God's Expanding Family: The Social Architecture of Ekklēsia Movements by Dr. Trevor Larsen

The number of movements78 to Christ around the world has multiplied dramatically since 2006. As these young movements increase in size and maturity, they face the challenge of developing into "ekklēsia movements." I use the word ekklēsia (Greek for "church") to signify linked believer communities which follow patterns similar to those described in the New Testament period, not necessarily the patterns of conventional churches in the modern era.79 Culturally fitted to their contexts, movements consist of disciples making disciples while linking them into communities of God's expanding family. This article focuses on Movements among Unreached People Groups (UPGs), which must survive and thrive in adverse conditions.80

In this chapter, I will explore patterns of thriving ekklēsia movements consistent with those of New Testament movements. I will first investigate selected biblical patterns of ekklēsia movements during the New Testament era, then describe how some current movements among UPGs express those patterns. New Testament developmental phases of ekklēsia, such as the pre- Pentecost embryonic phase, and also birth, childhood, young adult, and adult phases, offer rich lenses of reflection diachronically. As I hope to show, the phase-by-phase development of ekklēsia from embryo to adulthood is a critical issue in the current global reality of emerging movements today.

Hermeneutical Lenses for New Testament Ekklēsia Movements

To study ekklēsia movements, we must address these questions: 1) What passages of the New Testament describe ekklēsia movements? 2) What are the contexts and developmental stages of ekklēsia in those passages? 3) What authority does biblical description have for development of ekklēsia movements today? To answer these questions, I will draw on three hermeneutical lenses.

The first lens for understanding ekklēsia in its embryonic phase is the "Jesus Band," described in narrative passages of the Gospels and in Jesus' teachings. Jesus' prototype believer community began with attachment to Jesus: "follow me." Those who were attached to Jesus joined others who had responded to his call. Second, Jesus' prototype of believer community was missional. Jesus demonstrated before his disciples a model of missional believer community initiated by the Jesus Band, in which missional pairs identified receptive households and attached to them to renew them as households of faith. This social pattern brought the gospel to receptive families and then villages. Third, Jesus redefined ekklēsia as the family of God (Matt 12:20). Renewed households which linked to each other as a redefined family were the social structure containing the fruit of gospel proclamation. Jesus trained his disciples to become brothers and sisters, known by their love and servanthood, and by giving honor rather than seeking it. Jesus redefined patrons and leaders as servants who nurtured the family of God. Fourth, Jesus taught about ekklēsia as representing the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus gave people with faith in Christ the authority of God's kingdom to overturn the kingdom of darkness and release mankind from its bonds (Matt 16:18–20). When people assemble in threes to pray for the renewal of a brother (Matt 18:15–20), Christ the King is in their midst. Fifth, Jesus described ekklēsia as a work under development, both as a building being built by him and as plants growing through their attachment to him. These were the fundamental characteristics of the Jesus Band, the prototype believer community.

The second lens for understanding the birth and development of ekklēsia in different cultural contexts is the Disciples' Communities of the Spirit as described in the narrative passages of Acts. The Holy Spirit plays the central role in forming ekklēsia in Acts, empowering apostolic agents to catalyze gospel expansion and renew social structures that support movements. The Spirit-formed fruit of the gospel is ekklēsia. God increases ekklēsia's geographic and ethnic diversity, as the Disciples' Communities advanced by phases from the Jerusalem Community (Acts 1–7) to Bridging Communities (Acts 8–12) to Gentile Region Communities (Acts 13–28). Repeating patterns in each phase and context reveal ekklēsia as an expanding system adjusting to each new context. The Apostolic agents linked diverse regional churches together into a mosaic.

The third lens for understanding ekklēsia is Social Dynamics in Movements, as found in portions of the epistles. These are rich in the social dimensions of the gospel, revealing not only the community's values and behaviors, but relational connections that framed ekklēsia.

A principle coloring all three of these hermeneutical lenses is "pattern imitation," one example of which is "follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). In eleven passages, Paul encourages multiple churches and mission team members in pattern imitation. This is critical to the expansion of ekklēsia movements, for teaching alone would not have kept up with the pace of growth.81 A hermeneutic of pattern imitation highlights selected aspects of the social structure of ekklēsia movements described in biblical narrative and the non-didactic portions of epistles that are rich in social dynamics. In this article, I will not highlight a fourth lens for understanding embryonic ekklēsia, epistolary teachings on ekklēsia.

Five Ekklēsia Movements in the New Testament

An overview of five movements in the New Testament reveals that the preaching of the gospel by apostolic agents produced at least five expanding ekklēsia movements. As movements expanded in geographic breadth, numbers of believer communities, and ethnic diversity, mobile apostles linked them into a family-like mosaic.

First, the Jerusalem movement multiplied to three thousand in one year, then to five thousand men (this many heads of households in Acts 4:4 indicates about twenty thousand believers) in just three years. By Acts 21:20, Jerusalem Jewish believers numbered "many thousands" who were "ardent observers of the Law". This amount of gospel fruit in Jerusalem was surprisingly large, considering that there had been a mass exodus of believers from Jerusalem due to persecution (Acts 8:1).

A second linked movement began seven years after the Jerusalem movement, through the witness and disciple making of Greek-speaking Jews who had been driven from their homes after Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 11:19–21). This second movement expanded from Jerusalem to Jews in Judea, Samaria, Cypress, Phoenicia, Cyrene and Antioch. Certain Jewish believers from Cypress and Cyrene bridged across culture to win many Gentiles in Antioch. Greek believers in Antioch signaled that ekklēsia was becoming something beyond a renewal movement within Judaism. When the Jerusalem church heard the report, they gave the believer community in Antioch special attention by devoting Barnabas to its maturation for a full year, who invited Paul to help. Antioch became a mission center from which this second movement expanded to other areas. Mission teams came to and went from Antioch on seven different occasions. Though we are not told the number of believers in this second movement, we are told of many unnamed believers spreading the gospel, resulting in a significant increase in breadth and ethnicity. Greek-speaking bicultural Jews played a key role in this missional expansion.

A third linked movement multiplied in the region of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Syrian Antioch. We are not told the number of believers, but Acts 14:21 tells us there were many disciples in the city of Syrian Antioch. Acts 14:23 reports that within one year of the preaching of the gospel, a team of elders was appointed over each of many new churches, indicating a fast rate of multiplication and maturation. This ekklēsia movement started with Jews in the region but soon grew strong among Gentiles.

A fourth linked movement took place in the province of Macedonia, with churches first established in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Three years later, Paul praised the new believers in Thessalonica for their influence throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia and beyond (1 Thess 1:7–8), indicating that new believers had spread this movement widely. Paul praised this movement for their transformed lives which were a strong witness (1 Thess 1:3–4; 9-10; 3:2–5), and for imitating the movement in Judea in enduring suffering for the gospel (1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1:3–4).

A fifth linked movement occurred in the province of Asia Minor, centered in Ephesus. After the Jews rejected Paul's attempts to reach them, Paul spent two years intensively discipling a small number of disciples in a privately owned rental hall. These Ephesian disciples proclaimed the gospel widely during this time, "so that all who lived in the province of Asia, both Jews and Gentiles, heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:9–10). Based on the large value of the magic books burned in Ephesus during a renewal (Acts 19:19–20),82 we estimate over ten thousand believers near Ephesus alone, after two years. Ekklēsia was established in ten cities in the province of Asia Minor.

The Nature of Ekklēsia: Spiritual Family

In the book of Acts, ekklēsia is created by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is central in empowering apostolic agents and through them birthing ekklēsia movements. The Spirit empowers witnesses (Acts 1:8; 4:31) and uses miraculous signs to convince unbelievers (2:4ff). When the gift of the Spirit comes upon new believers (2:38), they are added to believer community and actively participate in ekklēsia's practices (2:38–47). The Spirit guards the purity of ekklēsia (5:3,9), empowers those to be selected as leaders (6:3), and guides apostolic agents to open the next area (8:29). The Spirit generates ekklēsia, fills it with power, and miraculously transforms it. Epistolary passages collaborate this theme; the Spirit distributes capacities to its members to build it, while unifying it (1 Cor 12). The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:16).

This community of the Spirit is also a social community, built on the primary social unit of renewed families. In the Gospels and Acts, the Spirit forms ekklēsia to fellowship with God and each other, as a distinctive mark of the church, using family terms. Believers are called "the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). Young leaders are to treat ekklēsia members as fathers, brothers and sisters (1 Tim 5:1–2). Paul uses family terms with his disciples: he was like a father and mother to them, and they his brothers and sisters (1 Thess 2:7–14).83 The nature of ekklēsia as the household of God (Eph 2:18–19) influences the social structure of ekklēsia movements.84

The Nature of Ekklēsia: Expanding Organism

What emerges in the biblical images is that ekklēsia by nature is a living, growing organism, in the process of being built up and expanding. Ekklēsia is expansive not static by nature because the gospel that produces it continuously adds more adherents, and this produces movements. Jesus promised he is building his ekklēsia (Matt 16:18).

Biotic images picture how ekklēsia grows, lives, sustains itself, bears fruit, reproduces, and moves into new areas and peoples (Eph 2:21–22; 4:15–16). It grows through repeating patterns: the social units replicate themselves as larger and larger units of the same kind. In the Bible, ekklēsia has no buildings and is not limited to any location, it has organic structure.

Social Structures in Ekklēsia that Support and Sustain its Multiplication

Three social structures have strong biblical support and are critical in ekklēsia movements today: 1) two interdependent wings of ekklēsia, 2) three levels of linked ekklēsia units, and 3) teams of leaders.

1. The Two Interdependent Wings of the Body of Christ

Mission Teams were the first wing that drove the expansion of the organic system (Acts 9:15; 13:1– 3), complemented by local believer communities as the second wing that solidified the fruit of the gospel locally. These two wings working together developed ekklēsia movements.

Jesus provided the prototype of a mission team which birthed and then partnered with a local believer community as a two-winged organism. The mission of the Jesus Band followed Jesus' holistic pattern: preaching the gospel, healing the sick, and freeing the demonized (Matt 10:1–6), which resulted in people becoming receptive to the gospel. How was this fruit bearing organized socially? In his three mission trainings of the Jesus Band, Jesus taught repeated patterns he had already demonstrated in his ministry. He trained his disciples to rely on the hospitality of receptive households to provide an operational base for mission in a new area (Luke 10:4–7). After the first training, Jesus sent his inner circle of 12 on a mission to the Jews only (Matt 10:5–6), sent the 12 to Jews and Gentiles after a second training (Luke 9), and sent the 72 on mission after his third mission training (Luke 10:1–11). Taken together, his mission trainees learned about gospel preaching, identifying receptive households, healing, and freeing the demonized, by immediately after training doing what they had observed and heard Jesus doing.

The Jesus Band's pattern in the first stage was "mission pairs to receptive households." This mission thrust expanded as each mission pair successfully connected to responsive hosts in the area. Jesus' mission team then followed the same pattern to expand from "receptive hosts to receptive villages" in the second stage. This household-based mission strategy fit well with the centrality of oikos in the society, which included nuclear family and others attached to them. Jesus' mission was financed when itinerate

mission pairs placed themselves in a vulnerable position financially and socially by leaving their home base, then responsive hosts provided for their needs in a reciprocal relationship. The mission pair served responsive households and their relational networks. This extended family network provided credibility in the area and supplied mission teams' practical needs.

Sometimes their mission approach included a third phase: "mission pair to transformed witness." The Samaritan woman immediately shared about Messiah with her village and they believed (John 4:39). The Gerasene demoniac immediately proclaimed the gospel in the Decapolis region (Mark 5:19–20), and Zacchaeus the tax collector immediately witnessed to his household and social circle (Luke 19:1–10). In each phase a missionary pair connected to a responsive household. This connection renewed the household spiritually and empowered it as a new center of ekklēsia expansion.85

Mission teams in Acts repeated the Jesus Band pattern of birthing then partnering with the local believer community as a two-winged organism of mobile teams and local communities. Examples include Peter and his team with Cornelius' household (Acts 10:44–48), and Paul and his team with the households of Lydia and the Philippian jailor (Acts 16).

Most new areas were reached by apostolic mission teams, the driving force multiplying ekklēsia movements.86 Mission teams' second role after birthing ekklēsia, was "appointing local elders in every church," a consistent pattern implemented within one year of the preaching of the gospel (Acts 14:23). The third role of trans-local apostolic agents was to build the scalable architecture of trans-regional ekklēsia movements. This included providing foundational teaching and encouragement based on feedback from Paul's representatives (1 Thess 3), problem solving (Acts 6 and 15; 3 John 1:9–12), training and mobilizing other apostolic agents, and helping local leaders mature (Acts 20:17–38). This process continued long after handing over leadership to teams of local elders. The fourth role of apostolic agents was to weave together ekklēsia from different regions into a trans-regionally linked family (Rom 16; Col 4; Phlm). They did this by making personal visits, writing letters, praying, sending emissaries, sending commendations, and sharing information about regions in financial need.

Local ekklēsia conserved and nurtured the fruit of the gospel and supported local and near- region expansion. Teams of local elders solidified ekklēsia. They identified selected believers to join mission teams for a time.87 Some local believers played a stronger role in the bridging of the gospel to new social segments, especially bicultural mobile individuals such as Peter, Philip, Priscilla and Aquila as well as bicultural ekklēsia such as the Greek-speaking Jewish segment of Jerusalem's ekklēsia.

Apostolic agents, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers equipped all believers to be priests, who then actively built ekklēsia (Eph 4:11–16). The sphere of the equipping of apostolic agents and prophets in biblical narrative was trans-regional (Acts 9:15). Most believer-priests served their ekklēsia locally, though the mobile jobs of others widened their ministry, and some (such as Timothy) were recommended for mission teams.

2. Three Levels of Linked Family Networks

The term ekklēsia is used flexibly in the Bible of three social unit sizes or levels; all were an expression of ekklēsia. Ekklēsia multiplied as many house ekklēsia, which were linked as one city ekklēsia.88 Multiple city ekklēsia shared identity with other cities as a regional ekklēsia. House Ekklēsia was the primary component of ekklēsia for the first two or three centuries.

Jesus provided the prototype of house ekklēsia. Peter's house was the center of Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing, prayer and fellowship in Capernaum (Mark 1:29, 33; 2:1; 3:20; 9:23). Peter's house was the operational base for mission to Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida, around the Sea of Galilee. This home became available to him when he called Peter, the head of this household. With Peter, Jesus gained two disciples (Peter and Andrew), and his extended family (including Peter's mother-in-law). Through Peter's extended family, the Jesus Band enjoyed access to their wide relational network. The home of Martha in Bethany similarly provided a household operational base for Jesus' mission in that area (Luke 10:38-39).

The early church movements were centered in households. "Households thus constituted the focus, locus, and nucleus of the ministry and mission of the Christian movement" (Elliot 1981, 188). Early house church gatherings included the word, bread breaking, prayer, and koinonia fellowship, and shared funds (Acts 2:41–47; 4:32–37).

How many believers gathered? Weighing archeological research, Krautheimer (1965, 15– 17) concludes that from 30 to 150AD, believers gathered only in houses and their gatherings included a common meal.89 Based on rabbinic text and archeological investigation, Gehring (2004, 45) describes the typical living room in rural Palestine at the time as 5m2. Ten people could gather if seated closely together. Common courtyards provided somewhat larger space during the warm season. In Corinth, Gehring (2004, 135–136) describes 3m x 4m workshops unearthed, the largest 4.5m x 6m, and posits gatherings of 20 people (2004, 135). Sometimes a room was added on flat rooftops of larger homes. A gathering of 120 (Acts 1:12–15) represented the upper seating limit (Gehring 2004, 65).

Acts 4:4 mentions 5,000 men, which we view as heads of households. Gehring posits an average of ten to twenty people per household, including servants and extended family (2004, 87). This indicates an estimate of 50,000 to 100,000 believers. We will use half of his smaller number: 25,000 believers. If we estimate that four households on average (twenty people) could gather in the largest rooms in the largest of their homes, there were 1,250 house churches in Jerusalem by Acts 4:4, three years after Jesus rose. Home-based meetings depended on patronage in the expansion of ekklēsia.90 Patrons' larger houses became natural gathering points and this often made the host the leader. Mary was wealthy enough to have a house with a courtyard and a servant (Acts 12:13), which became a frequent gathering place. Lydia, a dealer in luxury cloth, had both the wealth and influence to host and legitimize new believers in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15; 40). Priscilla and Aquila's mobile business was successful enough to serve as a missional center for gatherings in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus (Acts 18:18, 26; 1 Cor 16:19).

City ekklēsia was a collective of multiple house ekklēsia in the same city or small area. We have indications of eight house ekklēsia (at least renewed households) in Rome who shared a joint identity as one city ekklēsia (Rom 16). From the descriptions, we estimate the larger of these house gatherings was twenty believers. Paul identified several people by name, though he had not been to Rome. Believers he knew elsewhere had moved to Rome, then these believers sent word of others. These eight house churches were treated as one brotherhood in Rome, though the number of house churches and the breadth of the city make it unlikely they all met together.

Believers who gathered in six house ekklēsia in Corinth shared a joint identity as one city ekklēsia. Only in Corinth does the Bible report that the whole church of a city met together in one place. Meeting in one place, whether the whole church or a portion of it, provided an occasion to test whether the rich and the poor would demonstrate their unity in Christ by sharing their food during the Lord's Supper.
Judging from the large number of people who lived close enough to burn their magic books in Ephesus, the "church of Ephesus" was probably not limited to the city proper but also included believers in nearby areas. Fellowship would have been more frequent with those who lived closer.

City ekklēsia could have had a double meaning, sometimes referring only to those house ekklēsia within the city, and on other occasions adding the additional house churches near the city.
Larger city ekklēsia gatherings (more than 12) occurred at Tyrannus' lecture hall in Ephesus, at Corinth and at the upper room in Jerusalem (120 people). The church quickly outgrew the largest of these, for the five thousand men in Acts 4:4 were too many to have met together in the temple courts of Jerusalem. Clearly, gathering the whole church together in one place was not a necessary condition for the shared identity of each city ekklēsia.
We know for certain that there were at least second generation churches during the period described in Acts. The lecture hall of Tyrannus functioned as mission center training for 1st generation Ephesian believers, then those trained intensively by Paul spread the gospel. The small number of believers Paul trained intensively could not have personally proclaimed the gospel to everyone in the province of Asia Minor in two years (Acts 19:10). Thus, at least third generation churches are indicated.91 The churches in Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colossae were reached by Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12), one of their own, who may have been in the first-generation church Paul trained in Ephesus. Third generation local leaders identified as "the brothers at Laodicea," Nympha, Archippus (Col 4:15–17), and Onesimus (Col 4:9) extended the ministry that Epaphras had initiated, and Epaphras remained influential throughout the

Lycean valley. Local leaders rather than Paul were the primary church planters, for Paul had not met many of the believers in Colossae (Col 2:1).

Heterogeneity increased as numbers increased, as evidenced by differences in ethnicity (Acts 6:1), economics (James 2:1–7), and affiliation (1 Cor 1:11–15), which surfaced tensions. Differences within city ekklēsia tested unity and pushed believers to redefine oneness in Christ as inclusive of differences.

Regional ekklēsia was the shared identity of multiple city ekklēsia in a wider region. On some issues, all the house and city ekklēsia in a region acted with one joint identity. Believers in the province of Macedonia shared a joint identity as one ekklēsia which contributed to the needs of the poor in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26), though there were multiple city churches in Macedonia (2 Cor 8:1). Ekklēsia in Samaria, Judea, Achaia, and Galilee were described as each having a regional identity (Acts 9:31; Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 9:2), each consisting of many city ekklēsia (the churches of Galatia: 1 Cor 16:19; the churches of Judea: Gal 1:22).

Differences of culture, ethnicity, religious background (god fearers, idol worshippers) and religious variant (believers from the circumcision party in Acts 11:2; 15:1) led to theological dispute within the Judean regional ekklēsia (Acts 10:1–11:18). Increasing diversity challenged the expanding ekklēsia movement and helped its theology and its problem solving to mature.

Three levels of ekklēsia were linked in a family-like mosaic as they expanded. All three levels of ekklēsia operated as an expanding family network. Kinship terms were commonly used by trans-local apostolic agents as greetings, and helped believers strengthen and broaden their sense of redefined family. Deep relational ties bonded them together. Disputes were settled in a family way. Donations were carried by apostolic agents from one regional ekklēsia to share in the suffering of another regional ekklēsia (Acts 11:27–29), which helped strengthen family bonds.

Traveling apostolic agents from Mission Teams commonly used commendations to weave together believers in one area with believers in other areas (cf. Rom 16). The organic social architecture built by apostolic agents framed expansion to other regions and people groups, such as Paul asking the Romans to help with his mission to Spain (Rom 15:22–24). This encouraged ekklēsia to bridge from one people group to the next and built unity between them. Ekklēsia became a multicultural mosaic at the regional ekklēsia level, and in certain multicultural city ekklēsia like Antioch.

3. Leadership Teams

A team of elders oversaw each city ekklēsia, though some likely included believer groups in the small region around their city. If our estimate of 1,250 house churches in Jerusalem in Acts 4:4 is accurate, Jesus' twelve disciples were far too few to have led them all. Who led more than 1000 house churches in Jerusalem? From the renewed oikos household social structure, leaders emerged and were recognized by each small group of believers. The twelve as a leadership team would have given oversight to more than a thousand house church leaders.

The mission team leader's first action, upon returning to a new brotherhood of believers which they had birthed, was to select a team of leaders for every ekklēsia (Acts 14:23). Transferring leadership of a newly established city ekklēsia from the mission team to local elders within one year of people hearing the gospel was an established repeating pattern of apostolic teams. Selecting teams of local elders ensures locally fitted leadership, supports leaders' growth and succession, and frees the mission team to bridge to the next area with the gospel. A team of leaders provides a visible model of transformation to a believer community. They model what should be imitated, give spiritual guidance, teach, and solve problems.

The Ephesian elders retrained in Acts 20 probably extended their reach beyond the borders of city ekklēsia to include the outlying areas, since the large number of magic books burned during a renewal indicate a large movement. This was likely a small region leadership team. James, John and Peter were prominent in the leadership team over the small region of Jerusalem.92 They arranged for the formation of a second level leadership team over the feeding of widows (Acts 6:1– 7), due to the increasing demands of expansion.

Mission leaders also operated in teams, making periodic mentoring visits to help teams of local elders mature. Senior members of mission teams trained junior members and gave them assignments. Paul selected a small number from each region to train while travelling together (Acts 20:4), some of whom were later sent to other regions.

Biblical and Social Features of Ekklesia Movements in UPGs Today

Having described the ekklēsia movements in the New Testament, I now want to reflect on a network of movements in UPGs today that I have been serving. The New Testament's description of movements both legitimizes similar movements happening today and provides guidance for them. Over a period of sixteen years ending in December 2014, a movement in Asia had grown to eighteen thousand believers in small groups in twenty-seven UPGs in one country and had multiplied in two other countries. Five years later in December 2019, this network of movements had multiplied to 300,000 believers in small groups, in fifty-eight UPGs in one country and in eighteen other countries.

Sixteen male movement catalysts who lead this network of movements have been in dialogue about ekklēsia for many years, and have been implementing these principles. Fourteen are Bible college graduates, four have doctorates in theology. One is a Bible college president; three others are seminary professors. The following discussion summarizes dialogues over two decades as they implemented in the field and reflected on Scripture. This is what they believe and what they practice. In a recent discussion, they asked me to emphasize two aspects of the nature of ekklēsia before discussing the three social structure elements of ekklēsia.

Movements as 'Spirit Brotherhood'

In the past, one of the movement catalysts had read the entirety of the book of Acts for the first time, then given me a summary of its essence. He used two Arabic words to summarize Acts to me. In English, these are "Spirit" (born of Spirit and spiritual in nature) and "brotherhood" (family bonds between all those who have God as Father). I consider this an apt summary of Acts. In a recent dialogue, this movement catalyst emphasized that first and foremost, ekklēsia is "Spirit brotherhood." What does he mean?

Ekklēsia is spiritual at its core and not merely social. Ekklēsia movements are of God and belong to God; it is God's divine work. This brother emphasized that ekklēsia's central source is the word of God, and that the gospel is the lens that guides us to integrate the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel, and shapes our monotheism as Christocentric.93 God revealed himself to humanity and initiated the formation of His renewed people as ekklēsia.

He stressed that we are only God's servants who participate in God's mission to build ekklēsia. Other catalysts listened to him during a joint zoom call. They then added to this theme, highlighting the central role of the Spirit in ekklēsia in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. The Spirit is the one who supplies divine capacity to build up the body of Christ, and the Spirit unites us in Christ.

Ekklēsia is a spiritual family formed by its Head. These movement catalysts voiced their shared conviction that the brotherhood bonds they experience in the ekklēsia movements they lead are much deeper and richer than any they have experienced in conventional churches they had previously served. They underlined that these brotherhood bonds, created by the Spirit, are what link ekklēsia movements in oneness. It is the spiritual-social structure of brotherhood that functionally replaces the organizational structure found in conventional churches to solidify a movement. Their field experience of shaping ekklēsia movements has expanded over the years. This has enabled them to experience the richness of their spiritual brotherhood and led them to much reflection on this biblical theme.

Movements as Organic Systems

These movement catalysts in joint discussion emphasized that ekklēsia is an organism not an organization. It is a system, but an organic system. They reported that in conventional churches they had previously led, only 5 percent of the members were active, but in ekklēsia movements they lead now, most members are active, and 20 percent of believer-priests are leading others. Describing why and how more believer-priests actively lead is a long discussion beyond the scope of this chapter. Put simply: in movements, progress happens in smaller increments, making these roles more attainable for all believers.

In their experience in conventional churches, these catalysts reported the focus as buildings, gatherings, and spiritual needs only. But in ekklēsia movements, they mobilize the capacity of believers into

communities to meet social and emotional as well as spiritual needs. They describe ekklēsia as a living organism that grows and bears fruit. They experience the gatherings of ekklēsia to be organically self-reproducing, thus always expanding and not limited to certain buildings or to certain regions.

Ekklēsia's Social Structures Supporting Multiplication

1. Ekklēsia is a living organism with two interdependent wings: apostolic teams and multiple local ekklēsia.

2. Ekklēsia is an expanding network linking God's family at three levels.

3. Both wings of ekklēsia are led by teams of leaders.

As mentioned previously, these principles are the consensus of sixteen movement catalysts, which emerged through much Bible discussion, field implementation, and evaluation together over many years. Each of these men have "apostle-like" gifting.94 They open new fields and new UPGs for the gospel. Their apostle-like gifting had not been affirmed in conventional churches, but it is affirmed in their "brotherhood." The brotherhood these men share has sharpened their apostle-like gifting. This mission team catalyzes the formation of many house churches, linking them so that each is joined to a "cluster church" of ten to fifteen home groups. Likewise, each cluster church is joined to a "small region church" of three or more linked clusters. And they work to connect each cluster church to a wide region church of three or more linked small region churches. Apostolic teams set multiplication of small groups into the DNA of movements: small groups that study the Bible inductively, pray, and serve one another and their community. They establish the fruit by linking house churches into clusters, under teams of local elders. They develop teams of leaders over each cluster church and over each regional church. The leadership teams they equip oversee increasingly larger sets of believer groups, as these movements multiply.

The first level of ekklēsia, the house church, is the prominent feature of kingdom expansion in these UPGs. Our review of the architecture of the New Testament period revealed that house ekklēsia was likely limited to ten to twenty in many homes but in some cases 40 or more believers could gather. Among UPGs in our country, because of tight security, the average house church is five believers. Movements in non-UPGs areas of other countries report larger gatherings. House churches in UPGs do not typically add more people to small groups, because social pressure and persecution slows progress. Instead they evangelize and birth new small groups and help them grow. As a result, believer groups in UPGs are smaller and then multiply into more generations of groups. This movement has tracked believer group multiplication to twenty-three generations, and leaders' groups to seventeen generations. Growing leaders' groups as fast as the gospel transforms households is one of our constant and most urgent challenges, and drives much of our leadership development.

The second level of ekklēsia is city ekklēsia. In Rome, we saw indications of eight house ekklēsia joined as one city ekklēsia, likely totaling about seventy-five believers, led by a team of elders for the city. Among UPGs, large gatherings very often suffer backlash, and obstacles increase. A cluster church of ten or fifteen linked small groups totals fifty to seventy-five believers, led by a team of elders. The elders oversees the collection and use of a cluster purse, baptisms, the influence of the Word, and the Lord's Supper. They guide the cluster's community development ministry, obedience-oriented Bible studies, and mentoring of new leaders. Cluster churches are thriving in many UPGs. A cluster church sometimes meets together when its elders consider it wise. They develop their unity face to face in a leaders' group for each cluster, through cross visitation, and through ministries together.

Groups birthed from the same mother group in the next two or three generations need equipping to function well as a cluster church. Influential local leaders invite group leaders to visit other group leaders, since relational trust must be built, because of deep suspicions in UPGs. After trust begins to develop through cross visitation, one or more leaders' groups are formed for the cluster. A mentor guides their development as a leadership team. Each mentor uses a checklist of learning modules to equip each leaders' group, to help the leaders better support ekklēsia in their region.95

As ekklēsia grows to wider and wider regions, it is aggregated based on travel routes, language, religious variant, and relational trust. Wider than cluster church is small region church. Just as the Ephesus city

leadership team likely influenced the house ekklēsia around Ephesus, a small region leadership team oversees all the cluster churches in an area, often within a one-hour driving range. Proximity allows them to do joint planning and problem solving more frequently and build relationships of trust and love. This movement uses 'coaching circles', in which three leaders help a peer leader find a solution for his challenge, by asking questions and giving support. In Acts 6, the elders directed the small region ekklēsia in Jerusalem to resolve an economic and ethnic dispute over food for widows. Recently, one UPG movement catalyst was too ill to travel, so the small region's elders met and came to a consensus on what to do when a cluster leader had been beaten and hospitalized, conferring with their distant mentor by phone for his wisdom.

A wide region leadership team might oversee two adjacent provinces, or one province, or a portion of a province, depending on how much fruit local leaders have multiplied. Shortly after a major earthquake, though their movement catalyst was detained elsewhere, the leadership team over the wide region mobilized believers in the ekklēsia network in this UPG to help disaster victims. A sum equivalent to five months of a carpenter's wages had been donated by the time the catalyst arrived two days later. The wide region leadership team had performed their role as area leaders and had been linking the many house ekklēsia in the region together with the house ekklēsia who were disaster victims.

In Acts 15, the Jerusalem elders met with mission team leaders to jointly settle a dispute. In our UPG movements, a multi-region leadership team meets for three days each quarter to jointly tackle challenges, discuss the Bible, and mutually support one another in a strong brotherhood. This quarterly gathering has played a big role when we have experienced persecution, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which we have lost many lives. Because the mission team is trans- regional, they link their network of small groups and leaders' groups to work together to distribute food to the hungry, restart jobs for the unemployed, help repair broken economic systems, and help people struggling with their children's education. The engagement of organic ekklēsia with community needs supports the movement's multiplication. The socially scalable architecture of ekklēsia described in this chapter allows its spiritual community to support its own maturation and expand as a family network into new areas and UPGs.

A Final Word

The Apostle Paul praised the ekklēsia in Thessalonica, who though discipled by him for only three weeks, quickly replicated his pattern and became a model imitated by ekklēsia movements in several provinces. Paul heard how the Thessalonians imitated the patterns they had learned and affirmed their movement as part of God's expanding family. His prayer request is echoed by many movement leaders today: "Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you" (2 Thess 3:1b).

Endnotes

78 We use a definition of movement on which many organizations have agreed: four or more generations of believer communities of more than 1,000 believers, within a limited number of years.
79 "Many of the churches planted by Paul would not meet what many today might consider a minimal standard for being an established church. Nevertheless, he addressed even the most problematical congregations as 'the church.' This forces us to consider more carefully what genuinely constitutes a local church in the biblical sense" (Ott and Wilson 2010, 4).
80 This chapter was modified from its original length. See more resources at www.FocusOnFruit.org, where a book on Ekklesia for Movements will be available in 2021.
81 Paul uses the Greek words mimetei (imitate) and tupos (type or pattern) in several of these passages, and encourages pattern imitation in other ways – to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:5-10; 2:14; 2 Thess 3:7-9), Philippians (Phil 3:17; 4:8–9), Ephesians (Acts 20:18–35), Corinthians (1 Cor 4:14–17; 1 Cor 10:31–11:1), Timothy (1 Tim 4:11–12; 2 Tim 2:2; 3:10–14), and Titus (Titus 2:7).
82 The magic books burned in Ephesus were estimated to be worth 50,000 drachma, about 50,000 days wages. An average household's daily wage in the USA in 2019 was $200, so these books would be valued at 10 million USD in the US in 2019. We might picture each of 10,000 households burning their magic books worth 1,000 USD to total 10 million USD. In any case, the report of magic books worth 50,000 drachmas indicates a large number of believing households.
83 See also 1 Pet 2:17; 5:9; 1 John 3:1; John 1:12; Ep 2:19; Gal 6:10; Phlm 2; Rom 16:2,13.

84 "Given the family character of the Christian community, the homes of its members provided the most conducive atmosphere in which they could give expression to the bond they had in common" (Banks 1994, 56).
85 For further discussion of how Jesus and the disciples used transformational dialog in the process of group formation, see chapter 1 of Core Skills for Movement Leaders, available at www.FocusOnFruit.org.
86 There are exceptions to the primary role of apostles in opening new areas. Unnamed believers driven from Jerusalem by persecution birthed ekklēsia in new areas (Acts 11:19).
87 Onesiphorus travelled from Ephesus to Rome to support Paul in prison, as he had done in Ephesus (2 Tim 1:16–17). 88 "Many NT scholars believe that both forms – small house churches and the whole church as a unit at that location – existed side by side in early Christianity" (Gehring 2004, 25).
89 "Archaeology confirms that for the first three centuries, the meeting place of Christians was private homes, not distinctive church buildings." (Ladd 1974, 532)
90 "The ability to attract such individuals [patrons] in greater numbers was probably a significant factor in the social 'triumph' of Christianity. These individuals provided the network of social relationships and economic capabilities that made possible growth, expansion, acquisition, and adaptation" (White 2004, 57).
91 Paul's practice was to multiply disciples in three generations after himself, as evident in 2 Timothy 2:2. Readers often overlook that there is a group of believers in each of these three generations.
92 For an extended discussion of how modeling, spiritual guidance, problem solving, and regional scaling work out in practice, see Core Skills for Movement Leaders, chapters 7–10.
93 Muslims believe God revealed three books prior to the Qur'an: the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel. In Muslim majority contexts, believers use these terms to denote the whole of the Old and New Testaments.
94 'Apostolic agents' differ from New Testament apostles in that they do not receive revelation from God. They are like the New Testament apostles in that they desire to proclaim the gospel where Christ is not known, in new UPGs. And like the apostles, they have influence trans-regionally as they build the linked mosaic of ekklēsia.
95 These checklists form much of chapters 9 and 10 of Core Skills for Movement Leaders.

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