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## **Drift: From Church Decline to Church Growth**

“Kent, how many churches have the Church Doctors consulted in the last four decades?” asked Dave, a denominational leader.

“More than 2,000,” I replied, “from 78 denominational backgrounds, plus non-denominational and independent churches.”

Dave continued, “Do you see some pattern?” He paused. “Any common issues that explain the decline of Christianity in our country?”

“Well, Dave,” I replied, “it’s complicated. But if we were to summarize a general issue behind many of the issues, it would be drift.”

“Drift from what?” Dave asked.

“Drift from our primary purpose—our mission, our primary calling, to make disciples who make disciples,” I replied. “The good news? There is a way to turn that around.”

### **What Business Are You In?**

Peter Drucker, the great management leader of the last century, once said, “If you forget what

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radio commentator, church consultant, and conference speaker. As founder of Church Doctor Ministries, Kent’s passion is to help the local church become more effective for making disciples of Jesus Christ. He is the primary creator of the SEND Movement, which trains Christians in the biblical basics of missions to effectively reach unbelievers in their social networks.

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business you are in, you are about to go out of business.” There is a direct correlation between aging and decline and the mission effectiveness of your church.

To describe the issue of drift a different way, Thomas Merton said, “People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.” Most pastors work hard. So do church staff members. Many dedicated church people serve their churches faithfully. However, many of these churches continue to decline.

It is easy to become busy in “the work of the church.” Yet, it’s often challenging to discern if the effort contributes to the mission God has given us. This is not a *business* issue. It is a *biblical* issue. At the heart of the matter are the mission of the church and the calling of God’s people. Those have a lot to do with the difference between the law and the Gospel. Martin Luther, in his 26th thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), said, “The law says, ‘Do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘Believe in this,’ and everything is already done.”

Grace is the wonderful news that Jesus accomplished His mission to pay for our sins. Yet, there is more: It clarifies the focus of our primary mission as Christ-followers. Our mission is to do everything short of sin to reach others for Jesus. That focus diminishes up to 80 percent due to the busyness that wears church people out—trying to keep all the “church stuff” going. Mission focus would greatly improve the ability to reach lost people. It would reduce the drift that plagues congregations and whole denominations. As Stephen Covey once said, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”

The enemy tempts believers with peripheral stuff to clutter mission and reduce our effectiveness. Carey Nieuwhof is the pastor of a large megachurch. He says, “Churches who love the method more than the mission will die.”

## **A Brief Look at History**

There is a cycle that challenges the effectiveness of your church. It subtly sabotages your primary mission. Paul Harvey said, “Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men, but the keepers of the aquarium.”

In the New Testament, the Christian faith exploded across the Mediterranean world. Churches did not reflect organization, but organism. They were living and lively, reflecting movement and multiplication. When the movement reached Rome, over time, the church began a journey toward organization and bureaucracy. Rome is still the center of what became Catholicism. The organized Catholic movement developed the order called Jesuits. They carried out the missionary efforts of the church. They did great work throughout much of the world. They reflected the mission movement. The rest of the church drifted toward maintenance and bureaucracy. Catholics built phenomenal cathedrals throughout Europe. The Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity did the same. Today, most of these great facilities are wonderful tourist attractions, and I love to visit them. But they are primarily hollow remnants of vibrant faith. Their mission impact is negligible.

The Christian movement reignited through the Protestant Reformation. It took indigenous forms in various countries, speaking the language of the people and taking on different forms of worship and music that fit the different cultures. Bibles were translated into the various languages spoken by the common people. Putting the Scriptures into words church members understood transformed Christianity from a hierarchal organization and returned it to a

movement. Yet, over time, and even today, the nations of both Eastern and Western Europe are primarily secular. Many of those believers are nominal.

## The American Church

Today, the United States is following a similar trend, with some notable exceptions. Many of the denominationally-oriented congregations have lost focus on their primary mission to reach people for Jesus Christ—and to make disciples who make disciples. Many denominational hierarchies have built political superstructures that sap finances and divert focus. The result? They drain resources and diffuse efforts toward the primary mission. Churches that are great examples of mission toward disciple-making basically ignore the politics of their denominational system. Other denominations have drifted to social agendas that diminish mission focus (though they would not agree with that conclusion). They have *redefined* Jesus' mission.

This is not a new trend. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were denominations that chose to take on popular social agendas of the day. By doing so, they diminished the emphasis on evangelism, outreach, and making disciples. The result? Today, those denominations are shadows of their former selves. Recently, several current denominations are following the same path. The results will be the same. To some extent, this is secular drift. It is not always or only a denial of scriptural truth. The focus and purpose diminish their emphasis on biblical teaching. They greatly ignore the Lord's commission to make disciples.

## The Threat of Busyness

Many churches remain true to the Bible and theoretically adhere to the mission to make disciples. However, an overabundance of programs leaves little time or energy for the focus on the primary mission of making disciples. Most churches have an “evangelism committee” that meets to talk *about* outreach rather than doing it. They rarely focus on equipping all church members to reach out to the unbelievers in their personal social networks. Instead, they focus on church signs and websites or “bring-a-friend” Sundays, rather than equipping members to make disciples.

While this reality may launch a “guilt trip” on pastors, it is unwarranted. It's not the pastor's fault. As we have discovered (while consulting numerous churches from a wide variety of denominations and fellowships), the vast majority of pastors has been trained to *manage* Christians and churches. They have been well trained in *theology*—the great teachings of the Bible. Pastors have been taught *ecclesiology*, the doctrines about the nature of the church—what it means to be church. However, most have not been equipped in *missiology*—the teaching about all that Scripture reveals concerning the mission of the church. Consequently, most pastors are not trained to equip members in effective outreach.

## KEY RESOURCES

Hunter, Kent R., and Tracee J. Swank. *The Amazing Power of God Stories: Share What God Has Done in Your Life* (available in 2022).

Hunter, Kent R., and Tracee J. Swank. *An Apple a Day...From the Church Doctors: A Daily Dose for Everyday Faith* (available in 2022).

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

The SEND Movement.  
[www.thesendmovement.com](http://www.thesendmovement.com).

Whether they realize it or not, pastors are trapped in the busyness of congregational life. For many, their churches are declining and aging. Pastors can't equip people to reach their communities in a country that is increasingly becoming a dominant mission field. Pastors can't train church members in what they, themselves, have never learned. You might wonder: Why didn't they learn biblical teaching about mission when they were trained to be a pastor?

## The Big Lie

After wrestling with this issue, our Church Doctors have come to a conclusion about the “issue behind the issue.” This is the causative reason the church is losing ground in America and elsewhere. It is why secularization rages and threatens the moral and spiritual fiber of the nation.

At some time in history, this big unspoken lie became the worldview of Christians: “America is a Christian nation.” Look at this subtle reality. Our definition of the “mission field” becomes somewhere over there—far away, *foreign*.

I came to understand this in several steps.

**Step #1:** When I graduated from seminary, I stayed to earn a PhD in theology. My primary reason for that extra training was to reach people who are not yet Christians. I hadn't received that training in college or seminary as I studied for my master of divinity degree. So, I went to grad school to get my doctorate. After three years (which totaled 12 years of education beyond high school), I got the degree. I learned a lot more, but still found no training in mission and outreach.

**Step #2:** While leaving seminary grad school, I thought back to my graduating class three years earlier. There were three or four classmates who felt called to be “missionaries,” which meant they were called to serve on the *foreign* mission field. They had to go on to another school that trained them in *missiology*.

**Step #3:** My first placement into a church was a congregation in the inner city of Detroit. It was a large church—900 members in worship—and I was their only pastor for the first couple of years. It was an all-white congregation in a neighborhood with approximately 50 percent African Americans. Everything we tried failed to grow the church. I asked my denominational leaders about what I could learn to help my church reach out. I was told, “We don't know what to do. We have already closed several churches in the city of Detroit.”

**Step #4:** During months of discouragement, I received a brochure in the mail about mission training for busy pastors. My wife wondered if I would go to school forever. The church board allowed me to go, but I had to pay for it. This training was two weeks at a time. Before I went, I had to read 2,400 pages of assigned reading from selected books. After I returned, I had to write a paper about what I learned and apply it to my church. I did that, three times a year, for three years. It changed my life! That changed our church. Then what happened? I became a trained missionary. Through me, our staff and many of our members became “missionaries,” whether they knew it or not. The church grew cross-culturally. As word got out, others became interested. Leaders from my denomination visited to find out how such an “extraordinary” thing could take place. In the meantime, pastors started asking me to “consult” their churches. We formed Church Doctor Ministries.

## The SEND Movement

Good news! There is a way to gently turn your church into an effective mission movement in your community. It is not a quick-fix program. It is a *movement* that works like leaven in bread dough: It is almost invisible, it takes time, and it changes everything! After the first 20 years of consulting

churches, Church Doctor Ministries began to develop a training and equipping mechanism for local churches. It has traveled through 10 more years of refinement and improvement. It is called the SEND Movement. It is often funded by members of the church who give above and beyond their offerings to the congregation.

The SEND Movement is not a program. Further, it is not for everyone in the church. It basically teaches missiology to staff and to those God moves to be involved. It normally starts small: the staff, plus six to 10 others, who are invited to consider involvement. (Jesus started with 12!) Yet, over time, it grows—more people get involved.

There is no church-wide hype about the SEND Movement. There are no sermons or posters that make it appear as a quick-fix program.

The movement begins with a spiritual gifts discovery workshop for those involved in the SEND Movement and anyone in the congregation who would like to discover, develop, and use their spiritual gifts. The staff and those committed to the SEND Movement are taught basic missiology through video teachings spread over three years. They discuss the short teachings and process the material together. They will also receive next steps and action plans to put to use what they have learned. Those involved in the SEND Movement are encouraged to read some books about mission teaching. They discuss how they can apply mission thinking to their lives and increase the effective outreach of their church.

Other workshops are provided by Church Doctor Ministries throughout the three-year cycle. The church is assigned a Church Doctor coach, who connects with the leadership on a regular basis. The congregation develops a SEND prayer team. A Church Doctor intercessory coach regularly connects with the prayer team.

Those involved in the SEND Movement pray for, look for, and invite other members to join the SEND Movement. When there are several more ready to start, the church begins a second cycle of the SEND Movement, using the same teachings. This multiplication of the movement continues. It is a movement not a program! connects with the prayer team.

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## **The Bottom Line**

Every church is located on a mission field. When Christians are trained as missionaries, they reach out to unbelievers in their own social networks, and the movement thrives. Church grows. When churches grow, nations change. Lives are changed for eternity. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the drift becomes a movement again. The church becomes a mission. God's people experience divine fulfillment. "All heaven rejoices over one sinner that repents" (Luke 15:10). When effective churches reach people for Jesus, it's exciting for the whole church as well!

## KEY THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER

“Becoming a friend to sinners is messy business, but cleaning up new wine that burst old wineskins is even messier.”

—David Putman, *Detox: For the Overly Religious*

“There is no other way to turn the church around except by innovation.... What was that innovation? New wine that required new wineskins.... God is calling today for the rebirth of Christianity.... That requires humility. The decline of North American civilization and the rise of secularism is the dismal failure of the Christian church to be the Body of Christ in mission.”

—Global Leadership Summit, 2012

“The challenge is this: If you don’t change the style, you *will* change the substance — the content.”

—Kent R. Hunter, *Who Broke My Church?*

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by a renewal of your mind....”

—The Apostle Paul, Romans 12:2

“When you perpetuate traditions beyond their lifespan, you practice a form of Amish Christianity.”

—Kent R. Hunter, *Who Broke My Church?*

“Worship is the liturgy of life. When you want to do indigenous ministry—go into the village and study the people and observe the liturgy of life—and translate it into worship.”

—Missionary Tony Steinbronn, Gaborone, Botswana, Africa

“So many missionaries are so intent in doing God’s work they forget God’s main work is to make something of them.”

—Missionary Jim Elliot

“Healthy Christians make healthy churches....Church health comes from recapturing Kingdom culture — the culture of King Jesus. It is not a program. It is a spiritual environment, a way of life. It is the air you breathe.”

—Kent R. Hunter, *Who Broke My Church?*