

Movements: God's W



Way of Reaching Entire Peoples



Patterns in Long-Lasting Movements

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Rebecca Lewis has spent 40 years with her husband and family working to see the gift of God's blessing for families reach the most overlooked peoples on earth.

As I write, millions of acres are burning in Australia. Most attribute the fires to winds and climate change, but authorities have arrested over 180 people for starting the fires, 27 deliberately.¹

Movements in history are similar. While they are propelled by the wind of the Holy Spirit, **God uses people to start them and plans to spread them.** To see what long lasting movements have in common, I have begun studying over a dozen movements in history *that lasted over 100 years and impacted hundreds of thousands of people.* Here is what I have found so far.

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Five patterns in Lasting Movements:

- 1) They were started by a person called by God and compelled by the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Each individual continually sought God for a specific unfolding plan to spread the vision widely.
- 3) The plans resulted in highly committed groups with the same vision that were small and self-replicating.
- 4) The groups engaged in transforming both the individuals and their broader community.
- 5) Institutionalizing or aligning with powers seemed to slow or stop movements.

No people group or nation has become identified with Christ without a movement taking place among them at some point, with the gospel spreading faster than the growth of the population. But these movements don't just happen.

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A Person with a Plan

Paul set out with his companions to tell the diaspora synagogues of the Greek world about the Messiah Jesus. But, under the compulsion of the Holy Spirit, Paul realized God was calling him uniquely to spread the gospel in the Gentile world, leaving behind

communities of faith with designated elders.² When movements to Christ had been started in one region, he moved on to the next, leaving teammates behind to finish the work of establishing committed communities.

Successful movements have been mostly started by *individuals called by God and then directed by the Holy Spirit to slowly develop an organized plan.* These individuals were either already a part of the people group or they learned the language and culture very well and were quickly joined by native coworkers. Their unfolding plans included a concern to establish apostolic teams or small groups with the same calling over a large geographic area, always pushing into areas with no witness. The founding individuals continued in their calling for the rest of their lives, sometimes supported by spouses, but often single or not supported by their spouses. The role of Bible study should not be discounted; however, it was not personally available in most of these movements as it is in modern movements.

1 <https://www.news.com/stories/dozens-arrested-in-australia-for-deliberately-setting-fires/>

2 Allen, Roland, *A Roland Allen Reader*, The Compulsion of the Spirit, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983.

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up small-group accountability bands and classes based on James 5:16. (“Confess your sins one to another and pray for one another, that you might be healed.”) He rode thousands of miles to establish groups all over England.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit used analysis and demographics to convict and compel. In 1792, William Carey sparked the entire Protestant mission era not just with vision, but with statistics and a call to use “means” (organized endeavors) to send the gospel to completely unreached nations, which began the era of the Protestant mission agencies.³ After others’ abortive attempts to reach the Chinese, Hudson Taylor was compelled by the Holy Spirit to take up the challenge (1849). Concerned with China’s vast inland areas with no witnesses, he made sure that there were at least two witnesses in every province in China, eating, dressing and speaking like them, 800 workers in 300 stations, starting schools and Bible studies.

In these long-lasting movements, the founder sought the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit for a self-sustaining plan that emphasized small, active groups and geographic coverage. *Many people, though filled with the Holy Spirit, have not started lasting movements.* For example, evangelist George Whitefield, contemporary of Wesley, had no plan and famously lamented that the thousands he had won to the Lord were like “a rope of sand.”

In the 5th century, St Patrick was called to Ireland, not only to win the Irish to faith but to instigate the extensive Celtic missionary movement, which sent bands of disciples to set up monastic evangelistic outposts throughout central Europe, bringing many people groups to Christ. Likewise, in the 13th century, St Francis was compelled by an encounter with the Holy Spirit to follow the example of Luke 10, where Jesus sent his followers out from town to town to places he planned to come later. The Franciscan movement resulted in three lasting monastic traditions (male, female and married) and evangelized hundreds of thousands in both Europe and around the world. After an encounter with the Holy Spirit in the 18th century, having previously failed as a missionary, John Wesley started the lasting “evangelical awakening” movement, by setting

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Committed Small Groups Changing Society

Lasting movements seem to have invariably had small committed communities with a sense of unified destiny to spread their transformational message to other communities. Large gatherings, like Jesus and the thousands, or Pentecost, were not the backbones of the movements, and in most cases special buildings were not erected or important to the movements.

From the beginning, movements to Christ spread most rapidly when they were person-to-person, almost “underground,” bringing hope in a way often perceived as subversive to the powers that be, as can be seen in Jewish or Roman society. The early Christian movement became quickly known for rescuing children from infanticide, healing and caring for sick and widows, taking in plague victims, and other remarkable counter-cultural endeavors, outlined by Rodney Stark in the *Rise of Christianity*.

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Conversely, *while being organized into small groups seems beneficial, being institutionalized seems to counter the effectiveness of movements.* As Ralph Winter wrote: **“Every single denomination in this country that has evolved a required formal, extensive graduate professional training for ordination is now going downhill. There are no exceptions in the whole world.”**⁴

Movements to Christ have been hurt when they have become, or seemed to be, aligned with political, economic, or ecclesiastical powers, especially foreign powers. Faith in Christ spread in all directions for the first 300 years, before becoming overly aligned with the Roman Empire during the 4th century, when the enemies of Rome, like Persia, massacred thousands of Christians. State-sponsored councils resulted in anathemas placed on leaders of other movements to Christ and in the first military attacks on outlying Christian communities, like the Donatists. The spread of the gospel by military might met with resistance and was largely superficial and ineffective.

4 Ralph D. Winter, “The Largest Stumbling Block to Leadership Development in the Global Church,” in *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*, 4th ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2008), 64.

While dedicated believers in Roman “Christian” society began to hunker down in monasteries, the Celtic missionaries from powerless Ireland became the most successful starters of movements to Christ in Europe for the next 200 years. Patrick’s Celtic movement stood against the constant violence in Irish, Scottish, Gothic and Roman cultures, and some famous Celtic leaders set off as missionaries as penance for violence.

Later missionaries were often more successful in sparking movements to Christ when they challenged instead of aligned with colonial powers—maintaining their commitment to be ambassadors for Christ alone. Their compassion for their people group included fighting against things destroying their families, whether from without or from within. Hudson Taylor’s missionaries sided with the Chinese against Britain in the century-long fight to free China from opium-pushing British merchants, earning undying gratitude from the Chinese.

Those coming to Christ, now members of a heavenly kingdom, supported one another in their deliverance from sin as well as banding together to stand against earthly injustice. For example, the Wesleyan groups fought generation after generation against slavery and also against alcohol, which was destroying the poor in England and America. Greedy economic interests of global companies still deal ruthlessly with unreached people groups, enslaving them as laborers or customers for the alcohol, tobacco and other drug industries—addiction forcing the sale of their children into the sex-trafficking industry.⁵

Even a long-lasting secular movement bears out these patterns. Karl Marx had a vision for changing the “League of Justice,” a semi-Christian utopian socialist group in Europe (1830s). The group’s stated goal was “the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, based on the ideals of love of one’s neighbor, equality and justice” and their motto was “All men are brothers.”⁶ Marx and Engel joined this “Justice League” and changed the name to “The Communist League” with the new motto “Workers of the world unite!” They turned a dying organization into a lasting global movement, by issuing *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and by copying the card-carrying accountability cell groups structure of Wesley’s movement. The Communist cell groups focused on indoctrinating and developing members into

5 For the full story on this, see the PDFs of the recent *Mission Frontiers* issue (Sept/October 2019): Making a Killing: The Global Death Industries and Missionary Response.

6 Volkov, G.N., et al., *The Basics of Marxist-Leninist Theory*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979.

committed revolutionary “comrades.” The small groups “are Communism’s cutting edge...a Communist may belong to many cells...Wherever you have three or more Communists, there you have a Communist cell. They are expected to work together in an organized way in the interests of Communism,...a body of activists with well-defined aims, a single mind and purpose.”⁷ Even though the Communist movement is a false hope, destroying the lives of many, *it has tapped into people’s desire to be part of a committed community and a movement of hope to make their world a better place.*

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We should not fear, but welcome, committed groups of Christ followers bringing their force to bear against whatever is destroying their families. This activism shines the light of God’s love in their communities, even when they cannot publicly share their faith due to persecution. Movements to Christ throughout history have been moved by the Holy Spirit to pull their people groups out of everything from violence, slavery, and idolatry, to infanticide, cannibalism, promiscuity and addiction. Why let the Communists, socialists, or fascists try to claim the high ground of social transformation, with skewed priorities, when *historical movements to Christ have been exceedingly more successful in bringing peace, health, and brotherly love to communities?*

As we seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance in sparking lasting movements to Christ, it is important to recognize the importance of Bible-centered, transformative small groups, where believers learn to listen to and be led by the Holy Spirit. In addition, it is important for them to understand they are part of a spreading movement of hope, rescuing their people group, and even the whole world, from Satanic forces and false hopes. 

⁷ Hyde, Douglas, *Dedication and Leadership: Learning from the Communists*, U. of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1966, pages 143-146.

