

A *Movement*¹ in Every People: How the Unreached become *Reached*

by Robby Butler, a disciple of Donald McGavran and Ralph Winter ²

By 1975 McGavran and Winter had guided 1,000 missionaries in studying how the gospel had spread in their fields of service. They found that: 1) ***movements spread through peoples***, and 2) ***peoples are only reached through movements***.

From this awareness, Ralph Winter began advocating

- ***new efforts*** to reach thousands of neglected *Hidden Peoples*,³ and
- ***movements*** as God's *means* for reaching these *Hidden Peoples*.⁴

In response, the 1980 world missionary congress in Edinburgh adopted the watchword "**A Church for Every People.**"

This was widely embraced, yet few (besides missiologists)

- understood the **biblical** model and mandate for *movements*, or
- recognized the **historical** significance of *movements*, and thus
- grasped that this meant a church ***movement*** for every people.

Thus in 1981 McGavran sought to clarify this watchword:⁵

- ***Peoples*** are only ***reached*** through ***movements***.
- And **90% of church-planting methods *HINDER MOVEMENTS***.

My article here updates McGavran's with added biblical references and fresh insights from 500+ new movements.

Introduction

What is the most fruitful way to "reach the unreached"?

- Shall we work toward just one or more **growing congregations**?

¹ In *movements*, disciples and *ekklesia* multiply faster than population growth.

² I worked at the U.S. Center for World Mission (now Frontier Ventures) for 24 years, eight of these as Ralph Winter's personal assistant and another eight on the leadership team and institutional boards. When Dr. McGavran could no longer read, I had the privilege of reading to him and learning from interacting with him.

³ Later called "unreached peoples," Winter described these "hidden peoples" as lacking (**emphasis added**) "a viable, indigenous, evangelizing church **movement**."

⁴ McGavran and Winter, the pioneers of "people-group" thinking, saw *movements* as the *only* way peoples are "reached." Under their influence the Lausanne-sponsored 1982 definition of "people group" originally read (**emphasis added**): "... the largest group through which the gospel can spread **as a church-planting movement**"

⁵ 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*.

- Should we aim for a **minimal percentage** to become believers?
- Or shall we seek God for a **movement of multiplying *ekklesia***?⁶

Acts details a multi-people **movement**, in which God’s word has the central role (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-33).⁷

This long-range goal of **movements** must shape our **methods**.

The One-by-One Method

Starting *A* church where none existed is relatively easy.

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.

Over time a few locals follow Jesus, and a little church grows with the missionaries urging them to become “a new family.” A new social structure is formed, and a building may be erected.

Such *extraction evangelism* typically draws the **marginalized** from different *peoples* and *segments*—the elderly, youth, orphans, mission helpers and ardent seekers. This produces a *conglomerate church*, alienated from the peoples of the region. Other locals say “You are no longer part of us,” and they are right. This is a new social unit which, if it survives at all,⁸ becomes a new people group by the second generation.

Such *conglomerate* churches usually struggle and fold, but the Bible and experience reveal a more fruitful approach.⁹

⁶ English Bibles generally 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* multiplied rapidly and met mostly in homes among pre-existing households or *oikos* (Greek). One definition of *ekklesia* adapted from George Patterson is “two or more gathered in Jesus’ name to lovingly obey all He commands.” By this definition, Paul and Barnabas, and the disciples Jesus sent out two by two, were able to *model* *ekklesia* wherever they were sent.

⁷ Steve Addison of Movements.net has developed this thought in a series on his site.

⁸ With travel ever more convenient, missionaries are far less likely to spend a full lifetime on one field. Ever shorter field terms reduce the potential for extraction evangelism to leave a sustainable new community when the missionary departs.

⁹ Consider the detailed case study reported by T&B Lewis in [*Mission Frontiers: Planting Churches: Learning the Hard Way*](#)

Extraction evangelism makes reaching peoples *harder*.

Extraction evangelism into conglomerate congregations *hinders* movements. Why? The *lost* in each unreached group generally place a **very** high value on their *group identity*. (They don't yet value their identity in Christ). To the *lost* in these groups, any congregation of individuals—coming one by one from different peoples and segments of society—looks like an assembly of traitors who have left “us” to join “them.”

In marriage most “high identity” peoples insist “our people marry only our people.” Yet when converts join conglomerate churches one-by-one they are often forced to take a spouse from some other group. This permanently alienates the couple from both groups, and their kids are born into “no man's land.”

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: “You have abandoned us. You are no longer one of us.” *When this happens, we may win our hundreds but lose millions.*

Conglomerate congregation grow slowly. Worse, they make the pursuit of disciple-making/church-planting 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 1981¹⁰ (**emphasis added**): “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.

¹⁰ *A Church in Every People: Plain Talk about a Difficult Subject*

The 90 missionaries may protest: “What could be better for *reaching a region* than winning individuals *from each people*? Instead of the sealed-off church you describe, this gives us entry into all the peoples from which our members come!”

This perspective develops in “Christian” lands, where those who follow Christ are not ostracized as traitors but perceived to have done something good. In lands where “being a Christian” is common, every new convert *may* become a channel through which faith can flow to relatives and friends. Yet most peoples experience such “uniting with a foreign religion” as betrayal.

In tightly-knit unreached peoples—where converts are shunned and Christianity is seen as an invading religion—winning and gathering a congregation from *different* peoples and segments of society erects *barriers* rather than building *bridges*.

One-by-One CAN lead to movements.

The one-by-one method sometimes *does* result in movements when believers from tightly-knit peoples break away from a conglomerate church and the influence of the missionaries and “revert”—re-adopting their original family identity *in order to spread their new faith*.

When this happens the faith *may* break loose and spread rapidly. But in the process it may also lose its mooring in the Bible and become syncretism. Thus missionaries generally resist such “reversion” rather than adapting to facilitate the grounding of such movements in the Bible.

Movements: the KEY to Reaching the Unreached

Consider the multiplying ministry modeled by Jesus’ disciples and Paul, in which households and synagogues (existing communities) were introduced to the gospel *as a group*. This engaged and transformed existing social groupings, then spread to other groupings to enfold and transform whole segments of society. As Winter quipped, “the ‘church’ (i.e., the ‘committed community’) is already there, they just don’t know Jesus yet.”

These seven principles lead toward movements:

1. Keep the *goal* clear

From the beginning the clear goal must be multiplying *ekklesia* through receptive *households* in ways that leave relationships and social structures intact.

Those familiar with winning and incorporating *individuals* into existing churches must give special attention to this:

- *Don't win individuals* to gather them with strangers.
- *Win whole households*, or lead individuals to *share from the start* with their whole *household* (Greek *oikos*)—their extended family and those dependent on them.

As Christ transforms existing *oikos*, the *oikos* may become an *ekklesia*—enjoying natural social cohesion, fulfilling the “one anothers,” experiencing God’s blessing, and modeling and sharing the good news with other households in their people.

In Luke 10 Jesus directs His disciples to seek those who will:

- welcome the message and messenger into their households, and
- gladly share what they learn with their family and community.¹¹

Jesus told His disciples **not** to go “from house to house,” but to stay with the family that welcomed them. When the disciples left, the believing household they left behind was an *ekklesia*.

When we join “God already at work” in this model, 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 a full disciple-making/church-planting movement.

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 Nairs, say quite openly, “God desires that thousands of Nair follow Jesus Christ, yet remain solidly Nair. You Nairs whom God calls will become more beautiful Nairs, loving your Nair

¹¹ Movement practitioners call these “Persons of Peace”—those who welcome the messenger and the message, and introduce them to their community.

neighbors better than before.” Build into new believers a sense of God’s love for their whole community, and of God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth—including theirs.

Train them to bear exclusion and 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.

3. Encourage new followers of Jesus to *retain their culture*

In *movements*, new believers continue to eat what their people eat, and to eat with their people. If their people are vegetarian, they do not say, “Now that I follow Jesus I will eat meat.” In movements such believers become more faithfully vegetarian. In clothing, they continue to look precisely like their kinfolk.

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

If a people lives by stealing, they will “steal no more.” But in *movements* individuals will, in most matters, continue to look like and identify with “*their people*”—in how they talk, dress and eat, in where they go, and in the kind of houses they live in.

4. Pursue *group decisions* regarding baptism¹²

Unreached peoples are generally collectivistic—making decisions as a group rather than as individuals. When first

¹² Ninety percent of the salvations recorded in Acts involve groups believing together. Only on three of 32 occasions does an individual come to faith or get baptized alone. Despite the clear scriptural mandate for circumcision, Paul wrote three times that this external mark of Jewish identity was meaningless. The “only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love,” he added. Yet in working with *collectivistic* societies missionaries often hinder movements by pushing for *individual* obedience to the scriptural, external marks of “Christian” identity (baptism and the Lord’s supper).

believers in such peoples are baptized *individually*, their family may reject the new believer as “abandoning *us* to join *them*.”

The gospel must involve whole families as early and as much as possible, as it did with Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Crispus, Stephanus, Aristobulus, etc.

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.”

Ostracism is highly effective against an individual, but weak against a dozen. And against 200 it has practically no force. Therefore train and equip new believers to love and share with their *oikos* while waiting on the Holy Spirit for a *group decision* about baptism (even if the whole family doesn’t participate).

5. Train believers to grow in loving obedience

Leaders commonly make the mistake of focusing on theological instruction rather than on training their people in reproducing, loving obedience to all Jesus commanded. Such leaders think, “If our people become theologically mature Christians, others will be attracted to the church.” Yet when believers focus on understanding without concern for loving obedience, they remain *spiritually* immature, and become a poor witness.

“But,” you may say, “won’t a focus on simply obeying and sharing the gospel produce believers who don’t know the Bible? Isn’t this a recipe for creating shallow or nominal believers?”

Both Scripture and today’s movements demonstrate just the opposite; consider the Samaritan woman and the Gadarene demoniac. The reality is that people *learn more from teaching than from being taught*.¹³ Those who actively share their faith, and witness the gospel changing lives as a result, come to a richer and deeper experience of God’s grace much faster than those who simply listen to the best theological instruction.

¹³ See *The Overnight Student* by Dr. Michael Jones

Consider the record of Acts, and the brief months or even weeks of instruction Paul gave those communities which were becoming *ekklesia*. We must trust the Holy Spirit and believe God still calls people out of darkness into His wonderful light.¹⁴

For a movement to flourish, the missionary, national leaders *and* new believers must actively train others to obey the Holy Spirit as *He* convicts them through discussing *whole books* of the Bible. What the *Holy Spirit* convicts of may surprise *us*, yet when new believers practice swift obedience to what *they* see in scripture—including teaching others to obey—they mature more rapidly than they can through mere theological instruction.

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

Urge new believers to adopt the attitude, “God has given me the privilege of showing my relatives and neighbors a better way of life. This way I am following 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 than I was before—a pioneer to bring my people to the fullness of God’s blessing.”

Successful *movements* lead whole families and communities to see the gospel as *good news for their people*. The movements in China began only after the Chinese stopped seeing the Church as a competing, foreign religion.¹⁵

7. Emphasize equality amidst social stratification

Neither Jesus nor Paul fought unjust political or societal structures, instead they emphasized the brotherhood of all believers—and the equality of all people before God.

Paul wrote “In [Christ] there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free.” To believing slaves, he wrote, “Be a better slave” and to masters, “Be a better master.”

¹⁴ Today inductive, “discovery” Bible study/storytelling is widely recognized as a 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.

¹⁵ See the video [The Cross in China](#).

Jesus and Paul taught that the poor and sinners receive more grace than the rich and self-righteous, and women and children have equal standing with men before God. As a result, early believers repudiated slavery, abortion/infanticide and war—all widespread in their time.

Conclusion

As we pursue God for movements in *every* people, **let us *NOT* assume that “one-by-one evangelism is a bad thing.”**

One precious soul willing to endure severe ostracism to follow Jesus has repeatedly been blessed by God toward winning others and even starting a movement among his or her people.

Extraction evangelism into conglomerate churches *is* one approach God is blessing to the increase of His Church.

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

Movements are another approach God is blessing.

The great advances of God’s kingdom among non-Christian religions have *always* come by movements. This is the ministry model Jesus gave in sending His disciples to find households open to the gospel, and which He modeled in speaking to synagogues, Samaritan villages and crowds.

As Jesus called individuals to become full-time workers, these individuals retained their group identity to become *bridges* to whole families, communities, and towns where they brought the blessing of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some, like Paul, were sent even to households and groups in other cultures.

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

Some missions start proclaiming Christ on a desert-like plain. Life there is hard, a large missionary presence is required, and the number of believers remains small.

Yet here and there the missionaries or new believers find ways to climb out of that arid plain into the verdant mountains where disciples and churches multiply. This is *movement* land, where the Church grows strong.

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

- Where only individuals are coming to faith, let us gather and train them to each start a new *ekklesia* among their family and friends rather than separating them from their family and friends into a “church” family centered around the missionary.
- And let us pray from the outset for *movements*, working through the existing social structures to *advance* the gospel and lead *multitudes* out of darkness into His wonderful life.

Postscript

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* from neighboring peoples, then *pursuing movements through these seekers* rather than incorporating them into existing churches.
- Winter promoted the *complementary* idea that we should not simply *wait* for God to provide such bridges, but intentionally and aggressively *send* laborers to pursue God for movements where they don’t yet exist.
- Laborers today, in 500 recent movements on nearly every continent, are finding that movements have even greater impact when (as in the New Testament) there are no dedicated buildings or paid staff.
- Once a movement is *established* in a people, it is *often* fruitful to encourage the leaders to start similar movements in nearby peoples.

Related Resources

See theMissionNetwork.org/MovementResources

Get your FREE review copies of two books I helped publish:

Both use the vehicle of story to spread vision for what God is doing through movements. The first is a manual for those seeking to become fruitful, the second aims to spread vision and understanding of movements beyond the mission community:

- ***Stubborn Perseverance***: How to launch multiplying movements of disciples and churches among Muslims and others (a story based on real events), at StubbornPerseverance.org/review-copy
- ***Hastening***: Book ONE in ***No Place Left***: A Saga of Destiny Fulfilled, at NoPlaceLeft2025.org/review-copy

Glossary

Ekklesia: A gathering in Jesus' name, often daily, to lovingly obey all He commands, as modeled in Acts 2.

Oikos: Household (or other high-trust network) which interacts in making major decisions.

People Group: The largest relational network with a *common sense of identity* in which a *church-planting movement can freely spread*.

Unreached: A people group with neither a *church-planting movement* nor the *residual influence (Bibles and churches) of a past movement*.

Movement: Disciples and churches multiplying consistently to fuel the *exponential* spread of the gospel within a people group.

Discovery Bible Study (DBS): A group of pre-believers obeying God as He speaks to them through open-ended discussion of Bible stories.

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

Adopted: An unreached people group with a team committed to *interceding* and *advocating* for a **movement** in that people group.

Engaged: An unreached people group with a team **resident**, pursuing God and working **long-term** in the **local language** to launch a **CPM**, with a minimum of **one such team for every 100,000 in population**.

Church-Planting Movement (CPM) Continuum:

1. **Purposeful:** Starting a 1st gen (G1) of new believers & *ekklesia*.
 1. looking for persons of peace / houses of peace
 2. some G1 believers
 3. some G1 believers gathering regularly to learn more
 4. consistently winning G1 believers
 5. multiple regular gatherings of G1 *believers* to learn more
 6. one or more G1 *ekklesia* gathering regularly
 7. several G1 *ekklesia* gathering regularly
 8. some G1 *ekklesia* starting new gatherings
 9. first G2 *ekklesia* gathering regularly
2. **Focused:** *Several* 2nd gen (G2) believers/*ekklesia* (i.e. 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. **CPM:** New *ekklesia* in *each* gen are starting multiple streams of new *ekklesia*, and new believers in *each* gen are reproducing.
6. **Sustained CPM:** indigenous leaders guide hundreds or thousands of *ekklesia*, with little/no need for outsiders.
7. **Multipling CPM:** catalyzing CPMs in other people groups

About the Author



Robby graduated from Caltech in 1982, then served 24 years with the U.S. Center for World Mission (USCWM, now Frontier Ventures). There he worked closely with and was mentored by the founder—Dr. Ralph Winter. He also served in information technology and as personnel director, and served or worked closely with Dr. Donald McGavran, Dr. Thomas Wang of the Lausanne Movement, and Dr. Luis Bush of AD2000.

Working with such global leaders helped Robby grasp strategic considerations for completing the missionary task. And Robby's ongoing service to mission leaders fuels gaining and distilling further insights such as those in this booklet.

Robby helped Steve Smith publish the *No Place Left* saga (*Hastening* and *Rebirth*), edited James Nyman's *Stubborn Perseverance*, and has been a frequent contributor and guest editor for *Mission Frontiers*.

In 2004 Robby founded **Mission Network**, a service agency to link Christ's body with proven insights and like-minded others for multiplied effectiveness in advancing God's Kingdom. In this context my primary focus is discovering, distilling and distributing new insights God is giving His body toward greater fruitfulness to complete the Great Commission.



Robby's current focus is researching, distilling, publishing and promoting materials and methods to better equip Christ's body to pursue movements among every people group.

As of 2017 Robby and his wife Jackie live in Mount Vernon, Washington state with their three children: Joelle ('96), Dana ('98), and Wesley ('01).

Want to bring Light to the Greatest Darkness?

The *country* of India has more unreached peoples—and with larger populations—than ALL other *continents* combined.
Yet India receives less than 2% of all foreign missionaries!

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