

# **In Search of a Definition of Disciple-Making Movements**

## **Movements**

“A movement is happening,” declares the subject line in a recent email. It doesn’t take but a few active brain cells to see the prolific use of this term, movement. Somewhere along the line the word ‘movement’ has become the essential label for anything in the Christian world that represents itself as significant.

This back drop is critical because this article will attempt to define Disciple Making Movements (DMM). Not an enviable task since the cat is out of the bag. Unlike a political story that operatives can “get out in front of” to control the narrative, this narrative has been controlled by any and everyone who has decided to use the term.

If I had the chops of a Malcolm Gladwell or Steven Levitt, I would have a logical and historical explanation of the liberal use of the word movement among Christian leaders. But I won’t even feign an attempt to join their ranks.

I will suggest that there has always been a revivalist spirit among Great Commission minded people. A longing for a Biblical experience that is “Acts” like-thousands added daily. Mix that with the writings of David Garrison about Church Planting Movements (CPM) in the late 90’s and you get fertile soil that sprouts the liberal and indiscriminate use of the term movement.

## **Church Planting Movements**

This journey to a definition of disciple making movements must necessarily take us through Garrison’s work with his fellow IMB cross cultural workers. They were describing what they were experiencing because of their attempt to push Jesus’ message into difficult and dangerous places.

Garrison, who has a Ph. D from the University of Chicago, penned the results of these discussions. They defined a Church Planting Movement as rapidly multiplying indigenous churches, planting churches that sweep across a people group or population segment.

It is important to remember that they weren’t promoting a new strategy simply describing what they were seeing. The good news of Jesus was moving rapidly across a people group in such a way that indigenous churches were planting indigenous churches in their ethnic environment.

We shouldn’t lose sight of the obvious fact that what they are describing is the tip of the iceberg. To get churches planting churches in population segments that were either closed or highly resistant to the good news of Jesus, you first had to have people pledging their allegiance to Jesus and living out his commands.

As Garrison pointed out in Church Planting Movements (2004), this wasn’t happening one place, it was happening in many places with stunning numerical results. Through

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the vision of Keith Parks and the countless soldiers like Donald McGavran and George Patterson who had gone before them, they stumbled on to a strategy that would set the good news of Jesus free from current constraints and allow this powerful truth to move rapidly through ethnic groups.

The results that Garrison and his tribe were claiming raised suspicion with many. They were certainly “Acts” like results that many Great Commission minded people longed for but had not yet seen. As these numbers grew in credibility due to numerous sources surveying the different movements, so to did the adoption of methodologies that contributed to the viral spread of the good news of Jesus.

### **Disciple Making Movements**

Oliver Wendell Holmes said,

“For the simplicity that lies this side of complexity, I would not give a fig, but for the simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity, I would give my life.”

Not to create complexity but in an effort to get to the simplicity that lays on other side of complexity, a twist in this story has to be explored. This is where the term Church Planting Movements gives birth to the term Disciple Making Movements (DMM).

David Watson was one of those with Garrison in the development of the term Church Planting Movements. David was at this point in the story is with Cityteam Int'l (now known as New Generations) and played a key role in training many indigenous leaders in a particular strategy that came out of the Bhojpuri movement in northern India.

That strategy used a method of reading the Bible to discover what God was saying and built an obedience based culture in these groups. People were asked to commit to a particular action in the coming days that would be an act of obedience to God speaking to them through the portion of the Bible read in the group. They were also encouraged to share with their relatives and close friends what they were learning in their Bible reading group.

New Generations (previously Cityteam Int'l) amassed an impressive group of indigenous organizations worldwide but especially across sub-Saharan Africa that were trained in this new way to reach previously unreached populations. Again, the results reported after a few years of application of this methodology were “Acts” like. Hundreds of thousands of previously unreached populations were becoming disciples (people growing in obedience to all of Jesus’ command) who quickly shared their allegiance to Jesus so that disciples were making disciples.

While achieving impressive Great Commission results the New Generations tribe grew weary of those who “co-opted” the label, Church Planting Movements making it mean anything they wanted. This perceived abuse of the label coupled with the growing popularity in the west of this new approach to seeing people disciplined to allegiance in Jesus gave birth to a new way to describe what was taking place.

The term disciple making movements described for them, what was taking place. While Garrison was describing the result, planting churches, the New Generations tribe preferred to describe the process, disciple making. It is not clear who first said, “When you make disciples,

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you always get churches but when you plant churches you don't always get disciples'" but this phrase brings clarity to the two terms, start with making disciples and you get churches.

The New Generations tribe was attempting to label their particular strategy that resulted in a Church Planting Movement. Through a simple process of asking not yet followers of Jesus to read the Bible, figure out how they could obey what they were reading and share with their social network, they were discipling people into a life of allegiance in Jesus.

There were other strategies, some with labels like T4T popularized by Ying Kai and Steve Smith and G12 led by César Castellanos and others without labels that had led to Church Planting Movements. The New Generation team attempted to use the label Disciple Making Movements for their strategy of discovery focused, obedience based multiplicative disciple making.

In summary, Church Planting Movements are the effect while disciple making movements are the cause that leads to CPM. The necessity of this discussion reside in the fact that these two terms began to and still to this day vie for the label applied to any movement of the gospel no matter the extent of it. Because few know this history, the terms Church Planting or Disciple Making "movement" are often applied to anything that looks exciting, out of the ordinary and portends significant numbers.

Enough of a history lesson, on to the promise, a definition of Disciple Making Movements.

### Towards a definition of Disciple Making Movements

What constitutes a Disciple Making Movement. Various definitions already exist:

- when a disciple making process expands to 4 generations consisting of 100 groups over a short period of time
- when a disciple making process spreads to 4 different streams with each moving to four generations resulting in at least 100 groups

There is no definitive, authoritative measure that will allow an "inerrant" definition. But can we come to an agreement in the our tribe ([discipleship.org](http://discipleship.org)) about the use of the term?

Let's first unchain disciple making from discipleship. By Jesus' practice making disciples starts with lost people and ends with Biblically functioning communities. The traditional use of the term "discipleship" is synonymous with growing Christians. Not that the already convinced don't need to mature in Christ but let's reflect Jesus' strategy not confine it. When we have the integrity to start counting generations as the good news breaks into lostness we reflect the character of Jesus' ministry.

A simple way of discovering if we are on the way to movement is found in Harry Brown's, (leader of the New Generations team) description of movement thinking; three dimensions, wide, deep and long. Acts-like Movements possess a width in terms of numbers, depth in terms of quality and length in terms of sustainability.

These dimensions are vital to any definition of a DMM because inherent in these dimensions are multiplication. For the good news of Jesus to go wide, deep and long there has to be multiplication of disciple makers at its core. We might think of it this way,

- to sustain the width of large numbers,
- disciples have to be able to replicate disciples with a quality

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- that allows a 3rd generation of disciples to do what happen in the first generation
- out of sight of the first generation.

Or can your disciples' disciples make disciples without you present?

Thinking generationally challenges our methodologies. Our methods must be simple and repeatable so they they instill a multiplication DNA as a primal instinct in new disciples. Any definition of a Disciple Making Movement must include multiplication at ever level.

### Finally, the bottom line!

The definition of a Disciple Making Movements can be seen from two different vantage points. Using a modified understanding of the language in the Four Disciplines of Execution, we might think in terms of lead measures, what causes movement and lag measures, how do I know if I have one.

Our lead measure might focus on Brown's 3 dimensions turned into questions.

- Is there abundant fruit? - **Is the good news of Jesus giving birth to new disciples?**
- Does the fruit bear more fruit? - **Are these disciples producing more disciples?**
- Does the fruit last? - **Is there generational growth without the original catalyst?**

This set of questions allows us to test our methods and see if we have the makings of a movement and to adjust our methods accordingly.

As much as we resist bringing metrics into ministry, it is instructive to think in terms of multiple generations as Paul encouraged Timothy (II Timothy 2:2). Practitioners will report that once you reach four generations you know that you have multiplication DNA embedded in every generation because replication can take place without it being dependent on a personality.

It is also important to think in terms of multiple streams as well. The idea of multiple streams of disciple makers demonstrates the exponential character of disciple making. Simple repeatable methodology that multiplies in different streams, magnifies the power of the Spirit through the Word of God and reduces the probability of results caused human effort alone.

### Disciple Making Movements Defined

Ultimately a Disciple Making Movement is

- any gospel activity
- that has abundant fruit among the lost,
- that multiplies these disciples (people growing in obedience to all of Jesus' commands)
- who in turn multiply themselves in others
- so that we can see at least 4 generations regularly produced
- the regularly multiply into local expression of church (ecclesia)
- producing at least 100 new churches
- and these streams continue to multiply.