

Motus Dei:
Disciple-Making Movements and the Mission of God

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Abstract

God's mission is diverse, and so are the ways missiologists discuss it. This article outlines a constructive missiology of the current "disciple-making movement" phenomenon in a way that makes creative connections between different conversations in the field of mission studies. In so doing, a new concept called *motus Dei* (Latin for movement of God) is situated into our understanding of the *missio Dei*.

Key Words: Disciple-Making Movements, Frontier Missiology, Integral Mission, *Missio Dei*, Theology of Mission

Introduction

Nearly one percent of the world is currently living in the midst of a disciple-making movement (DMM), according to some reports: "Over 1,020 church planting movements (rapidly multiplying groups that have surpassed four generations of church planting in multiple streams) have been documented. Together, they comprise over 73 million believers in over 4.3 million churches" (Long 2019:16). One percent of the world's total population equals about 78 million people - an extremely sizeable number. The extent of this impact today calls for a fresh articulation of the mission of God in light of the current DMM phenomenon. This brief essay outlines a missiology of DMM and inserts a new concept called the *motus Dei* (Latin for *movement of God*) into the understanding of the mission of God and his people.

In doing so, I hope to make creative connections between various streams of missiology and to bring these conversations into dialogue with one another. Yet this is no easy task. The field of missiology is diverse, and different camps emphasize nuances of God's mission in ways that appear to be competing. Is emphasizing such variety justified, or are we more unified than we appear? I hope to offer a constructive appraisal of DMM missiology to those who might view it with suspicion, and conversely to help DMM proponents see how their ministry fits in the broader picture of God's mission in all its diversity.

Integral Mission as Both Apostolic and Indicative

As is commonly known, the concept of mission is variously understood and much debated in missiology. According to Bosch, "mission remains undefinable; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections. The most we can hope for is to formulate some approximations of what mission is all about" (1991:9). One broad definition is provided by Wright, author of the influential book *The Mission of God* (2006). Wright defines mission as the activity that the church undertakes, under the Lordship of Christ, in building the church, caring for creation, and serving society (2017). Even though Wright – along with Bosch (1987:10) – considers evangelism as the central integrating activity of mission, in his definition mission also happens even when the church is not expressly proclaiming the gospel or making disciples. In responding to the famous criticism by Neill, "If everything is mission, then nothing is mission" (1959:81), Wright claims, "It would seem more biblical to say, 'If everything is

mission...everything is mission.’ Clearly, not everything is *cross-cultural evangelistic* mission, but everything a Christian and a Christian church is, says and does should be missional in its conscious participation in the mission of God in God’s world” (2010:15). The mission of God is therefore to redeem his creation back to himself. Because the church is the body of Christ and is an extension of him, we participate with God in *his* mission in this world.

All Christians do not share this wide view of mission, however. A much narrower view is provided by DeYoung and Gilbert, who hold that mission only happens when disciples are made in the ministries of evangelism, preaching, and discipleship (2011). Unlike Wright and others in what is sometimes referred to as “*missio Dei*” missiology (e.g. Bosch 1991; Newbigin 1995; Van Gelder and Zscheile 2011), DeYoung and Gilbert do not believe that social justice or creation care are part of the mission of the church. According to them, our mission is not to make the world a better place, and the presence of sin and evil in a community is not the failure of the church. In other words, mission is about building the church and proclaiming the gospel, not about eradicating social problems. DeYoung and Gilbert are concerned that, if mission is broadened past apostolic practice as seen in the New Testament, the proclamation of the gospel and the priority of making disciples of all nations will be marginalized.

Whatever the case may be, there are many more examples of those who define mission in both broad and narrow senses, but for our purposes here we note that the understanding of mission in missiology is contested. Part of the difficulty in defining “mission” is because it is an extrabiblical term. *Missio* comes from the Latin verb *mitto* meaning sending. *Missio* (and later *missiology*) were both used extensively during the colonial period when discussing the church’s activities outside of Christendom as a way of self-centering Europe and justifying racist attempts to proselytize and civilize the non-Christian other (Kollman 2010). Considering this ungodly collusion between mission and colonialism, many authors have suggested that the term mission be removed from Christian vocabulary. For example, Bevans and Schroeder argue that mission should be understood as “prophetic dialogue” to describe the activity of the church today (2004). Recently, Stroope has proposed that the language of mission should be replaced by “pilgrim witness” and an emphasis given on the Kingdom of God (2017). However, words in any language used to describe the diverse activity of God and his covenantal people in this age are bound to have limitations and are prone to misuse and misunderstanding.

So how can we move forward? The term “integral mission” was first proposed by René Padilla in the 1980s in order to *integrate* the ministries of social action and evangelism as equal partners in the mission of the Church (Kirkpatrick 2016). With this construct in mind, I propose that “mission” can be understood as the *integration of two types of diverse activities, both apostolic and indicative in nature*. Let me explain these terms as intended here: integral mission combines *apostolic* efforts, such as evangelism and discipleship, with efforts to holistically transform communities in a way that *indicates* the presence of the Kingdom of God. The benefits of this integration draw upon the strengths of *missio Dei* missiology while acknowledging the difficulties of calling everything the church does simply “mission.” *Apostolic* mission seeks to glorify God by multiplying transformational churches among all peoples (Ott 2019). At the same time, these churches should be serving society’s needs and eradicating evil in all its forms, integrating the social and the spiritual realms of life (Samuel 1999). This holistic transformation is the *indicative* sense of mission, in which good works serve as an *indication* of the Kingdom of God when they are connected with the already-but-not-yet reign of Christ. While the root cause of all the problems in the world is spiritual, stemming from our alienation

from God and failure to glorify him (Myers 1999:88), reconciliation to God should also result in peoples becoming reconciled to each other and to creation.

In practice, the difference between *apostolic mission* and *indicative mission* can be quite ambiguous (which points to their necessary integration). We might say that the apostolic opens the door for, and also enables the broader fulfillment of, the indicative. But we might also say that the indicative can reveal the need for the apostolic. Both aspects of integral mission affirm that the church is indeed involved in societal transformation, but also that the acts of the apostles, as seen in making disciples in places where there is little access to the gospel, remain a high priority for the church today.

In the following sections, I will explore how integral mission as apostolic and indicative relates DMM to the *missio Dei*. To begin, I will outline a brief missiology of DMM.

Towards a Missiology of Disciple-Making Movements

In this article I use DMM as an umbrella term to describe “movements” that are variously labeled. One older term is “church planting movements” (CPM), popularized by Garrison (2000). Historically, while not all CPMs have been DMMs, the two terms are mostly interchangeable today. CPM proponents tend to claim that church planting happens in the midst of disciple making, not vice versa, and so the terminology has shifted to DMM in recent years. Additionally, the term T4T (training for trainers) is also used to describe an approach to CPM (Smith 2011). There are some important differences between DMM and T4T (Parks and Smith 2015), but they are all best understood as small-group discipleship movements. The small groups themselves are what multiply, and many of them combine to either form churches or consider themselves as a house church network (Lim 2017). In recent years, these DMMs have been observed in several different contexts and are characterized by rapid reproduction within a social network (usually in collectivist societies and rural contexts (Watson and Watson 2014:31–32)) of small groups of seekers or new believers who study the Bible inductively together and seek to obey its teachings. These movements tend to happen on the margins of the established, institutional Church (Addison 2019:29). In one sense, the DMM “strategy” is not actually a prescriptive methodology but a descriptive account of the phenomenon. Yet books such as *Contagious Disciple Making* (Watson and Watson 2014) and *Miraculous Movements* (Trousedale 2012) portray DMM as indeed a well-defined strategy. This is because the approach of DMM has, for the most part, been reverse-engineered from the phenomenon itself (Garrison 2004:11).

What does this reverse-engineering of DMMs involve? In general, religious and social movements consist of “mechanisms through which actors are engaged in collective action” (Della Porta and Diani 2006:20), and DMMs are no exception. As multiplying small groups inside dense networks with a shared vision and identity, DMMs usually have in common 1) a standard, transferrable liturgy for each meeting, 2) specific sets of easily reproducible inductive Bible studies, 3) accountability for evangelism, and 4) a communal piety expressed in frequent prayer and fasting (Farah 2015). DMMs tend not to be an organic or spontaneous movement of reproducing house churches. Instead, they are an organized movement with a clear mechanism for multiplication of small groups “that sweeps through a people group or population segment” (Garrison 2004:21). These movements bridge gaps or structural holes between other networks. One of the criteria for the success of new religious movements is that they remain “an open social network, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders” (Stark 1996:142). This connecting

capacity draws in new people to the common vision and identity of the movement, who then replicate the process within their own network.

But how is the term “movement” quantified? Garrison defines movements as at least 1,000 new baptized believers or 100 new church starts within two decades (2014a:39). Others add that a movement is defined by churches that reproduce to the fourth generation within a short time frame and in multiple family-tree branches or streams (Parks 2017). The Watsons combine both of these definitions: a movement is “a minimum of one hundred new locally initiated and led churches, four generations deep, within three years” (2014:4). Others prefer to use more qualitative criteria for measuring movements; if the biblical DNA for healthy growth is present, then growing movements will hopefully flow from that DNA (Higgins 2018). Movements are thus defined by healthy growth and rapid reproduction of discipleship groups and churches within a relatively short period. They are distinguished from revivals, evangelistic campaigns, mass conversions, people movements, and the so-called “church growth movement” (Garrison 2004:23–25).

DMMs can be viewed both phenomenologically and methodologically. Discipleship movements are a phenomenon happening in our world today. As such, they deserve to be studied as they occur and are observed in different contexts. However, DMM is also an approach to ministry that proponents claim simply replicates and continues the ministry of Jesus (Addison 2012; Trousdale and Sunshine 2018:147–168). As such, DMM is subject to critique by those who claim that the results are exaggerated and the methodology is unbiblical (Vegas 2018; Wu 2014). Indeed, it is nearly impossible to articulate an approach to ministry today that someone will not criticize. As with all criticism, some criticism of DMM strategy is legitimate, and there are real differences from traditional approaches. However, there are responses (Waterman 2018; Garrison 2014b), and some criticism is based on unfortunate caricatures and simple misunderstandings.

I would argue that, in general, the DMM methodology is not explicitly *biblical* per se, but neither is it explicitly *unbiblical*. Individual principles of DMM are clearly found in the Bible (Garrison 2014b), but, like most ministry approaches, there are no clear examples of the synthesized DMM strategy prescribed in Scripture. However, there are ways of ministry that seem to be more prone to multiplication, especially when compared with approaches that center around an attractional, institutional church (Esler 2013). Moreover, while DMM is not anti-institutional, it is anti-institutionalization. Institutions are important to all movements, but their misuse can inhibit multiplication. Both those who are pro-DMM and those who are cautious of it would do well to recognize this multiplying aspect of DMMs. If there is wisdom in the approach, especially as it has been induced from the phenomena itself, then it deserves serious attention. But at the same time, DMM doesn’t need to be presented as the only biblical approach for engaging the world in mission.

My purpose in the remainder of the article is to continue outlining a missiology of DMM as it relates to missiology in the *missio Dei* conversation. It is my hope that this process will enrich the conversation of both apostolic and indicative mission as we consider the *motus Dei* today.

Locating DMM in the *Missio Dei*

With the closing of the modern paradigm of mission, Bosch’s landmark work on missiology noted the elements of an “emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm” (1991:368ff). Numerous

other works have also observed that the Church appears to be in a new phase of ministry (e.g. Guder (1998), Jenkins (2002), Hirsch and Frost (2004)). DMM has a number of features that resonate with this new emerging paradigm of mission. In this section, I would like to show how these features intersect with the *missio Dei* understanding of mission, thus demonstrating that the two conversations need to be more closely integrated.

The Globalizing Church and the Role of West-South Partnerships

Historically, most missiologies have been written from a monocultural perspective where the West has assumed itself to be the major player. But the rise of the Church in the Global South has increased the diversity of perspectives, and there is much to be learned. One remarkable feature of DMMs is that Western missionaries play a minor role. The prevalence of these movements in the South is part of a larger trend, wherein Christianity “shifted southward” (Robert 2000) in the previous century. The Christian mission community is now “polycentric,” with many sending and receiving centers (Yeh 2016), not just a one-way street from the “West to the rest.” DMMs now are also giving rise to other DMMs in nearby contexts, where the strategy is to use “hot coals,” i.e. effective disciples from the fires of one movement to start new movements among culturally-near peoples (Smith 2016). As well, DMM challenges the structures and modes of ministry for the Western church: the West is learning from the South (Galanos 2018).

Another globalizing feature of DMMs is that they tend to be “unbranded.” By working outside known denominational structures, DMMs form ecumenical partnerships and tend to refuse to have names of leaders or prominent churches associated with them (Trousedale and Sunshine 2018:237ff). While they might be “evangelical” in commitment, many emerging movements would not understand the term. More could be said about the eventual institutionalization of movements, but it is important to note this ecumenical and unbranded character of DMMs that seem to be evangelically centered around Jesus and the Bible.

DBS as Translation and Inculturation

Lamin Sanneh has demonstrated how the gospel can be translated and have a home in any and every culture (2015). In the colonial era, even ethnocentric missionaries from the West were able to sow the seeds of a truly indigenous church by translating the gospel into the common language of the people. This turn in mission history after the collapse of Christendom produced what has commonly come to be known as a “post-Western Christianity.” DMM has shown itself to be part of this trend through the utilization of “discovery bible study” (DBS) as a teaching method. By allowing a Socratic method of question-asking and discovery, DBS has a way of “deculturalizing” the gospel from the culture of the missionary (Watson and Watson 2014:9–17). The gospel is then inculturated through groups of believers and seekers investigating the Bible on their own terms. With the presence of biblical leaders to skillfully guide the process, DBS puts the emphasis on inductive learning instead of the more traditional deductive instruction performed by outsiders.

In this way, DBS anticipates the limits of the contextualization paradigm of mission. While there are dozens of approaches to contextualization (Moreau 2012), the general idea emphasizes the outside communicator as the primary agent involved in the formulation of the gospel message, in other words, a *deductive* approach to mission. In contrast, as a more *inductive* approach to mission, DBS allows for an interpretive process to unfold where the emphasis is

taken off the contextualized formulation of the gospel and placed on God's active presence *within new contexts* as hermeneutical spaces for people to work out what the Bible says to their situation in ways they understand (Dyrness 2016:1–27). Without being expressly stated, DBS seems to address the inadequacies of the contextualization paradigm and allow for decolonial expressions of Christianity to emerge.

The Eradication of the Laity

Decolonial expressions of biblical faith also relate to the forms of church utilized by DMMs. Most contemporary ecclesiologies are built on the structures established in Christendom, with a clear separation between laity and clergy, at least in practice. DMM, however, aims for total mobilization and enrollment of all believers into mission, also emphasized in the *missio Dei*. In this way, the “priesthood of the believer” is stressed both in theory and in practice. Of course, different believers have different gifts (Eph. 4:11-16), but in movements many more people are called into apostolic leadership roles than in institutional Christian models. The Watsons note that “Professional leadership in the church has resulted in a reduction of those who feel qualified to minister. The net result is a weaker church, one that does not have the infrastructure to multiply, expand, or grow” (2014:52).

Obedience-Based Discipleship and The Common Good

DMMs are not an end in themselves. One of the features of DMMs is the insistence on an obedience-based discipleship, taken from the phrase used by Jesus in Matthew, “teaching them to obey” (28:18). Much of contemporary forms of discipleship are based on a Western education model of church, where people were seen as lacking the right doctrine and theology. This is certainly important, but it is also incomplete. The focus of Jesus in Matthew 28 seems to put the emphasis on behavior. Learning to do all that Jesus “has commanded” necessarily entails a biblical outlook on life, where word and deed, plus the spiritual and the social, are combined into one coherent unity.

In this sense, DMMs are holistic in nature. They reject the bifurcation of word and deed that was present in much of the ecumenical/evangelical divide of the previous generation. Perhaps this sacred/secular divide was more of a Western problem based on Enlightenment ideals, as it does not seem to be part of the worldviews of the global South. Biblical reconciliation deals with the whole person, not just “saving souls.” It is the Platonic body-soul dualism, pervasive in Christian theology since Augustine, which “has caused this understanding of reality in the Western mind, in contrast to a holistic biblical one” (Hwa 2017:67–68).

In this holistic way, movements are often found contributing to the common good of society. Schools, health clinics, agricultural projects, and sports development are just a few examples of the fruit of DMMs (Johnson 2017). Discipleship in DMM is not seen as an individualistic process for developing personal piety, but a communal affair that impacts all of life. DMM “ministry models are completely holistic, including compassion and healing – they make obedient disciples who bring replicating transformation to whole families and communities” (Trousedale and Sunshine 2018:288). This holistic transformation is a strong emphasis in the *missio Dei* as well.

Prayer, Miracles, and Weakness

A final element of DMMs to be briefly introduced in this essay is the role that the supernatural plays in these movements marked by signs and wonders (Trousdale and Sunshine 2018:226). The Enlightenment paradigm for missions in the previous generation put a strong emphasis on doctrine and rationalism in the churches of the West. DMMs offer more tangible and experiential forms of biblical faith. However, the kind of practical faith expressed in DMMs is no shallow prosperity gospel. DMMs integrate the supernatural with prayer, worship, and discipleship. “The miracles that accelerate the disciple-making process don’t happen in a vacuum. They are a result of intercessors and of pioneer missionaries who are prepared to spend a lot of time engaging people, finding people of peace, and then investing additional weeks or months coaching leaders of Discovery Bible Studies” (Trousdale 2012:135).

The use of the descriptor “Pentecostal” to describe these churches is an inappropriate Western term, because they are not simply transplants from a denomination (Robert 2000:57). But the dependence on the Holy Spirit and experience of the miraculous in DMMs, evidenced through abundant prayer and fasting, is part of a larger trend of the explosive growth of Christianity in the Global South that is more charismatic in nature. In previous generations, especially in the modern paradigm, mission was often attempted from the position of colonial strength and political power. But DMMs today often occur from the powerless and “ordinary people” (Trousdale 2012:167). This mission from weakness appears to provide more opportunity for the power of God to be displayed in supernatural ways.

Conclusion

In their passion for movements, DMM advocates tend to discuss them as if they are the primary way God is working in the world today. The same could be said for those who advocate the *missio Dei* with respect to holistic ministry. This article represents one bridge-building attempt to show that there is more common ground than is often recognized. Discipleship movements, occurring at the intersection of divine initiative and human responsibility, play an important role in God’s mission to redeem his creation back to himself. Despite the tendency to emphasize our distinctive differences, we in the mission community need to embrace our unity in Christ and to listen more carefully to one another.

What can the wider mission community, and missiologists collectively, learn from the current DMM phenomenon? One central lesson is profoundly theological: sometimes, God moves quickly. Other times, slowly. In his sovereignty, speed and quantity is not the issue, but the quality of growth and the glory God receives. Related is that statistics should never be the sole measure of success. Furthermore, we should not expect movements to happen in every context if we just do ministry in a certain way. At the same time, this study of DMM demonstrates that there are approaches to mission and forms of ecclesiology that seem to facilitate movements better, so we are wise to inquire how they can be fostered more effectively.

God seems glad to work both inside *and* outside of traditional ecclesial patterns established in Christendom. However he works, God often moves in ways that defy expectations; it is *his* mission, after all. We might call this divine activity the *motus Dei*, the movement of God. In light of this *motus Dei*, we can – and indeed should – pray earnestly with apostolic and ecumenical passion, “that the message of the Lord may *spread rapidly and be honored*” (2 Thess. 3:1), just as it is with DMM.

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