

## Assessing Christward Movements

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The concept of “movements” enjoys a prominent place in the missions community. This is particularly true of movements related to the frontiers of mission, such as Church Planting Movements (CPMs) and Disciple-Making Movements (DMMs), although the exact term one uses is not so important. We really are talking about trying to understand what God is doing when large numbers of people are coming to faith in a frontier mission environment. The key thing is that these are movements — they are not static entities like most churches are.

Mission researchers find ourselves at the critical junction between practitioners who report on such movements — often anecdotally and/or at second hand — and the stakeholders supporting their efforts, who want to confirm and understand what is going on (and whose reactions to the reports can range from overjoyed to highly skeptical).

Much of the research in this area has focused on quantitative measures — which is to be expected, since we naturally associate movements with (large) numbers. Unfortunately, quantitative research alone has significant potential to give a distorted image of what is occurring in a movement. For example, although it can give a picture of the breadth of a movement, quantitative research is much less able to measure a movement’s depth. In addition, quantitative methods might give an idea of *how much* a movement has grown in the past and might expand in the future, but they are not as useful in telling us *how* the movement took root, expanded, and might continue in the future (including *where*, among *whom*, and *why*).

For this reason, we propose a more robust, mixed-methods model for confirming, characterizing, and understanding kingdom movements. Mixed methods research has become more popular in Christian mission circles the past few decades. Usually this means qualitative research done to complement quantitative because there is a growing awareness that the two complement each other, allowing the strength of one to support the weakness of the other. For example, qualitative research can clarify those things which quantitative instruments have left open to interpretation.

While thinking like this is certainly good news, it is unnecessarily limiting. Since missiology incorporates a wide range of academic disciplines, there is no good reason that mixed-methods missions research cannot include the tools of other social sciences—other ways of conceptualizing and analyzing data. Therefore, we propose a model for field assessment of movements that looks something like a three-legged stool.

Consider it this way: It is possible to sit on a stool that has only one leg under it, but few of us would want to. It will be very unstable and flop all over the place! It is also possible to sit on a stool with two legs — better than on a stool with only one — but a two-legged stool is still unstable and will rock back and forth. A good, solid stool is one with three legs.

Sometimes we build research plans for studying a Christward movement that look much like a one-legged stool. That is, we use only one method, usually quantitative research. That means we focus on doing surveys to count things like people, baptisms, and churches. There is nothing wrong with doing qualitative research, of course. In fact, it can be very good. Numbers can show us how widespread a movement is, such as how far into the countryside it has spread. But they really don't say anything about the movement's depth, or the actual discipleship taking place. An example of this can be seen in places where large numbers of people are reported to have

“converted” and baptized. Yet later we learn that many of these were already believers who perhaps enjoyed the religious experience, or were simply marking their joining of a different Christian denomination.

But the goal of doing a field assessment of a movement is to gain a high level of confidence that something reproducing and spreading is taking place. It IS NOT to come up with numbers that somehow prove anything. We don't need numbers; we need CONFIDENCE about what is happening when we talk with the people in our churches, with foundations, with stakeholders of all kinds. Therefore, we need more legs holding up our stool, and the three we propose are, quantitative, qualitative, and network analysis

Each of these serves a different function in giving us a clear picture of a Christward movement. Each contributes different reasons for confidence that what we say we know about a movement is accurate. Thus, we want to do two main things in this paper. The first is to explore each of these research paradigms and how they can work together for a field assessment. The second is to give some ideas of how to do this without compromising security issues that are a serious concern for many movements.

## QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

The first leg of our stool is quantitative research. ‘Quantitative’ refers to numbers — anything that can be measured or counted. The emphasis in quantitative research is on objective measurement. This includes two different types of parameters. True *quantitative variables* have an actual numerical value, such as a person's age. *Categorical variables*, on the other hand, have non-numerical (or qualitative) values; they include factors such as gender and ethnicity.

Although the categories themselves are not numerical, the number of people who fit into each category can be counted.

Quantitative research can be used to describe such aspects of a movement as the number of people who have been converted, the number who have been baptized, and the number of churches established. Quantitative research also could be used in an effort to explore the relationships between factors that might play a role in a movement (such as ethnicity, gender, or age) and even to establish cause-effect relationships between two or more factors.

In most cases, researchers studying movements are not able to collect all (or perhaps any) of the data first-hand. For example, a researcher cannot attend every church service every Sunday in order to observe the number of people present. Researchers generally rely instead on questionnaires or surveys to gather the information they desire. Sometimes the same information can be sought in multiple ways in order to provide data validation. For example, a researcher might ask a pastor how many people in his church have been baptized and also ask individual congregants whether they have been baptized.

When dealing with survey data, it is important to remember that they represent what people have reported about the questions they were asked. Ideally, their answers reflect reality.

Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case. Sometimes this is because respondents actually seek to deceive the researcher (when, for instance, a pastor inflates the number of churches he is planting in order to secure more funding). At other times, respondents might knowingly reply with false information in an effort to please researchers or supply the answers they think the researchers want to hear, although culturally they do not consider this to be lying. In some cases, people give responses that they wish were true or that they think are true but

aren't (such as over-reporting the number of times per month they attend church activities or read the Bible), without a deliberate attempt to deceive.

Thus, numbers can tell us certain kinds of things, but far too many people have the wrong idea about numbers. Recall that although quantitative research can answer questions such as "How much?" or "How many?", it cannot address questions of "Why?" or "How?" Contrast this with the attitude of many church and mission leaders, who often see quantitative research simply as a matter of "bigger numbers = good, lower numbers = bad".

Further, the potential shortcomings with respect to misreporting by survey respondents make quantitative research most useful over an extended period. With respect to movements, respondents might be able to over-report things like conversions, baptisms, or churches in one or two surveys. Over time, however, fantastic rates of growth cannot be sustained. Neither can the total number of converts exceed the population of an area. Researchers will thus be able to detect invalid data more easily over the long term than based on the results of a single survey.

Of course, quantitative research and surveys are not bad in and of themselves. Yet they are not, used alone, the best way to understand what God is doing in a place or among a people. Often they are most useful in providing data that can be used to formulate qualitative questions that will address the deeper realities undergirding potential movements. For example, they might give a sense of rate of increase (if the numbers hold up well over 3–5 years) that would then lead researchers to ask how and why the increase is occurring.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The next leg of our stool is qualitative research. Often this takes the form of in-depth interviews.

I think most mission researchers are quite familiar with qualitative research, because over the

past 30 years it has become a more and more important part of what we do. In-depth interviews have become popular because they tell us whether people are actually understanding and doing what they are learning when they gather — are they really internalizing the gospel, or just showing up for meetings? In other words, they help us see the “quality” of a movement.

As with quantitative research, however, we need to remember what qualitative research cannot tell us. For example, suppose a researcher goes into the field and interviews 10 people about what they do in their house churches. That is great information, but without some quantitative research to go with it, we can’t really know if these housechurches are reaching different generations of society, or only the old people. And we need quantitative research to tell us if the people who come to these meetings are then following up with water baptism or not—which I think we all agree is pretty important.

## NETWORK ANALYSIS

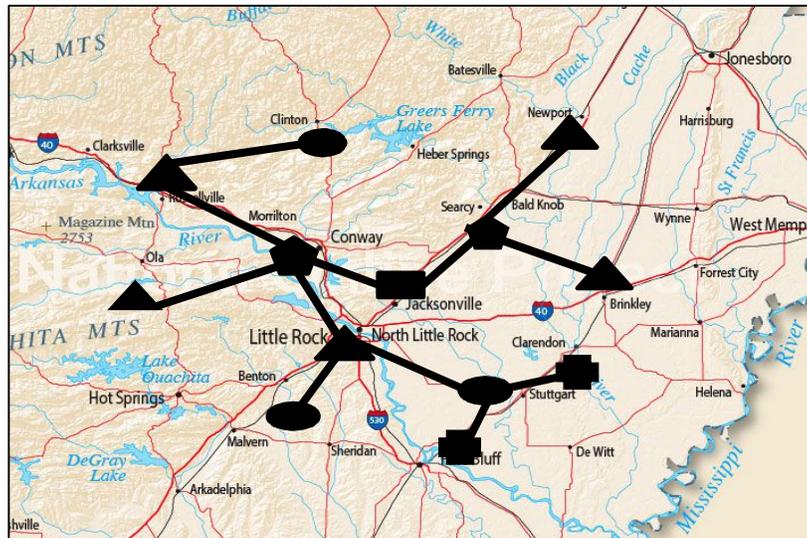
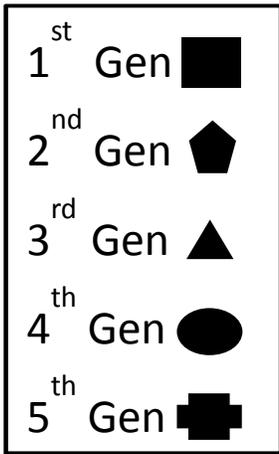
Christward movements (or whatever term you use) are, in the words of social scientists, social networks — not in the sense of Facebook or Twitter, of course, but as real human webs of relationships. Therefore, one way to study them is by means of a social network analysis.

A major part of knowing whether what you are studying is in fact a “movement,” and how healthy it is, requires you to know how the different parts connect to each other and how it grows. Obviously we could make this extremely complicated, and some people might want to do very complex network analyses, but our focus here is on research that has practical value in mission, so we will keep our analysis simple.

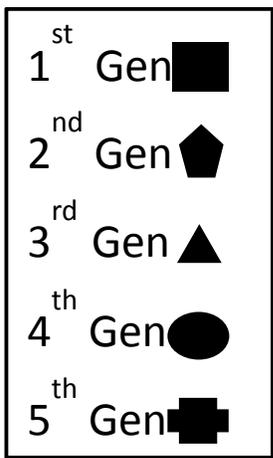
In order not to compromise security, let us frame our discussion around an imaginary Christward movement . Suppose it begins with a group of disciples in the city of Jacksonville, Arkansas

(where DH lives). This is the group with which we would start our network analysis. We can call it the first generation, or the “mother” church — again, the exact name does not really matter for the analysis. The important information is that everything starts here. This is where an outsider (or, if you prefer, an apostle) comes in and begins something where there was never anything before. Suppose this little group then starts two new daughter churches (second-generation groups), and that from them then come third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation groups.

In order to visualize the relationships among the various groups, we can overlay their locations on a map and use lines to connect them, showing the pathways by which one group started another.



Now we can start collecting other pieces of information that will help us understand this simple network and how it is growing. For example, suppose that one of the second-generation groups has both English-speakers and Spanish-speakers in it. We can add that information to our network map using green for English and orange for Spanish speaking groups.



Now we have a useful social network map of a little Christward movement in Central Arkansas. This does not take any sophisticated computer programs or special training. But it does give us a good picture of what is happening with this movement. We can see where it jumped from one ethno-linguistic group to another. We can see that while the mother church is influential, not all growth is driven by it. Instead there is good evangelistic impulse coming out of the second and even third-generation groups. This tells us that there is good potential for continuing multiplication down the generational chain. Indeed, there are many other things we can learn from such a study, all depending on how much information we want to gather and include in the network map.

Additional data could be added as available or considered important. For example, a network map of a Christward movement might include:

- Who started each group — Was it an apostle (a “sent one” from the starting group? Was it more a team effort? Or did someone move and start a new group?
- The date each group began
- The nature of inter-group relationships — Is there ongoing relationship between a “mother” group and a “daughter” group? If so, what kind of relationship? Does the mother group financially support the daughter? Is there a leadership relationship between the generations? Does the mother group exercise control and authority over the daughter group? Or are daughter groups independent from the mother group? And if so, when — from the very beginning? Once they reach a certain size or other measure of viability?

Because the answers to such questions have serious missiological implications, you might choose to include this information in your network map. You can make it as simple or as complicated as you wish. The main thing to keep in mind is that this kind of “movement mapping” is another way to confirm the emergence of a Christward movement.

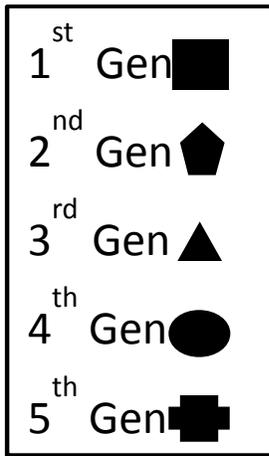
## SECURITY CONCERNS

We must acknowledge up front that security is a very real issue when we discuss reports on movements because many of them are in sensitive areas of the Muslim or Hindu world. Both of the authors are involved in research highly sensitive environments and know that any inappropriate information sharing can prove deadly to our brothers and sisters on the ground.

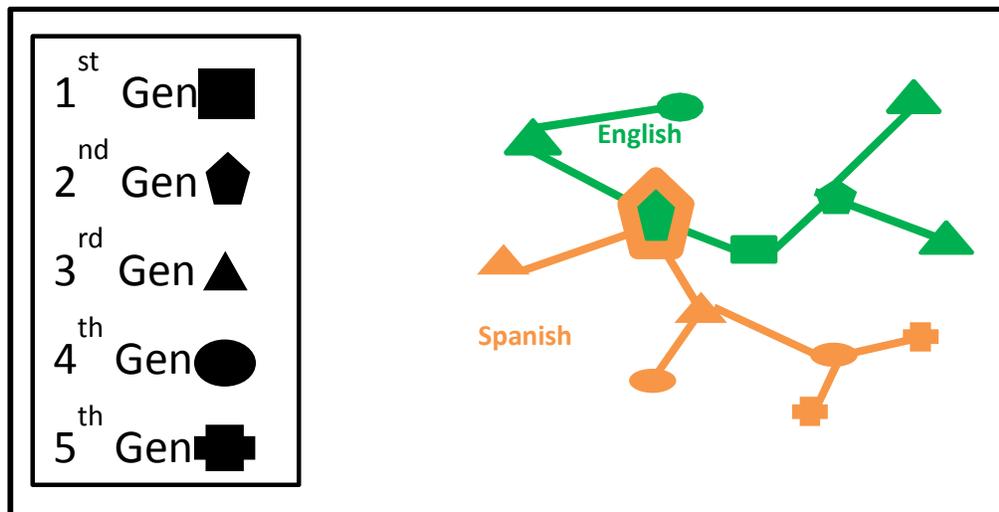
However, we are convinced this does not mean that we should not do research, or share findings,

in such situations. It just means we must be careful and creative. The basic principal of sharing sensitive mission information is that of “redaction,” that is censoring strategic parts of the data. The process of redacting a mission research report is not terribly complex. It is best to start by drafting a full and complete version, then piece-by-piece remove information that could create security concerns. By redacting, that is starting with all the information and working backward toward a secure document, we are more likely to produce a final report that is still informative without unduly risking anyone’s security. Usually this process will require several drafts, each going back and forth between the researcher and those on the field, until everyone is comfortable with the balance between information and security.

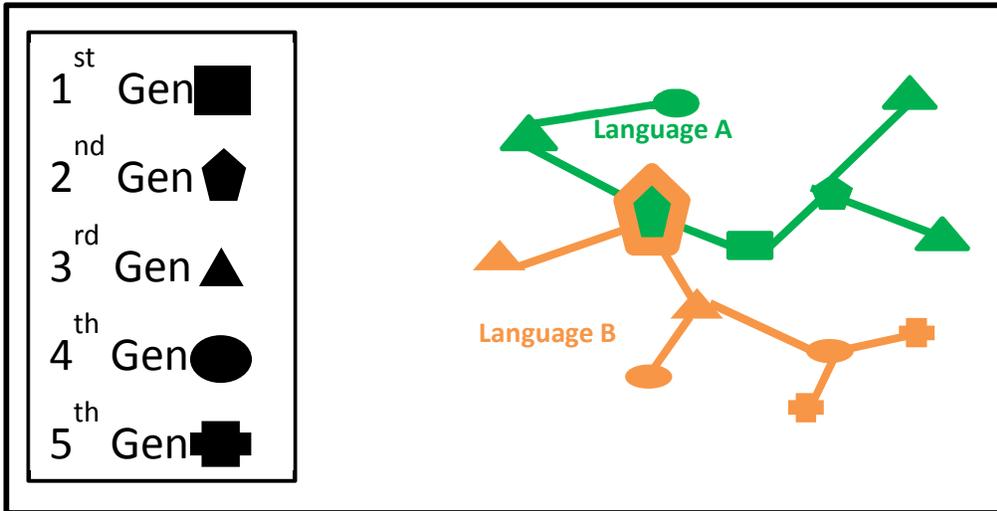
The idea of redacting written reports for security concerns is not difficult to grasp, but it may seem impossible to apply the same to a network map. Therefore, let’s explore how we can develop a meaningful network map of a Christward movement, yet still now give the enemies of Christ anything to work with if they were to come across it. In keeping with the basic principal of redacting a report, we start with the full network map.



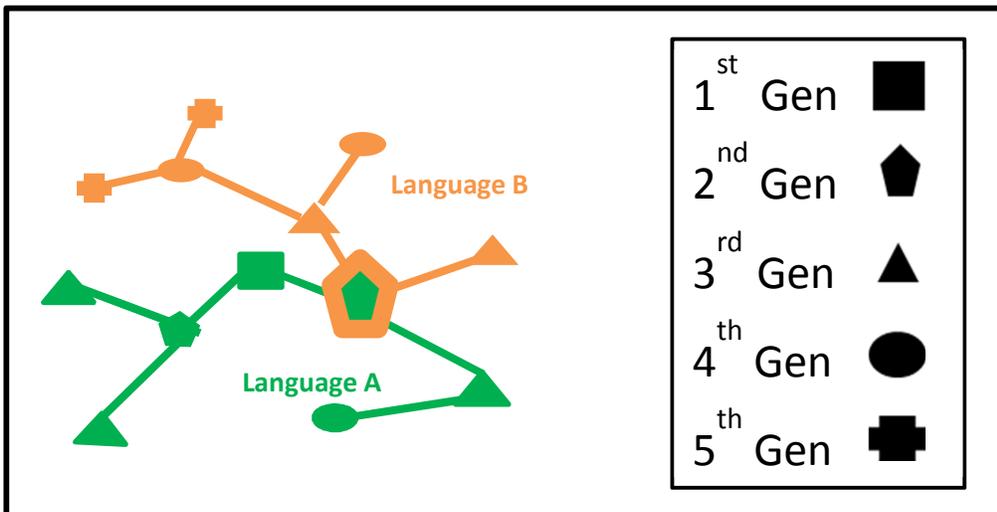
Then we strip out all geographic data (some of which, such as latitude and longitude, might be embedded in the points themselves). This will leave a simple diagram of the network relationships.



Without any geographic reference points, identifying the actual location of groups become much more difficult. In many situations, the next logical step would be to obscure ethno-linguistic information.



In situations of very high security concern, additional anonymity can be added by inverting (making a mirror image of) the network map and/or by rotating the network map.



There are probably other changes which could be made, but we must be careful that we only redact as much as necessary for proper security, and no more.

When all manipulations are completed, the resulting social network map that is secure yet tells us many things. For example, the network map depicted above gives us the following information:

1. Multiplication — The network is growing generationally, which is an important sign of health. Growth is not confined to a single generation or a single “parent” group (which might not be the first generation).
2. Geographic spread — The network is moving beyond its immediate first-generation location. Of course, without a scale attached it is impossible to tell how far the movement is spreading; that information must be supplied by the persons presenting or interpreting the network map to others. In addition, how “far” a movement is spreading will depend on factors such as its immediate context (urban versus rural, population density, modes and availability of transportation, etc.).
3. Ethnolinguistic spread — The movement is crossing ethnolinguistic barriers – a very important piece of information to know in most mission environments.

## CONCLUSION

As “movements” have become more and more talked about in mission, we as researchers need to find ways to study them which give all involved solid confidence about what we do and do not know when looking at them. So I hope we have shown that a three-legged research stool is a much more stable and secure for this than one with only one or two legs.

At the same time, we recognize even research done in this way can never answer all the questions people may raise, or dispel every doubt some may have. However, we believe that using mixed methods approach including quantitative, qualitative, and network analysis will give us much more confidence in understanding what God is doing in a movement, and present a high quality picture of what God is doing among a particular people.