

THE NATURE AND NECESSITY OF CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS

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This paper introduces church planting movements and considers how they differ from both networks and institutions. It then addresses the nature of gospel partnership within such movements and the place theological vision plays in enabling and establishing a partnership.

In the space of a single generation, the church has become aware of the strategic importance of church planting if it is to reach a post-Christian nation with the gospel of Christ. Reflecting this change, a growing body of literature has paid attention to the need for new forms of church and in particular missional community models of the church if we are to be effective in this task.¹ However, considerably less attention has been given to the need for church multiplication movements, if we are to see healthy and effective church planting happen at a pace and to the extent that is necessary to reach our cities and our nation for Christ. Through the ministry of Redeemer Presbyterian Church and its sister church-planting organisation Redeemer City to City, Tim Keller has led the way in advocating the establishment not

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¹ Missional Church might be best summarised as ‘gospel community on mission with Jesus’. For an overview see Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 251-261. For a leading example in the literature see Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006).

just of church planting networks but movements. *Center Church* offers a paradigm for how this might be achieved.²

I. What Do We Mean by Church Planting Movements?

In considering the place of movements for church multiplication, it is essential to distinguish a movement from both a denomination and a network. A degree of confusion arises from the fact that movements share some common characteristics with networks and networks, in turn, share some of the dynamics observable in a movement. However, it is critical to our understanding that we grasp the fact that movements are not networks and they are quite unlike denominations.

A church planting movement may be defined as a self-sustaining movement of church-planting churches, committed to working together through a shared vision for the planting of gospel-churches within a city, region or nation.³

1. Attributes of Church Planting Movements

Movements by their very nature are difficult to define.

² Keller, *Center Church*, Section 3, 251-377. Also, published separately, Tim Keller, *Serving a movement: Doing balanced, Gospel-centered ministry in your city* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan, 2016). The content of this article is essentially a sustained reflection of things learned from the ministry of the organisation *Redeemer City to City* and its sister organisation *City to City Europe* and of the example and ministry of Tim Keller in particular.

³ David Garrison has studied the global phenomenon of such movements and offers the following definition: ‘A Church Planting Movement is a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment.’ David V. Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, Virginia: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 21.

Movements are felt as much as they are understood. They have a certain atmosphere. They exude a culture, and people sense the resulting ‘vibe.’ These vibes cannot be objectively passed along and studied. They must be caught and experienced.⁴

Despite this difficulty, seven characteristics commonly recognised as belonging to church planting movements will help highlight some essential differences between movements, networks and denominations.

(i) Open Rather Than Closed Membership

In his seminal article "Sets and Structures: A Study in Church Patterns"⁵ Paul Hiebert contrasts two approaches to the issue of inclusion and belonging in a group; namely, centered-set thinking and bounded-set thinking.

Hiebert highlights four distinctives of a centred set. First, belonging is not defined in terms of the boundary but of the centre. Church planting movements function as centred sets, in which churches are invited to gather around a centre of common ideas, values and goals – shared theological vision.⁶ What matters in bounded-set thinking is defining and maintaining the boundary – what is needed, as a minimum, for a church to be included within the set. In some sense, it is appropriate to say in centred-set dynamics, ‘all are welcome’ (within the bounds of orthodox Christian faith) as long as they are moving towards the vision and values at the centre of the set.

⁴ Alan Hirsch, “Reflections on Movement Dynamics” in Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 253 (Italics original).

⁵ Paul Hiebert, "Sets and Structures: A Study in Church Patterns," in *New Horizons in World Missions: Evangelicals and the Christian Mission in the 1980s*, ed. David Hasselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 217-227.

⁶ For an introduction to the concept see Keller, *Center Church*, 17-25. See also Mark Pickett, “Review Article: *Constructing Theological Vision*”, 98-111 [accessed 22 February, 2017]. Online: <http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-64-article-5---review-article-constructing-theological-vision>. The term has its origins in Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Eugene, Origen: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999).

Secondly, Hiebert observes that in a centred set “a number of stages or levels of participation might be recognized.”⁷ In other words, churches can journey towards the centre over time as they increasingly warm to the vision and values at the centre. Centred sets, such as movements, also allow for different levels of commitment and recognise that plants often have a primary affiliation with a network. For many planters, the movement may not be their primary network. For example, they are also part of a closed set, such as Acts 29, FIEC, New Frontiers, or denomination but the vision and values of the movement serve to compliment the training and resourcing they receive from their network. It could be said that the movement serves the networks.

The third quality of a centred set is that leadership is defined not by position or authority; leaders lead by way of influence in a movement. It is those whose thinking most closely aligns with the centre who emerge as leaders. The idea is everything.

Finally, Hiebert argues that the church, or in our analysis the movement, is concerned to strengthen the centre “so that it might attract a following.”⁸

In this difference of philosophy, we readily identify a key distinction between movements and networks. Movements are centred sets; networks are more typically bounded sets. This difference is reflected in how the concept of membership functions. Typically, as a bounded set, you either belong, or you do not. For movements categories of inclusion and exclusion are less helpful.

⁷ Hiebert, 225.

⁸ Ibid., 226.

Frost and Hirsch, leaders within the missional church movement, recognise the centered-set approach in their work on missional church and movements.

Everyone is in, and no one is out. Though some people are close to the center and others far from it, everyone is potentially part of the community in its broadest sense.⁹

They notice that bounded sets are often hard at the edges but then soft at the centre, centred sets soft at the edges but hard at the centre.¹⁰ Bounded sets operate like a farmer who erects a fence to keep cattle from roaming too far. However, in an environment like the outback of Australia, where ranches are so large that fencing it impracticable, and where conditions are hot and dry, boring a water-well at the centre of the ranch ensures that cattle will never stray far away. So, the vision at the heart of a movement keeps people in the movement.¹¹

As a result of this open-handed approach, movements are very dynamic and have a fluid structure.

(ii) Spontaneous rather than planned

Church planting movements are also distinctive in their lack of any “prescribed formula or strategy for how the or where these churches will exist or function.”¹² What generates the planting of new churches is a shared culture and not a process.

⁹ Michael Frost, and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan Baker Books, 2013), 68.

¹⁰ Ibid., 253. They also identify a third ‘fuzzy’ set which is both soft at the centre and at the edges!

¹¹ Ibid., 68.

¹² Danile Kewley and Sven Östring, “Can Church Planting Movements Emerge in the West? Case Studies of Three Church Planting Strategies in Western Australia.” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 2010, no.2: 25-43.

Movements do not normally occur through large frameworks such as big budgets, big plans, big teams, or big organizations. Movemental Christianity does not seem to emerge from big-box programming...Movements occur through small units that are readily reproducible...Being nimble and flexible is all important.’¹³

Keller also notes “Movements spontaneously produce new ideas and leaders and grow from within.”¹⁴

(iii) Organic rather than structured

Movements like all living things have the capacity to grow from inside.

A church (or group of churches) with movement dynamics generates its own converts, ideas, leaders, and resources from within in order to realize its vision of being the church for its city and culture...In the language of missiologists, such a church is ‘self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting.’¹⁵

In that sense, it does not depend on an outside organisation. Rather it is self-propagating and self-sustaining, “the result of a set of forces that interact, support, sustain, and stimulate one another.”¹⁶

2020birmingham is a church planting movement for the city of Birmingham. Begun in 2010, it has helped to establish 16 churches from across a variety of networks and denominations. From the outset, the movement has had no strategy for planting nor any particular ideas as to how the movement would generate further planting. Churches and networks within the movement have raised up planters and opportunities for planting, but the movement itself has not been co-ordinated programme for planting.

¹³ Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters become Movement Makers* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass), 178-179.

¹⁴ Keller, *Center Church*, 340.

¹⁵ Ibid., 337.

¹⁶ Ibid., 371.

(iv) Flat rather than hierarchical

Movements are also marked by the absence of hierarchical structures or chains of command. Leadership comes through influence rather than a voice of authority. Catalytic leaders provide vision, inspiration and influence to the movement. They also serve to strengthen the vision and serve as gate-keepers who protect the ‘DNA’ or values of the movement.

The general rule in movements is that we structure just as much as is necessary to adequately empower and train every agent/agency in the movement so it can do its job.¹⁷

Movements are therefore nervous about the negative effect of institutionalisation. Hirsh concludes “we must resist the tendency, innate to every organisation, to slow down and lose momentum.”¹⁸

In fact, going further, movements are by their nature bottom-up rather than top-down. A movement by definition comes from the grassroots. “Movements that spread rapidly usually proliferate within and across networks of relationships.”¹⁹

(v) Kingdom-minded rather than empire building

A further important distinctive of movements is that while there is strong ownership of a shared vision or goal, the movement itself makes no claim to own the churches within the movement. In movements, the principle of invisibility is at work as the movement exists simply to serve individual planters and networks through prayer, training, resourcing and so on.

¹⁷ Hirsch, *Reflections*, 256.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stetzer, *Viral Churches*, 143.

All of which means that churches within a movement begin to spend considerable, time, energy and resources supporting and facilitating the church-planting of those outside of their tribe or network.

Movements make the what – the accomplishment of the vision – a higher value than how it gets done or who gets it done.²⁰

(vi) Highly Innovative and risk taking

A culture of innovation also marks movements. When the goal is the rapid multiplication of churches across a city or a region flexibility is critical, and churches that are highly-contextualised to their communities are most likely to achieve their goals. Planting is high-risk, dynamic and innovative; and new ideas and initiatives come from any direction and in ways that quickly impact the whole movement. Within 2020birmingham, innovation is evident in the sheer variety of church planting models represented within the movement. All types of planting are encouraged and supported whether that be pioneer planting, multi-site, mother-daughter, or replant/revitalisation. And within these models of planting can be found various approaches to church life and practice from more traditional examples through to expressions of the missional community model.

Kewley and Östring observe this same phenomenon at work in their study of three church-planting movements that church planting movements show both a strong commitment to mission and adaptive, flexible approaches to planting.²¹

²⁰ Keller, *Center Church*, 340.

²¹ Kewley and Östring, 33-34.

(vii) Collaboration rather than isolation

The key to fast growing city movements is a commitment to work across denominations, working together for a single, greater, goal. The sum is very much greater than the parts.

A compelling vision that is bigger than any one church or network can achieve compels trans-denominational partnership. Quite simply “changing a city with the gospel takes a movement.”²²

Such thinking requires planters and networks within a city to be deliberate and intentional in seeking out partnership. The vision compels planters to look for opportunity; to give time to building new relationships. Driven by a conviction that so much more can and needs to be done than can ever be done in isolation.

If you will begin to view cooperation as a joyful opportunity to cause someone else to succeed, then giving away all you have for the sake of new or established network is worth the effort. Church multiplication movements will occur only so far as leaders are ready to cooperate for a cause that is far greater than themselves.²³

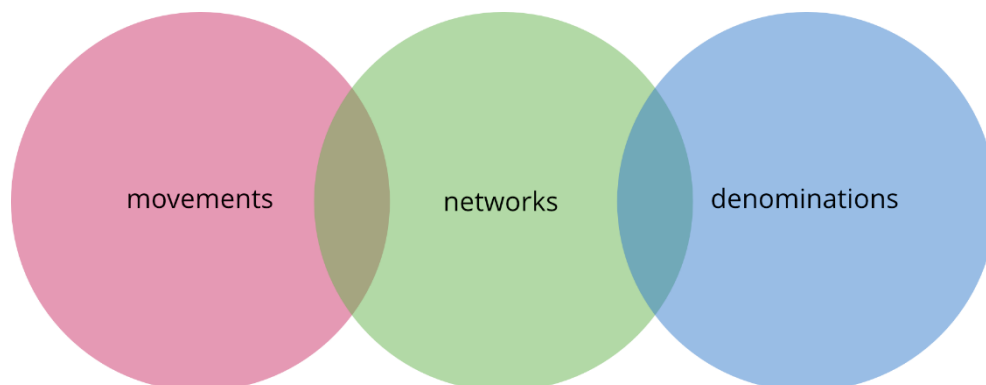
The following table highlights similarities and contrasts between movements, networks and denominations according to the seven criteria considered above.

²² Keller, *Center Church*, 371.

²³ Stetzer, *Viral Churches*, 81.

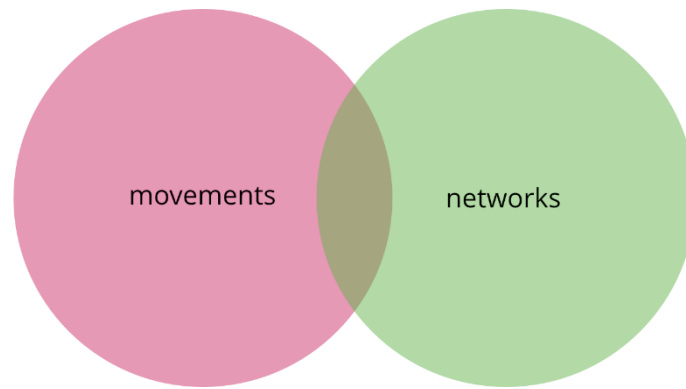
	Movement	Network	Institution or denomination
Set or membership	Open	Closed	Closed
Strategy	Spontaneous	Spontaneous	Planned/Strategy
Organisation	Organic	Organic	Organised
Authority structures	Influence	Influence and Authority	Authority
Ownership	Kingdom	Empire	Empire
Innovation / adaptation	Innovative	Innovative	Traditional
Cooperation / partnership	Collaborative	Tribal	Tribal

It is possible to represent the relationships between the three diagrammatically as follows

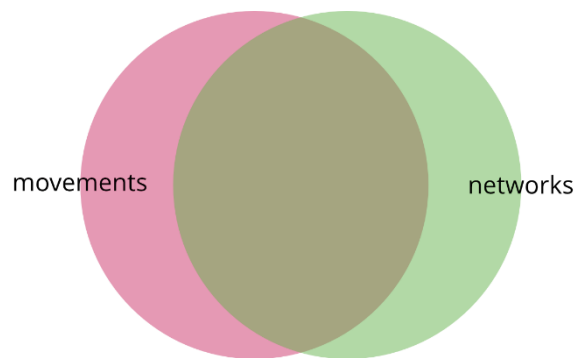


As has already been shown, while movements share some characteristics with networks, they are different. However, depending on the nature of the movement and its stage of development it will share to a greater or lesser degree the organisation and structure of a network.

A young movement tends to be very dynamic and organic. Things happen spontaneously, innovation and collaboration are moving things on at a pace. It would look and function quite differently from an established network,



As movements become more established, they inevitably develop a higher degree of organisational structure. They may employ workers to enable the movement to continue to grow, and they share a growing range of characteristics of a network or association.



However, it is important to recognise that despite the considerable overlap in structure, a movement will always remain a distinct entity with a different theological vision from any network.

II. How do Church planting movements work?

1. A rich understanding of Gospel partnership

Gospel partnership is so much more than gospel fellowship. How are movements different from gospel fellowship that might exist across a city?

Bruno & Dirks²⁴ draw our attention to the significant contrasts between gatherings of churches for fellowship and mutual encouragement on the one hand and the kind of kingdom partnership we recognise in movements on the other.

Fellowship gatherings tend to exist simply for encouragement or perhaps to share information or expertise. For example, to inspire and send leaders back to churches with new ideas and a refreshed vision. In movements, however, it is not ideas alone that are shared but more importantly goals; joint ownership of some tangible greater goal that far exceeds the expectations and plans of any individual church.

Ownership of these goals is truly a shared responsibility. Churches agree to pray, work and perhaps give to something bigger. All of which means that when the leaders of churches gather there is not so much a focus on those individual churches but a focus on the kingdom.

In a network, I help you accomplish your own goals, I help you accomplish your own goals, expecting you'll do the same for me. In a partnership, we work together to accomplish Kingdom goals that we couldn't achieve by ourselves.²⁵

2020birmingham, from the outset, identified a shared goal, facilitating the planting of 20 new congregations over a ten year period. That goal required a sustained commitment, mutual accountability and shared responsibility.

²⁴ Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion* (Wheaton, Illinois; Crossway, 2014).

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

III. *Theological Vision as the Uniting Principle for Church Planting Movements*

Two things are essential for the long-term viability of healthy church planting movements. A shared theological commitment and alongside that a shared theological vision. Clarity on the gospel can alone provide a solid basis for unity in mission. Shared *theological vision* provides the values that shape the vision for mission. Unless this is explicitly celebrated, then there is no common goal and, therefore, no obvious reason to work together.

1. *The priority of theological commitment*

Bruno and Dirks draw attention to these twin needs as they distinguish between foundation and focus.

Kingdom partnerships are usually focused on one specific gospel implication: assisting the poor locally or overseas; influencing one area of culture, such as the arts; or teaching biblical interpretation to rising church leaders. Gospel implications may be the focus of a partnership, but they cannot be the foundation. When a single implication of the gospel is all that's holding us together, rather than the gospel itself, the ministry will fall apart as soon as the money runs out or differences arise, as they always do. Kingdom partnerships must be built on the gospel alone. This means that there should be a direct line between the aims of the partnership and Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.²⁶

For any movement to be self-sustaining in the long-run, it cannot afford to assume the gospel. The movement itself must be rooted in and empowered by the gospel. The engine for a movement cannot be anything other than the gospel. "*The gospel unites leaders and churches in a way that no philosophy, tradition, task, or mission ever could.*"²⁷ Without that commitment to a vision

²⁶ Bruno & Dirks, 33.

²⁷ Ibid., 36.

of the gospel, the gospel will quickly be lost. “If we’re not driven by the gospel, *none* of our efforts will have any reason to continue.”²⁸

2. *Shared Theological Vision*

However central our grasp of the gospel is to both inspire and enable a movement of the gospel more is necessary to enable churches to come together in meaningful collaboration. Tim Keller has highlighted the place of theological vision in enabling partnership.

Theological vision is neither our doctrinal foundations which express ‘what we believe’ nor is it an alternative to ministry expressions i.e. ‘what we do.’ Theological vision sits in the middle. It is ‘how we see.’ It is doctrine filtered and applied or the gospel implications addressed in answering the question; What does it mean to be a church for our day in our place? Rooted in what we believe it seeks to ask how do we meaningfully live out the gospel in all its fullness in our time and place. Michael Felker comments

A Theological Vision helps you determine what you are going to do with what you believe within your cultural setting. With a Theological Vision in place, leaders and churches can make *better choices* about ministry expression that are *faithful to the Gospel* while at the same time are *meaningful to their ministry context*. That means a greater impact in Worship, Discipleship, Evangelism, Service, and Cultural Engagement.²⁹

To use a sporting analogy, a theological statement provides the ‘rules of the game’; theological vision suggests the tactics we employ by which we play

²⁸ Ibid., 48 (Italics original).

²⁹ Michael Felker, “Do You Have a Theological Vision,” n.p. [accessed 11th November 2016]. Online: <http://www.michealfelker.com/2012/12/13/do-you-have-a-theological-vision/>, (Emphasis original).

the game. As Hirsch observes “movements are essentially DNA-based organizations.”³⁰ Movements are centre set organisations that choose to unite around a shared theological vision.

(i) Theological Vision sets the priorities for ministry

So, theological vision will enable us to choose between the many potential priorities in ministry. Movements form when churches recognise the urgent need and priority of planting highly-contextualised churches for every community across a city: a vision so big that no one denomination, network or association of churches can possibly achieve.

(ii) Theological Vision enables & encourages partnerships

Leaders from different denominations, with different temperaments, different theologies, if they share a vision, are able to work together in creative collaboration. It is a theological vision that creates what Keller calls a “bias for cooperation” without which movements rarely function.³¹

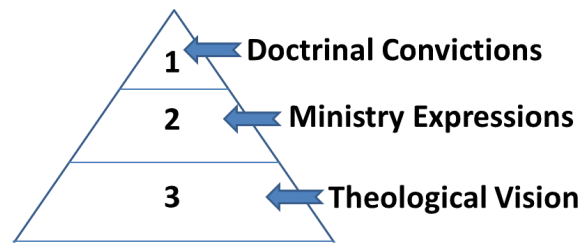
2. Theological Vision enables level 3 partnership

The following model may prove useful in considering how an awareness of theological vision enables partnerships between gospel churches that might not have considered working together because of either different doctrinal distinctives or ministry expressions.

³⁰ Hirsch, *Reflections*, 262.

³¹ Keller, *Serving a movement*, 236.

Levels of partnership



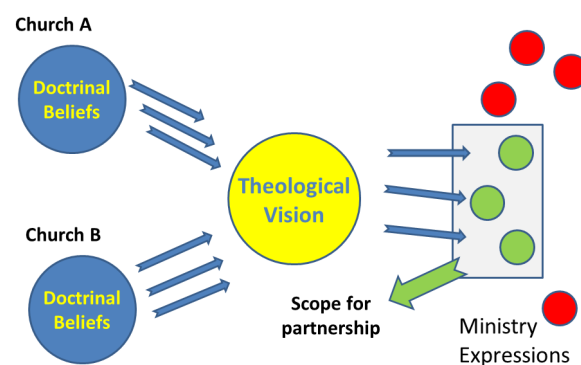
Level 1 partnerships refer to those that exist between churches of the same denomination or affiliation. The partnership focuses on identical (or near-identical) shared doctrinal beliefs and convictions. That might, for example, include expressions of theological commitment to a certain ecclesiology, etc. However, it is evident that churches in the same denomination that share equally strong theological convictions, nevertheless, can look very different when it comes to their ministry practice. How are we to account for such difference? At heart, although they share the same doctrinal beliefs an implicit and unavoidable theological vision is also at work in addressing questions of ministry practice. So, one could and should expect two churches, who confess the same statement of faith but who exist in very different cultural settings to arrive at quite different views as to what ministry should look like in their time and place.

Level 2 partnerships are broader and encompass churches outside of a single tradition. These partnerships are still rooted in doctrine, but level 2 partnerships tend to focus on a combination of shared theology and ministry expression. So, for example, churches with a commitment to Scripture

expressed in a high view of expository preaching may choose to come together for training in Word-based ministry. A good example of such partnership in a UK context would be Gospel Partnerships that bring together churches with similar convictions on expository preaching and Bible-handling. These churches could not come together to celebrate denominational distinctives but come to train together around shared ministry practices.

Level 3 partnerships centre neither on doctrinal belief nor ministry expression but theological vision. A shared commitment to some core theological convictions are essential but what compels the partnership is a shared vision. A recognition and commitment to certain key ideas surrounding ministry.

So, church planters in a city may come from a variety of different tribes; Reformed, Pentecostal, Baptist, etc., but share some very similar theological vision – the same of vision and values, emphases and philosophy of ministry – that draw them into fruitful partnership. In the case of a church planting movement, this is clearly a theological vision for highly-contextualised planting across a region or city.



Without a conscious awareness of theological vision, it can be difficult to understand how level 3 partnerships are possible. How can churches, so different from one another on some doctrinal issues, and so different in ministry practice work together? Celebrating a shared theological vision is the answer.

Two churches can have different doctrinal frameworks and ministry expressions but the same theological vision – and they will feel like sister ministries. On the other hand, two churches can have similar doctrinal frameworks and ministry expressions but different theological visions – and they will feel distinct.³²

Theological vision is the glue that holds a movement of quite diverse churches together. “Focusing on theological vision allows us truly to serve a movement rather than to just create or inspire churches in our own image.”³³

The 2020birmingham movement is an example of a level 3 partnership. Church-planters from a wide variety of networks and denominations express their partnership by their shared concern to encourage and learn from one another as we share the questions of how to do effective pioneer ministry in the city of Birmingham. Our doctrinal beliefs, while essentially evangelical, are nevertheless somewhat different. Our expressions of ministry within our churches differ and to such an extent that we could not honestly say that we would feel at home in each other’s churches. A shared theological vision provides both relational glue and drives the partnership forward; working together for the planting of 20 new churches or congregations between the year 2010 and 2020.

³² Keller, *Center Church*, 21.

³³ Ibid.

Level 3 partnerships are only possible where the churches gathering focus their time and energy on questions of theological vision. That can, and in the case of the 2020 Birmingham partnership did happen intuitively. In one sense, we discovered how a shared theological vision had enabled and empowered partnership retrospectively. But with a clear concept of theological vision, they become easier to understand and appreciate. “The quality of the theological vision often determines the vitality of the ministry, particularly in urban settings.”³⁴

An explicit theological vision is the centre for the set and enables movement leaders to seek out like-minded partners in ministry.

While we must continue to align ourselves in denominations that share our theological distinctives, at the local level our bias should be in the direction of cooperation with other congregations.³⁵

When theological vision is grasped and how it functions is understood, churches are more willing to work together, putting to one side suspicions over working with those who do not share our same doctrinal distinctives and who look very different in ministry practice.

Questions:

- Do you think it is important to distinguish between movements and networks? What might be at stake?
- How would you seek to explain the differences and do you find the categories and table helpful?

³⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁵ Keller, *Serving a movement*, 236.

- How far should we take level 3 partnerships? What limits should we place on who we are willing to collaborate with?
- How do level 3 partnerships work in practise and what part does theological vision play in keeping them focused, strong and united?