

**Purpose:** To connect with those who have an active relationship with Church Doctor Ministries as peers in ministry, clients, and partners in prayer and support.

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## Look for What's Not There

In the movie “The Magic of Belle Isle,” Morgan Freeman plays an angry man in a wheelchair who drinks a lot of alcohol. The backstory is that he is an accomplished author whose life seems ended. He moves into a small home next to a single mother with young daughters. He is miserable and irritated with life.

The next-door neighbors try to welcome him, but at first, he resists. The youngest girl discovers that he is an author. She wants to be a writer as well, so she asks for his help. After several attempts to be good neighbors, the mother and the daughters have a softening effect on the “grumpy old man in the wheelchair.”

Finally, the anger softens, and the man begins guiding the little girl—encouraging her to write. This story is like a parable of redemption, just like Jesus can soften even those who are incarcerated criminals. As the girl grows in her writing, she asks the old man how he writes such great stories. His answer is a parable for Christians and the Church. The old man says, “Never stop looking for what’s not there.”

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## Complaining about Church Issues

In our work as church consultants, we often encounter those who think we are there to “uncover” the dirt. Some Christ-followers think we are focused on the problems. Yet, we have banished “problems” from our vocabulary. Problems are not part of our Church Doctor culture. We only speak of “challenges.” While that might seem like simple semantics, it is much more. It is understanding that sometimes God allows challenges to get our attention. Occasionally, our worst nightmares turn into our greatest blessings. Consider Hebrews 12:2, “For the joy that was before Him, Jesus endured the cross.”

When you look at your church, or the Christian movement in general, it can be helpful to focus what is *not there*. For example, when I went to college in response to God’s call to ministry, it came as God brought me to a whole new level of faith. I wanted to help bring that same spiritual blessing to others. Therefore, I was very interested to learn about how to reach people far from God. However, in college, I was—as Morgan Freeman’s character said—“looking for something that was not there.” I concluded that it must be something I would encounter in seminary. No one at the Christian college taught me anything about reaching lost people for Jesus.

Fast-forward four years, and I was off to seminary. After a year of some great classes about theology and doctrine, I discovered I was looking for something that was not there. I began to wonder, “Maybe I should try a different seminary.” So, in my second year of seminary, my wife and I tried something *very different*. We moved to the other end of the world—Australia. I enrolled in a seminary in the city of Adelaide, South Australia. Our time “down under” was a great adventure. It was interesting to be an immigrant in another country. We fell in love with the people. I had many great classes, but nothing about reaching those who are not yet believers.

After a year “down under,” we came back to the U.S., and I served my internship in Florida for a year. It was the church secretary who taught me how to do a funeral. The “supervising” pastor was out of town. That pastor was a great leader, but honestly, I did not learn much of anything about reaching those who are far from God. Finally, after that year, I returned to seminary for my last year and graduation, which occurred the following spring. While my classmates went on to ministry, I was led to believe that perhaps I should stay for graduate school. “Maybe that’s where you learn how to reach the unbelievers who make up the majority of our country,” I thought. Three and a half years later, I received a PhD in theology. While I am very grateful for the extra learning, I had reached the end of what the system had to offer. Yet, I still had not learned much about how to reach lost people for Jesus. Indeed, I was looking for what was not there!

My first church placement as a pastor was in the inner city of Detroit. The church had just under a thousand people in worship, and I was the only pastor. I quickly learned why no other pastors had been willing to serve that church. The congregation had declined by 68 percent in the previous 10 years. The neighborhood was changing from all-Anglo to 50 percent African American. Most of the great people in my church were older, and many of the African American families in our community were younger and unchurched.

Everything we tried to reach our community failed. I asked my denomination for guidance: “What works in a situation like this?” When I talked to the leaders at the highest level of my denomination, I was told, “We don’t know what works.” Another one said, “Yeah. We’ve already closed 20 churches in the city of Detroit—all like yours, and your church will likely die

as well.” I wondered, “Is there some bigger issue? Are we looking closely enough for what is not there?”

No one could tell but my wife: I was suffering from clergy depression and feeling like a failure. In retrospect, I think God had me ready—open to discover what, honestly, isn’t there in most churches—even today!

There is a word for this in Scripture. It is the word “time” or “timing.” In Scripture, there are two words for “time.” *Chronos* is the word for “time” as in “it’s 2:30 p.m.” However, the other word, *kairos*, means “the Lord’s time.” In my despair, I experienced a “*kairos* moment.” While I was in the depths of discouragement, my breakthrough came in the form of a brochure in the mail. I almost discarded it as “junk mail.” I really didn’t know this material could change my life—and my church. The brochure was an advertisement from a seminary that taught busy pastors the concepts of mission and how to put them to use. The school was in California, but the classes were organized for pastors. It described numerous classes, two weeks at a time, so the pastors only missed one Sunday. They required the “students” to read about 2,400 pages of assigned books before arriving, and we had to write a paper after returning home. The paper was a plan of implementation for your church based on what you learned in the class. The degree program required you to attend three two-week sessions each year, for three to four years. You could work it around your schedule.

After I prayed about it, I shared my interest with my wife, Janet. Her reaction? “Are you going to go to school the rest of your life? Do you really need yet another doctoral degree?” My response: “I’ll go once. If it’s not what I am looking for, I won’t go back.” I used the same explanation with the leadership of my congregation. In so many words, I was honestly saying, “I am looking for what is not there.” The end result? I finally learned how to be a missionary to my own country.

## The Church in America

### KEY RESOURCES

Church Doctor Ministries. *Missionary Outreach Clinic: Become Missionaries to Your Own Social Networks and Centers of Influence*. [www.churchdoctor.org](http://www.churchdoctor.org).

Church Doctor Ministries. *The SEND Movement*. [www.thesendmovement.com](http://www.thesendmovement.com)

Church Doctor Ministries. *Introducing the SEND Movement* (video). [www.thesendmovement.com](http://www.thesendmovement.com)

Hunter, Kent R. *Group Gathering Discussion Guide: Who Broke My Church?* Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Ministries, 2017.

Hunter, Kent R. *Prescriptions from a Church Doctor* podcast. “Mission Possible: How Everyday, Ordinary Christians Become World Changers.” [www.churchdoctor.org](http://www.churchdoctor.org).

Hunter, Kent R., and Tracee J. Swank. *Restoring Civility: Lessons from the Master*. Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Ministries, 2020. [www.restoringcivilitybook.com](http://www.restoringcivilitybook.com).

Hunter, Kent R., and Tracee J. Swank. *Who Broke My Church? 7 Proven Strategies for Renewal and Revival*. New York, NY: Hachette/FaithWords, 2017.

Jones, Jeffrey M. “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.” Gallup.com. May 6, 2021. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

In the U.S., many churches are declining in attendance. Meanwhile, there are some churches experiencing growth. Some of those congregations are adding people who left dying churches. Yet, others are actually reaching formerly unchurched individuals: those who have no faith or church background. That group now represents the majority of Americans.

Around 1935, the Gallup organization started asking a large sampling of Americans about church membership. They have provided this random sampling survey every five years. They ask, “Do you happen to be a member of a church, mosque, or synagogue?” (Please understand: This question does not discover if they actually attend a church.) In the 1960s, the Gallup numbers responding in the affirmative were around 70 percent. This year—2021—they have now dropped to 47 percent. This is the lowest number since they started the survey. The message? We are losing America. Why?

For decades, Church Doctor Ministries has worked with congregations to help them see what is not there. To understand this, look back with me to when I graduated from seminary. In my graduating class, there were, perhaps, six or seven students who felt called to be “missionaries.” That meant they were called by the Lord to serve on the “mission field,” which described “somewhere overseas.” Those students were required to attend a “mission school,” after seminary. They were taught *missiology*.

Do you get the point? Perhaps this will help: When our Church Doctors address groups of believers in various churches, we often ask, “Who knows a missionary personally?” There are usually two or three people who raise their hands. We ask them to share with the group about the missionaries they know. They go on to tell about some missionary in a foreign country. Then we tell the group: Go home, look in the mirror, and say, “I am a missionary.” For many, the first time they look in the mirror, they discover “what is not there.”

In truth, most American Christians and their churches—and even whole denominations—have not looked for what’s not there. We haven’t grasped what it means to be on a mission field. Consequently, we don’t train pastors in the discipline of “missiology.” Therefore, collectively, we are losing America. The same pattern has occurred in much of Europe. The beautiful cathedrals become tourist attractions. The mission of Jesus? Not so much!

## **Meet Phil**

When Jesus began his ministry, many Jews didn’t get it. Actually, most of the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, missed the mission. They weren’t looking for what’s not there. If you have seen the first season of “The Chosen,” directed by Dallas Jenkins, you will remember the challenges faced by Nicodemus. Most of the religious leaders weren’t looking for what’s not there. However, Nicodemus was open to God’s movement. Little by little, he came to see Jesus for who He was and is.

John the Baptist was in prison. He sent his disciples to ask about Jesus. John was looking for what’s not there. John’s disciples asked Jesus, “Are you He who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight...” (Matthew 11:2-5). The message? When the *mission* of Jesus touches you, you begin to see what’s not there.

Recently, our leader at Church Doctor, Tracee Swank, asked me to help teach the Missionary Outreach Clinic at a church she had consulted in Indianapolis. On the drive to the church, Tracee said, “I can’t wait for you to meet Phil. He’s blind, and he’s amazing.”

One of the first people to arrive for the workshop was Phil. He introduced himself, and we shook hands. I said, "Tracee mentioned I would get the chance to meet you." He then said something I could never anticipate. Phil said, "I'm so glad to meet you. I read every issue of the *Church Doctor Report*. I love it."

Actually, I didn't know what to say! My mind was racing. "How does a blind guy read the *Church Doctor Report*?" So, I just said, "Oh, that's great...ah...I'm glad it's ...it's helpful to you."

Phil sensed I was perplexed and said, "I have an electronic reader that scans your report." Then he added, "I really want to read two of your books, *Who Broke My Church?* and *Restoring Civility*. Are they in audiobook form?" (They aren't.) Just then, Tracee came to my rescue and asked Phil what his electronic reader needs to read those books to him. He replied that all he needed was a typed copy of the manuscript.

As I interacted with this delightful Christian named Phil, I thought of the words, "Keep looking for what's not there." Then the words of the song "Amazing Grace" came to mind: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Is your church, your denomination, looking for what's not there? Has the enemy blinded us so much that we have limited the mission field to *only* over there? Has that led to the diabolical failure to train pastors in missiology? Have we simply focused on training pastors to learn the right theology and to "manage" Christians? Are we losing America because we have stopped looking for what's not there? Is this the enemy's deception? Does this occur in history when churches slide from mission to maintenance at home, only to focus on "mission" to those who are far away?

Decades ago, we at Church Doctor spent hundreds of hours developing practical mission training that could be taught to church staff and those in their congregations who are looking for what's not there. In the last 10 years, it has been revised, field-tested, and used in several churches—with great results. It's called the SEND Movement.

However, we have come to realize there is an "issue behind the issue." If we are really going to turn the Christian movement—and our nation—around, we must focus on what is missing, what we have lost or misplaced. You can't do what you don't know, and you can't teach what you haven't learned. The enemy is subtle! Perhaps his strategy is to keep God's people so busy with nonessentials that they fail to keep looking for what's not there.

As for Phil, he loved the Missionary Outreach Clinic. And, as we left, he said two things: "I have thought of several people I can tell about Jesus." Then he asked, "Are you an Indianapolis Colts fan?" I said that I was. And he responded, "I *watch* every game." It occurred to me that Phil is not handicapped. He "sees" what's not there. He is filled with amazing grace!