[Movemental Ecclesiology: Recalibrating Church for the Next Frontier](https://abtslebanon.org/2021/04/15/movemental-ecclesiology-recalibrating-church-for-the-next-frontier/)

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There is no doubt that God has been teaching us all kinds of key lessons over the last year. The COVID-19 pandemic has been probably the most disruptive event for the Church since WWII and has compelled Christian leaders across the globe to re-evaluate their mindsets and their practices.

The long-held belief that the Church exists almost exclusively in its Sunday/weekend expression has been called into question, and as the so-called “queen” has been removed from the game, leaders have been forced to learn what the other chess pieces on the board can do. This in turn has forced us to reflect on the nature of the Church as a living, distributed, incarnational, network—the very essence and mark of all world-changing, transformative movements.

Furthermore, many contexts have experienced crisis stacked on top of *other crises*. The [exponential rate of decline of Christianity in America](https://missionbooks.org/blogs/news/a-looming-crisis-in-the-american-church) and [Lebanon’s year of meltdown](https://abtslebanon.org/2020/10/28/middle-east-conversations-2020-webinar-report-lebanons-year-of-meltdown-faith-refined/) serve as but two examples to demonstrate that the pace of change is increasing rapidly in today’s world.

For many church and ministry leaders, this has involved re-examining deeply ingrained habits and wills. It seems that God has taken charge in guiding us to both adopt and adapt to newer, more fluid expressions of *ecclesia*. To varying degrees, we can now see church communities operating more as a movement, such as responding to needs in society and also being less focused on church buildings. Pastors, in many cases, are doing a lot more than they were before the pandemic.

Perhaps it is only natural, but this transformation is happening *because of the crises* and not as a result of revisited theology. (Consider that much of the New Testament was also written in the context of crisis!) Furthermore, [God has quietly brought 1% of the world into his Kingdom through church planting movements in the past 25 years](http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/1-of-the-world-a-macroanalysis-of-1369-movements-to-christ), mostly among Hindus and Muslims. We have [much to learn](https://www.motusdei.network/) from these remarkable movements and their churches.

Considering our present crises and the prevalence of discipleship movements to learn from today, perhaps now is the time to revisit our theology of church.

To do this, we propose an imaginative exercise to reflect on a new and, we believe, biblically faithful expression of church. This contrast between “typical ecclesiology” and “movemental ecclesiology,” seen in the embedded picture, “*A Paradigm Shift in Church Mindset*,” may be better understood as a continuum and not an artificial dichotomy the way it is portrayed. [Hybridity is possible](https://amzn.to/393nsqt), and the two can creatively coexist like [two trains coming and going from the same station](https://2414now.net/2021/03/27/a-two-rail-model-for-existing-churches-to-reach-the-unreached-part-1/). But sometimes it is indeed helpful to learn through examining meaningful differences.



Typical ecclesiology is often the unreflected-upon legacy of Christendom. We do church according to our traditions in the way we assume it has always been done. By contrast, a movemental ecclesiology emerges from our understanding of Jesus who was *sent into* the world (Jn. 20:21). Christ is the head of church (Col. 1:18); his missional life of crossing boundaries serves as our source and exemplar. This rally to a wild Messiah for the sake of the other is not simply a first step, but rather a radical reorientation that permeates all we think, feel, and do.

A [pastor-centric ecclesiology](https://ephesiology.com/blog-post/the-dark-side-of-hierarchical-leadership/) typifies Protestant churches, usually resulting in a top-down authority structure. By contrast, a movemental ecclesiology believes that movements of disciples making disciples are initiated by [apostles, prophets, and evangelists](https://www.theforgottenways.org/what-is-apest.aspx), and then sustained by shepherds and teachers (Eph. 4:11). Furthermore, it should not be assumed that ministry is only performed by salaried ministers, but that every believer has a role to play in the life of the church who is equipped for ministry in the church and service in the world.

Typically, in evangelical Protestant churches across the globe, the “pulpit” is the focus of the church. As the bulk of the Sunday service centers around a monologue, this usually ensures that the preacher-teacher does most of the learning! In contrast, a movemental ecclesiology prioritizes Bible *learning* over Bible *teaching*. The nuance is subtle but profound. Bible learning expresses itself in diverse participatory process where the Scriptures are discussed, experienced, and obeyed in both Christian community and also in the world.

Reflecting some of the best thinking in organizational theory, churches today are typically designed around events and programs. Sunday school, youth group, community action projects, etc., all have the potential to be impactful. However, a movemental ecclesiology does not assume that discipleship is taking place in these events. Instead, an explicit disciple-making orientation lays a foundation and the criteria for all the church does.

Where do you “go to church?” Have you ever thought about that cliché and what it implies? It implies that church is centered around a building and a place for the sacred. Indeed, humans universally long for the aesthetic and are inclined to sacralized locations. And yet, God dwells not in special places but among his New Covenant people (2 Cor. 6:16). The Church can be understood as a network of household (in Greek, *oikos*) churches, especially considering that this mode of church emerged in the first three centuries in a hostile, non-Christian context and proved to be both multiplicative and transformational.

Typical churches tend to resist change (and only do if circumstances demand it). Of course, we have a great faith to preserve and pass on (2 Tim. 2:2). But sometimes it is necessary to break institutional tradition in order to accomplish kingdom vision. In this sense, movemental churches are led from the center, not from the top. This “organic” and flat structure empowers ordinary disciples to innovate according to the needs and opportunities of the context. For instance, if you cut off the head of a spider, the organism dies. But if you cut off a piece of a starfish, its decentralized nature produces a whole new starfish (see Alan’s new book, [The Starfish and the Spirit](https://amzn.to/393nsqt)).

Furthermore, issues of church economics, i.e., “[ecclesionomics](https://missionexus.org/ecclesionomics-part-3)” often shape unconscious financial disincentives for multiplication. The standard ecclesionomic model of large pastor-centric churches with full pews has been successful mostly among affluent people. However, this creates an expensive standard that is often impossible to replicate. Additionally, poorer contexts who do try to mimic this attractional church model (which requires a high financial overhead) usually must develop an unhealthy dependency on outside financial resources for survival.

Movemental churches may similarly be vulnerable, but for very different reasons. As each believer sacrificially serves in a dynamic disciple-making movement ethos within a microchurch network, the potential for church multiplication is increased. It usually is an enlightening exercise to discuss this question, *what would it look like to make disciples if you have a next-to-zero budget and no dedicated building to use*? The irony of this question is that this was the situation of the first-century church (not just something experienced by many churches today because of the pandemic). The Kingdom of God, like yeast, may start out small and seemingly insignificant. But we do *already* have the latent potential for engaging in risk and thriving in it – “*as the Father has sent me, so I send you…”*

We have covered a lot of ground in this post, and much is left unsaid. This post is intended to stir your apostolic imagination for ways to recalibrate Church back to the centrality and ethos of our Lord and Founder. Let us repent, reimagine, recalibrate, and renew. In a word, let us [ReJesus](https://amzn.to/3vCg3bw) ourselves and our thinking to his Church as a movement.

[The world is changing rapidly](https://www.ted.com/talks/mike_o_sullivan_the_end_of_globalization_and_the_beginning_of_something_new), and we are never going back to “normal.” But do we really want to? We were redeemed and designed for this challenge, and the world desperately needs the healing of Christ. So, let us rally to Jesus and his movement. Let us continue recalibrating Church for the next frontier.

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