

The Motus Dei Network: Fostering Communal Intelligence on Movements

BY **WARRICK FARAH**

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Longtime readers of *Mission Frontiers* are most likely familiar with movements. Movements are indeed an exciting work of God and no mere passing fad in missions. They have occurred in the past and will continue in the future. However, familiarity can sometimes be unhelpful if we have faulty assumptions or if we take too much for granted. One solution to this potential problem is to frame our quest for knowledge about movements through thoughtful and deliberate questioning.

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The Strategic Advantages of Research

Asking rigorous questions about movements is not to doubt their existence or to criticize the work of God. Neither should it be seen as criticism of movement catalysts, nor a threat to organizations that promote movements. Good research questions are designed to test our presuppositions and force us to wrestle with the nature and limits of our existing knowledge. While fundamental to research in general, this helps us discover what is going on *behind* what is going on.

In studying movements as researchers, we might ask, “What is fostering the irruption of movements in the world today?” How can the stewardship of this knowledge edify the Church and bless God’s work in redeeming all nations back to Himself? However, we do not seek the right answers as much as we seek *the right questions* and commit to follow the evidence where it leads.

This research quest holds many pitfalls we need to avoid. On one hand, we might become overly pragmatic, believing that movements can simply be managed more efficiently with the right knowledge. On the other hand, we might propagate sterile research for the sake of more research that has little to do with the actual lives of people and leaders catalyzing movements.

The solution is not so much balance as it is integration. Movements research can and should be both practically tangible and also theoretically robust. Through prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit and with the Bible open, asking the right research questions about movements can facilitate this integration. But further to the point, we propose that this approach reframes missiological discourse around a new concept: the *motus Dei*.

The Genesis of *Motus Dei*

Motus Dei is Latin and means “movement of God.” As a theological term, it intentionally mimics the concept of *missio Dei* which means the *sending/mission of God*. While not without conceptual problems,¹ the *missio Dei* conversation has contributed much to our understanding of mission through the past several decades. God in His nature is *missio*, sent into the world. Created in His image, we are also sent into the world to join God in *His mission*.

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¹ Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017). An abbreviated version is *Transcending the Modern Mission Tradition* (Oxford, UK: Regnum, 2020).

Motus Dei invokes a similar albeit different concept. If the nature of our faith is participating in the *movement of God* to redeem the nations back to Himself, this suggests we need to further investigate the essence of movements and theologies that promote them. We need also to examine those traditions and theologies the church has developed that might impede *motus Dei* in a specific context.

We have reframed this conversation on movements around *motus Dei* because we desire, first and foremost, to be rooted and grounded in the life-giving character of God. We aim not simply for acceleration of fruitful ministry and multiplication of disciples, but ultimately for Jesus to receive worship from all peoples. God's movement to achieve global worship through holistic salvation of the nations is not just something He *does*; it is part of His very being.

Like the “church growth movement” or the “missional church” conversation from previous generations, *motus Dei* has two slightly different nuances. As previously explained, it is primarily the situating of a new missiological concept, *motus Dei*, in the field of mission studies.² But secondly, it is the creation of a research network and the title of an upcoming book published by William Carey, *Motus Dei: The Movement of God and the Discipleship of Nations*. In time, we hope these two nuances will integrate into a deeper, richer understanding of *motus Dei*. Ultimately, we hope this will be as edifying to the Church as the concept of *missio Dei* has been.

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Reimagining Research on Movements

I have personally been interested in movements for around 20 years, ever since I read David Garrison's booklet *Church Planting Movements*.³ While causing me to question many of my own assumptions about ministry, the booklet also gave my spirit a joyful hope and gratefulness for the work of God. It even impacted how I read the New Testament.

² For an initial discussion of *motus Dei*, see Warrick Farah, “Motus Dei: Disciple-Making Movements and the Mission of God,” *Global Missiology* 2, no. 17 (2020): 1–10.

³ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements (Booklet)* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2000).

Yet as I continued to learn more about movements, I also discovered the ways movement ideas are perceived and described sometimes cause confusion. Additionally, some may even have a negative reaction before understanding the concept.

In light of this, I began to imagine a missiological research project on the topic of movements. What causes their emergence? How can their description be more nuanced? As I considered these questions, I quickly realized that researching movements is neither straightforward nor appropriate for one person alone.

As movements are a large phenomenon in our world today, researching movements is necessarily a vast exercise. To do it justice requires integrating multiple perspectives and multiple fields of study. This will require asking a variety of questions from a variety of angles. With this robust research approach, we can avoid either sensationalizing the emergence of movements or dismissing movements as the latest fad.

Communal Intelligence and the Body of Christ

It seems natural for people to constantly search for the genius in the room or hope to read books or articles by a single genius who will answer all our questions. But this is a myth, especially in the Body of Christ. We all need each other.

We consider it more helpful to frame our conversation through the concept of “scenius.” As a play on words, this term conveys that *the scene itself is the genius*. In other words, instead of looking for the genius in the room, we may say the room *is* the genius.⁴

The Motus Dei Network is an application of scenius. In order to better understand movements and what God is doing today, we seek to embrace our unity in Christ and learn from one another. Extreme creativity, innovation, and knowledge come best from communal intelligence, not simply lone geniuses or great persons. *Motus Dei* is our attempt to gather this “ecology of talent” in a way that fosters communal intelligence on movements.

In this conversation, we have catalysts, researchers, leaders, practitioners, theologians and academics. Currently over 100 people are involved: men and women

⁴ “Scenius” originated with Brian Eno and I first heard it from Alan Hirsch at his *Movement Leaders Collective*. See <https://movementleaderscollective.com/why-scenius/>

from the Global North and the Global South. This informal network does not intend to train practitioners or mobilize prayer, although as solid mission research we expect it will be a seedbed for both. We are framing Motus Dei as a multi-year conversation on the topic of movements that is informed by missiological research and authentic relationships.

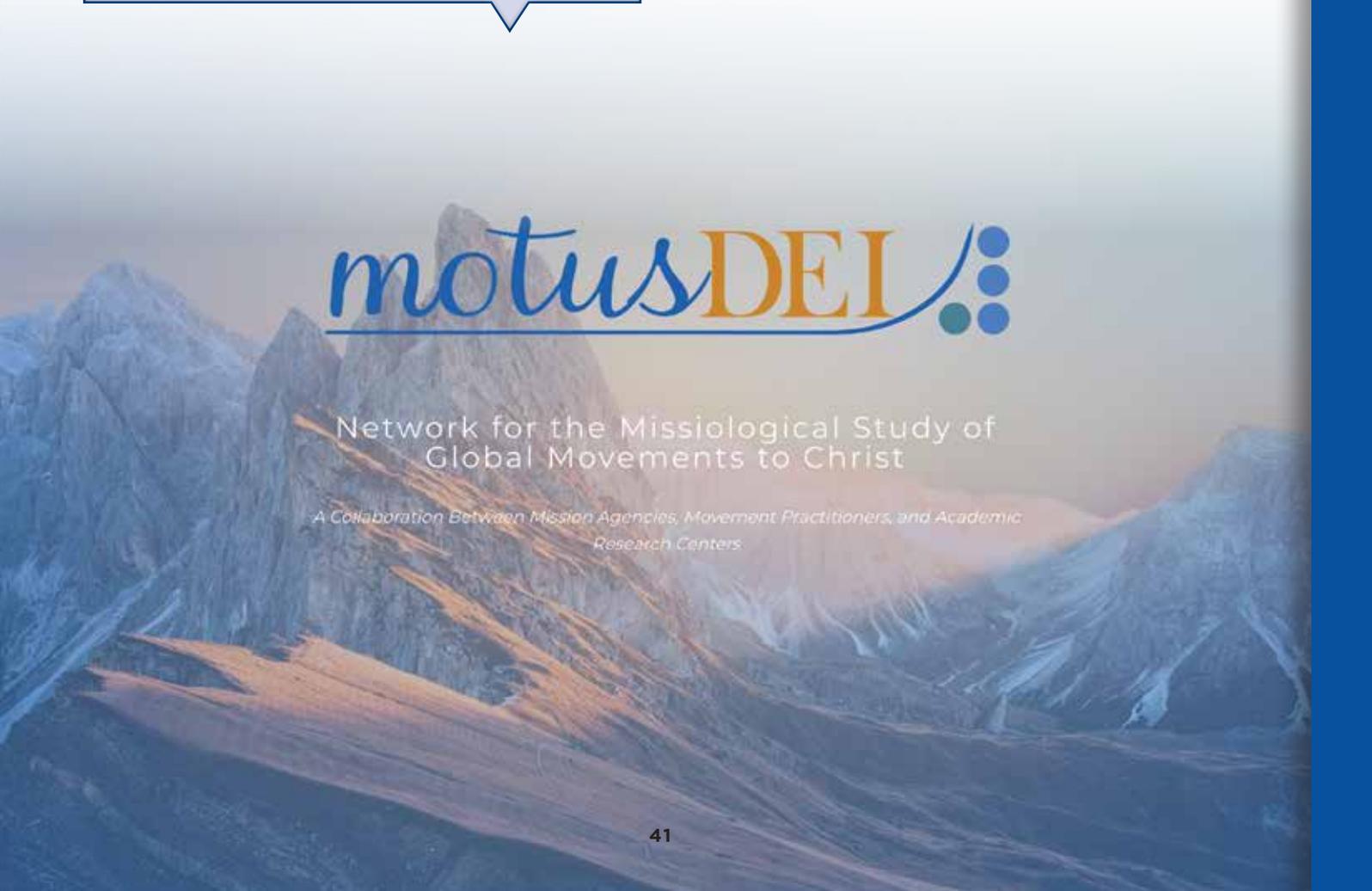
Relationships are important because we do not all agree on what “movements” are, how they should be described or how they should be catalyzed. But more importantly, we refuse to buy into the worldly pattern of controlling the narrative in order to marginalize voices of those who we disagree with. As we challenge the human tendency to form “silos” of information, we anticipate disagreements and even contradictions in our network. Yet we believe our discourse will be richer and deeper for it.

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Our first major output from Motus Dei is the book arising from our virtual *Movements Research Symposium* in October 2020. At this symposium, 20 chapters of the book were presented in abbreviated form and discussed. We see the symposium and book as only first steps. In the coming years, we intend to have different tracks of smaller working groups gathering to share research and wisdom around different aspects of movements: particularly biblical theology, the social sciences and missional praxis. Missiology includes integration of all three of these streams, so these working groups will be in conversation together.

Join the “Movement” Movement

Motus Dei is a learning community. If you have significant experience in movements and would like to join the Motus Dei conversation, or if you have movements research you would like to share, please connect with us at <http://motusdei.network>. Until then, enjoy this journey of *motus Dei*. As you read and reflect on our upcoming book, we pray you will be compelled in wonder and joy to join God’s redemptive movement among all peoples today. 



motusDEI

Network for the Missiological Study of
Global Movements to Christ

*A Collaboration Between Mission Agencies, Movement Practitioners, and Academic
Research Centers*