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The Cathedral of Notre Dame on Fire: Thoughts and Lessons

It was 2:30 a.m. when Joe was awakened by the sirens. He looked out the window and saw the church across the street engulfed in flames. He put on pants over his pajamas and grabbed a sweatshirt and slippers. He went outside, stood on the sidewalk, and watched the futile attempt of the fire department to save the building. As a practicing Christian, Joe felt sad for the people who belonged to that church: "I don't know what we would do if that happened to our congregation," he thought.

Just then, Joe noticed his neighbor, Mike, was out watching from his front lawn. Joe knew Mike well. He also knew that Mike had no interest in church or God. "Hey, Mike, I see you heard the commotion also," Joe remarked.

"Yeah, Mike replied. "I don't think they'll save anything."

Joe responded, "Mike, I didn't know you were interested in church."

"Well," Mike said, "I've never seen a church on fire before!"

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help Christians and their churches become more effective for the Great Commission, to make disciples of all people. For 40 years, he has led the research and development efforts of Church Doctor Ministries. His prayer is that more Christians will invest in ways that help their church, and others, become more effective for Kingdom growth.

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- ▶ Forward it to staff and leaders in your church, denomination, network, or fellowship.

What Is Church?

The fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral was no joke. It was one of my favorite historic cathedrals. I was there the first time with my college roommate, Paul. Then, later, I visited with my wife, Janet. A few years after that, we shared the awesome experience with our young children.

To me, that structure was an amazing wonder. How did they build that, at that time in history? God, and the Christian faith, must have been *really* important to those people. It was inspiring!

It also inspired me to hear that when the cathedral burned, many people stepped up and pledged money to rebuild it. What a statement of generosity!

There are several cathedrals in Europe that are among my favorites: the cathedral in Cologne, Germany; the Sistine Chapel in Rome; St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey in London; and St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland.

As a kid in Sunday school, I learned a little hand gesture that taught me about church. Did you? "Here is the church, here is the steeple, open it up, and see all the people." Through that, I learned that the church is really about people, not buildings.

Based on the sheer size of the Notre Dame Cathedral, it was, at one time in history, packed with people who were there to worship. Today, it is filled with tourists. Worship attendance in France is at 11 percent, according to a Pew Research study from 2011. By my observations, most of them are older people. That says something about the future of Christianity in France, much like the rest of Europe.

A recent Gallup research report (May 2019) states that, in the U.S., when people are asked, "What religion are you?" 50 percent of Americans now check the response "none."

What About People?

Jesus came, lived, died, and rose again — for people. He said, "Where two or three are gathered in My name, I'm there." Jesus doesn't "live" in empty buildings, now museums, even though the remnants reflect a previous time when faith was "white hot." Even reflecting on history can inspire — and also depress.

The Christian movement seems to come and go in different places of the world. Sometimes, Christianity thrives and struggles at the same time. The denomination I served in Australia is now struggling. Yet, in the same country, Hillsong has grown in influence and spread all over the world, even planting churches in the U.S.

England has nearly empty churches everywhere. Some have closed. There is a Methodist church in Sheffield converted to a mosque. Yet, in England, there are several hundred churches that are growing, not just in numbers, but people growing in vibrant Christian faith. Those people are involved in mission, reaching out to their social networks. There are also growing immigrant churches in and around London — people primarily from Africa. These churches reflect tremendous crowds and spectacular outreach. There is also Holy Trinity Brompton, which has planted churches throughout London. Holy Trinity has also developed the most used — and likely the most effective — outreach approach in the world today: the *Alpha* course.

For the last 20 years, Church Doctor Ministries has taken groups to England to experience the hot spots. Sometimes you have to experience what God can do in order to catch it and bring it to your own church. It's an amazing experience every year for those who make the trip. Most agree, "It's life-changing!"

There are "revival" movements in many places around the world. Some of the growth areas of the faith include South Korea, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, even the underground church in China. North America has several growing movements that aren't on the radar of most Christians — yet. So, why are so many churches failing to be the vibrant beacons of the Good News of Jesus described in Scripture?

What Happens?

Christianity goes through a cycle. Why? Well, it's not God. It's people. People tend to naturally drift from the basic dynamics of the Christian mission they profess. They lose sight of their personal mission, the co-mission they share with the Leader. They fade into a preoccupation with activities that are *good* — but not uniquely *God* activities. They get worn out from all the programs that eat their time and energy, but have little impact on their unchurched neighbors.

TEN ELEMENTS OF RENEWAL: CATCH FIRE!

1. Be confident: Jesus wants lost people found — and churches like yours are His primary mechanism.
2. Spiritual renewal is the greatest issue we face in the world today.
3. God's primary mechanism for reaching lost people is your local church.
4. Pray for those in your social network who do not know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord.
5. Look at spiritual renewal as a movement in your congregation, not a program. It begins with those who have "holy discontent." You can move forward with a critical mass of 40 percent of those who attend worship.
6. Contact Church Doctor Ministries for a free, anonymous, short survey that will measure the percentage of people in your church with "holy discontent," an indicator of readiness for renewal.
7. Consider an assessment of your church to identify the challenges and strengths to build a new, productive future.
8. Read some of the resources provided in this newsletter. Learn more about how God renews local congregations like yours.
9. Pray for your nation, and pray for churches to impact those in your communities.
10. Above and beyond what you donate to your church, support ministries that help churches for renewal.

The purpose of the Christian movement gets lost in the activities of running the "church machine." The movement becomes an organization layered in programs that have little or no impact toward the purpose and focus of Jesus.

Most churches are trapped in a governance model that actually hinders the kind of productivity you see in the New Testament church — and vibrant churches around the world. The bureaucratic maze in most congregations doesn't even remotely reflect the tone of Christian *low control* balanced by *high accountability*. Our research shows that in most churches, approximately half the people in the church are unable to articulate the primary purpose of the church, even though it is usually quoted from Scripture in their constitution. In many congregations, church

leaders subconsciously struggle with focus and clear purpose. And when they get back to the biblical approach of making disciples? They feel liberated! Perhaps that is because Jesus gets freed.

Most Christians do not know their spiritual gifts. The drift from using spiritual gifts toward volunteerism is contrary to Scripture. It reflects modern corporate models. Few Christians are actively discipling anyone, including their own children. They leave discipling to the organized church. The challenge? Programs can't disciple anybody. People disciple people.

Many church people see ministry as the work of the staff even though the New Testament clearly says that the leaders of the church are to equip God's people to do the work of ministry — using their spiritual gifts. Martin Luther, the reformer who led the Protestant movement, said, "Your baptism is your ordination to ministry." In the New Testament, it's called the "priesthood of believers." We are called ambassadors for Christ — all of us, not just the staff.

Most church people think the mission field is "over there." It is! It is also where you live. Your personal mission field is those who are unbelievers in your social network: friends, neighbors, relatives, people where you work or go to school. A trip to Walmart should be a short-term mission trip.

The result of this drift away from discipleship and knowledge of spiritual gifts? Decline and death. Church buildings become museums, tourist sites, mosques, breweries, or whatever. Thousands of church facilities are now symbols of a day gone by. God's people have lost their way because they have lost their *why*. They have drifted from the movement they claimed.

Is There Any Good News?

Oh yeah! After working with 1,600 churches from 78 denominations, networks, and non-denominational churches, we have very good news!

Sometime in the last 12 to 18 months, two new answers to prayer have emerged. First, according to Church Doctor Ministries' research, people in the U.S. who are not active Christians are increasingly without hope for the future.

KEY RESOURCES

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Since non-Christians find no hope in Jesus, they hope in things, like money, the economy, a safe, untroubled world. They also watch, read, and listen to newscasts. The result? They are discouraged and pessimistic.

For Christians, our hope is in Christ. That makes a huge difference, even if we are troubled by the same issues. Without Christ, people lack the hope to “rise above.” Here is a silver lining: Hopeless people become receptive to the Good News of Jesus Christ, *if they are reached in the right way.* (More on that below.)

There is a second breakthrough — finally. Many Christians are waking up to the reality that their congregation needs help or it will run out of people. This receptivity to help is an answer to prayer for those of us at Church Doctor Ministries. Why? Because we help Christians cooperate with an all-powerful God who desperately wants to renew them and their church. God wants to rekindle a holy fire in your congregation — not to burn it down. Jesus wants you to reach your community.

Finances

Most Christians not only fund their local church, but they also give generously to missionaries on the mission field.

It's time, overdue already, to fund the American mission field. When Martin Luther felt led to reform the church, he was blessed with a prince who helped finance the movement. That led to the multiplication of other reformers. If you are a Protestant, that prince and others are part of why you have a Christian church.

I'm glad some people can help rebuild the Notre Dame Cathedral. Maybe some tourists who aren't believers will give Jesus another thought. Pray with us that God will help fund every ministry, like Church Doctor Ministries, that helps churches revitalize in order to reach a world that has greatly changed. People still need Jesus Christ. The only mechanism Jesus uses to reach lost Christians is people in churches like yours.

I'm reminded of what Mother Teresa said:

“I can do some things you can't do. You can do some things I can't do. Together, we can do great things.”

- Pray for ministries that work hard to help Christian churches become more effective.
- Pray for ministries that help Christians become missionaries to their neighbors.
- Pray for finances for ministries that help Christians fulfill the Great Commission.
- Pray for Christians to invest prayer and resources to rekindle a spiritual fire in churches where God's people are serious about reaching their communities for Christ.

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