

Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities

by Rebecca Lewis

Editor's Note: In April 2007, the IJFM sponsored a face-to-face discussion on "insider movements," involving over twenty participants, most of whom have personal acquaintance with these movements. Following that meeting, Rebecca Lewis, with input from the others, formulated the following definition and distinctives of "insider movements" in an attempt to clarify the discussion.

Toward Defining Insider Movements

An "insider movement" is any movement¹ to faith in Christ where a) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks, and where b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socioreligious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.

Two Distinctives

1) Pre-existing families and social groupings develop into fellowships of believers as they become followers of Christ; so the pre-existing community becomes the church, rather than a new social group being created or "planted" as a church.

Current church-planting methodology has inadvertently tended to promote a modern Western paradigm of church formation based on Western individualism. This model, which consists of gathering together individual believers (often former strangers) into new "communities" of faith, results in what can be called "aggregate churches."

While the aggregate-church model works well in highly individualistic Western cultures (e.g., the US), most of world, including most of the remaining unreached peoples, live in cultures that have strong family and community structures. In such societies, the process of forming aggregate churches tends to extract believers from their families and pre-existing networks of relationships, significantly harming these relationships. The new aggregate church of extracted believers is rarely able to either provide the community support thereby lost or to continue to spread the gospel through its members' families, who now perceive the "church" as having "stolen" their relative or friend.

Meanwhile, the New Testament also affirms an alternative church model, the *oikos* or household-based church, where families and their pre-existing relational networks *become* the church as the gospel spreads in their midst. The God-given family and clan structures are thereby supported and transformed from unbelieving communities into largely believing communities. Decisions to follow Christ are often more communal rather than individual (see NT examples in Acts: Cornelius, Lydia, Crispus, etc.) The destruction of the families and the creation of

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semi-functional, extracted, new communities of believers-only is thereby avoided, and the gospel continues to flow along preserved relational pathways. The movement to Christ has thus remained inside the fabric of the society and community.

In “insider movements,” therefore, there is no attempt to form neo-communities of “believers-only” that compete with the family network (no matter how contextualized); instead, “insider movements” consist of believers remaining in and transforming their own pre-existing family networks, minimally disrupting their families and communities. These believing families and their relational networks *are* valid local expressions of the Body of Christ, fulfilling all the “one another” care seen in the book of Acts, and so they do not need to adopt the meeting and program structures common in Western aggregate churches.

2) The believing families in insider movements remain inside their socioreligious communities by retaining their given birth identity while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.

The new spiritual identity of believing families in insider movements is in being followers of Jesus Christ and members of His global kingdom, not necessarily in being affiliated with or accepted by the institutional forms of Christianity that are associated with traditionally Christian cultures. They retain their temporal identity in their natural socioreligious community, while living transformed lives due to their faith in Christ.

As Jews, the Apostles initially thought that conversion to the Jewish religion, including physical circumcision, was required to follow Jesus. Learning otherwise was a paradigm shift. Through a vision, Peter was the first to understand that they were no longer to call the Gentiles unclean. All of the Apostles later came to a unity of understanding that it was not necessary for Gentiles to convert to the Jewish religion. Further, it was preferable that they not convert, but remain as they were when God called them (I Cor. 7: 17-24). Jesus Himself had previously affirmed to the Samaritan woman, and later to her whole town, that true faith is not limited to Jewish religious forms, but consists in worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

Followers of Jesus were first called Christians (meaning, of the Anointed One or Messiah) in Antioch (Acts 11:26) in the first century when Gentiles were coming to Christ. However, Christianity—as a variety of traditional practices, religious systems and institutions—developed over the centuries that followed. The colonial power of Roman Catholic and Protestant “Christian” nations gave political and ethnic meanings to the words “Christian” and “Christianity” globally, making the terms increasingly unacceptable to some major blocs of unreached people groups around the world.

Just as the Apostles freed the Gentiles from any perceived need to convert to the Jewish religion, today we should likewise free people groups from the

counter-productive burden of socioreligious conversion and the constraints of affiliation with the term “Christianity” and with various religious institutions and traditions of Christendom. We must once more affirm with Paul and the Apostles that the obedience of faith in God through Christ alone is sufficient for salvation and that His Word, His Spirit, and the fellowship of the saints is sufficient for spiritual growth. **IJFM**

Endnote

¹ “Movement”: Any situation where the Kingdom of God is growing rapidly without dependence on direct outside involvement. Please note that Garrison (2004) has defined “church planting movements,” as opposed to “insider movements”, in the following manner: “Church Planting Movements, though opting for indigenous house church models rather than traditional church structures, nevertheless make a clean break with their former religion and redefine themselves with a distinctly Christian identity. The resulting movement is indigenously led and locally contextualized.” (Garrison 2004, “Church Planting Movements vs. Insider Movements, p.154, *IJFM* 21:4). So the main differences between “insider movements” and “church planting movements” lie in the nature of the “house churches” (pre-existing social networks turning to Christ rather than artificial aggregate groupings) and the social identity of those involved (retained versus changed). In both movements the churches are not institutionalized, and the people in both movements share a new spiritual identity as members of the Kingdom of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. In the case of “insider movements”, however, this new spiritual identity is not confused or eclipsed by a new social identity.

A Note about the C-scale, by Rebecca Lewis

In 1998, John Travis proposed a scale, C1-C6, six types of “Christ-centered Communities,” found in Muslim contexts. Since then, many have interpreted the “C” to stand for contextualization—which was not the original intent—because these fellowships were compared to Western churches and how much they retained Islamic identity, forms and practices as opposed to Western Christian identity and forms. In my view, “insider movements” are distinct from the C-scale in that, regardless of how Western or non-Western their forms, all that matters is that no *new* communities (no “aggregate churches”) are formed to extract believers from their pre-existing families and networks, so that they naturally retain their former identity. As such, “insider movements” can take place within any socioreligious context, Western or not (such as Russian Orthodox, Mormon, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Chinese Communist, etc.), as long as believers remain inside their families, networks and communities, retaining the socioreligious identity of that group. So, while their new spiritual identity is in following Jesus Christ, and they gladly identify themselves with Him, they remain in their birth family and community and retain the temporal identity of their familial socioreligious context. A C5 church might or might not have developed along the lines of natural social networks, and it might or might not be part of a movement and is therefore distinct from “insider movements.” “Messianic synagogues,” for example, though highly contextualized in forms to religious Judaism, are not an “insider movement” because they are neither flowing through Jewish family networks nor have they succeeded in retaining an acceptably Jewish identity among Jews. Messianic mosques and messianic ashrams often suffer the same fate, following an aggregate model of fellowship formation instead of letting the gospel flow through pre-existing natural communities.