

*Does the size of a “movement” make any difference?
L.D. Waterman and Kevin Higgins offer two perspectives on this issue.*

When Does a Movement Count as a Movement?

By L.D Waterman

As I finished reading the book *Understanding Insider Movements*, one question struck me. It may have been catalyzed by John Travis’ description of “a small movement” (in “Insider Movements among Muslims: A Focus on Asia”). I began wondering: How large is a “small” Insider movement? How large would an *average*-sized Insider movement be? How many people, fellowships (*ekklesia*), or *somethings* would be needed for something to properly qualify as an Insider Movement? I couldn’t find an answer anywhere in the book.

Discussions of Church Planting Movements (CPM), in contrast, have offered clear delineations of size and scope. For example, David Garrison begins *A Wind in the House of Islam* with this definition: “For the sake of clarity and consistency, let’s define a movement of Muslims to Christ to be at least 100 new church starts or 1,000 baptisms that occur over a two-decade period.” (p. 5) More stringently, David Watson in *Contagious Disciple-Making* writes: “We defined a Church-Planting Movement as an indigenously led Gospel-planting and obedience-based discipleship process that resulted in a minimum of one hundred new locally initiated and led churches, four generations deep, within three years.” (p. 4) In both cases, their definition enables them to offer a clear estimate of the number of CPMs in the world at the time of their writing (Garrison: 70 among Muslims; Watson: 68 total).

We can understand clearly from *Understanding Insider Movements (UIM)* that in an Insider Movement, the believers remain within their prior socio-religious group. But I couldn’t find any numerical criteria for a “movement.” In quickly reviewing the 719 pages of this definitive work on the subject, I found almost no mention of what size we should be envisioning when we hear or read the phrase “Insider Movement” (IM).

The closest thing I found to any size indicator in a definition was in Kevin Higgins’s “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoteds’ of Acts,” on page 226. This definition includes the phrase “believing families....” Since the word “families” is plural and a family, by definition, constitutes plural individuals (and could be quite large) this gives encouragement that at least according to Kevin, an Insider “Movement” must be more than a few groups of single young men (or women) meeting together. This still leaves a lot of room for skeptical imagination about what is actually in view when proponents such as contributors to *UIM* discuss an Insider “movement.”

I must say I was somewhat encouraged by the specific examples shared in two *UIM* articles. Ben Naja, in “Jesus Movement: A Case Study from Eastern Africa,” wrote: “several hundred have been baptized, dozens of home-based fellowships have been started and in two instances Jesus mosques have been built and are used for the gatherings of the Jesus disciples. This movement is still growing.” (p. 129) I also noted in Tom Payne’s “And the Spirit Fell upon Them” that: “The

original *Injil*-reading group has now multiplied many times over, with new insider groups starting in several other places around the country.” I greatly rejoice in these testimonies, yet they still seem to fall in a numerically different category than the kinds of movements being described as Church Planting Movements.

Thinking I may have overlooked something, I asked a number of friends (many of them authors of articles in *UIM*) if they knew of any minimum size criteria for something to be considered an IM. Some offered very helpful *qualitative* evaluative criteria (including “Leaders from within the people group train other leaders,” which has implications for size), but nothing directly specifying size or *quantitative* criteria. And in soliciting estimates from those who might know, I received confirmation of a total of one (perhaps two) IMs that would fit David Garrison’s criteria of a CPM.

Adding together all the best pieces being offered still appears to leave a vast chasm between the size component of “movement” in “Insider Movement” as compared to in “Church Planting Movement.” In CPM’s definition (at least according to two key proponents), “movement” means a certain number (or greater) of churches started within a certain number of years. In the clearest IM definition, it means at least plural “believing families.” This is not necessarily a criticism of IM (though some might interpret it as such). I would take it, however, as a noteworthy word of caution, lest in strategic discussions of “movements,” someone get the impression that CPMs and IMs differ only in socio-religious identity of believers. It appears there may often (almost always?) be a vast difference in size.

We don’t consider size of a movement to be the most vital consideration. Yet for those who see some value in numerical reports of God’s work (among whom I would count the Holy Spirit, in his inspiration of Luke as the writer of Acts), it seems noteworthy to compare the one or two IMs (stated to be as large as some CPMs) with the 70 or 68 CPMs cited by Garrison and Watson. Not that more and bigger always means better. But if we aim for the biblical goal “to win as many as possible” (1 Cor. 9:19), the vast difference is well worth noting.

Measuring Insider Movements? Seeking Criterion for the Criteria

By Kevin Higgins

L. Waterman recently asked the very appropriate question about whether insider movements are actually movements.¹ His questions focused on how to know if the “movement” aspect of “insider movements” was true, an inquiry that was framed by the descriptions of movements put forth by David Garrison, David Watson and others.

This article is intended as part of the ongoing discussion of that question. I am not addressing this discussion to the “insider” aspect of such movements but asking what sort of criteria we should use to evaluate the “movement” aspect.

I begin with an overview of movement thinking to give some context. From that I seek to narrow the crucial questions down to two that seem to me to be at the heart of all the other measurements of movements. Then I proceed to question those questions, and conclude with what I suggest might be the criteria that I think might be used in the New Testament, applying this to my understanding for assessing insider movements, as movements.

The Movement-Movement

In the world of mission the topic of “movements” is in vogue. Books about movements, training programs to equip people to produce movements, and organizations claiming to catalyze movements are a major growth industry. We might say that we are in the midst of a movement-movement.

While this seems to be a recent development, historically the fascination with movements seems to stem from the work of Donald McGavran and his research in India a generation ago.² McGavran was a missiologist. He lived and worked in India. And his concern was for how the Gospel might spread throughout the great land of India. He noticed that it did spread in some cases, and not in others and asked “why”?

The initial impact of McGavran’s work was felt more deeply in the western church than it seems to have been in the mission world. This impact is evidenced in what came to be known as the church growth movement (that word again). It seems ironic to me that his thinking about movements created a movement, but not the sort he was likely to have imagined.

For critics, there were a number of controversial elements in McGavran’s thinking: his heavy reliance on social science based research, an apparent emphasis on numbers, the homogeneous unit principle, and his promotion of the idea of focusing resources of mission on responsive “fields” while holding less responsive “ground” with minimal personnel until the season for responsiveness might emerge.

The church growth movement focused on trying to figure out how to apply some of McGavran’s principles to western churches. Almost all of the controversial aspects of his thinking, just outlined, made their way into the church growth movement’s application of McGavran. In particular, his methodology of asking why some things grew and others didn’t, became a key point of focus.

¹ Waterman, L.D., “When Does a Movement Count as a Movement” 11 March 2016; <http://btdnetwork.org/when-does-a-movement-count-as-a-movement/>. Accessed August 15, 2016

² McGavran acknowledged reliance on the earlier research of J. Waskom Pickett, whose book “Christian Mass greatly influenced him. See McGavran (1982) and Wilson (year?)

Later, church planting became a priority within the church growth movement. This developed for a very practical reason: more unchurched people came to be “churched” as a result of church planting than through other methods.

More recently the range of how movements are described and defined has multiplied: church planting movements, disciple making movements, house church movements, simple church movements, insider movements, and, less frequently, mission planting movements and even more rare, movement planting movements.

Most of these recent examples do not trace their lineage intentionally to McGavran, at least not in published versions of their work. Perhaps some don’t even realize that there is a “family tree” connection between current movement thinking and McGavran, much less the church growth movement.

While I would suggest that there are major differences between current expressions of movement thinking and the church growth movement, including what I would see as much more sophisticated missiological and cultural reflection, there is at least one major trend. The early “dna” of the church growth movement can be felt in the tendency to apply numerical evaluations to the measurement of whether something is or is not a movement.

Church growth writers in the early days spent a fair bit of time having to justify for critics their use of numbers to measure the health of a church. Today movement proponents and researchers are asked to explain movements in terms of numbers or need to establish certain numerical markers for the purposes of research.

That last point brings us full circle, back to Waterman’s questions about insider movements: given that most other movement descriptions have numerical measuring points, and based on those one can say yes or no as to whether there is a movement, is there something akin to this for insider movements? Waterman’s survey of insider literature did not uncover any examples of such numerical criteria.

He states,

“We can understand...that in an Insider Movement, the believers remain within their prior socio-religious group. But I couldn’t find any numerical criteria for a ‘movement.’”

Before assessing things further, I will include here the types of numerical measurements Waterman *did* find in his exploration of *other* types of movements. Waterman has summarized perhaps the most widely known. He writes,

“For example, David Garrison begins *A Wind in the House of Islam* with this definition: ‘...at least 100 new church starts or 1,000 baptisms that occur over a two-decade period.’ (p. 5)...”

And,

“David Watson...‘...a minimum of one hundred new locally initiated and led churches, four generations deep, within three years.’” (p. 4) In both cases, their definition enables them to offer a clear estimate of the number of CPMs in the world at the time of their writing (Garrison: 70 among Muslims; Watson: 68 total).”

The two examples cited by Waterman are clear, concise, and numerical. But there is a core question buried inside these statements, and the answer to it is not universally agreed upon among movement

proponents and trainers. In fact, the answer to the buried question has yet to be universally agreed upon between denominations.

Questions Behind The Questions

Clearly one element that both definitions seek to answer is:

How many churches does it take to know you have a church planting movement?

That question makes sense. These are after all, examples of *church* planting movements. But this begs a question about which the Christian world has been divided for centuries. Here is how I phrase it:

How do we know when a given “fellowship” or study group is a church? This will include a number of factors, just one of which would be how many people need to be in a church before you can count it as a church for the purposes of answering whether there is a church planting movement?

In this article I will not be able to thoroughly explore this crucial question about what it is that enables to call this or that group of a believers a church. Therefore, I will refer for practical reasons to another article by Waterman on this topic, and will use his conclusion there as a working definition:

“A biblical church is a significant group of Jesus’ followers having an identity as a church (ekklesia) who gather together regularly on an ongoing basis, with recognized leadership under the headship of Christ, to worship God and encourage one another in obeying all his commands (including, but not limited to baptism and the Lord’s Supper).”

Several things are worth noting, in my opinion, before moving on. First, there is not specific numerical criterion other than the statement “significant group.” Second, there is an assessment included which is based on the intention of those gathering: “having and identity as a church.” Third, and finally, the criteria are essentially qualitative in nature.

As I mentioned above, I will use this as a working definition of “church.” This article is not aiming to discuss “church” but rather the criteria for assessing insider movements, as movements. This definition is sufficient for accomplishing that purpose.³

Before moving further into my main purpose, it seems wise here to pause and address a potential misunderstanding. I have mentioned above that the church growth movement was critiqued for, among other things, its apparent emphasis on numbers. And I have here clearly shifted from quantitative to qualitative measurements as a working assumption. What about numbers?

Numbers and Movements: Is Counting Wrong?

I am not arguing that counting is always wrong, or an inappropriate exercise. There is a whole book in our canon, after all, which has been titled “Numbers” in English texts. While the census of Israel undertaken by David in the Old Testament receives mixed reviews, there is no question that the numbers Luke provides in his account of the growing Jesus movement in Luke-Acts is an example of counting and reporting. There is nothing wrong with counting then, unless (depending on how one reads the census accounts) one’s motives or inspiration are wrong.

³ In articles exchanged with Timothy Tennent I explored the nature of “church” and insider movements more fully. I can’t repeat that discussion here and refer the reader to Tennent 2007 and Higgins 2006

Where does that leave us relative to using numbers to measure a movement, and assess if in fact it is a movement? That aspect of the question is after all the real crux of the matter.

I read the accounts in Luke-Acts as reporting growth, certainly. But I would be hard pressed to assert that Luke's numbers are being used as evaluations or assessments. They are reported almost casually, and I sense no hint of "proofs".

Thus, I don't have a strong objection to counting and measuring, but I do not see numbers as the essential measurement of a movement. Since I also assume that Waterman, Garrison, and those promoting DMM movements would probably agree with me on this point, a further word is probably warranted to explain further why I have not emphasized or exercised numerical measurements in the movements I know of (and let me be clear, this includes both insider and non-insider expressions of movements within our organizational sphere or work).

First, in my experience there has been a major issue when we have tried to assess a work numerically. In the cultures where I am the most familiar, it is very difficult to ask about numbers without giving very subtle messages that more numbers are better, and thus that one's success and honor as a leader is tied to the numbers one can report, and thus this leads to very subtle pressure to inflate and make things sound good. When this dynamic is added to the very common element of wanting to please others and give what we know will make someone we respect happy, the pressure can become much more than subtle.

Another reason for my approach is the principle if the qualitative measures are healthy, the quantification and numerical growth will take care of itself. I understand the parables of Jesus about the Kingdom to suggest this.

The third element in my thinking about this is that I see the emphasis of the New Testament to be qualitative in nature. This is the case whether we are looking at how we know whether a disciple is healthy, a church is healthy, or a movement is healthy (more on this assertion below). This brings me back to the main discussion.

Criteria for Assessing Insider Movements

As someone who has become known as an advocate for so-called "insider movements",⁴ I am often asked questions such as "how do you know these movements are real? How many believers are there? How many churches?" These questions are, I believe, indirectly affected by the history I reviewed earlier: numbers, church growth, assessment.

The survey above has hinted that there has been a parallel emphasis as well. I have already mentioned that I appreciate Waterman's definition of church is essentially qualitative in nature. I am going to argue for a similar approach in assessing movements.

In fact, even some of the examples already mentioned, which use numerical measurements for movements, qualitative assessments are included as well. So, for example, in addition to clear numerical or quantitative measurements, Garrison also describes qualitative characteristics of movements:

"Effective, reproducing bridges that lead to massive gospel witness

⁴ I say so-called because I would prefer different terminology. But the term "insider" is firmly entrenched in the literature, including in my own articles, so in spite of my wish we could find a better term, I see the need to use it. For descriptions and definitions of insider movements, see Higgins 2004 and 2006, as well as a much longer overview from many different disciplines in Talman and Travis 2015.

Effective, reproducing gospel presentations
Reproducing discipleship that turns new believers into CPM partners
Rapidly reproducing churches
Reproducing leadership development”⁵

Another example of this trend comes from a more recent expression of the movement-movement: DMM, or disciple making movements. Note these qualitative descriptors:

“Disciple Making movements are supernatural acts of God. They are outside of human control. They are not institutional, tradition-bound, managed, or owned. Disciple Making movements are often characterized by young believers still in a Disciple Making and maturing process themselves, passionately in love with Jesus who go from their newly established community of believers to make new disciples in a new region from which a new community of believers quickly emerges. This rapid multi-generational self-replication of churches in a given region or population segment defines church planting movements.”⁶

Each of these qualitative lists certainly includes numerical growth assumptions, and thus logic might lead to definitions and thresholds. As we have seen in Garrison, this is what does take place. And for such research to be published, this may well be a necessity.

But in my case, and the case of how our organization approaches things, we are not primarily assessing the health of movements in order to report, or prove, or support an argument.⁷ Instead we are primarily seeking to help a movement emerge and grow and then catalyze more movements. So we look primarily at the dynamics, the qualitative elements that seem to make this happen.

Where did we find those?

Looking for Qualitative Criteria

Actually, while I would love to be able to say that our organization bases its assessments of movements completely and only on criteria we have discovered in the New Testament, the reality is a little more “messy” and less direct. In fact, we had already started using certain criteria and teaching others to use those before we began to apply what I think is a more fully biblical set of lenses.

We began by modifying a set of criteria based on the “Three Selves” developed by both Henry Venn (an Anglican) and Rufus Anderson (Presbyterian). Later a fourth “self” was suggested, I believe by Paul Hiebert, and so we began to speak of Four Self Movements, which were:

Self-Propagating
Self-Governing
Self-Supporting
Self-Theologizing

⁵ Cited in Mission Frontiers, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/church-planting-movements-what-have-we-learned> accessed August 2016

⁶ See <http://www.idisciple.com> accessed August 2016

⁷ These statements do not imply that those who use more *quantitative* approaches are trying to prove what they measure exists or that certain approaches are better.

We developed definitions and a tool for assessing progress in movements among the unreached. But over time a number of things made my colleagues and I increasingly uneasy about these.

First, the first three “selves” were developed in response to the felt need for handing over established mission churches to local leadership. They emerged in the context, in other words, of a how to address a need in what had become a relatively established mission setting instead of fostering newer movements.

Second, as such, there is a sense in which these selves were in fact not part of the original vision or purpose of the churches they were now trying to encourage to be independent. The selves were never really criteria to measure a movement, but were employed to assess a “hand over.”

Third, the emphasis on “self” created a focus on the “self” dimension, not just the characteristics or dynamics of propagating and governing and supporting and theologizing. The ultimate aim of the thinking put forth was to get mission churches to do these things *themselves*.

Fourth, closely related to this was the fact that by including and indeed repeating the word “self” a subtle and not so subtle message was implanted which we became convinced smelled of western individualism. This seemed directly counter to the picture of *koinonia* and partnership so deeply rooted in the New Testament movement/s, which served to connect churches in ways that would be better described as interdependent.

Fifth, the final self, “self theologizing,” created huge misunderstandings not only to those outside of our organization, but also within. This was so true that often we could not overcome the resulting static and doubt merely be continually redefining what we meant by “self” and “theologizing” and so we felt a different term was needed.

Finally, the tool we had developed was complicated, wordy, and difficult to pass on and actually use. One result of this was a resistance to use it, even as leaders, because it was so difficult.

In addition to those considerations we were also affected by continuing to deliver our own training. That may sound strange, but will be clear when I explain. One component of our second level of training is a series of five studies focused on Luke and Acts. In a short period of time we go through those books five times, each time asking questions related to healthy movements. The aim is to help those we train to identify the dynamics that help movements grow and spread and become and remain healthy.

As a result, we in leadership found these texts kept speaking to us about how these dynamics which we discovered more inductively in Luke and Acts were quite different from the four selves we were then telling our trainees they should use as part of applying the training. There was a growing sense of “disconnect.”

For all of these reasons we felt a change was needed and decided to try to simplify, re-express, and rethink. We asked several people within our organization from different cultures to suggest changes.

As a result we came to speak of Four Signs of healthy movements. Here is a version of the tool in a simplified format. The underlined statements are the “sign” and the italics are descriptions that we use as we discuss whether a team is seeing these dynamics, and if so, how developed they are. The sub-sections end with a space for open-ended comments, and there is a space in our form to indicate whether the particular sign is indicating strength and health or not: yes, or not yet.

Sign 1: Multiplication: A movement with the vision to reach others. Matthew 28:16ff.
Believers share their faith with others regularly (resulting in more disciples and churches)
At least some believers have begun to reach out to other UPGs

COMMENTS:

Sign 2: Leadership: A movement empowered to lead. 1 Timothy 3:1 and 2 Timothy 2:2

Leaders have been equipped to organize the movement

Leaders from within the people group train other leaders

COMMENTS:

Sign 3: Raising Resources: A movement equipped to thrive. 1 Timothy 5:8 and Acts 18:1ff.

Leaders teach believers to be good stewards and generous givers

When needed, believers in the movement have started small-scale businesses in order to create local resources and sustain movement

COMMENTS:

Sign 4: Scriptural Engagement: A movement able to use the Scriptures well, and teach others to do so. 2 Timothy 2:2, 15; John 5:39

Leaders are able to understand Scripture and apply it to their culture

Leaders are able teach these truths to others.

COMMENTS:

Then, at the end of the tool, we have a summary assessment:

Overall Status: Movement (Yes, or Not Yet):

Overall Comments:

There are several important changes here from the previous tool we had developed. But, in the interests of staying focused on the purpose for this article, the main point in sharing this is to explain the sort of qualitative assessment approach we have elected to take.

Are there quantitative details that could be surfaced within the above descriptors? Certainly: how many disciples? How many churches? How many leaders? How much funding and resource? Etc. But in our view, if the dynamics are healthy, if we are giving yes answers to the descriptors above, then there is a movement, regardless of the size or numerical measurements.

Doubtless there are many other qualitative dynamics of movements we could have and perhaps should include. As we continue to grow and develop perhaps we will do so.

Scriptural Quantitative Criteria?

I will conclude this section with a brief look at some other New Testament passages that might speak to this topic. As I continue to probe the New Testament and seek to understand what makes for a healthy movement, I have come to appreciate Paul more and more in this regard. The citations should be seen as examples, not a comprehensive list for every topic:

Spreading of the Gospel

1 Thessalonians (the word went forth from you), Colossians (how to treat outsiders, asks for prayer for his own witness), Philippians (sees the Philippians as partners in the Gospel as Paul shares it in Rome and

rejoices in many expressions of others' preaching as well), Romans (Paul's own vision and passion for the Gospel in unreached areas)

Leaders

This is seen again in his own practice, his lists of co-workers (Colossians 4 for example) and in commands such as those in 2 Timothy 2:2 and in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1

Relationships, unity, and resolving conflict

Relationships are probably mentioned in every letter. The most famous examples include the "one another" commands and 1 Corinthians 13. Paul goes to great lengths, as well, to call believers to a high level of unity in diversity: he expects the Romans and Corinthians for example, to be able to truly accept without judgment brothers and sisters who differed in conscience over some significant issues.

Gospel and "sound" teaching

This includes explaining it positively and correcting false expressions too. This is found as one of the motives of almost every letter.⁸

Living "in" Christ, and Christ living in us:

This is such a frequently mentioned theme in Paul that I cannot even begin a list of references. There is that there is a deep and profound spiritual mystery behind and beneath the "cognitive" truths we sometimes associate with "truth".

Generosity

For example, see 1 Corinthians 16, 2 Corinthians 8-9, Philippians (one of the first "missionary prayer letters" thanking partners for their giving). There is also his own example of using his own resources.

Partnership/koinonia

Philippians comes to mind again, especially in the use of "koinonia" there: "in the Gospel," "in the Spirit," in "the suffering of Christ," and in "the ministry of giving and receiving." We could add Paul's use of "co-" and "with" and "fellow" in compound words describing his co-workers. And this perhaps suggests as well that for Paul "leadership development" and "partnership" were overlapping elements of his service.

The list could be much longer, but this will suffice to show that Paul seems to have clear qualitative ideas about what criteria makes for healthy and complete and mature communities of faith.

Before I conclude, two questions might come to mind:

Does this mean we are right to apply these to a *movement*?

And if we do, is it inappropriate to suggest other criteria, more quantitative in nature?

⁸ I find it significant, relative to Paul's approach to "sound teaching" and correction that there seem to be no examples in which he sent a letter that *either* corrected doctrine, *or* focused on relationships and character ("ethical concerns"), but instead wrote to do *both*. Every letter we have addresses both. The typical pattern (except in the so-called "pastoral letters" and the Corinthian letters), is that Paul first addresses what we might call doctrinal themes, and then turns the corner to apply these to relationships, ethics, and so called practical matters. The letters of Ephesians and Colossians exhibit this at about exactly the mid point (see Ephesians 4:1 and Colossians 3:1ff.). Roman's and Galatians each, in very different ways and in different tones, spend longer on the doctrinal issues. But both turn to life issues before closing (so, Romans 12:1ff.).

My reply to the first question runs the risk of opening a new controversy, perhaps. I am convinced that the distinction between “churches” and “movement” is a distinction not really made within the New Testament. This conviction raises implications for the closely related topic of “modality and sodality,” assumptions about which are made by much of modern mission thinking. I do not have space to argue this thesis, but I conclude from Acts and Paul that what we think of as movement, church, churches, mission structures, sodality, and modality, etc., are actually all just emphases within *one actual reality*: the Gospel spreading and bearing fruit in more and more lives, churches, and places (see Colossians 1). And, based on this thesis, I do conclude that the criteria in the epistles are quite rightly applicable to movements.

What about other criteria, numbers, etc.? I think it would be a mistake to argue that the absence of such criteria in the NT means we are wrong to develop and use such today. I see why others have done so. I see the value in research. I see the need, when preparing a book about movements, to be able to describe how one decided what to look at and NOT look at.⁹

My point is not that it is wrong or inappropriate to use numbers in order to *measure*, but simply that they are not essential *criteria*.

Summary, Conclusion

I have surveyed the movement-movement, and then shifted to the focus of this article relative to how to assess insider movements. I have suggested that qualitative measurements are sufficient. Indeed, in my opinion they are to be preferred.

I suggested that quantitative measurements tend to foster inflated reporting and the need to please (and to avoid personal shame as well).

I have noted that while the bible provides examples of counting and numerical measurement, it seems to be more by way of citing examples and giving testimony, as opposed to measuring and assessing.

And I have shared both biblical and organizational examples of qualitative measurement.

I will close by returning to Waterman, whose queries prompted this article:

“I began wondering: How large is a “small” Insider movement? How large would an *average*-sized Insider movement be? How many people, fellowships (*ekklesia*), or *some things* would be needed for something to properly qualify as an Insider Movement? I couldn’t find an answer anywhere in the book.” (Waterman 2016)

I understand and sympathize with the question because we who advocate for insider movements have not clearly articulated the criteria we use in measuring when and if a given “movement” is in a fact a *movement*, let alone being able to say why we would describe it as large or small.

In my organization we have narrowed the qualitative measurements such as what we find in the New Testament down to four major ones and we measure those as best we can via observation, questions, and discussion with those closest to the ground level. Our assessment as to whether or not we see a movement is based on whether we see more multiplication, more leaders, more generosity, and more engagement in scripture.

⁹ Though even in these cases, more qualitative criteria can be developed and applied in ways that would suit the needs for many of the examples I just cited.

I realize that “more” may imply numbers. But the difference is that we have not set some sort of a minimum threshold that enables us to say “more than this, a movement, but fewer than this, no movement.”

The church (in its local and catholic and movement expressions) is the Body of Christ. It is a living thing. This suggests an analogy to my mind. We cannot say that prior to this or that “line” a person is or is not human. The fact that human “dna” is present means this is a person, a human being, and they will grow and develop and become mature.

In the same way, I am suggesting that if the right “dna” is in place then we have a movement. The primary job description, then, for pioneer church planters: disciple and coach from day one with the aim of fostering this dna.

Healthy growing movements flow from the right dna.

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Quality is Essential; But Any Size Can Count as a “Movement”?

An Interaction with Kevin Higgins’ “Measuring Insider Movements?”

By L.D. Waterman

I appreciate Kevin Higgins’ willingness to interact with my question about size criteria for an Insider Movement to be counted as a movement. He proposes some excellent qualitative criteria for assessing a movement, and I believe his “Four Signs of Healthy Movements” constitute a valuable addition to our understanding and assessment of movements. I very much agree with him that the spiritual quality of a movement is essential and vital to assess.

At the same time, his response confirms my impression that (apparently) no one has proposed or applied any *quantitative* criterion for describing something as an “Insider Movement.” The only criterion needed is that “believing families” (plural, thus it must be more than one person) are following Jesus while remaining part of their socio-religious birth community.

After describing his “Four Signs of Healthy Movements,” Higgins asks: “Are there quantitative details that could be surfaced within the above descriptors? Certainly....But in our view, if the dynamics are healthy, if we are giving yes answers to the descriptors above, then there is a movement, regardless of the size or numerical measurements.” To me this signals at the very least a red flag of caution: *let the buyer beware*. Use of the word “movement” in the phrase “Insider Movement” can be misleading – giving the impression of something much larger than exists in reality.

What is a “movement”?

In common usage, a *movement* is understood as “a group of people working together to advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas,”ⁱ or “large, sometimes informal, groupings of individuals or organizations which focus on specific political or social issues.”ⁱⁱ Examples include the Labor Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, Occupy Wall Street, Women’s Suffrage Movement, Black Lives Matter, the Feminist Movement, the Charismatic Movement and the Student Volunteer Movement. All these involve(d) thousands, sometimes millions, of people. It would seem that describing something as a “movement” implies something necessarily *much larger* than just a few families. This is apparently not the case with Insider Movements.

I would raise a second concern with Higgins’ assertion that size or numerical measurements are unimportant. He invests a page and a half describing Donald McGavran’s contribution to movement thinking, concluding: “The early ‘dna’ of the church growth movement can be felt in the tendency to apply numerical evaluations to the measurement of whether something is or is not a movement.” However the New Testament obviously greatly predates McGavran yet also shows a clear and compelling interest in measurement and multiplication.

Quantitative measurements in the NT

A quick look through the New Testament shows that God inspired its human authors (most notably Luke and Paul) to consider movement size an important facet of his calling for his people. In the excellent article, “Movements in the Bible,”ⁱⁱⁱ J. Snodgrass presents this brief overview from Acts alone:

“Luke’s account of the remarkable spread of the gospel in the book of Acts sets the standard for what we mean by ‘movement.’ In Acts, Luke records the spread of the gospel from ‘Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’^{iv} When those cut to the heart by Peter’s sermon at Pentecost were baptized, 3,000 were added to the faith in a single day (Acts 2:41). The church in Jerusalem grew as ‘... the Lord added day by day those who were being saved’ (Acts 2:47). As Peter and John were ‘proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead,’ ‘many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about *five thousand*’ (Acts 4:2, 4). A short time later Luke recounts that ‘more than ever believers were added to the Lord, *multitudes* of both men and women’ (Acts 5:14). Then, ‘the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem’ (Acts 6:7).

“This growing and multiplying continued as the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem: ‘the church *throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, *it multiplied*’ (Acts 9:31). When those scattered by the persecution of Stephen came to Antioch, they spoke to the Hellenists there, ‘And the hand of the Lord was with them, and *a great number* who believed turned to the Lord’ (Acts 11:21). Back in Judea, ‘... the word of God increased and multiplied’ (Acts 12:24).

“When the Holy Spirit and the church in Antioch set apart Paul and Barnabas for the ‘work,’ they preached at Pisidian Antioch, the Gentiles gladly heard and believed, ‘And the word of the Lord was spreading *throughout the whole region*’ (Acts 13:49). Later, on Paul’s second journey with Silas, they revisited the churches of Derbe and Lystra, ‘So the churches were *strengthened in the faith*, and *they increased in numbers daily*’ (Acts 16:5). During Paul’s Ephesian ministry, he ‘reasoned daily’ in the Hall of Tyrannus, ‘so that *all the residents* of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks’ (Acts 19:10). As the gospel grew in Ephesus, ‘the word of the Lord *continued to increase and prevail mightily*’ (Acts 19:20). Finally, upon Paul’s return to Jerusalem, the elders there inform Paul ‘how many *tens of thousands* there are among the Jews of those who have believed...’ (Acts 21:20 ISV).”

Higgins writes: “there is no question that the numbers Luke provides in his account of the growing Jesus movement in Luke-Acts is an example of counting and reporting. There is nothing wrong with counting then, unless (depending on how one reads the census accounts) one’s motives or inspiration are wrong....I read the accounts in Luke-Acts as reporting growth, certainly. But I would be hard pressed to assert that Luke’s numbers are being used as evaluations or assessments. They are reported almost casually, and I sense no hint of ‘proofs’.”

Higgins thus downplays Luke’s inspired reporting of numbers in two ways. First, he raises the specter of wrong motives. This is certainly a valid concern, but one which applies equally to *everything* we do, not uniquely to reporting the size of God’s great works. Second, he claims “They are reported almost casually.” On this point I strongly take issue. In the context of Luke’s narrative, it seems clear the numbers are presented as part of the evidence^v that this is indeed a marvelous work of God. Luke intentionally often pairs description of numbers with statements about the work of the Lord, for example: “walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, *it multiplied*” (Acts 9:31). “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and *a great*

number who believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). Luke’s reporting of size, numbers and multiplication seem clearly intended to provide strong supporting evidence that the Lord has been mightily at work.

Missiological significance of numbers

It seems to me that the issue of movement size is not only biblically significant but also missiologically vital. As already noted in Acts, I believe that appropriate attention to numbers can testify of God’s work and recognizing it as such. In addition, attention to numbers can be an important element in effectively finishing the task the Lord has assigned us (to “make disciples of all nations” – Matt 28:19). Are we making progress or not? This important question is better answered by verifiable numbers rather than impressions gained from anecdotal reports or watching the world news.

Numerical assessment is vital to helping us do more of what is *more* fruitful and do less of what is less fruitful.^{vi} Luke’s motivation in Acts seems to be to show the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise in Acts 1:8 – the gospel effectively spreading to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The Apostle Paul clearly aimed for gospel advance to the uttermost parts of the known world: to Rome and on to Spain. He assessed his ministry in terms of what had already been fruitful: “So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.”^{vii} He also made strategic plans based on the presence or absence of the gospel message in various places.^{viii} So the quantity of gospel presence clearly played a role in the missiological thinking of the Apostle Paul. Also his strategy for multi-generational multiplication of leaders illustrates the value he placed on equipping “many” people.^{ix}

Tools now available, such as the “Seven Stages of the CPM Continuum”^x enable us, as individuals and teams, to assess the current state of our work and appropriate next steps to aim for, to fulfill Jesus’ command and make disciples of all nations. And on a larger scale, global research such as that being compiled in conjunction with the 2414 Initiative^{xi} and others, enables us to take the pulse of progress toward completing the Great Commission. The motto: “We are a global coalition praying and working together to start kingdom movement engagements in every unreached people and place by 2025” presumes a level of knowledge about which people groups and places are still “unreached.” If we don’t know where the goal is, we as the global church will have a hard time reaching it.

The danger of numbers...and non-numbers

Higgins gives three reasons “why I have not emphasized or exercised numerical measurements in the movements I know of.” His first reason is a noble one. He wants to avoid giving “subtle pressure to inflate and make things sound good.” I honor his desire to not lead coworkers into temptation. Yet this can happen with or without citation of numbers. I personally know of a specific case in which the description of something as an Insider *Movement* conveyed a misleading impression that the work was much, much larger and more fruitful than was in fact the case. I think we can agree that *all* reporting needs to be handled with wisdom, cultural sensitivity and humility, lest either the givers or the hearers of reports receive unhelpful messages at odds with God’s truth. The temptation to give an impression greater than reality lurks within the non-numbers of Insider Movements as well as in the reporting of numbers.

Did Jesus consider quantity unimportant?

Higgins offers a second reason: “if the qualitative measures are healthy, the quantification and numerical growth will take care of itself. I understand the parables of Jesus about the Kingdom to suggest this.” I see two glaring problems with this. First, I consider it a false dichotomy to claim that good quality renders irrelevant any interest in quantity. It seems clear to me that from a biblical point of view both quality *and* quantity are important.^{xii} Jesus said “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit....This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”^{xiii} The repetition of “*much* fruit” conveys clearly that Jesus considers quantity of fruit important as well as quality. Leon Morris comments: “The man who so abides in Christ and has Christ abide in him keeps on bearing fruit *in quantity*.”^{xiv}

Second, I’m surprised that Higgins would claim Jesus’ parables as support for considering quantity unimportant. Certainly Jesus’ parables teach the value of quality. At the same time it appears to me they also clearly and frequently portray the value of quantity (multiplication). Just a few salient examples would include the parables of the sower, the mustard seed, the yeast and the talents.^{xv} Each of these parables portrays numerical (quantitative) increase as a positive kingdom value.

A flawed analogy

Higgins says: “I appreciate Waterman’s definition of church is essentially qualitative in nature. I am going to argue for a similar approach in assessing movements.” I in turn appreciate Higgins’ affirmation of my definition of church. But I believe his analogy of church to movements is fatally flawed. The New Testament never mentions specific numbers in a church, most frequently using the non-numerical descriptor “household” (*oikos*) or descriptions per city. For the advance of the kingdom movement as a whole, however, numerical descriptors (both specific and non-specific) are frequently used (e.g. 3000 added at Pentecost, and “a large number of priests”).^{xvi}

An unsettling conclusion

Higgins concludes by underlining his (in my opinion, false) dichotomy between quality and quantity in movements. “I have suggested that qualitative measurements are sufficient. Indeed, in my opinion they are to be preferred.” I wonder: would anyone buy a product if the advertisement claimed, “This product’s quality is so good that the quantity doesn’t matter”? I doubt it. Yet this seems to be the claim given on behalf of Insider Movements. For decades now, all focus has been on the *quality* of insider movements (which has itself been the subject of much dispute). Yet it appears that even at their very best, the potential of Insider Movements as such to contribute to completing the Great Commission remains entirely a mystery.

I appreciate that Higgins acknowledged: “What about other criteria, numbers, etc.?....I see the need, when preparing a book about movements, to be able to describe how one decided what to look at and NOT look at.” This brings me back to the starting point of my original article (“When Does a Movement Count as a Movement?”): the book *Understanding Insider Movements*, as the definitive work on the subject to this point, gives no numerical criteria for how its editors or authors decided what to look at or include in their description.

My conclusion

I appreciate Higgins' appropriate attention to the quality of movements. At the same time, his thorough avoidance of any quantitative criteria for movements confirms my concern after reading *Understanding Insider Movements*. Proponents of Insider Movements claim these as movements, but have no desire to include any numerical criteria in the classification. Thus any claim that something is an Insider Movement tells us nothing about the size of the "movement" relative to the group or location in which it exists, and thus nothing about its potential to fulfill the Great Commission among that group.

In contrast, statistics of church planting movements offer a more concrete picture of God's work in specific locations. This constitutes a clearer testimony of gospel advance and a better indication of how much a movement is or is not impacting the group or geographical area in which it exists.

In my original article (written two years ago), I cited numbers of church planting movements claimed by David Garrison and David Watson, based on their published definitions: "Garrison: 70 among Muslims; Watson: 68 total." Since then, collaboration and sharing of data has brought a great increase in the number of recognized church planting movements around the world. As Robby Butler notes in his article "Astonishing Progress":^{xvii} "In mid-2017, formation of the 24:14 Coalition deepened trust between movement leaders and researchers, and many shared their data for the first time. Credible organizations and networks reported approximately 2,500 movement engagements, including nearly 500 movements that had produced millions of new disciples. As 2017 ended, the count was nearly 650 movements with 50 million disciples!"

I consider this credible and very helpful data for our planning toward completing the Great Commission. This, I believe, is a goal worthy of our best effort – worth the challenges of wisely and honestly sharing accurate reports of the Lord's great works in our day.

ⁱ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/movement>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_movement

ⁱⁱⁱ *Mission Frontiers*, 2018 Jan/Feb Issue

^{iv} All Snodgrass's Scripture quotations from ESV; all italics in Scripture quotations added.

^v Certainly the numbers responding to gospel message are not the only evidence given. Christ being glorified, lives being transformed and miraculous signs and wonders are among other evidences consistently presented.

^{vi} This numerical relevance was a part of many early presentations of the idea of Insider Movements. Hope was offered that believers remaining "inside" their birth religion would enable the reaching of much larger numbers, and perhaps eventually transform that religion from the inside out. With few exceptions, the hoped-for numerical effectiveness of the insider strategy does not seem to have developed.

^{vii} Romans 15:19b

^{viii} "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known." (Romans 15:20, NIV)

^{ix} "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others." (2 Timothy 2:2, NIV)

^x <http://multmove.net/cpm-continuum/>

^{xi} <https://www.2414now.net/>

^{xii} This also addresses Higgins' third reason: "I see the emphasis of the New Testament to be qualitative in nature." From a NT perspective, both quality *and* quantity have positive kingdom value. The importance of one doesn't negate the importance of the other.

^{xiii} John 15:5,8 (NIV)

^{xiv} *The Gospel According to John*, by Leon Morris. (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament*)
Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971. p. 671 – commentary on John 15:5

^{xv} Matthew 13: 3-9, 31-33; 25:14-30

^{xvi} Acts 2:31; 6:7

^{xvii} <https://multmove.net/wp-content/uploads/Astonishing-Progress.pdf>