

Book Review

Warrick Farah, ed., *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2022

Farah, Warrick, ed. (2021). *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*. William Carey Publishing, 376 pp., \$26.99 paperback, \$9.99 e-book, ISBN: 9781645083481, 1645083489.

Introduction

Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations was edited by Warrick Farah and published by William Carey Publishing. David Coles, James Lucas, and Jonathan Andrews were the Associate Editors. This compiled volume has five parts and 22 chapters. It is a compendium that investigates and documents how God is using movements to advance Christ's kingdom across the world. The writers acknowledge being part of a "learning community" (22) and that there continue to exist some "tensions and contradictions" (25) in their perspectives.

This useful volume presents research findings on several movements of God in the last 30 years. It covers 1,400 movements that have led to the formation of 80 million disciples, primarily among unreached people groups (UPGs) in Asia, Africa, and the African diaspora in Europe. These disciples constitute one percent of the global population of 7.8 billion.

Motus Dei, meaning the movement of God, can take on many names: Disciple Making Movement, Kingdom Movement, People Movement, and Church planting Movement, to name a few. The missional term of colonial days—Mass Movement (as termed by Waskom Pickett)—is not used. The conversation around "movements" is ongoing and is in the process of maturing, even as its definition continues to evolve. When we examine movements, no single person or theory sufficiently answers all the questions around it. It is the collective work of God's people, with God. This volume, in a way, embodies the characteristics of the movement itself—of learning together, and moving together with God. Several of the researched movements place importance on the "household" (*oikos*) unit, four-generational church planting (where one church plant leads to the other), and a "person of peace" in the initiation process.

Summary

Warrick Farah speaks of *Motus Dei* against the context of the world, pointing out that the world's unevangelized population grows by around 70,000 people every day, contributing to the massive expansion of the global unreached population year on year. He traces the early church's history and finds that *Motus Dei* has not always flourished—in some instances it declined over time, and in some cases completely died out. Early movements were not characterized by organized evangelism and church multiplication strategies but a Christ-like, counter-cultural lifestyle against the context of suffering and persecution. These movements are known for transcending boundaries and unifying the diverse. The author advocates for the unlearning of unbiblical doctrines, traditions, and practices, that many have been picked up along the way. To facilitate a movement, new believers should be able to remain within their pre-conversion social context, and the emergence of the church must reflect its location within a particular cultural framework. However, discipleship is necessary in these movements and it consists of "Orthodoxy (correct belief), Orthopraxy (correct behavior) and Orthopathy (correct

feeling)” (51). In this process, context and traditional ecclesiology must remain in creative tension. Farah’s research is quite extensive and well done.

Samuel Kebreab presents the Motus Dei in Africa among the Yoma people. By learning the principles of Motus Dei, Kebreab bounced from a discouraging situation to seeing 5,672 Christ-followers from 364 villages, reaching people previously “unreached” by and “unengaged” with the gospel. According to Kebreab: i) miraculous signs are important, ii) ordinary people need to be used, iii) one’s approach must be holistic—love, compassion, healing, and deliverance must also be complemented with clean water, providing seeds, better health, better education, and skill development, and iv) compassion ministry allows access into communities. He states these practices are not only effective but also inexpensive.

David Coles discusses eight theological and missiological objections among the general populace to the Motus Dei. He addresses these objections in the light of scripture, mission history, and contemporary missiological trends. God’s kingdom is advancing among the least reached groups, and those who profess the faith are also beginning to proclaim the gospel. Only time will tell how these movements will reflect God’s kingdom.

Gene Daniels speaks of Kingdom Movements among Muslims, which pose a challenge to researchers in terms of verifiability. Daniels employs the example of early church movements and the growth of Christianity in China—both of which remain unverifiable—to inspire trust in the movement among Muslims.

Justin D. Long addresses the question of how we can count movements by analyzing the United States. He counters accusations of an overcount of the number of movements in the U.S. and argues instead that the opposite may be true.

Part II provides the theological grounding for movements. David S. Lim claims that God’s plan is “kingdomization” and not “Christianization” (121). It can be achieved by ordinary people without significant financial investment. This is a response against traditional, investment-oriented methods that employ highly-trained missionaries. He identifies six characteristics of such kingdomization movements.

Craig Ott traces theological foundations from movements in the book of Acts. Pointing out that the gospel spread rapidly, churches were planted and grew, and whole regions were reached, Ott suggests learning from these dynamics to facilitate movements. Miracles are necessary even today, and the message and messenger remain unchanged. He presents four case studies: Jerusalem; Judea, Samaria, and Syria; Pisidian Antioch; and Ephesus. There will be opposition and we have to face it.

Trevor Larsen identifies the patterns of Ekklesia Movements on the basis of the New Testament. Larsen examines their birth and development through three lenses: Jesus Band, Disciples’ communities of the spirit, and social dynamics. The underlying principle is the “imitation” of Jesus and Paul (162). Ekklesia Movements are living, growing and expanding. They are not static—Jesus is building the Ekklesia.

Michael T. Copper discusses the basis for the first-century movements from the Johannine gospel. Accordingly, to see movements happen today workers are to pray, fast, use missiological exegesis (culture, history, and ethnic particularities), and connect Jesus to the culture. This process will lead to indigenous church planting movements. James Lucas studies the Luke-Acts narratives and discovers the stories of the “people of peace” (199), where the house (*oikos*) plays a major role in reaching people and building momentum for movements.

Part III examines the dynamics of movements. Steve Addison studies the rationale for the rise and fall of movements, tracing seven characteristics. A movement's rise or fall hinges on our faithfulness to the core missionary task assigned to us. Movements cannot stand still—we must not be complacent in the face of warning signs. Paul Arlund and Regina Foard contend that women play an equal role in the multiplication of movements. Their cultural intelligence must be recognized, and they need to be involved in key decision-making processes. Women are igniting multiplication movements and leading in those movements all over the world. Paul Kuivinen argues that “ethnodoxology”—“the expression of ” as well as “the study of ” ethnic Scripture-based songs and other art forms (251)—plays an important role in the multiplication of movements. It helps along movements among oral learners and engages the culture, language, and history of people. Ethnodoxology (261) does not alienate anybody. It may not initiate a movement, but it will help existing movements. Frank Preston emphasizes the media as a valuable asset to church planting. John Wesley's Methodist movement was built on the seventeenth-century usage of media. Media has also been put to great use during the Covid pandemic. The key here is to use media personnel, who constitute a form of lay leadership, to build momentum. Bradley Cocanower and Joao Mordomo's work on North African migrants and asylum seekers to Europe employs the term “Terra Nova” (meaning “new land”) in referring to the nearly two million-strong diaspora. They reiterate that we can see movements of God when we recognize that we are “blessed to be a blessing” (285).

Part IV lists case studies of movements from Kenya, India, and Thailand. The case study of Kenya is particularly interesting. Aila Tasse and L Michael Corley discovered that in East Africa 12,555 churches have been planted, and 271,695 disciples have been reached, within a short span of 15 years. Victor John and Dave Coles studied the Bhojpuri people in India. Signs, wonders, and miracles are key, although the focus must remain on gospel preaching. John and Coles suggest that the normative “payment and titles of ministry” can hinder movements (326). The study of movements among Thai Buddhists—where we might least expect a movement to take place—is quite fascinating. Stephen Bailey, Dwight Martin, and Pastor Somsak have facilitated the movement with ordinary believers and simple methods. They did not find traditional western Christian practices to be an obstacle; however, they do not force people to come to church. The indigenous believers are given freedom to decide on their cultural practices, including ancestral rituals and religious practices. In Algeria and Iran, 80 movements were identified by Rania Mostofi and Patrick Brittenden. However, they also recognize that second generation Christians are struggling and face difficulty in taking this momentum forward.

Part V spans two areas: leadership and the paradigm shift of Christian growth from an organizational orientation to one of movements. Right leadership is a key, believes Emanuel Prinz. People are indispensable, not methods and curriculum. Eric and Laura Adams outline nine practices for “Movement Thinking”: pray, learn, partner, evaluate, display faith publicly, widen contacts, listen to God, obey God, and empower leaders (397).

Reflection

Motus Dei is an excellently researched book for evangelists, missionaries, pastors, missiologists, and anyone interested in mission principles and praxis. It offers biblical, historical, and theological grounding and presents case studies from around the world. This volume is a must-read for serious mission practitioners. It points to excellent missiological references, and students of missiology will benefit from it.

The writers recognize context, history, social dynamics, biblical narratives, theology, and missiology when they study a movement. Hence these studies have not been conducted in silos.

The writers also reflect their awareness of the perspectives and viewpoints of other writers. The chapters are thus not simply the opinions of some 25-plus authors without connection to one another. They are interwoven and interlinked. However, the editor Farah recognizes the studies' limitations. The movements examined have not reached the maturing stage, and conflicts and contradictions exist.

Part II of the book, addressing biblical and theological foundations, are superb studies that advocate for a return to scripture. However, the authors appear to be fixated on calculations and statistics. Such an emphasis begs the question: did Jesus place importance on numbers? Jesus and Paul wanted everyone to hear the gospel. The preoccupation with numbers has not been welcomed even among many Evangelicals and fundamentalists, let alone Ecumenicals. Some go to the extent of positing the statistical focus as a North American phenomenon.

A quantitative orientation also comes with distinct challenges. Chapter 3 presents the findings from a Likert Scale survey through mean values. This choice effaces the specificity of the respondents' categorical agreement and disagreement. These findings would have better been reported as proportions in order appropriately to convey the relative degree of agreement, or lack thereof, on the objections studied.

The case studies are well-documented and point to what God is doing around the world. They offer good models to emulate, but the question remains: if the models have worked among the Africans and Asians, why have they failed among secularized Europeans and Australians? God is the same, and if we claim to use universal biblical principles then it is worth examining why corresponding models have worked in some places and not others.

In the history of Christianity, we see both successes and challenges. While the faith was rejected in the land of its birth, it triumphed in the North African and European contexts. Barring the countries where the Greek philosophical tradition was strong, most European countries had what we call animistic or primitive faiths. This is also true of South American countries, the Philippines, the islands of Oceania, and pockets of Indonesia and East Timor. For example, we read about the movement in India among Bhojpuri people. Even today, 70-80 per cent of Indian Christians are from so-called primitive faiths, or belong to socially marginalized sects. Aloysius Pieris, a Roman Catholic theologian, claims that Christianity has not made inroads where there is a presence of "Meta-cosmic Soteriology" (Pieris 1988, 8-16). God's ways and works are mysterious, a reality that must affect any missiological perspective.

The aim of missional movements must be to achieve "true discipleship," and Coles' chapter claims that this is taking place. However, one must exercise caution in defining "true discipleship." In the Thai context, believers continue their religious rituals until they choose not to. If this same model of believers continuing to observe religious rituals were applied to India, several millions of Indians could be considered Christians. Hindus have no problem with this ideology of both following Jesus and observing their respective religious/social rituals, and insider movements would grow among both Muslims and Hindus. Such a process would eventually lead to both syncretism and pluralism. Can we encourage such movements? There are no easy answers.

The house churches "oikos" movement is a model we can directly adopt from Jesus Christ. Gathering in homes is a good starting point. However, Asian countries are filled with temples, pagodas, gurudwaras, mosques, and many other religious structures. Coming to Christ from these religious milieu, followers of Jesus find it extremely difficult to worship in houses. They do not necessarily need cathedrals, but they desire a neutral space where they can come together irrespective of caste, creed, and color. Oikos is a good beginning, but it cannot always be maintained in the long run.

Funding for movements is a contentious issue, and many authors have discussed it. We need to identify the relative strengths and shortcomings of different practices and workshop ways to overcome challenges. The suggestion from some authors that movements should be purely locally funded appears reductive and needs discussion.

The great merit of this research is that it is contemporary, practical, and easily relatable. However, the bulk of researchers appear to be from the West, or have been trained in the Western tradition. The majority of the books and articles cited were produced in the West. Is there a way to empower the locals who initiated movements to reflect and produce their own narratives? We don't have much research on the movement in China, emerging without external influence, but movement of God in China exists nonetheless. This Chinese example presents an interesting opportunity: how does a movement begin, seemingly unprompted? Another question to explore concerns those movements initiated by someone from the Global South without any Western influence, for example the West African Harris Movement in the early twentieth century.

Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations is a great read. I find this book extremely useful both for my teaching and missional practices. It is an instructive tool for anyone interested in knowing the way God works, and it is a great tool and resource for churches, foundations, and missiologists who want to know about "Motus Dei."

References

Pieris, Aloysius (1988). *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.