The Genesis and Evolution of Church Planting Movements Missiology: A Plea for Intercultural Perspectives

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# Introduction

Both as a phenomenon and an approach to ministry, church planting movements (CPM) were introduced into mission discourse in the 1990s (Wilkes 2007, 1; Ott and Wilson 2011, 71). Currently, more than 1% of the world is living in the midst of a CPM, primarily within least-reached Muslim and Hindu contexts (Long 2020). While a “movement” may be broadly defined as “any situation where the Kingdom of God is growing rapidly without dependence on direct outside involvement” (Lewis 2007, 76), CPM appears to be a specific type of missiological movement. However, the missiology of these discipleship movements is still evolving as tensions exist and majority world voices are underrepresented. This essay seeks to explore the emergence of a CPM missiology as a unique feature in mission studies within the geopolitical context of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Before this time, Christianity had already “shifted southward” (Robert 2000), yet for American evangelicals in the 1990s, America was still the “presumptive hub” of global evangelicalism (Noll 2004). In light of this, the discussion will highlight the significance of a missiology of CPM, examine gaps in information from an intercultural perspective, and propose research for future development.

# Missiological Antecedents of CPM

Contemporary CPM has many influences but three are most significant. Early in the twentieth century, Roland Allen (1868-1947) was particularly important for contributing to the concept of biblical faith as indigenous church multiplication. Building upon the work of Rufus Anderson (1796-1880), Henry Venn (1796-1873), and John Nevius (1829-1893), Allen taught that churches should be self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing. His books *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (1912) and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: and the Causes Which Hinder It* (1927)demonstrated that Allen was a “Pauline Pragmatist” who believed that the book of Acts and Paul’s writings challenged the status quo and were relevant for today’s missionary approaches (Branner 1975, quoted in Payne 2012, 316). Donald McGavran (1897-1990) was also a seminal thinker in “church growth” who sought, similar to Allen, to study the reasons for and barriers to indigenous church growth (Hunter III 1992, 158). A controversial figure to some, McGavran was perhaps best known for popularizing the theory of “people movements” (PM) which claims that networks and social-ties play a significant factor influencing people from the same tribe, class, or caste to convert to Christianity over a relatively short-period of time (McGavran 1955; Hesselgrave 2000).

A third significant influence is Ralph Winter (1924-2009) who founded the U.S. Center for World Mission (USCWM, now Frontier Ventures). Winter gave an address at the 1974 Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization on “people blindness” that later came to be associated with the phrase “unreached people groups” (Lausanne Movement 2009).[[1]](#footnote-2) Both Allen and McGavran can partly be attributed with the seedbed of a postcolonial approach to mission, and their emphasis on indigeneity influenced Winter’s focus on peoples lacking indigenous churches. In the early 1980s, the USCWM also launched the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* course with a focus on frontier missiology among the least-reached (Winter and Hawthorne 1981). The second edition of *Perspectives* contained an article by George Patterson titled *The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches* (1992). According to *Perspectives* coeditor Steven Hawthorne, Patterson “infused into the course most of the basic ideas of movements ecclesiology” (2021). However, Patterson et al.’s missiology in the 1980s included the language of multiplication, not movements *per se*. Their focus was on “planting a church that was inherently reproducible. They did not use the language of movement, but they functionally were aiming for it” (Gill 2021). McGavran and Winter also used the concept of “multiplication” frequently, but “movements” was in their missiological lexicon as well. Initially, it does seem that the phrase “church-planting movement” began to circulate in the USCWM in the late 1980s. It was used several times in *DAWN 2000: 7 Million Churches to Go* (Montgomery 1989) in connection with Ralph Winter (although he himself did not like the phrase (Winter 2004, 130)). However, CPM was not given any formal definition or informal description at that time.

As the next sections will seek to demonstrate, a missiology of CPM seems to have developed from Allen et al.’s concept of indigeneity, Winter et al.’s focus on unreached and multiplication, and McGavran et al.’s observation of the influence of social networks. McGavran’s “Church Growth Movement” (CGM) diverged under the leadership of Peter Wagner and subsequently “came under heavy criticism for being overly pragmatic, theologically shallow, and methodologically reductionistic” (Ott and Wilson 2011, 71). It is important to note that “many of the criticisms of the CGM have been directed toward particular fragments of the classic McGavran movement, not toward the principles described by McGavran” himself (Morris 2016, 9). Like McGavran and Winter, Allen did not support a results-oriented ministry focus; he believed that the proper motivation for missionary practice was the manifestation and glory of Christ himself (Payne 2012, 477). Due to many valid criticisms, the CGM began to reorganize into the Great Commission Research Network in the 2000s.

# IMB’s Cooperative Services International as the Innovation of CPM

Contemporary CPM missiology finds its genesis in the twilight of the CGM. David Barrett (1927-2011), a British missionary statistician and sociologist of religion, is best known for his ground-breaking *World Christian Encyclopedia* (WCE) (1982) which completely transformed modern understandings of world Christianity for both the Church and the secular academy (Zurlo 2017, 315ff). From 1985-93, Barrett served as a Research Consultant for the Foreign (now International) Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Coupled with Barrett’s understanding of African-Initiated Church (AIC) movements (Barrett 1968), the WCE displayed the magnitude of the “unevangelized” world not previously grasped by the IMB. Subsequently, the IMB launched a “New Directions” initiative in 1997 which sought to align mission efforts with unreached peoples.

Barrett was credited with creating the concept of the non-residential missionary[[2]](#footnote-3) (NRM) (Carlton 2006, 26) which was later developed into a book by the same title (Garrison 1990). During this time in the IMB, the Cooperative Services International (CSI) formed as a special unit for radical innovation within the IMB itself (Carlton 2006, 157). Previous IMB methodology had aimed at creating programs and infrastructures for Baptist denominations. Known as a type of “skunkworks,” the CSI was comprised of non-traditional NRMs who had a vision for reaching entire people groups. A significant innovation of the CSI was learning to partner with other “Great Commission Christians” outside the IMB (W. Smith 2021). Due to IMB’s history and size, this was a novel practice for IMB during that time.[[3]](#footnote-4)

One of Barrett’s PhD students was IMB missionary William “Bill” Smith (1944-) who was impacted by Barrett’s understanding of AIC movements and his “big picture” understanding of the world. Smith was the first under the structure of the CSI to serve in a “Strategy Coordinator” (SC) role (a development on the concept of the NRM) which was to mobilize all available resources for reaching a specific people group. A background in military intelligence had shaped Smith for cultural and societal analysis of East Asian cultures and also so-called “restricted-access” contexts. The proliferation of the internet in the 1990s offered novice researchers improved opportunities for research and contextual analysis. A key feature of the early SC training involved working backwards from a compelling “End Vision.” This included creating a strategic master plan based on thorough research of the context, studying the book of Acts, discussing case studies, and developing the giftings and capabilities of the SC for effective networking. Smith also saw himself as “an implementor and not a theoretician,” and so in the early stages of the SC there was a lot of experimentation around the catchphrase “what’s it gonna take?” to reach a people group (W. Smith 2021). In the 1990s, both Bill and Susan Smith and fellow IMB CSI member Curtis Sergeant trained hundreds of SCs, both within and outside of the IMB (Sergeant 2021).

A number of pioneering SCs emerged at this time. Of note were Ying and Grace Kai, a Taiwanese-American couple with a history of church planting. Ying’s story of catalyzing a movement in China included writing a “master plan” under the guidance of Smith. The result was a movement that included 1.7 million baptisms and 150,000 new churches (S. Smith 2011; Kai and Kai 2018). Another SC during this time was David Watson who partnered with Victor John in Northern India in what is called the Bhojpuri movement (John 2019). According to Watson, in 2008 a survey revealed that 80,000 churches had been planted and 2 million people baptized (2014, xiii). After a chance encounter while teaching *Perspectives* Lesson 13 in America, Watson also trained Shodankeh Johnson who has seen a large movement spread to several countries in West Africa (Johnson 2021).

The innovations[[4]](#footnote-5) of the CSI were met with fierce criticism within both the IMB and the SBC. Today, the most recent version of IMB’s “Foundations” philosophy of ministry does not mention CPM at all (International Mission Board 2018). Interestingly, all of the movement catalysts referenced in this section no longer serve in the IMB. This includes David Garrison (1957-), a PhD in Historical Theology who was Barrett’s research associate from 1987-88 and the founding Program Director of CSI from 1988-1997. From 1998 Garrison served as a strategist and a researcher in the IMB until his departure in 2015.

# David Garrison’s Research and the Formalizing of CPM

During 1996-97, Garrison sought to study and describe the initial movements in Cambodia, India, China, and Cuba that were catalyzed through the CSI in the early 1990s. The research approach involved participant observation in those movements which later led to two focus groups of other IMB SCs to discuss and describe their common elements (Garrison 2004b, 120). In these two meetings, the term “church planting movements” was first employed as a descriptive phrase for the phenomenon.[[5]](#footnote-6) The product of this research included a 57-page booklet called *Church Planting Movements* (Garrison 1999). The booklet proved to be so popular that it was translated into over forty languages and distributed free of charge by the IMB. At the same time, the number of movements around the world increased to around 30 which provided more data for refining the research. The result was the book by the same title published five years later (Garrison 2004a).

With a focus on the phenomenology of these movements, Garrison described ten universal elements in every CPM, ten characteristics in most CPMs, and seven obstacles to CPMs (Garrison 2004a, 171–258). The publication of *Church Planting Movements* brought CPM into the wider missiological discussion. At the same time, others such as Watson were developing their missiology of movements. In their book *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication*, Craig Ott and Gene Wilson also sought a missiological description (2011, chap. 4). For comparison purposes, Table 1 provides these three outlines of a CPM missiology that developed in the 2000s.

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| **Table 1** Three Outlines of CPM Missiology | | |
| CPM’s Ten Universals, Ten Characteristics, and Seven Deadly Sins, by Garrison | The Critical Path of Every Church Planting Movement, by Watson | CPM Principles, Practices, and Deterrents, by Ott and Wilson |
| Universals:  1. Extraordinary Prayer, 2. Abundant Evangelism, 3. Intentional Planting of Reproducing Churches, 4. The Authority of God’s Word, 5. Local Leadership, 6. Lay Leadership, 7. House Churches, 8. Churches Planting Churches, 9. Rapid Reproduction, 10. Healthy Churches.  Characteristics:  1. A Climate of Uncertainty in Society, 2. Insulation from Outsiders, 3. A High Cost for Following Christ, 4. Bold Fearless Faith, 5. Family-Based Conversion Patterns, 6.  Rapid Incorporation of New Believers, 7. Worship in the Heart Language, 8. Divine Signs and Wonders, 9. On-the-Job Leadership Training, 10. Missionaries Suffered.  Deadly Sins (Barriers):  1. Blurred Vision, 2. Improving the Bible, 3. Sequentialism, 4. Unsavory Salt, 5. The Devil’s Candy, 6.  Alien Abduction, 7. Blaming God | 1. Passionate, extraordinary prayer, 2. Authority of Scripture that leads to obedience, 3. Household conversions, not just individual conversions, 4. Making disciples, not converts, 5. Obedience to the Word, not doctrine, 6. Miracles, 7. Intentional church planting, 8. Local leadership — keeping foreigners out of the spotlight 9. Appropriate, abundant evangelism, 10. Community of believers — forming believers into minimum practice groups that will become churches, 11. Reaching out - missions, 12. Reproducing - disciples/ churches/ groups - rapid incorporation of new believers that will reach out to all segments of society, 13. Inside local leaders - worship in heart language, 14. Authority of the Holy Spirit, 15. Persecution - bold, fearless faith - suffering, 16. Coaching/ mentoring/ training (on-the-job training), 17. Outside leaders who model/equip/watch/leave, 18. Self-supporting - not allowing money to be an issue or drive it at all, 19. Redeeming the local culture. | Principles:  1. CPMs are works of the Holy Spirit, 2. CPMs are gospel centered, 3. CPMs are lay grassroots movements, 4. CPMs have a multiplication DNA, 5. CPMs are influenced by external factors  Practices:  1. Adopt an apostolic approach to church planting, 2. Develop, empower, and release local workers while recruiting from the harvest, 3. Maintain an ongoing emphasis on evangelism and discipleship, 4. Build multiplication into every level of church life and ministry, 5. Model ministry that can be reproduced by local people using local resources.  Deterrents:  1. Expensive church meeting places, 2. Making church planting dependent on formally educated, paid church planters, 3. Dependence on outside resources. |
| David Garrison (2004a, 147; 199; 216) | David Watson (in Roberts Jr. 2008, 176–77) | Craig Ott and Gene Wilson (2011, chap. 4) |

While clear similarities exist between each of these three, it must be noted that there appears to be no unifying theory that undergirds a missiology of CPM. In its place, there are a mixture of descriptive and prescriptive elements that seem intended to induce an imagination for how to catalyze movements. In other words, these missiologies are a blend of observational missiology, applied missiology, and theological missiology, that answers the respective questions: What is happening? How should we go about our work? And, What is mission? (T. Esler 2016). At the least, these three outlines indicate that CPM missiology officially began to coalesce and take shape especially after the 1999 publication of Garrison’s *Church Planting Movements (Booklet)*. With obvious antecedents in previous generations, CPM initially started as a 1990s innovation in IMB’s CSI and formalized in the 2000s into a more widely-known missiological concept in missions discourse.

# Flexible and Diverse CPM Strategies

With CPM framed as a phenomenon and the result of a strategy (not a strategy *per se*), it was recognized that there were various methods used by practitioners to arrive at a CPM. One early strategy came to be known as Training for Trainers, also known as T4T. This strategy was developed by Ying and Grace Kai during their time in China (S. Smith 2011). In T4T, new believers are immediately taught how to share their faith with anyone, how to commune with God, and how to train others to do the same. Another strategy based on early SC training was called “Four Fields,” developed from Mark chapter 4 and popularized later by IMB SCs Nathan Shank and Steve Smith (Shank 2021).

In 1999, David Watson left the IMB and joined CityTeam International (now New Generations) where he worked with Jerry Trousdale. Trousdale was instrumental in popularizing the account of Watson’s partnership with Shodankeh Johnson in West Africa, published in the book *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims are Falling in Love with Jesus* (2012). A significant development in this book was the shift away from CPM terminology (2012, 16). CityTeam found that the popularity of CPM language had undergone significant semantic stretch. At a “rebranding meeting” in 2010, Trousdale expressed his concern that “‘Church Planting Movements’ now is used to describe anything, and therefore has lost its unique meeting” (Trousdale 2010, 6). To illustrate this problem, Trousdale declared wryly that CPM could also be *Kingdom of God Principles Producing Rapidly Multiplying Movements of Obedience-Based Discipleship, Transforming Individuals and Families, Even Among the Most Unreached Peoples of the World* – corresponding to the acronym KOGPPRMMOBDTIFEAMUPOW. Instead, it was proposed to employ a new term in the place of CPM that is God-honoring, simple, concrete, emotive, and unexpected – the result was “disciple making movements” (DMM) (2010, 9–10).

However, since then, the same semantic stretch that happened to CPM has occurred with DMM. This is undoubtedly true of any discourse. Today, DMM is often used synonymously with CPM, but DMM eventually also came to be understood as a strategy for CPM. In 2015, Steve Smith and Stan Parks coauthored two articles in *Mission Frontiers* that compared the similarities and differences between T4T and DMM (S. Parks and Smith 2015a; 2015b). One similarity of the two approaches is the “person of peace” concept, taken from Matthew 10:11 and Luke 10:5–6. In CPM literature, this person serves as a bridge or a gateway into a community or social network. Jerry Trousdale writes that “people of peace are God’s pre-positioned agents to bridge the gospel to their family, their friends or their workplace” (2012, 90).[[6]](#footnote-7) Both for those who use T4T and DMM, the person of peace principle has been well-documented in the phenomenology of church planting movements (Garrison 2004a, 45, 213). Common also is the emphasis on obedience and accountability which creates much ministry activity in movements (Farah 2021, 14). One feature that is more prominent in DMM than T4T is the use of an inductive teaching tool called “discovery Bible study” (DBS) which indigenizes the movement from its beginning (Williams 2016, 225). However, it is important to note that, in reality, “CPM practitioners constantly learn and borrow elements from each other, which results in somewhat blended models” (S. Parks and Smith 2015b, 34), and so CPM strategies are not static methods but a dynamic process of learning and evolving within the context of a movement.

# The Challenge of Defining CPM in a “Community of Practice”

In addition to strategies for CPM, the definition of CPM has gone through several modifications. In Garrison’s original booklet, CPM was defined as “a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment” (1999, 7). The definition was slightly amended five years later: “a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment” (Garrison 2004a, 21). Another early SC trainer in IMB’s CSI, Bruce Carlton, defined CPM as a “Holy Spirit-controlled process of rapid, multiple reproduction of indigenous churches among a specific people group so that every individual within that people group has the opportunity to hear and respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ” (2003, 18).

Later, Garrison continued his CPM research specifically among Muslims, published in the book, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (2014). In this book, “movements” were quantified as “at least 1,000 baptized believers over the past one or two decades or 100 new church starts over the same time frame within a given people group or ethnic Muslim community” (2014, 39). Others have added 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 (K. Parks 2017). The four generations metric was derived biblically from 2 Timothy 2:2 in which Paul references a message that is conveyed through four generations. The Watsons combine the descriptive, generational, and quantifiable elements of the definition: a CPM is “a minimum of one hundred new locally initiated and led churches, four generations deep, within three years” (2014, 4). Still, another definition of CPM appears in the recent compendium, *24:14 - A Testimony to All Peoples: Kingdom Movements Today*:

A CPM is a multiplication of disciples making disciples, and leaders developing leaders, resulting in indigenous churches (usually house churches) planting more churches. These new disciples and churches begin spreading rapidly through a people group or population segment, meeting people’s spiritual and physical needs. They begin to transform their communities as the new Body of Christ lives out kingdom values. When consistent, multiple-stream 4th generation reproduction of churches occurs, church planting has crossed a threshold to becoming a sustainable movement. (Coles and Parks 2019, 315)

One significant observation about the original and evolving CPM definition is the delimitation to generational growth which focusses on the reproductive nature of each individual church itself. This contrasts with a “hub” approach to church planting, where a centralized institution or a “mother church” with significant resources is the only church with reproductive ability. The idea for this type of growth is reminiscent of the “self-propagating” theology of Allen et al. and finds contemporary expression in Patterson (1992).

These evolving definitions of CPM demonstrate the universal problem of attempting to define social phenomena in a community of practice. Ultimately, all language is subject to a process of “negotiated meaning” as those within the discourse adjust, enhance, or change the terms they use (Wenger 1999). While others will likely amend the definition of CPM again in the future, there are further questions related to the issue of definition. Is the CPM definition simply a function of the strategies? There are many types of movements that do not fit the generational church multiplication definition, but they are movements, nonetheless (Addison 2011). Could a narrow definition inhibit the research into CPM? Or is generational growth inherent in the definition of CPM?

# CPM as Missiologically Related but Distinct from People Movements

Questions about the nature of CPM can be investigated by revisiting CPM’s antecedents. Initially, some in the USCWM believed that CPM and PM were simply different names for the same phenomenon (e.g. Wood 1995). In his review of *Church Planting Movements,* Ralph Winter stated his belief that Garrison’s portrayal of CPM is not significantly different than McGavran’s PMs (2004). However, Marc Byrd has argued that CPMs are “a very specific type of People Movement” (Byrd 2007, 27) and that the terms are not necessarily interchangeable. For McGavran, PMs are understood “in terms of the decision-making process of multi-individual, mutually interdependent conversion” (2007, 26) whereas CPM is understood in terms of the end result: a “rapid multiplication of indigenous churches” (2007, 26). PM as a missiological concept is broader in scope and refers to types of socially homogenous contexts where people make multi-individual and interdependent decisions. According to Garrison, however, “Church Planting Movements are not limited to a geographical or racial sector of society. God has demonstrated that He can produce them among urban or rural, educated, or illiterate people on any continent and from any religious background” (1999, 57).

Between Allen and McGavran, Allen’s contributions seem to have significantly more influence than McGavran on CPM today. McGavran advocated for a “harvest principle” in that mission efforts should focus on responsive peoples. In contrast, CPM advocates seek out “the least likely candidates – unreached people groups” regardless of their perceived receptivity (Garrison 2004a, 25). Another key difference with McGavran is his priority placed on evangelism in mission strategy. In his day, McGavran was dealing with the modernist/ fundamentalist controversy where many in the Ecumenical tradition “obscured evangelism” (Goheen 2014, 236) and regarded personal conversion as non-essential to the missionary task. This may partially describe McGavran’s evangelism “prioritism” in mission practice. Yet perhaps because they have emerged in the Global South in places where the modernist/fundamentalist divide is not felt, CPMs seem to be more holistic and integrative in nature (Johnson 2017; Shank 2013). Non-Western CPM catalysts would not be impacted by the Platonic dualistic worldview of their Western colleagues (Waldorf 2020, 137; Farah 2020; Hwa 2017).

# The Statistical Significance of CPMs Today in Relation to the Incredible Expansion of Christianity in the Twentieth-Century

There are further reasons to differentiate CPM from PM. McGavran’s concept of People Movements covers the Christianization of Africa in the twentieth century when Christianity made major progress among ethnoreligionists. For instance, The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) rose from 1 percent Christian in 1900 to 95 percent in 2020. However, this growth has not resulted in significant societal transformation. Even today, Christians in Africa have fewer physicians, lower life expectancies, and less access to education and clean water. For example, despite being an overwhelmingly “Christian” nation, the DRC is also often referred to as the “rape capital of the world” (Zurlo and Johnson 2021, 5). For the twentieth century, McGavran claimed that “At least two-thirds of all converts in Asia, Africa, and Oceania have come to Christian faith through People Movements” (1990, 224). Yet these observations looked, quantitatively, at converts to Christianity, not necessarily at the qualitive changes demanded by biblical discipleship. One early African CPM practitioner, Younoussa Djao, claimed that CPM addresses the lack-of-discipleship problem in Africa because CPM produces disciples, not simply converts: “This is what the Church in Africa needs, to not only obey the Great Commission, but also to live out Christ’s life and make a positive difference” (2006, 80). The twentieth century was indeed a century of significant growth for Christianity in the Global South, but the prolific spread of CPMs since the 1990s mostly among Muslims and Hindus (1350+ movements with 79+ million disciples) aims for deeper levels of transformation (of course this does not happen in every CPM) than typically happens with surface-level conversion to Christianity.

# Additional Missiological Discourses Parallel to CPM

In addition to PM, numerous other conversations may appear equivalent to CPM but are in fact parallel or tangential.[[7]](#footnote-8) One such example is the missional church conversation that arose in part due to shifts from a Christian to a post-Christian context in the postmodern Global North (Guder 1998). While it also seemed to arise in the twilight of the CGM, the missional church conversation has typically remained siloed from CPM literature. For instance, the books *The Missional Church in Perspective* (Van Gelder and Zscheile 2011) and *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* (Hunter III 2009) do not mention Garrison’s research.

However, a few books have attempted to apply lessons from CPM literature in a Western, post-Christian context. Bob Roberts Jr. integrated lessons from both Garrison and Watson in his book *The Multiplying Church* (2008). Despite this, even today, North American missiologist Ed Stetzer remarked that “There are no identifiable largescale micro church movements in the West, especially ones that meet the definition of a Church Planting Movement given by the missiologist David Garrison” (2021). The thirty-four Western industrialized democracies of the world are segmented by a post-labor society that undermines CPM methodology (Stetzer and Im 2017, 14). Still, there are recent attempts at integrating lessons learned from CPM/DMM into the West. *The Starfish and the Spirit* (Ford, Wegner, and Hirsch 2021) differentiates between DMM and movements of disciple-making (MDM). Whereas DMM is about spiritual awakening, making new believers *among* the harvest, MDM is about revival in the church, making disciples *for* the harvest.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Another parallel conversation is the discussion of insider movements (IM). Both IM (Talman and Travis 2015) and CPM missiologies believe that traditional church models original to Christendom are inadequate for movements of new Christ-followers that are indigenously led and locally contextualized. However, while new believers in IMs retain their religious identity, CPMs “make a clean break with their former religion and redefine themselves with a distinctly Christian identity” (Garrison 2004c, 154). Note however that the IM label is often used by critics to lump dissimilar types of “insiders” into a single dichotomized category. In this sense, IM is ill-defined and imprecise: there are many kinds of IMs that do not fit well in tightly defined missiological descriptions (Farah 2015). Especially in least-reached people groups where a kingdom movement is inbreaking for the first time, socioreligious identity is often unclear or irrelevant for the new Christ followers. In any case, while identity is an ongoing issue for CPMs, it is far less an issue than for IMs, where insider identity is the definitive feature of the missiology itself.

# Examining Tensions within CPM Missiology from an Intercultural Perspective

As with other novel missiological discourse, the emerging movements missiology has been met with opposition that has been fierce at times. Criticisms have come from different sides of the Christian tradition. Within the SBC, CPM has actually been demonized (B. Allen 2015; Radius International 2019), while another complained that “CPM methodology denigrates working with American volunteers who wish to build church buildings. Thus, thousands of volunteers are not utilized that would like to serve” (Brawner 2007, 10). On the other hand, the end of the twentieth century saw an increase of those who were critiquing the evangelical missions enterprise. Representative of this was Samuel Escobar who criticized the “managerial missiology” of American evangelicalism as beholden to statistical analysis, pragmatism, and a static view of culture (2000, 109–11). In the same vein, Jackson Wu accused CPM proponents of biblical eisegesis (2014b) and critiqued CPM as the product of an American evangelical subculture that prioritizes rapidity, numerical growth, novelty, independence, and a bent towards western pragmatism (2014a).

As we have seen, CPM missiology has been framed primarily by North American voices. While this hegemony may be understandable to date, it has also limited the discourse. Garrison’s initial phenomenological research was undertaken by other North American males and at a time when there were only “7 confirmed church-planting movements with another 42 church-planting movements reported” (Carlton 2006, 235). Today, there are more than 1,350 movements, and “the vast majority of current movements—between 80 and 90 percent of them—were started by believers from other (near-culture) movements” (Coles and Parks 2021). The actual CPMs happening in Muslim and Hindu contexts are catalyzed and led by indigenous believers from the Global South who might not identify as “evangelicals” (Farah 2020, 5), at least not American evangelicals. Despite this, indigenous voices are critically underrepresented in the missiological discourse of CPM.[[9]](#footnote-10) A next step would be a research project(s) to examine how movement leaders and practitioners from the Global South understand and frame movements. With wide-ranging implications, this could be highly beneficial for missiology but, more importantly, for movements themselves. An intercultural perspective would guard against the perception of American missiological exceptionalism or any hints of missional triumphalism. While adding to the growing understanding CPM today, one expects also that hearing from more majority world voices in movements could have a positive, reflexive effect on mission in the Global North as well.

In light of these criticisms from various wings of the Christian tradition, including the need for an intercultural perspective, this section will briefly highlight some of the most prominent tensions in CPM missiology and propose ideas for development.

1. **Rapidity and Complex Adaptive Systems**. Both CPM and traditional approaches to church planting often rely on “linear thinking” to conceptualize the task which is more common in Western worldviews (Abbott 1988). John Massey, a critic of CPM methodology, states that “The emphasis on rapidity also stands in contrast to Jesus’s pattern of leadership development; he took three years to build and train his team of apostles” (Massey 2012, 107). Perhaps, however, the emphasis on “rapidity” in CPM missiology provides space for analysis from a complex adaptive systems framework (Law 2016). In CPM, it is not simply that events happen quickly in succession but rather that many things are happening simultaneously. Reflecting conceptual frameworks already present in the Global South where thinking is not dichotomized or sequentialized (Garrison 2004a, 243), a network perspective could enhance the analysis of CPM.
2. **Evangelism and Holism**. While CPM relies on abundant evangelism (Garrison 2004a, 177), many movement practitioners and movements themselves are holistic in nature (Johnson 2017; John 2019). Does CPM prioritize proclamation evangelism, or does CPM missiology have the inherent potential for holism, integrating the ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and community transformation? Nathan Shank summarizes, “Local churches that are part of CPMs are demonstrating the ability to transform their communities as a result of life transformation and obedience to the admonitions of Scripture. Rather than transform society first then redeem individuals second, in CPMs it is normally reversed: redeem individuals first and then help these Spirit-led believers and churches transform their communities” (2013, 31). And yet, is that how non-Western movement leaders see the task? The understanding of the functional integration of cultures (Moon 2017, 210) could offer fresh insights into this perennial debate as the lens of “integral mission” (Padilla 2002) is utilized.
3. **Biblical Principles and Contextual Innovations**. Both the DBS approach and CPM proponents themselves rely on a form of “biblicism” (e.g. Bird 2020, 88). In CPM, the Bible is an open book, clear and understandable in its teachings, to be applied and obeyed in all of life. This belief is consistent with the Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture (e.g. Westminster Confession 1.7). Many CPM proponents believe that if biblical principles are implemented, movements can result in any context. For example, Trousdale writes that “God is doing all these things wherever these simple biblical principles are implemented” (2012, 187). This begs further questions of preconditions, sociocultural structures in society, theologically principled pragmatism, best practices research, biblical hermeneutics, and contextual innovation. Related are questions regarding divine sovereignty and human responsibility, perennial questions in the missionary task (Ott 2013).
4. **Christendom and Postcolonialism**. CPM bypasses the need for Christendom’s statism churches (J. T. Esler 2012, 113) and attempts to minimize outside/foreign involvement. The chief contribution of CPMs are the factors that contribute to ways churches multiply in unreached contexts. CPM also seems to benefit in spite of the lack of advanced theological education and connection to ecclesial traditions established in Christendom. To what degree should CPMs be “traditioned” (Brittenden and Mostofi 2021) into the historic Christian faith and the global community of believers? What is the relationship of that practice with neocolonialism? The pluriform nature of the Church is a not a threat to biblical faith but embodies Christianity’s very nature of continuity (Flett 2016, 19).

These are simply a sample of the tensions that an intercultural perspective could potentially help resolve. Answers could prove helpful for movement practitioners but also for global missiology.

# Conclusion

A missiology of CPMs may be distinguished from the indigenous movements conversation that emerged in the colonial period, which was characterized by Western domination. It may also be differentiated from the early conversations in the CGM which saw the rapid spread of Christianity around the globe in the twentieth century and the emergence of non-Western missions. These previous discussions focused on indigenization and group conversions within castes, people groups, and ethnoreligionists. Instead, CPM has emerged in unreached contexts, particularly among Muslims and Hindus, particularly at a time when the “center” of Christianity was clearly established in the Global South and when mission was polycentric (Schattner 2013, 54). Garrison et al. has discovered missiological principles on which McGavran et al. did not focus; mainly, factors that multiply microchurches in unreached contexts.

Despite the need to include and integrate deeper analysis from the Global South, it would be unfair to simply charge that CPM missiology is the result of a 1990s American captivity to strategy and technique. It would also be unfair to claim movements are simply wills of the Holy Spirit who “blows where he pleases,” as if the missional implementation of biblical principles were dispensable. One could actually make the case that CPM is a positive synergy of Westerners and non-Westerners harmoniously working together in the global body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. CPMs are reflexively influencing mission the Global North (Galanos 2018; Trousdale and Sunshine 2018), so this is not simply a “missionary” conversion but one in the field of World Christianity as well.

CPM may appear to be a total paradigm shift to Christendom ecclesiology and Southern Baptist polity (and hence the criticism from both), but it is actually a confluence and development of a number of pre-existing streams including Allen et al.’s indigeneity thesis, McGavran et al.’s social networks emphasis, and Winter et al.’s focus on the unreached and multiplication. CPM has been an innovation specifically for unreached or least-reached contexts, so it is not surprising to find them most commonly in those contexts today. But missiological analysis from those inside the movements themselves would greatly enhance the conversation. Minimal research on CPMs today from this intercultural perspective means that a CPM missiology is still evolving and maturing. The discourse now needs a “second pass” over the phenomenon from this intercultural perspective. We still have much to learn.

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1. The “people group” concept has gone through significant missiological revision recently, see Bartlotti (2020) and Datema (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Defined as a “full-time, professional career foreign missionary who is matched up with a single unevangelized population segment for purposes of concentrating on priorities of initial evangelization and eliminating gaps and inadvertent duplications with other agencies” (Garrison 1990, 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The IMB was also adept at creating three-letter acronyms (TLAs). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Historically, most missiological innovations have not been radical paradigm shifts of the Kuhnian type but small tweaks to existing models. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. According to David Garrison, “No one recalls who first coined the term ‘Church Planting Movements,’ though it appears to be a modification of Donald McGavran’s landmark ‘People Movements’ adapted to emphasize the distinctive of generating multiplying indigenous churches” (2011, 9). David Watson has also previously remarked that he participated in the 1996 focus group with Garrison where the term “Church Planting Movement” was coined (2014, 3), but the term actually originated in the USCWM in the 1980s. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. David Watson and others were made aware of the “person of peace” aspect of initiating CPMs through a message derived from Luke 10 delivered at a CSI annual meeting by pastor and missionary Thom Wolf in 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. There are other missiological conversations related to CPM, but space precludes an adequate treatment. Two are worth mentioning: World Christian Revitalization Movements Studies (see <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/revitalization>), and the house church movement (Lim 2016; Zdero 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Two other recent publications envision CPM missiology in a Western context: *From Megachurch to Multiplication* (Galanos 2018), and *The Kingdom Unleashed* (Trousdale and Sunshine 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In addition to the previously mentioned CPM resources written in narrative form by Asians and Africans (Kai and Kai 2018; John 2019; Johnson 2021), there are two recent outlines of CPM missiology written by Africans (Shalom and Larsen 2019; Kebreab 2021). These CPM missiologies are remarkably similar to those listed in Table 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)