land.

Let us seek God for movements while accepting what He gives:

- Where only individuals are coming to faith, train them to start new *ekklesia* within their *oikos* rather than separating them from family and friends into a church family centered around the missionary.
- Pray and work for indigenous movements, adapted to the local context and working within existing social structures to lead multitudes out of darkness into His wonderful life.

Afterword

The article above is inspired by McGavran's original article and largely follows his outline and illustrations.

A few further observations:

- McGavran championed watching for seekers on the fringes of existing churches, then pursuing movements through these seekers (rather than fighting to incorporate them into the church).
- Winter promoted the complementary idea of sending laborers to pursue indigenous movements among peoples where the influence of Christendom is feared and resisted. Movements are the path by which such peoples are reached—as God's blessing begins flowing through existing relationships to persuade a people that the gospel means blessing for their people.
- Laborers today, in nearly 650 movements worldwide, are finding that movements spread fastest when stories of Jesus are freely shared (as in the New Testament), without reliance on dedicated buildings, paid staff or weekly sermons.
- Once an indigenous movement is established, it is often fruitful to encourage the leaders to start similar movements in nearby peoples.

Glossary¹⁹

Ekklesia: Reproducing cells and clusters gathering in Jesus' name, often daily, to obey all Jesus commands, as modeled in Acts 2.

¹⁹ My own attempt to simply and clarify these concepts.

Oikos: Household (or other high-trust network of pre-existing relationships) which naturally develops consensus regarding major decisions.

Movement: Four+ streams of disciples/*ekklesia*, consistently reproducing to 4+ generations (resulting in exponential growth, like compound interest).

Indigenous: Adapted to local culture rather than missionary culture.

People Group: The largest relational network with a shared birth identity through which the gospel can spread as a church-planting movement.²⁰ (Practically, the shared identity in which a marriage can readily be arranged.)

Unreached: A people group with no indigenous movement and no residual evidence of one (i.e. readily available Bibles and a “Christian” identity). Alt.: A people which fears Christendom, perceiving new believers among their people to have “traitorously left their own people to join another people.”²¹

Discovery Bible Study (DBS): Obedience-oriented, open-ended discussion of the Bible, often starting with pre-believers.

Disciple-making movement (DMM): A movement pursued primarily through Discovery Bible Study.

Adopted: An unreached people with a team committed long-term to interceding and advocating for an indigenous movement among that people.

Engaged: An unreached group with 1) a resident team, 2) working long-term, 3) in the local language, toward 4) an indigenous movement.

Fully Engaged: An engaged people with at least one such team for every 100,000 in population.

Church-Planting Movement (CPM) Continuum (abbreviated):

- 1. Purposeful:** Aiming for multiplying believers and *ekklesia*.
- 2. Focused:** Multiple G1 believers/*ekklesia* and some 2nd gen (G2) (i.e. some new believers/*ekklesia* have won/started others).
- 3. Breakthrough:** Multiple G2 believers/*ekklesia* and some G3.
- 4. Emerging CPM:** Multiple G3 believers/*ekklesia* and some G4.
- 5. Full CPM:** Four or more G4 streams with consistent growth (each generation reproducing new believers/*ekklesia*)
- 6. Sustained CPM:** indigenous leaders guiding hundreds or thousands of *ekklesia*, with little/no need for outsiders.
- 7. Multiplying CPM:** catalyzing CPMs in other people groups

This article is available in printable formats at MultMove.net/articles

²⁰ Adapted from the 1982 Lausanne-sponsored gathering of missiologists, convened to embrace McGavran and Winter’s insights by redefining *people groups* and *unreached peoples* in terms of movements (rather than percent Christian). That consensus was not embraced by researchers, who still rely heavily on percent Evangelical and percent Christian for determining what groups are unreached.

²¹ McGavran in “A Giant Step in Christian Mission” (Jan 1985 *Mission Frontiers*)