

## INTRODUCTION

---

*Alan McMahan, General Editor*



Did you feel the ground move beneath your feet recently?<sup>1</sup> In Southern California where I live now, or in the volcanic archipelago of Indonesia where I used to live, that shifting motion was evidence of a changing landscape that on a daily basis barely seemed to change at all. Massive forces we can hardly comprehend are altering the terrain in which we navigate, shifting the landmarks that we once considered as fixed. Unless you are one of the few who live on top of the fault zone, whose driveway now no longer lines up, or whose house suddenly seems to be moving in two directions at once, you might not have noticed . . . or cared.

---

<sup>1</sup> Image from *The Denver Post*, Jupiter Images, 5/26/13. [http://www.denverpost.com/ci\\_23320394/colorado-at-center-new-global-positioning-technology-gps](http://www.denverpost.com/ci_23320394/colorado-at-center-new-global-positioning-technology-gps).

If you have lived long enough, you may have noticed a significant shift taking place among North American evangelicals regarding their understanding of missions and the purpose of the church. The way that missions and the church's responsibility for local evangelism is viewed now stands in rather sharp contrast to the way it was viewed even just a couple of decades ago. A visit to many evangelical colleges, universities, and seminaries—once the training camps to equip a generation of missionaries, church planters, and pioneers—would reveal something quite different today.

Instead of focusing on unreached peoples, church planting, and effective evangelism, mission efforts today are more likely to be centered on Christian involvement in humanitarian efforts, social justice causes, and developing employment competencies for a multi-cultural world. Most students in my classes admit that they have never had any training in evangelism, have never personally won someone to Christ, and are not choosing vocational ministries; yet, it is assumed they will produce believers and out-reaching churches simply by placing them as vocationally competent Christian professionals in the workplace and in the community.

Mission-sending efforts, more often than not, take the form of church-sponsored, lay-led, short-term trips, and long-term missionaries are defined as those who spend two years abroad. Evangelism and church planting are not considered by many to be urgent, prioritized activities for healthy churches but are viewed as one more event among many other equally important activities in which the local church may be engaged.

To be clear, we need Christians who are involved in living out their faith in a multitude of ways, and engaging in humanitarian efforts and social justice issues are important.<sup>2</sup> However, we must also understand the urgency and importance of reaching the lost and growing the church in every place where Christ is not known. In a day where terrorism, materialism, and injustice abound, we need the clarity of understanding that without Jesus, there is no enduring solution to the problems we face.

Speaking to this reality, Chris Little opens up this issue of the *Great Commission Research Journal* with an in-depth investigation into whether evangelism should be the priority of the church. His insightful article was so thorough we have elected to publish it in two parts, the first of which is in this issue, with the conclusion to follow in the Summer 2016 issue. Approaching this topic from a number of angles, Chris offers much for the church to ponder.

Mike Morris, who serves as the book review editor for this journal, follows with an article that contrasts the implications of “harvest theology” to that of “search theology” to guide our evangelistic efforts. Students of Donald McGavran will recognize this debate as one that he addressed years ago, but it has significance today. If your evangelism efforts are indiscriminately

---

<sup>2</sup> Notably humanitarian efforts and social justice initiatives have historically followed most all movements toward faith in Christ.

conducted with no regard for your audience or the leadership needed to grow healthy churches, this article might provoke new thinking.

Much of church growth research has historically focused on what large churches have done that resulted in their success. The assumption on which this is based is that large churches have demonstrated their outreach effectiveness and therefore need to be studied to determine the principles that led to their growth. Ian Hussey makes a valuable contribution to our thinking with research findings showing that small churches may be contributing significantly to Great Commission effectiveness, even if they are not growing larger. His insights might challenge some previously held assumptions about small churches.

North Dakota is not the first place one looks when attempting to do research on where the church is growing! However, in the next article, Mark Teasdale and Steve Trefz explore how churches in the rapidly populating Bakken oil fields are discovering new and surprising insights into the nature of the outreach task that is before them. Their research reveals how these churches are effectively reaching the unchurched and what other churches can learn from their experiences.

The next couple of articles inform our thinking from lessons learned abroad. Kelly Michael Hilderbrand examines the difficulties the church has experienced as it attempted to expand its reach in Thailand. Citing a number of environmental and cultural factors that have historically worked against the church, he continues to reveal some of the mistakes the church has made in its approach to win these people to Christ. His insights demonstrate the roles both contextual and institutional factors play to frustrate the growth of the church and the opportunity of the lost to hear the gospel as “good news.” The insights offered here should cause us all to consider how the unchurched communities around us view the church and the message it bears. Clearly, the church needs to do its homework to understand the needs of the community and to bathe its outreach efforts in prayer.

J.S. Williams, writing under a pen name for security reasons, explores the critical importance of natural social networks for the extension of the gospel in Central Asia. Referencing Donald McGavran’s seminal work in *The Bridges of God* and the more contemporary theories of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, the author explores case studies of church planting efforts among Muslims to examine how the gospel travels through family and relational networks to impact a whole community or people group. Given the Western world’s emphasis on individualism, the church has given inadequate attention to explore the implications of this principle at home. Williams’ research findings bear important implications for evangelism in the United States and abroad.

In the last two articles, the authors address the issue of how to strengthen the global church by better strategic partnership and leadership between churches in the West and around the world. Andrew McFarland looks at the interdependence that can be fostered between sending churches and receiv-

ing churches as illustrated by William Carey, the father of modern missions, and his evangelism efforts in India. When such partnerships are operating at their best, enormous benefits flow to both parties, advancing the gospel.

Peter Rios contributes to our understanding of partnerships by talking about the kind of leadership necessary to make maximum impact in an increasingly globalized world. Building a framework for developing globally engaged leaders on his study of the apostle Paul's ministry, Peter identifies six sets of skills that leaders would do well to master in order to extend the reach of the church around the world.

Included also in this issue, as is commonly our practice, are book reviews of published works that have shaped our understanding of how we can be more effective in carrying out the Great Commission. We appreciate the fine work done by our team of the following book reviewers: Nicholas Clark, Mike Morris, Philips Sunday Akinbobloa, and Chase Weeks. They have skillfully highlighted the unique contributions these published works make. Especially when so many resources bombard us, it is helpful to know where to focus our efforts.

It is also my privilege in this issue to announce the addition of two outstanding scholars to our editorial team. Dr. Bishop Parnell Lovelace Jr., the pastor and founder of a mega-church in the Sacramento area and now a church consultant, will serve as the editor for our North American desk to gather and review articles for upcoming issues of the journal. I am excited to have him on board, and I know you will enjoy interacting with him in the months to come. He will be the first point of contact if you have an article you would like to submit regarding ministry in North America.

Also joining the team is a person for whom I have great admiration. Dr. Leonard Bartlotti will serve as the editor for our international desk. Len is an experienced mission leader with over 20 years of experience living in conflict zones in the Middle East. He is an outstanding thinker, author, and speaker who has a passion to see men and women discover the Savior. He will be scouring the international context to bring to our attention the research and insights that will guide our actions at home and abroad. If you know those with whom he should be in contact, or if you have something to submit, he will be glad to hear from you.

Along with me also works Gary McIntosh, our dissertation review editor, and Mike Morris, our book review editor. Now with a team of five content editors, we will be able to provide an increasingly robust publishing effort. Each of them brings a wealth of wisdom and expertise to this endeavor. Appreciation also goes to Joy Bergk, our publication manager, Laura McIntosh, our technical editor, and the rest of the Biola team that makes this publication possible.

It is our goal that the insights in this issue strengthen your service, embolden your faith, and help to multiply the church. Before the Lord of the harvest, we stand in awe.