

Revitalizing Missions: Complex Systems Science-framed Paradigms for Revitalization Studies

We are living in an age of unprecedented change; even change is changing, now nearly continuous and ever more systemic and complex. Missiologists, being the Church's pathfinders to cross geographic and cultural boundaries, must increasingly address how to navigate and cross the temporal boundaries of change in the contexts of twenty-first century realities.

The analysis and response to change falls generally under the discipline of revitalization studies, and primarily employs AFC Wallace's theory of revitalization and/or Social Movement theory. However, in the multicultural and globally networked contexts of the 21st century, both models, developed from reductionist, general linear realities, have been shown to be inadequate, oftentimes leading to inaccurate conclusions. For example, many churches, following Wallace's model, focus on finding visionary leaders to effect change; unfortunately, in many cases, conflict and division are the results. Additionally, using these models for Christian revitalization is intrinsically problematic as their ontologies are inconsistent with biblical principles.

This paper argues for the increased adoption of Complex Systems Science (CSS)-framed paradigms in mission studies. CSS paradigms, by expanding the analytical dimensions, even spiritual (i.e., Holy Spirit's agency), are more representative of complex 21st century realities and more consistent with observed characteristics of Christian revitalization. The CSS "Cusp of Change" model is compared with traditional revitalization models using the case study of North American, multicultural Chinese churches, and concludes that generative leadership (not visionary), harmonic resonance (unity), and organizational transformation (discipleship) are more critical factors in empowering churches and mission agencies to respond to complex change.