

Indigenous *Movements*¹: How *Peoples* are Reached

by Robby Butler—disciple of Donald McGavran and Ralph Winter²

By 1975 McGavran and Winter had guided 1,000 experienced missionaries in studying—globally, and in their own fields: “How are *peoples* reached?” Answer: *indigenous movements*.

However few outside their direct influence saw either:

- the *biblical* model and mandate for *indigenous movements*, or
- the *historic* significance of *indigenous movements*.

Yet McGavran, Winter and their colleagues concluded:

We cannot say we have evangelized a person until that person can join an *indigenous movement* in their own society.³

Furthermore, this era of collaborative study revealed that:

- The Bible (Mt. 28, etc.) calls us to disciple peoples (*ethne*).
- Peoples are disciplined only through *indigenous movements*.
- *Indigenous movements* spread only within individual peoples.

The World Consultation on Frontier Missions (Edinburgh '80) birthed the watchword “A Church for Every People”

Then in 1981 McGavran critiqued this watchword, saying:⁴

- *Peoples* are only *reached* through *indigenous movements*.
- And 90% of church-planting efforts *hinder indigenous movements*.

In what follows I adapt McGavran’s outline with added biblical references⁵ and fresh insights from nearly 600 new movements.⁶

¹ In *movements*, disciples and *ekklesia* multiply faster than population growth. *indigenous movements* reflect local culture rather than the culture of the missionary.

² I worked as Ralph Winter’s personal assistant for eight years, then on his leadership team and institutional boards another eight. And when Dr. McGavran could no longer read, I had the privilege of reading to him and learning from interacting with him.

³ *The Analysis of a Movement* (written for GCOWE '95), reprinted in *Frontiers in Mission*—available with unrestricted reprint permission at library.wciu.edu/ebooks/Winter_Ralph/Frontiers_in_Mission.pdf

⁴ 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*. I have also produced [an annotated version of his original](#).

⁵ Acts details a series of indigenous movements—of God’s word in local culture (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-33).

⁶ A May, 2017 “think tank of mission practitioners” identified nearly 600 movements unfolding around the world today, most having started since the year 2000.

Introduction

What is the most fruitful way to “reach the unreached”?

- Shall we work toward just one or more *growing congregations*?
- Should we aim for a *minimal percentage* to become believers?
- Or shall we seek an *indigenous movement* of multiplying *ekklesia*?⁷

This goal of *indigenous 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 church grows around the missionaries, who urge 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 several *peoples* and *segments* of society—the elderly, youth, orphans, mission helpers and ardent seekers. The result is often a *foreign, conglomerate church*, alienated from the local peoples.⁸ Locals observe, “You are no longer part of us,” and they are right. This is a new social unit which, if it survives at all,⁹ becomes a new people group by the second generation.

Such *conglomerate* churches usually struggle and fold, but the Bible and recent experience reveal a more fruitful approach.¹⁰

⁷ 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* met mostly in pre-existing households or *oikos* (Greek), told stories of Jesus and multiplied rapidly. One definition of *ekklesia* adapted from George Patterson is “Followers of Jesus who gather in His name, often daily, to lovingly obey all His commands.” By this definition, those Jesus sent out two by two—as well as Paul and his teams—*modeled* *ekklesia* wherever they were sent.

⁸ See “[Extraction Groups vs. Community Groups](#)” at [DavidLWatson.org](#)

⁹ 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 such *extraction evangelism* to leave a sustainable new community when the missionary departs.

¹⁰ See *Planting Churches: Learning the Hard Way* in Jan/Feb 2009 *Mission Frontiers*

Extraction evangelism makes peoples *more resistant*.

Such *extraction evangelism* into *conglomerate congregations* actually *hinders indigenous movements*. How? Most unreached peoples place a high value on their *group identity*. Any group of individuals coming one by one from different peoples and segments of society looks to such peoples like an assembly of traitors who have left “us” to join “them.”

In marriage most such “high identity” peoples insist “our people marry only our people.” Yet when converts join conglomerate churches one-by-one they often feel forced to take a spouse from another group. This 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, saying: “You have abandoned us. You are no longer one of us.” *When this happens, we may win hundreds but lose millions.*

Conglomerate congregations grow slowly. Worse, they make the pursuit of *indigenous 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 1981¹¹ (emphasis mine):

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.

¹¹ *A Church in Every People: Plain Talk about a Difficult Subject*

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 indirectly in an *indigenous movement*. This can happen when believers break with a conglomerate church (and usually from the missionary’s influence) to “revert” (re-adopting their original identity) *in order to spread their new faith in a culturally relevant way*.

When this happens the faith *may* spread *very* rapidly. However in the process it may also lose its mooring in the Bible and become syncretism. Thus missionaries generally resist such “reversion” rather than working with such “renegades” toward grounding such *indigenous movements* in the Bible.

Movements: the KEY to Reaching the Unreached

Jesus’ disciples and Paul’s teams modeled multiplying ministry in which synagogues (existing communities) and households (*oikos*) were introduced to the gospel *together*. This engaged—rather than competing with—existing groupings, then spread to other groupings to enfold and transform whole people groups. Winter quipped, “the ‘church’ (i.e., the ‘committed community’) is already there, they just don’t know Jesus yet.”¹²

“[In Acts,] ‘the church that is in their house’ [was] ... where family ties and church worship went together, where church ... and family authority were often indistinguishable, where church discipline and family respect were one and the same thing, where ‘honor thy father and thy mother’ were ... spiritual accountability in the church. ... the synagogues of the New Testament period as well as the Gentile-run churches of the New Testament period mainly consisted of a cluster of extended families guided by the elders of those families.

“[In] traditional societies around the world [an indigenous] movement ... reinforces, not dismantles, natural families”

¹² Winter in “The Analysis of a Movement,” reprinted in *Frontiers in Mission*

Seven principles that lead toward movements:

1. Keep the *goal* clear

From the beginning the clear goal must be an *indigenous movement* of multiplying *ekklesia* through receptive *oikos*¹³ 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* seek to win and gather *individuals* with relative *strangers*.
- *Do* seek to win *whole oikos*, or help individuals win their *oikos*.

As Christ transforms existing *oikos*, they may become *ekklesia*:

- enjoying natural social cohesion,
- fulfilling the “one anothers,”
- experiencing God’s blessing, and
- modeling the good news for other households in their people.

In Luke 10 Jesus directs pairs of disciples to seek those who:

- welcome the message and messengers into their households, and
- gladly share what they learn with their family and community.¹⁴

Jesus told His disciples *not* to go “from house to house,” but to stay with the household that welcomed them. When the disciples left, this household could become an *ekklesia*.

When we join “God already at work” in this way, 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 an *indigenous movement* to reach that whole people.

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 whom God calls will become more beautiful Nairs, loving your Nair neighbors better than ever.”

¹³ Extended family networks and those dependent on them.

¹⁴ Movement practitioners often call these “Persons of Peace”—who welcome the messenger **and** the message, **and** introduce them to their community.

Train new believers to bear 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.

Build into new believers a consciousness of 1) God’s love for their whole people and its unique culture, and 2) God’s promise to bless all the clans of the earth—starting with theirs.

3. Encourage the movement to become *indigenous*

In *indigenous movements*, new believers remain one with their kinfolk in clothing, marriage, etc. They continue to eat with their people, and to eat what their people eat. If their people are vegetarian, new believers do not say, “Since I follow Jesus I can now eat meat.” Rather they become more faithfully vegetarian.

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 already ridicule their old gods. All Nairs can remain Nairs while abandoning idolatry to follow Jesus.

Indigenous movements empower the lost to join a worshipping community *of their own people* without embracing western theology, traditions, culture or individualism. For collectivistic societies this may mean an honor/shame gospel.¹⁵

4. Pursue *group decisions* regarding “distinctive” obedience¹⁶

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

¹⁵ See HonorShame.com

¹⁶ Missionaries often hinder *movements* in *collectivistic* societies by urging *individual* obedience to the scriptural, external marks of “Christian” identity—baptism and the Lord’s supper. Yet 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. And despite the scriptural mandate for circumcision, Paul wrote three times that this sign of identity is meaningless; concluding the “only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Rom 2:25–29; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6).

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

Train first believers to love and share with their *oikos* while seeking the Holy Spirit *as a group* about obediences that may lead their people to see them as joining a foreign religion.

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.”

The gospel must involve whole families early, and as much as possible, as with Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, etc. Ostracism is highly effective against an individual, but weak against a dozen. And against 200 it has practically no force.

5. Focus on *loving obedience*, not just *theological instruction*

Leaders often think, “If our people become theologically mature they will attract others to church.” Yet Jesus command was to “teach obedience” (Mt 28:20). When *obedience* to Jesus does not match or exceed our *understanding*, we are *spiritually* immature and become a poor witness. We must follow Jesus’ and Paul’s example: modeling the gospel alongside preaching, and immediately engaging new disciples in multiplying. Consider the Samaritan woman and the Gadarene demoniac.

“But,” some may say, “won’t swift engagement of new believers in 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. People *learn far more from teaching than from being taught*.¹⁷ Those who actively share their faith and see the gospel changing lives come to a richer and deeper experience of God’s grace much faster than those who simply listen to the best theological instruction.

¹⁷ See *The Overnight Student* by Dr. Michael Jones

Consider the brief months or even weeks of instruction Paul gave those *oikos* which were becoming *ekklesia*. We must *trust* the Holy Spirit, and believe *God* still calls, equips and sends people out of darkness into His wonderful light.¹⁸

For a movement to flourish, its leaders *and* new believers must actively train others to obey the Holy Spirit as *He* convicts *them* through discussing the Bible (ideally whole books). *How* the Holy Spirit leads may surprise *us*. Yet when new believers are taught swift obedience to what *they* see in scripture—and *teach themselves* by *teaching others* to obey—they mature and reproduce much more rapidly.

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 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—a pioneer to bring my people to the fullness of God’s blessing.

Successful *indigenous 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.¹⁹

7. Lead those on the church fringes to reach *their people*

Missionaries often look diligently *outside* the church for “persons of peace” through whom the gospel can spread. Yet wherever conglomerate, westernized churches have been established, such “persons of peace” may be “right under our noses,” on the fringes of the church—drawn toward God, yet still too connected to their community outside the church to fully fit “in.” These may be seeds for additional movements.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ See the 1-hr YouTube video [The Cross In China \(Chinese Revival Story\) - Part 1](#).

Rather than fighting to break these individuals free from their community to become part of a new “church family,” let us follow Paul’s example with the God-fearers in the synagogues of the Roman Empire. McGavran called these “bridges of God.” Let us equip and encourage them to start *indigenous movements* among their own *oikos* and people.

Conclusion

As we pursue God for *indigenous 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 starting an *indigenous 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.

According to McGavran, “The great advances of the Church on new ground ... have *always* come by people movements, never one-by-one.” This is the approach Jesus modeled in speaking to synagogues, Samaritan villages and crowds, and in sending His disciples to find households open to the gospel.

As Jesus called individuals to become full-time workers, most worked through their group identity to become *bridges* to whole families, communities, and towns where they brought the blessing of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Others, like Paul, were sent start *indigenous movements* in other cultures.

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

missions start out proclaiming Christ on a desert-like plain. There, life is hard; the number of Christians remains small. A large missionary presence is required. But, here and there, the missionaries or the converts find ways to break out of that arid plain and proceed up into the verdant mountains. There, large numbers of people live; there, great churches can be

founded; there, the Church grows strong; that is people movement land.

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

- Where only individuals are coming to faith, train them to start new *ekklesia* within their *oikos* rather than separating them from their family and friends into a “church” family centered around the missionary.
- And pray and work for *indigenous movements*, adapted to the local context and working within existing social structures to 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* on the fringes of existing churches, then *pursuing movements through these seekers* (rather than seeking to incorporate them into the church).
- Winter promoted the *complementary* idea of *sending* laborers to pursue *indigenous movements* in peoples where they don’t yet exist.
- Laborers today, in nearly 600 movements worldwide, are finding that movements spread fastest when (as in the New Testament) stories of Jesus are freely shared, without reliance on dedicated buildings, paid staff or weekly sermons.
- Once one *indigenous movement* is *established*, 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 for 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), by James Nyman: StubbornPerseverance.org/review-copy
- ***Hastening***: Book ONE in ***No Place Left***: A Saga of Destiny Fulfilled, by Steve Smith: NoPlaceLeft2025.org/review-copy

Glossary²⁰

Ekklesia: Followers of Jesus who gather in His name, often daily, to lovingly obey all He commands, as detailed in Acts 2.

Oikos: Household (or other high-trust network) which normally seeks consensus in major decisions.

Movement: Four or more generations of disciples/*ekklesia*, reproducing in each generation (for exponential growth, like compound interest).

Indigenous: utilizing local culture rather than the missionaries’.

People Group: *The largest relational network with a shared identity in which the gospel can spread as a church-planting movement.*²¹

Unreached: A people group with no *indigenous movement* and no residual *evidence of one* (i.e. a “Christian” identity and Bibles).

Alt.: A people in which Christ’s followers are perceived by their peers to have “traitorously left their own people to join another people.”²²

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

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

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

Engaged: An unreached group with 1) a *resident* team, 2) working *long-term*, 3) in the *local language*, for 4) an *indigenous movement*.

Fully Engaged: An engaged people with at least one such *team* for *every 100,000* in population.

Church-Planting Movement (CPM) Continuum (abbreviated):

0. **Purposeful:** Aiming for *multiplying* believers & *ekklesia*.
1. **Focused:** Multiple G1 believers/*ekklesia* and *some* 2nd gen (G2) (i.e. some new believers/*ekklesia* have won/started others).
2. **Breakthrough:** *Multiple* G2 believers/*ekklesia* and *some* G3.
3. **Emerging CPM:** *Multiple* G3 believers/*ekklesia* and *some* G4.
4. **Full CPM:** *Multiple* G4 believers/*ekklesia* with consistent growth (*each* generation reproducing new believers/*ekklesia*)
5. **Sustained CPM:** indigenous leaders guide hundreds or thousands of *ekklesia*, with little/no need for outsiders.
6. **Multiplying CPM:** catalyzing CPMs in other people groups

²⁰ My attempt to simply and clarify these concepts.

²¹ Adapted from the 1982 Lausanne-sponsored gathering of missiologists, convened to embrace McGavran and Winter’s insights by redefining *people groups* and *unreached peoples* in terms of *movements* (rather than percent Christian): That consensus was not embraced in all circles—especially among researchers, who still rely heavily on the more readily available data (percent Christian).

²² McGavran in “A Giant Step in Christian Mission” (Jan 1985 *Mission Frontiers*)

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 and 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 guides him in gaining and distilling further insights such as those in this and other booklets.

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

In 2004 Robby founded **Mission Network**, a service agency to provide Christ's body with proven insights and link like-minded others for greater effectiveness in advancing God's Kingdom. In this context his primary focus is discovering, distilling and distributing new insights God is giving His body to accelerate completing 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. RobbyQButler@gmail.com or 360 420-5634.

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).

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