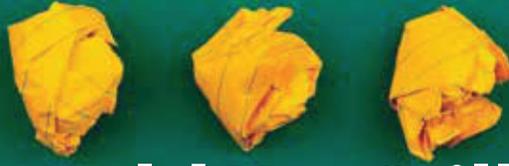


# “Insider” Movements:



## Should We Still Be Talking About Them? Yes and No

I am fond of saying that we are in the midst of a “movement movement.” It seems everyone in the world of missions is talking about movements. Books and articles abound, and conferences, training, and reports of movements proliferate. Thankfully this is because there are movements to talk about!

This is an unprecedented time of movement growth and multiplication. This is in part why *Mission Frontiers* has been including reports of movements and discussions of movements as a central theme every time we publish, no matter what the stated topic of a given edition.

### There Are Movements, and Then There are Movements

The concept is not new, in some ways. The observation and study of large numbers of people turning to Jesus led to the descriptions of “people movements” by forerunners such as Waskom Pickett and Donald McGavran. More recently we tend to speak about, and hear more and more about Church Planting Movements, or CPMs, and Disciple Making Movements, or DMMs.<sup>1</sup>

The celebrations of movements does not mean there have been no questions, and CPMs and DMMs have garnered their share of critique. But of all the types of movements being discussed today, “insider movements”, or IMs, have certainly attracted the most attention in terms of critique.

CPMs, DMMs, and IMs all share a lot in common, including: the conviction that all believers in Jesus will be drawn into deep level change and transformation; the importance of a believing community in shaping the life of believers; the centrality and singularity of Jesus as the way of salvation; the central place of the Scriptures in shaping life-faith-doctrine-moral values-practices.

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The main difference between IMs and other movements has to do with how believers in a movement understand their new identity in Jesus relative to the religious community of their birth, and more specifically, how they navigate the religious elements of their socio-religious heritages (events, practices, etc.).

<sup>1</sup> Though writing before the advent of widely known “DMM” models, Becky Lewis’ discussion of the ways people movements and CPM differ is very helpful, as is her description of IM. *Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community*, International Journal of Frontier Missiology, 26:1, Spring 2009, p. 16ff.

In every movement, including insider movements, believers say yes to some aspects, and no to others. Advocates and leaders of insider movements have tended to a posture that has allowed more “yesses” than non-insider advocates and leaders.

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### My Thinking: 2004

In 2004 I outlined this definition of insider movements. Note that this was still very early in the emergence of the whole idea:

***Insider Movement:** A growing number of families, individuals, clans and/or friendship-webs becoming faithful disciples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture. This faithful discipleship will express itself in culturally appropriate communities of believers who will also continue to live within as much of their culture, including the religious life of the culture, as is biblically faithful. The Holy Spirit, through the Word and through His people will also begin to transform His people and their culture, religious life and worldview.<sup>2</sup>*

Five years later, Becky Lewis wrote a similar definition:

*Insider movements can be defined as movements to obedient faith in Christ that remain integrated with or inside their natural community. In any insider movement there are two distinct elements:*

- 1. The gospel takes root within pre-existing communities or social networks, which become the main expression of “church” in that context. Believers are not gathered from diverse social networks to create a “church.” New parallel social structures are not invented or introduced.*
- 2. Believers retain their identity as members of their socio-religious community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>*

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The ongoing link to one’s birth religion that both of the above definitions refer to has been the primary source of friction and questioning about IMs. The question often boils down to something like, “how do IMs avoid heresy?”

In another article in this edition, I will take up the question of how IMs, indeed how any movement, is shaped and influenced by ongoing engagement with Scripture and how the Spirit and Word can serve as a sort of spiritual and theological GPS.

For now, I want to turn to a different lens through which I have begun to understand IMs.

### My Thinking Now: 2021

My own thinking has continued to evolve. And while I still stand by the definitions that I, and later, Becky Lewis, have published, and still affirm what God is doing in IMs, I have come to rethink what it is that is distinctly *the core*.

What are the essential elements that make this or that movement “IM” versus some other type of “M”? Is it really the religious element?

I began to think about movements such as the rapid explosion of believers in Iran, believers who in general want nothing to do with Shia roots and religion. The realization came to me that this movement is still “inside” a socio-religious background.

In this case for many, not all, believers who are coming to faith in Jesus seem to be doing so after having already embraced a shift in world view relative to Islam, in many cases *prior* to coming to Jesus. If “insider” were to be defined and limited to only specific and narrow categories of religious practices (for example), then we would miss the essential “inside-ness” of a growing and exciting move of God. No one suggests that the believers in Iran should go back to Shia Islam but they weren’t “in” that when they came to faith in the first place. It was in many cases already behind them.

<sup>2</sup> *The Key to Insider Movements: The “Devoted’s” of Acts*, International Journal of Frontier Missiology, 21:4, Winter 2004, p. 155ff.

<sup>3</sup> In IJFM, 26:1, Spring 2009, p. 16ff.



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This includes the post-Shia-Iranian-socio-religious-reality they were part of before meeting Jesus. They are in many ways still “in” that, even as their faith, heart, relationships and worldview all continue to be shaped in Scripture and community. That is, they are part of an insider movement.

I am now convinced that the deepest markers of whether a movement is an “insider” movement or not are not the questions about the socio-religious decisions themselves. Such decisions are *results* of something deeper, results of decisions “insiders” may make, and so the crucial questions are ones such as:

*Who makes decisions in the movement?*

*How do they make them?*

*Why do they make them?*

**So: Still Talk About Insider Movements? Yes**

So, it is important to keep talking and probing “IM”. In line with that, here is what I am thinking about those three questions.

*Who?*

I am not ignoring the vital role of what we might more and more refer to as “alongsiders” (see the article about that in this edition of *MF*). But at the end of the day,

what matters, what I believe makes a movement an insider movement, is that the movement itself, its leaders and fellowships, make the decisions.

*How?*

In a later article in this edition I describe my conviction that the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to shape and teach the people of God. It is a simple, but not simplistic, way to speak. Healthy movements make decisions through engagement with Scripture that is ongoing, communal, corrective, and closely interacting with the questions and challenges of the context *the movement* is in, as opposed to the priorities and preferences of an outsider/alongsider.

*Why?*

There are and will be many ways to answer why a decision is made, including motives such as wanting to get “truth” right. But also important will be questions about how this or that decision may allow for the good news to continue to flow most freely, without compromising its essence. The controversy in Acts 15 for example, was about how to decide what was right, including what was right Scripturally, and how to keep from placing unnecessary burdens on the emerging Gentile movement. The Scriptural wrestling, for example, was between what the Law of Moses said (cited by those saying the Gentile

believers needed to be circumcised), and what James found in several of the prophets. And we see the concern about burdens in the letter that James and others drafted for communicating their decision.

This focus on who and how and why is a different way of speaking of “insider movements.” It is a development that still needs more discussion. I am not claiming all advocates will agree with me. And all of that suggests that, yes, we need to keep talking about insider movements.

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### So: Still Talk About Insider Movements? No

And yet, it may also be time to stop. I will give just two reasons for this, for now.

The first reason is that the term has never felt right, frankly. The *term*, not the concept itself, smacks of secrecy, isolation and even something less than honest or above board (for more about misunderstandings of the concept see the article in this edition about common concerns).

The second and more important reason is related to new thinking arising from non-western advocates and leaders and missiologists.

In 2017 a number of Asian and western men and women gathered to consider the topic of movements, and specifically to try to imagine new language for movements—language more rooted in biblical concepts.

Specifically, we were concerned to find new words for “Church Planting Movement” and “missionary” and “missiology.” Using the insights from the call of Abraham in Genesis 12, and references to blessing in Ephesians as well as other papers and conversations, we experimented with things like, “family blessing movements,” and probably much less likely to stick, terms like “blessionary,” and “blessiology.”

But we agreed that we need new language.

### FBMs? Family Blessing Movements?

Earlier in this paper I cited Becky Lewis’ definition of IMs and her mention of remaining within pre-existing social structures. This assumes or includes the idea that “church-planting” is essentially planting churches within those existing structures, as opposed to the creation of new social structures we then call “churches.”

The social structure that more and more movement advocates promote, IM and CPM, and DMM alike, is the household. The *oikos*, or extended household of the New Testament has universal expression in one form or another in every culture and society. More or less nuclear? Yes, but present. Extended to aunts and uncles or not? Good question, but the concept is still present—and so on.

And given that the promise to Abraham involved the families of the earth, and the promise of God’s blessing for them, perhaps “family blessing movement,” as clunky as it may be, captures something that all sorts of movement advocates can rally to, whether CPM, DMM, or IM. 

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