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## What Is Your Church Missing?

Did you have a good Thanksgiving gathering? Did anything unexpected occur? Was it good? Not so good? Amazing? My wife and I gathered with 35 others at the home of our daughter and son-in-law. As usual, there was an abundance of food, laughter, and conversations throughout the afternoon. That's normal. Yet, something occurred in one of my conversations—and it has breakthrough potential for you, your church, and the Christian movement in America. Sometimes God shows up in a profound way when you least expect Him. As I share it with you, my prayer is that it will become a breakthrough for your life—and your church.

### Welcome and Prayer

After everyone arrived, our son-in-law, Jason, gathered everyone in the kitchen/dining room area—and we were elbow to elbow. He welcomed everyone and announced that his daughter, Kailyn, would say the prayer. She is 13 and often prays for the crowd at family gatherings. She prayed: “Dear Lord, thank you for having us all be able to come here today. Please help this food nourish our bodies, and help us have a good and happy day. Amen.”

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churches that want to effectively reach unchurched people through meeting needs and training God's people in mission principles that work. God wants lost people to be found and brought into your church. Their latest book is a unique approach to Bible study that takes three to five minutes a day. It is called *An Apple a Day: A Daily Dose for Everyday Faith*, available from [churchdoctor.org](http://churchdoctor.org).

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It wasn't a profound prayer, but sincere. However, it represents a breakthrough opportunity for most Christians and their churches. Surprisingly, most pastors and church leaders—as well as most Christians—need this missing link. *It is called invitation and challenge.* Most churches in America get the *invitation* part and almost entirely miss the *challenge*. This is important for the future of your church—and for you as a Christ-follower.

## **Later That Day**

Among the guests were Colleen and Chris, who flew in from Florida to join the Indiana gathering. Chris is the son of my wife's sister, Sally. Colleen is the young woman who lives next door to Chris. I had seen them both—and met Colleen—a few months earlier at Chris' mother's 80th birthday gathering.

I remembered having a conversation with Colleen at the birthday gathering and was interested to learn that she is an active member of a large, growing, nondenominational church. I already knew that Chris had grown up—and was a regular worshipper—at a mainline, traditional church. His primary worship experience was liturgical, structured, and—from the standpoint of language—dated. It was what missionaries call his primary worship “heart language.” He hadn't experienced anything different.

Different groups of friends and relatives were spread out in the various rooms at our Thanksgiving gathering. As usual, I traveled among the rooms to have conversations with the smaller groups. On my journey, I wandered into the dining room and found Colleen and Chris by themselves. So, I sat down and asked how they were doing—hoping to learn more about their growing relationship. I wasn't prepared for Colleen's first question. And, reflecting on our conversation, I wondered if Colleen had a plan designed to help Chris grow spiritually.

## **The Greatest Challenge Churches Face**

As I took my seat at the table, I asked an obvious question: “How are you folks doing?” Colleen said, “Fine,” and I still didn't get to learn much. Colleen had a different agenda and I think it was to try to help Chris' spiritual growth.

“Kent, you've worked with a lot of churches, haven't you? How many?”

I responded, “Not counting large conferences all over the world—here in America, we've worked intensely with 1,700 congregations, and of those, consulted with over 500 from 78 denominations and from nondenominational and independent churches.”

Then she asked the most profound question every Christian in the country ought to be considering: “Kent. If you could identify the one greatest challenge for American churches, what would it be?”

Imagine my surprise! Not about the question, but by the fact that I can't recall anyone asking that question in precisely that way. And it wasn't difficult to respond—not at all! I hope it makes you think deeply about your church or denomination and the spiritual crisis facing the nation.

## **Invitation and Challenge**

There are a lot of ways you can describe the teaching of Jesus in summary categories. One of them is described as invitation and challenge.

As the most impactful leader in history, Jesus' teaching followed the pattern of these two general approaches. The first was *invitation*. He said, "Come follow me." Most church leaders get this. It takes the form of "come to worship," "come to Bible class," and "come help out" with the programs—and includes the initiative: "Invite your neighbor's kids to come to Vacation Bible School."

In most churches, there is an unspoken, subtle myth that this is what the mission of Jesus is all about. It is *church-centered*, program-centric, building-focused. It reflects the local church as a magnet. The difficulty with that? It is the direct opposite of what Jesus taught and modeled.

Jesus didn't just focus on *invitation*. He balanced that with the *challenge*: "Go make disciples." This is sometimes called "outreach" or "mission" in effective churches—those that are growing, reaching people who are not yet believers. Jesus' challenge is an equal priority. It is all about equipping Christians with the worldview and mentality of mission as well as the practical efforts that work.

I then shared with Colleen, "What is absent in most churches? The challenge part!" I looked at Chris and, based on his limited experience in a "you-all-come, just-focus-on-right-teaching" church, he looked like a new arrival in a strange land.

Then Colleen began to share some of the outreach activities of her church. They included local outreach in which she is involved. She also added mission work her church does beyond their own location, in this country and beyond. As she shared more about her nondenominational, mission-focused church, it became clear: Those who lead her church get it—unlike most congregations that don't. It raises the question, "Why not?"

## **Where Is the Mission Field?**

In my extensive training for ministry, I spent four years in college, four years in two different seminaries—one in the US and one in Australia—and then spent three years in post-doctoral work receiving a PhD in theology. When I entered ministry in the inner city of Detroit, I quickly learned that I had been taught almost nothing from the discipline of mission. It was challenging because that first congregation—which was all Anglos—had declined by two-thirds in the previous 10 years and was surrounded by young, African American families that didn't have a church home. *Nothing I had learned in 11 years of training helped.* I asked for guidance from the mission leaders in my denomination and was told, "We have already closed a number of churches in Detroit in settings like yours. We don't know what to do."

How did the majority of churches in America get in this terrible situation? Why are so many congregations declining—with the median age growing older as we lose so many of our children and grandchildren?

After years of struggling with these questions, researching the health and effectiveness of congregations, and *studying the training they give to American missionaries sent to countries all over the world*, it has become clear. We have subconsciously declared America as a "Christian nation" and the "mission field" as over there somewhere. The result? Most training institutions do **not** teach mission principles.

In my own dilemma at the Detroit church, I learned of a seminary in California that trains busy pastors in mission principles. I went two weeks at a time, three times a year, for three years and learned from these professors. All of them were effective missionaries in different countries around the world. Before leaving the US, they received the mission training domestic pastors

normally don't get. This training changed my life—and changed our church in Detroit. We grew in outreach so dramatically the denomination was sending leaders to see the amazing phenomenon!

## **You Can Learn This**

Any Christian can learn this! As a Christian, you have likely been impacted by the basics of “you all come.” You can also “go make disciples.” The mission principles are “new” to most American Christians—including pastors! However, they aren't rocket science. And they will become the most rewarding impact for your Christian life. Further, our country—and perhaps your own children and grandchildren—represent an unreached mission field. We at Church Doctor Ministries have taken the most basic principles of mission and provide them on video teachings. It is called the SEND Movement project. This project represents Jesus' other side of “Come follow me.” He *sent* His disciples to go make disciples. Jesus' *invitation* is important to you, or you wouldn't be reading this. His *challenge* to “Go make disciples” will change you and your church. You can become part of the solution!