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Programs are Good, Transformation is Great: The Missing Ingredient in Many Churches

“All that is not eternal is eternally useless.”
— C.S. Lewis

It was a typical cool, cloudy day in Dublin as the cab driver drove us through the crowded streets.

“Here we are,” he said, “the pride and joy of Ireland!”

As I emerged from the cab, I peered upward. The steeple of St. Patrick’s Cathedral seemed to pierce the clouds and greet God Himself in the heavens. For an instant, the mammoth cathedral took my breath away.

We stopped at the entrance to buy the ticket to get inside. As we waited in line, I got my first peek at the vaulted ceiling. I paused to think about my favorite historic worship structures: Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral, both in London, England; the Cathedral at Cologne, Germany; and, of course, the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, France. Now I would add St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

It seems like everyone knows at least something about Saint Patrick himself. After all, we celebrate St. Patrick’s Day, even in the U.S. But beyond the green beer, what do you really know? Before this wonderful visit to Dublin, I must admit, I knew very little.

Kent R. Hunter is Founder of Church Doctor Ministries. Kent teaches at conferences, consults churches, and writes books. He is the Architect of *Healthy Churches Thrive!* — a three-year adventure of discipleship and spiritual formation that builds Kingdom culture, releasing God’s people in mission.



www.churchdoctor.org

E-mail Kent: kenthunter@churchdoctor.org

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Inside St. Patrick's Cathedral is a series of displays, lined up around the perimeter of the sanctuary. They tell the fascinating history of Patrick, a young Irishman who made a spiritual impact on a nation.

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When Patrick became a Christian, he also became a missionary. His work among the pagan Druids resulted in many people coming to Christ. He baptized a great number of these converts at the site of a well, in what was the small town of Dublin. It is now the site of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

This true story teaches a lesson about church programs and transformation. Patrick began a movement. Christianity spread like wildfire throughout Ireland. However, in the many years following his death, Christianity became a series of rituals, programs, activities — all crystallized in a giant cathedral. It is beautiful, indeed, but like many cathedrals across Europe, it has become a symbol of the past. The movement became a monument. What does that teach us about churches today?

Pastor Tom's Confession

"Hi, pastor," I said, as I shook Tom's hand. "Thanks for inviting us to serve you and your church in this consultation."

"I'm so glad you're here," Tom replied. "I'm excited about this process. I'm eager to hear what you will learn...and what recommendations you'll make."

"Can I pray?" I asked, seeing his head bow, as he shared his appreciation for the way we would begin.

"As we get started, Pastor Tom, I'd like to begin with a question we always like to ask the pastor in our first interview. I'd like you to share your up-to-the-minute response to the question, 'Why am I here, conducting this consultation?'"

Tom didn't hesitate: "People call me the 'program pastor.' I've been here, as pastor, for 20 years. Every year we've tried a new program. That's two decades of my life and the lives of our members. My goal has always been to try to reach unchurched people in this area of the city — there are so many. But the results are negligible. We bought into all these programs. We've achieved one thing: people are burned out. Another program is not on their agenda. And — I feel — as a leader — and a promoter of reaching out — I feel like I've lost my credibility. I know Jesus wants us to introduce Him to others. Our church attendance is actually declining, just a little. We're stuck — actually going backwards. Yeah — that's why you're here."

Jesus' Plan: Not a Program

It's hard to hear Tom's report. Thousands of pastors could share a similar story, including me — at least when I started my ministry. At the risk of oversimplifying, Tom, like pastors from most Christian traditions, was essentially trained to manage a church, not grow a church.

In my own ministry, even with a Master of Divinity degree and a Ph.D in theology under my belt, my passion to reach lost people for Jesus Christ was an exercise in frustration. I concluded that I had a great education but no training to be a "missionary" leader. So I went, part time, through a mission training experience while I continued pastoring my church. What did I learn?

I didn't learn a program! And it's not a hidden secret. It's there in Scripture: Jesus and the apostles of the early church modeled it. In addition, modern, trained missionaries get it (often sent to other countries right after seminary and *missionary training*). They reach out to people

who were never Christians, and they plant new churches with new converts who get it. But most pastors inherit a church with people steeped in maintenance-oriented programs. It's somewhat cruel to say, but one of my mission professors explained it: "It's easier to give birth than to raise the dead." Yet, God is a specialist at resurrection!

My professor didn't imply that church members were "dead" spiritually. But they have yet to be "reborn" as mission-minded people. Any church can make this refreshing change and experience the joy of reaching lost people. My church did. The Scripture says, "All heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents." It's exciting for those on earth as well!

Jesus' approach is not a program. Programs recruit people *to do something*. What they do is usually focused specifically on their church, an institution. Jesus' approach is transformational (Romans 12:1-2). Jesus' mission is birthed out of people *becoming someone*. **The context is not institutional but relational.**

To say it another way, the Kingdom of God grows as God's people, with mission culture, live out every day as missionaries to the people they meet everywhere. A trip to Walmart becomes a short-term mission trip. It is not about what they do. It is who they are. It is who they have become. It is not a step-by-step program. It is spontaneous mission living. The outreach switch is always on. Always!

Cultural Reengineering

When Jesus gathered the 12 disciples, He began with those who were ready (receptive). He said, "Come follow Me, and I'll teach you how to catch people" (rather than fish). No one knows how many people refused Jesus' invitation. Most didn't make it into the Book. But those who responded are in Scripture. In truth, it's very likely they had no idea what they were in for. The point? For missionary discipling, you don't need people

THE TEN STEPS TO CAPTURE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER

1. Take inventory. Line up all you do against Jesus' commission: How effective is your church when it comes to the mission of Christ?
2. Assess the timing: Are about 50% of your active worshiping group willing to look at an assessment of your church as a reflection of the New Testament church? Are the key leaders ready?
3. Does a core group of influencers in your church reflect "holy discontent"? Is this "spiritual restlessness" reflected by comments like, "As great as our church is, I just don't understand why we aren't reaching more people"?
4. Determine to redirect at least 60% of the energy in your church (time, involvement, people) from programs to focus on growing Kingdom culture.
5. Study the gospels of the New Testament from the perspective of what Jesus teaches when He says, "The Kingdom of heaven is like..." or, "The Kingdom of God is like...."
6. As you focus on the message about the Kingdom, use the same medium Jesus used: the power of stories ("parables").
7. Connect Jesus' use of stories with His proclamation, "when the Holy Spirit comes, you will be witnesses of/for Me" (Acts 1:8).
8. Ignite the power of "witnessing" by asking people to share what God has done in their lives recently. Develop a culture of being witnesses until it spontaneously occurs as church members share with those who are not yet Christ-followers.
9. Encourage everyone in the church to regularly pray for those in their social networks who are not yet practicing Christians. Recognize that prayer doesn't cause revival, but every revival follows fervent prayer.
10. Change the spiritual center of gravity from the church building to the public realm. Instead of focusing on bringing people to church, take faith to people. God works, most often, through established relationships, rather than church buildings or worship services. As a later step, new Christians join worship at church.

to “begin with the end in mind.” Like Jesus, you are looking for people who are willing to grow.

Jesus didn’t run them through a program. As they grew, He did direct them to do some stuff: love one another, go make disciples, etc. But, if you look closely, you will see that most of what Jesus taught, modeled, and helped them to experience was focused on imprinting them with Kingdom DNA. He changed their culture: their values, what is important; their beliefs, what is truth; their attitudes, their posture with God and humanity; their priorities, what should be first on the list; and, their worldviews, how they understand the world and how God intends the world to work.

Culture flavors everything: who you are and what you do. It’s not a program, with steps one, two, and three. It’s a lifestyle, spontaneously directed by the Holy Spirit in an individual molded with the passion of Jesus to touch the lives of unbelievers. Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, in their book *Simple Church*, explain:

“Simple church leaders are designers. They design opportunities for spiritual growth. Complex church leaders are programmers. They run ministry programs.

“Church leaders who are programmers focus on one program at a time.... Designers are focused on the end result, the overall picture.

“The simple church leaders we surveyed were expert designers. They were not producers of spiritual growth and church vitality. Only God is the producer of growth.... They have skillfully designed an *environment* where life change is likely to occur...a simple process that moves people through stages of spiritual growth” (Page 26, emphasis mine).

Programs tend to keep people in church buildings. And they keep people exhausted. Transformational regeneration produces missionaries who have a holy infection — and their infectious spirituality changes the world, one person at a time.

Church programs can make a temporary difference. However, only behavioral habits produce transformational improvements. Wise church leaders disciple Christians in Kingdom culture. They believe what Jesus told the disciples: “I will build My church,” and He does, through disciples who become His Kingdom people.

Your church will never do what the church should do until it becomes what the church should be.

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