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Reaching Unbelievers: The Strategic, Powerful, and Missing Piece

Jim and his wife, Barb, are active members of their church. They are regular in worship and active in some of the ministries. Yet, they are challenged by the persistent decline of their congregation over the last 20 years. They have watched the aging of their congregation: far more older people than younger. That's why they asked Dr. Art to join them for breakfast.

Art was well known as a missionary to Africa. He recently retired and returned to his home in the same city where Jim and Barb's church is located. Jim and Barb met Art for breakfast, hoping to learn how they could help turn around the decline of their congregation.

Changing Focus

After they ordered their breakfast, Jim framed the issue that brought them together: "Art, our church has been declining and aging for almost 20 years. If it continues, our church will dwindle to a level that is not sustainable. I fear our church will run out of people and close, like a couple of other churches in this city. "We...." Jim searched for the painful words: "We..., our church, will go out of business. Art, we're looking at the death of our congregation."

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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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Jim and Barb were not prepared for Art's response. In fact, they had never thought about it.

"I mean no offense," said Art, "but you're focused on the wrong thing. You are looking for ways to keep your church—the organization—from going under."

Art had their attention, but they wondered if he understood or appreciated how much they loved their church.

"Let me explain it this way," Art continued. "It's normal to fall in love with your church. And, it's great that you have so many fond memories—and your church has meant so much to you. But focusing on keeping the church *for us*—those who are already there—may not be the way toward turning it around."

"I don't know what you mean," said Barb.

"Well," Art continued, "think about a couple of things Jesus said. I'm sure you've heard it before. Remember when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Son of God? Jesus said, 'On this rock'—his testimony—'I will build my church.' Also, remember when the Lord said, 'I have come to seek and save the lost'? Jesus' focus was reaching people. His passion was that those who don't know Him become believers and receive forgiveness and new life. His focus, His passion, His energy, was to change lives for eternity. Jesus' approach wasn't to grow churches. That was the result."

Clarity of Purpose

Most churches are birthed with a group of believers who have a passion to reach lost people. It should be no surprise: God blesses that! The result? The church grows, as new people come to Christ.

As this process continues, the local church grows in size—the number of people gets larger. That's when a subtle shift takes places. The energy for *mission* diminishes as the effort toward *ministry* increases. The larger crowd requires more effort. The focus on outreach declines.

The staff grows larger, and the trend toward "spiritual consumerism" grows. This is subtle, but powerful. The *movement* dimension of Christianity becomes more focused on *maintenance*. The end result is predictable: less effort toward outreach slowly refashions the local church from growth to maintenance: not entirely, but the proportion of emphasis shifts from outreach to organization.

Biblical Miscues

There are several connected drift areas that make up the subtle shift from mission to maintenance. Each one is a drift from key, biblical components of the movement Jesus launched.

(1) *From discipling to content download*. Learning all you can from Scripture is powerful. Preaching is the key ingredient. However, when on-the-job discipling to do ministry is greatly

reduced to *primarily* hearing biblical content, the multiplication of ministry suffers. In some ways, from a human perspective, it makes no sense that Jesus would spend most of his time and effort with 12 guys. Yet, He multiplied Himself. Beyond that, they became multipliers. The Christian movement, by design, moves forward by exponential growth. When a local church reduces this to growth by addition, sooner or later, decline is in the forecast.

(2) *From priesthood of believers to organizational volunteers.* In Scripture, it is clear: Every Christ-follower is a minister. This is a supernatural reality: Every believer has a unique set of spiritual gifts, fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a great leap toward consumerism to fade from ministers to members, pastored as consumers. It's great that most pew-sitters give money to keep the doors open and the machinery moving. However, there are declining and dying churches everywhere that have a large endowment, yet no future. There may be money to pay staff, but no equipped members to reach out to the dozens of people in their social networks who are far from God.

(3) *From the living organism, the body of Christ, to the religious corporation.* In the New Testament, several metaphors describe the most unique group of movement people on Earth—the local church. It is described as the body of Christ, a living temple of living stones, the bride of Christ, the sheep of the Shepherd, the household of God with brothers and sisters—and many more. Nowhere is the church described as a corporate entity. Yet, most churches follow constitutional rules—laws and bylaws— as if they are sacred. The family of God is paralyzed by politics. There is no shred of evidence in Scripture that hints of the church operating with motions, votes, majority rules, or parliamentary procedure.

Instead, God's people are called to ministry, not elected. They are gifted for service, not ratified by a quorum. Decisions are made through prayer and by searching the wisdom of

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- Rhodes, Matt. *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022.
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www.thesendmovement.com.
- Taylor, Joel A. *I Also Send You: The Great Commission of Jesus Christ*. Self-published, 2021.

God in Scripture. There are no boards, consistories, directors, or councils. There are counsels—those who take counsel from the Word of God. No one votes. They pray.

The Mission Miscue

After Art shared his opening remarks with Jim and Barb, he spoke from his heart and experience as a missionary.

“Jim and Barb, what I have to share with you may not help your church at this point, but it could. To explain, let me tell you how I became a missionary—and what I learned. Do you know much about the history of the expansion of Christianity over the centuries?”

Jim and Barb shook their heads no, but were intrigued, wondering where Art was going with this.

“Well,” Art continued, “in the very early days of the Christian faith, the church grew rapidly: in Jerusalem, Judea, and even in Samaria—which was a different culture.

“During the Apostle Paul’s lifetime, it spread to Corinth, Galatia, and several other places—even to Rome. Paul wrote letters to those churches. They were probably not just one huge church, but many house churches in those places. They were started by the disciples and second-generation disciples—sometimes called apostles.

“By the second and third centuries after Jesus, the Mediterranean world had many Christians. The movement grew like wildfire! Why? The mission principles of Jesus and the apostles were fresh. People learned the biblical principles of what today we call missiology—the biblical approaches that work to reach unbelievers and make disciples who make disciples—multiplication. Did you know that?”

Jim and Barb shook their heads in the negative. They had never heard or thought about it.

Art continued, “Have you guys been to Europe?”

Jim and Barb nodded.

“Did you see some of those great cathedrals?” Art asked.

“Yes,” replied Jim. “They are amazing!”

“Yeah, those people were really committed to the Christian faith,” Art said. “Some were Catholics who were not former Christians. Other were Protestants from the Reformation.”

Art paused, then asked, “How many people did you see worshipping on Sunday or at any other time in those churches?”

Barb and Jim responded in unison: “Almost none.”

Art continued, “Here’s what I think happens. And it’s the biggest cause of the decline of Christianity, in my opinion. It seems like the Christian faith grows, flourishes, and then wanes. Think about England, or Australia, or the U.S., or Canada. Yet, today the church is growing like wildfire in some places in Africa and South America. What do you think happens?”

Jim and Barb’s minds were racing with thoughts, curious about where Art was going with all this. “*What does happen?*” they wondered out loud.

Art continued, “I think that when Christianity gets established in an area of the world, the Christians subconsciously think about the ‘mission field’ as only ‘over there’ somewhere. So, they quit training their pastors in missiology—the biblical teachings about mission. The pastors are trained in a little evangelism, but basically their education is focused on how to *manage* Christians. If they aren’t trained in missions, they can’t train their people in missions. So, churches are well managed, but somewhat ineffective in reaching unbelievers. Eventually, those in the church grow older, their kids move away, and the church has more funerals than baptisms. The church is on its way to decline and ultimate death.”

Jim interjected, “But there *are* some really great, growing churches. We saw some in England. They aren’t the majority, but they’re growing—reaching people of all ages—a lot of young people. And we have quite a few outstanding churches in America. Not the majority, by any means—but how do you explain that?”

Art continued, “That’s right, Jim. There are exceptions. But if you dig deeper, those lead pastors somehow got mission training—the biblical teaching of missiology. For example, do you know the name Rick Warren? Saddleback Church?”

Jim and Barb both nodded.

“Well, Rick was a classmate of mine in missions school,” Art explained. “God has used Rick to reach thousands of people for Christ—many of them as first-time believers. He has also multiplied that church through several other campuses. Those pastors get it. They have caught the art and discipline of missiology from Rick.

“There are other well-known pastors who, on their own, have read books, gone to conferences, visited growing churches—and learned the discipline of missiology.

“But the vast majority of pastors have had no training in missions. So, they can’t equip their people. Over time, their churches plateau, decline, and die. The Christian movement in the country loses momentum.

“For example, do you know that the number of people in America who say they ‘happen to belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque’ has declined from over 70 percent in the 1960s to below 50 percent, for the first time since they started tracking churches in 1937?”

Jim and Barb were stunned.

Hope for Churches

“Every aspect of mission training is in Scripture,” Art said. “It is just scattered all over. It also needs to be ‘unpacked’ and organized in a practical way.

“It takes time to learn this discipline. That is why pastors who graduate from Bible colleges and seminaries attend ‘mission school’ if they feel called to the ‘foreign’ mission field. For those who are called to serve in their own country, their exposure to missiology is very limited.

“For most Christians, it takes two to three years to learn missiology on a part-time basis. But it can be done! Those who are retired and have more free time can learn missiology in a much shorter period of time.

“Missiology is practical,” Art said. “It comes from the Bible but requires ‘unpacking’ to understand

and apply. Any Christ-follower can overcome the challenge to learn and apply missiology. When they do, they can disciple others. In time, a mission movement takes place in your church. Scripture says, 'all Heaven rejoices when one sinner repents' (Luke 15:7). When churches grow, it's really exciting for everyone in the church as well! You can replace the strategic, powerful, missing piece. It can begin with you. And it won't end there."

Jim and Barb thought about what Dr. Art said. "I wonder if our church could offer mission training?" they asked. "There must be some people who would be interested. A few trained 'missionaries' could make a big difference."