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**THE NORTH AMERICAN CHURCH JOURNEY:
LESSONS WE ARE LEARNING**

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Daryl K. Thompson

abstract

The North American church is on a journey. It is a journey compelled by the church's decline in the past half century. The primary lesson that is being learned on this journey is that mission catalyzes Christianity in a way that nothing else does. Western European Christendom has significantly influenced the North American church. This expression of Christianity drifted radically from the early churches missional clarity. The result was an anemic Christianity that saw little personal and societal transformation. Missionally-minded and outwardly-focused pastors are essential to helping the North American church recover its missional orientation.

Developing missionally-minded and outwardly-focused pastors is a need for today. A pastor who is missionally minded has a mindset that the church's mission is to fulfill Christ's command to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew 28:19). He views this mission as the central or organizing function of the church.¹ Likewise,

¹ Alan Hirsch, a leading voice in the missional movement who has written considerably about being missional, uses the term in this sense. He writes, "However, the word *missional* has tended, over the years, to become very fluid, and it was quickly co-opted by those wishing to find new and trendy tags for what they were doing, be they missional or not. It is often used as a substitute for *seeker-sensitive*, *cell-group church*, or other church-growth concepts, thus obscuring its

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an outwardly-focused pastor has a primary concern for those who are outside of
the church and outside of Christ.² This focus causes the church to approach
ministry primarily from the perspective of reaching those who are not yet members
of God's family.

Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, demonstrates an outward focus
in their values with this statement: "When a choice is made between serving needs
on the inside or reaching out to others, we are committed in advance toward
ministry to outsiders."³ For a church to be missionally- and outwardly-focused, it
must be led by pastors who have a similar outlook, because they are the key leaders
and change agents in the church. Robert Lewis in his book, *The Church of
Irresistible Influence*, writes: "Pastors are, and will continue to be, the key to the
church. As shepherds, they are the primary shapers of church values, strategy, and
direction. As they go, so go the people."⁴

Chris Hodges, founding and senior pastor of Church of the Highlands in
Birmingham, Alabama, verbalizes this ministry orientation in *Outreach
Magazine's* September 12, 2012 e-mail edition lead article:

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As long as there is a heaven and there is a hell, [church] growth is not an
option. You're not growing in order to be *larger*, you're growing because heaven
and hell are realities. That's why [the Great Commission] is so important to
me—and why it's so important to God. He's not trying to build a large
institution on earth; He's trying to rescue people for eternity's sake. You have
to have [this] objective, so your church knows why it exists. You're not going to
be good at reaching people and you're not going to be good at growing if that
has never become a stated objective. I still personally lead a membership class.
Every new member is hearing from me personally, and that's one of the first
things I tell them: "If you're looking for a church that is just for you to meet
your needs, you're gonna hate it here." We say, "We don't exist for the people
that are here. We exist for the people who are not here yet."⁵

original meaning. . . . So a working definition of a missional church is a community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. In other words, the church's true, and authentic organizing principle is mission." Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 24.

² William Hoyt, a respected pastoral coach and church consultant, uses the expression in this way. He said, "Outward focus means prioritizing activities and ministries that reach out to new people, touching them where they live, work and play." William R. Hoyt, *Effectiveness by the Numbers: Counting What Counts in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 24.

³ Wooddale Church, <http://www.wooddale.org/ask/our-values>

⁴ Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 214.

⁵ http://www.outreachmagazine.com/people/4929-chris-hodges-great-commission-leadership.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=omnewsletter&utm_content=OM+Newsletter+20120913

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In an attempt to design a process for developing missionally-minded and outward-focused pastors, I used a five-step process for my doctor of ministry thesis. Step one was the development of a fifty-statement questionnaire. This was done by conducting phone interviews with fourteen EFCA pastors outside of the Northern Plains District (NPD) who had been identified as possessing the missionally-minded and outwardly-focused values and practices I was seeking to develop. Step two was the testing of NPD pastors using this questionnaire. Step three was a four-hour training event which I conducted. Units were presented on the state of the North American church, the mission of God, the case for being missionally minded, and the case for being outwardly focused. Step four was cluster group discussions which I facilitated. Step five was a posttest with the same questionnaire. The results indicated a 12.5 percent increase in missional thinking among pastors who participated in the process. The project was valuable in initiating a discussion and beginning a change process. However, it is just the beginning of a bigger and longer endeavor.

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How did the North American church get where it is today after starting so well?⁶ It is believed that church participation in North America peaked in 1958 at over 60 percent. It has been declining at an increasing rate ever since. Students of the North American church have been saying for over twenty years that approximately four out of five churches are plateaued or declining. This is true for evangelical as well as mainline churches.⁷ NPD churches mirror these figures. Efforts to address these trends have resulted in a church renewal emphasis (forties and fifties), a church growth emphasis (sixties and seventies), a church health emphasis (eighties and nineties), and a missional church emphasis (two thousand and beyond). Each of these has been helpful and has contributed to what has followed.

Not surprisingly, we have been significantly influenced by our past. The early church from the first to the fourth century experienced dynamic growth throughout the Roman world.⁸ Its growth was simply a result of personal conversions, transformed lives, and the resulting multiplication that followed. Then something very significant happened. Following the questionable conversion of the Roman Emperor to be (Constantine), Christianity shifted from an outlawed to an

⁶ The master trend of American religious history is a long, slow, and consistent increase in religious participation from 1776 to 1926—with the rate inching up slightly after 1926 and then hovering near 60 percent. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 281–282.

⁷ Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church: Understanding Models of Ministry for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 18.

⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4–13.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 7 official religion with the Edict of Milan (A.D. 313). Over the centuries, this resulted in major changes for the church. Its growth during the Middle Ages was largely due to its favored status by and relationship with the state. The result was an expression of Christianity that has come to be called Christendom. Some now say that this shift was absolutely disastrous for the Jesus movement.⁹

The differences between the early church and the Christendom church are dramatic. The early church could be described by what would be seen today as negatives. It was:

- Illegal
- Without church buildings as we know them
- Without the Scriptures as we know them
- Without professional leadership as we know it
- Without youth groups, worship teams, seminaries, and written resources as we know them

Christendom moved Christianity into the mainstream of society and adopted practices based more on the Old Testament than on the New. It brought:

- The erection of large buildings and the forming of large congregations
- The development of a priestly class
- Passive church involvement instead of participatory
- Infant baptism as the symbol of obligatory incorporation into the Christian society
- Discipleship being interpreted as loyal citizenship
- Maintenance rather than mission as the church's orientation
- Mission being carried out by specialist agencies not congregations¹⁰

These differences are displayed in the early church's missional clarity and Christendom's missional confusion; in the early church's simple and flexible forms and structures while Christendom's tend to be complex and rigid; in the early church's ministry being based on relationships while Christendom's tend to be on programs; the early church's gatherings being highly participatory while Christendom's are passive with the result that in the early church, growth was organic from the bottom up (individual believers reaching others) while the Christendom church's was institutional with growth being from the top down (pastors, preaching, and programs reaching others).

The difference between the early church and the Christendom church is reflected in the different responses in Russia and China to communism's

⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 60.

¹⁰ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 82ff.

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oppression. Christians in Russia had lived for years with a Christendom model and mindset when communism came along, and they simply continued to follow it under communism. The result was a weak and anemic church that survived but did not significantly impact the people or spread the gospel. On the other hand, Christians in China had not lived for years with a Christendom model or mindset. When western Christians were expelled from China, and western Christendom forms were also removed, Chinese Christians, out of necessity, gravitated to following the patterns of the early church. The result was beyond anyone's imagination. In less than fifty years, Christians had grown from two million to a conservative estimate of sixty million in China.¹¹

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The North American church has also been significantly influenced by the Christendom model and mindset. Although we do not have the same expression of it as Western Europe, we still have been greatly impacted by it. Christendom drifted significantly from the early church in its message, its mission, and its methods. The sixteenth century Protestant reformation was an attempt to address the message drift. What is taking place today is the attempt to address the mission and methods drift. Fortunately, we are being forced to do this because the underpinnings of Christendom no longer give the North American church the appearance of being successful. Unfortunately, we are slow and, at times, reluctant learners. Because of our history and our wealth, we find it hard to believe that we have much to learn from others, even though they are seeing a great advance of Christianity in their areas of the world. They may not have our academic institutions and resources; but they are in step with God in ways that we need to be.

The primary lesson that I have concluded from my reading, research, and experience is that mission catalyzes Christianity in a way that nothing else does. This is to say that engaging in the rescue mission with God is what energizes the Christian life and what accelerates the transformation process. When this mission is the central and organizing function of the local church, the local church experiences a vitality and dynamic that is absent when mission is only one of a number of things that the church is to do. Unless intentionally and diligently pursued, the local church's mission will gradually yield to the internal pull of self-concern and care. Mission also catalyzes the other functions of Christianity. It brings vitality and life to singing in a worship service, and it brings a dynamic to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God as well. It creates a desire to know God and to know the Word of God. This is why mission is meant to be the organizing and unifying function of the local church.

¹¹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 19.

Research done by Baylor University in Waco, Texas, supports this conclusion.

It was found that serving others outside of the church did more to produce growth in congregants' faith than did attendance at their church worship services.¹²

Growth and service go together! In an interview that Shane Stacey, Director of EFCA Reach Students, conducted with Greg Steir, Dare2Share ministry CEO and founder, this idea is also expressed. In the April/May 2011 ReachStudents Update, Stacey reported that Steir "suggested that evangelism is not an outcome of growth but a catalyst to growth."¹³ Steir continued on to say, "Evangelism therefore is not only an outcome of spiritual growth; it is also a trigger for it."¹⁴

Mission is not the organizing and unifying function in the typical North American church, however. The typical North American church's organizing function is its Sunday morning worship service with its singing and preaching. This is a product of Christendom's drift. Over the centuries, the church's support or gathered activities have replaced the church's mission or scattered activities. The result is that today nearly all of the typical North American church's resources are devoted to activities aimed at supporting the church's mission or outreach efforts instead of actually doing them. Few activities that actually focus on accomplishing the church's mission are left. Church researcher Thom Rainer wrote, "In a recent survey of churches across America, we found that nearly 95% of the church's ministries were for members alone. Indeed, many churches had no ministries for those outside the congregation."¹⁵ That which was meant to be the support for the church's main thing, the gathered activities aimed at encouraging and equipping believers to carry on the mission, ended up becoming the church's main thing.

The result is that many North American Christians do not have an understanding of the church's mission or of theirs. Paul Hiebert, a missionary statesman and anthropologist, believes that this is the experience of many Christians. He writes, "Most Christians have a smorgasbord theology—based on the study of specific biblical passages in sermons, Sunday School classes, and Bible studies—which answers certain questions and focuses on individuals and their needs. Most Christians talk about personal salvation and what God has done for them in their lives. They have a theology of worship and fellowship, of health and prosperity, and of care for the needy. But they have little in their thinking for a world full of diverse peoples, of an earth caught up in the evils of sin, of a history

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¹² Center for Family & Community Ministries, School of Social Work, Baylor University, "The Role of Faith in the Service of Christian Volunteers," 2006. <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/22974.pdf>.

¹³ Shane Stacy, "Evangelism: A Catalyst for Spiritual Growth," EFCA ReachStudents Update April/May 2011, <http://www.reachstudents.org/e-newsletter>. (accessed April 18, 2011).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Thom S. Rainer, "Seven Sins of Dying Churches," *Outreach Magazine*, January-February 2006, 16.

Thompson: The North American Church Journey: Lessons We Are Learning from before Creation to eternity, or of the reason for their existence in such a world.”¹⁶

Church consultant Kent Hunter echoes Hiebert’s thoughts. “Most Christians don’t have a clue to what the mission of the church is . . . up to 80 percent of church members believe that the primary purpose of the church is to provide a place of fellowship where Christians can share God’s love with one another rather than reach out to those who are unchurched.”¹⁷

72 Along with this shift is the unspoken assumption that the gathered activities produce the scattered activities. The preaching and teaching of the Bible and the worshipping through the singing of hymns and sacred songs produces mission activity by the church members. It is evident, though, that this has not been the case. Three things mark the North American church today. Each of them is in stark contrast to the early church. One is the small number of conversions churches experience. A second is the lack of personal transformation in the lives of those attending our churches. The third is the lack of multiplication of believers, ministries, leaders, and churches. It is apparent that the preaching and the singing have not done what it was assumed they would do.

Our seminaries contribute to our problems. Too many of them are out of touch with how the North American church is doing. An emphasis is on preparing pastors to do the things that are important for the Christendom church but not important to lead a missional church. Aubrey Malphurs, a seminary professor and church consultant, writes, “Seminaries aren’t helping the situation. They tend to be strong in such areas as Bible and theology, and these are critical; however, their pastoral ministries departments tend to focus on preaching, not leadership. I’m not saying that preaching the Bible isn’t important, because of course it is. But so is leadership.”¹⁸

The bad news is that the North American church is not doing well. The good news is that we are learning to recover the message, the mission, and the methods of the early church.

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¹⁶ Paul Heibert quoted in Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 7.

¹⁷ Kent R. Hunter, *Move Your Church to Action* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 12.

¹⁸ Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church: Understanding Models of Ministry for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 42.