

THE EPIC PROBLEM:
A CALL FOR DECENTRALIZED EVANGELICAL MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

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THE EPIC PROBLEM

The local church in America is facing a problem of epic proportions. Sally Morgenthaler notes that evangelical attendance in the early 21st century approximates only 9% of the population and is declining.¹ Recent research suggests there are “more than 200 million nonchurched people in American, making our nation one of the largest unchurched countries in the world.”² In fact, only three nations have more unchurched people than the United States – China, India, and Indonesia.³ Ron Sylvia in his book, *High Definition Church Planting*, explains, “In spite of the rise of American megachurches, no county in our nation has a greater church population than it did 10 years ago.”⁴ Josh McDowell, in his book, *The Last Christian Generation*, estimates between “69% to 94% of young people are leaving the traditional church after High School and few are returning!”⁵ Dave Earley and David Wheeler state in their book, *Evangelism Is...*, that “During the last 10 years...membership of all Protestant denominations declined by 9.5 percent (4,498,242), while the national population increased by 11.4 percent.”⁶ Will McRaney states, “95 to 97 percent of American Christians do not share their faith with others” and “60 percent of churches in America have a median age of sixty or higher.”⁷ Even

1. Sally Morgenthaler, “Windows in Caves and Other Things We Do with Perfectly Good Prisms,” Fuller Theological Seminary Theology News and Notes (Spring 2005), <http://effectivechurch.com/resources/faqs-resources-and-info/a/apostolic-movement-in-the-emerging-world/windows-in-caves-by-sally-mogenthaler/> (accessed April 21, 2013).

2. Dave Earley and David Wheeler, *Evangelism Is...: How to Share Jesus with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 29.

3. Justice Anderson, *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. J. M Terry, E. Smith, and J. Anderson (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 243.

4. Ron Sylvia, *Starting High Definition Churches* (Ocala, FL: High Definition Resources, 2004), 26.

5. Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2006), 13.

6. Earley and Wheeler, *Evangelism Is...*, 29.

7. Will McRaney Jr., *The Art of Personal Evangelism: Sharing Jesus in a Changing Culture* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2003), 5.

more troubling may be the fact that “There is no more than 4% difference between the attitudes and actions of professing Christian youth and non-Christian young people.”⁸ Unfortunately, it is not unreasonable to conclude that adult statistics would be similar. Can it get even worse?

Unfortunately – yes. H. B. London, Jr. and Neil Wiseman’s research in their book, *Pastors at Greater Risk*, explain that:

1. 45.5% of pastors need a leave of absence due to depression or burnout.⁹
2. 80% of the pastors say...that ministry has a negative effect on their family.¹⁰
3. The clergy has the second-highest divorce rate among all professions.¹¹
4. 33% of pastors confess “inappropriate” sexual behavior with someone in the church.¹²

Without question, the evidence leads to the obvious conclusion that church in America is simply not working, but what must be done?

WHAT NOW?

The question thousands of churches across the nation are asking is how do we stop the proverbial bleeding? Josh McDowell summarizes the American church situation well by stating, “The various creative approaches attempted over the course of this decade have drawn attention but produce little if any, transformational impact...Although many people attend a church, few Americans are committed to *being* the Church.”¹³ What does it mean to *be* the Church? Earley and Wheeler suggest, “Without a mammoth change in the culture of the contemporary church

8. McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation*, 28.

9. H. B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Greater Risk* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2003), 172.

10. *Ibid.*, 20.

11. *Ibid.*, 86.

12. *Ibid.*, 20.

13. McDowell, 28, 19.

that prioritizes fervent *evangelism*, Christ-centered *discipleship*, and biblical truth over personal comfort and individual preferences, the Church will continue to decline, and Christianity will lose its influence and identity.”¹⁴ McRaney similarly concludes, “The long-established, non-*missional* church is in big trouble in the U.S.”¹⁵ In other words, these authors suggest that *being* the Church means engaging in three areas: evangelism (sharing our faith), discipleship (growing in our faith), and missional activity (extending our faith), but is this correct? Before we answer that question, let’s look at how the church landed in its current predicament.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CURRENT PREDICAMENT

We will take a brief journey back to the beginning of the Christian Church. In the book, *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch estimates the number of Christians in AD100, which was approximately 70 years after Christ’s death, at around 25,000 and in AD310 the number of Christians was a whopping 20,000,000.¹⁶ The outstanding growth rate is hard to imagine. To put these numbers in perspective, current estimates suggest about 28 million evangelical Christians in the United States (9% of the current population). If you apply the growth rate of the early church to current evangelical Christianity, then in just a few generations, the number of evangelical Christians from the influence of the United States alone would be 2,240,000,000, or seven times the current population of the United States. So what caused such unbelievable growth in the early church? Was it freedom of religion? No. Actually, Christianity was illegal during this time. Was it the mass dissemination of Bibles? No. In fact, the compilation of New

14. Earley and Wheeler, *Evangelism Is...: How to Share Jesus with Passion and Confidence*, 30.

15. McRaney, *The Art of Personal Evangelism: Sharing Jesus in a Changing Culture*, 5.

16. Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), 18.

Testament as we know it did not appear until about AD367.¹⁷ Furthermore, formal church buildings and professional clergy did not exist, nor were there seeker services, youth groups, worship bands, seminaries etc.¹⁸ In light of the phenomenal growth from AD100 to AD310, what happened to curb the growth? Many suggest the change occurred with a Roman Emperor named Constantine who had some type of a Christian conversion and by 324, as the sole ruler of the Roman world, began institutionalizing Christianity.¹⁹ For instance, Constantine formally recognized professional clergy for the first time and engaged in extensive church building campaigns that “advertised the majesty and munificence of the emperor.”²⁰ The institutionalization of the church by Constantine is often considered one of the most influential events in Christendom.

One might think the incredible growth of early Christianity was an anomaly – an event incapable of repeating itself. However, in an article in *Christianity Today* entitled “Discreet and Dynamic: Why, with No Apparent Resources, Chinese Churches Thrive,” Philip Yancey explains that in 1950, with approximately 1 million Christians, China expelled 7,000 missionaries and did its best to stifle Christianity.²¹ Hirsch summarizes the impact of the Mao Tse-tung’s initiatives in the late 1960s and early 1970s by explaining that the dictator “nationalized all church property, killed all the senior leaders...banned all public meeting with Christians with the threat of death or torture, and then proceeded to perpetrate one of the cruelest

17. D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 734.

18. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 18-19.

19. Everett Ferguson, *Church History: Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 183.

20. *Ibid.*, 184-85.

21. Philip Yancey, *Discreet and Dynamic: Why with No Apparent Resources, Chinese Churches Thrive*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/july/16.72.html> (accessed April 22, 2013).

persecutions of Christians on historical record.”²² Accordingly, one would assume that Christianity would be nonexistent by the end of the persecution. However, from 1950 to the late 1970s the Christian population in China actually grew from 1million to approximately 60 million!²³ Once again, similar to the early church movement, the Chinese Christians had no buildings, very few Bibles, no professional clergy, and no organized leadership. What can we conclude from these astonishing results? Should we terminate all church leaders? Should we burn all the church buildings? Should we make sure that Bibles are inaccessible? Of course, these options are absurd. However, there are real lessons to learn. But what are they?

LESSONS LEARNED

During the 16th century, one of the most significant results of the Protestant Reformation was the rise of the importance of preaching. One of the Reformation’s most important leaders, Martin Luther, states, “Let us then consider it certain and conclusively established that the soul can do



without all things except the Word of God.”²⁴

Accordingly, Luther as well as other Reformers rightly stressed the importance of preaching the Word of God. Church members naturally wanted their friends and family to experience solid preaching from God’s Word and would ask many to “come” to church.

Over the years, the modern church enhanced these initiatives by expanding buildings, providing inspiring worship, and delivering excellent

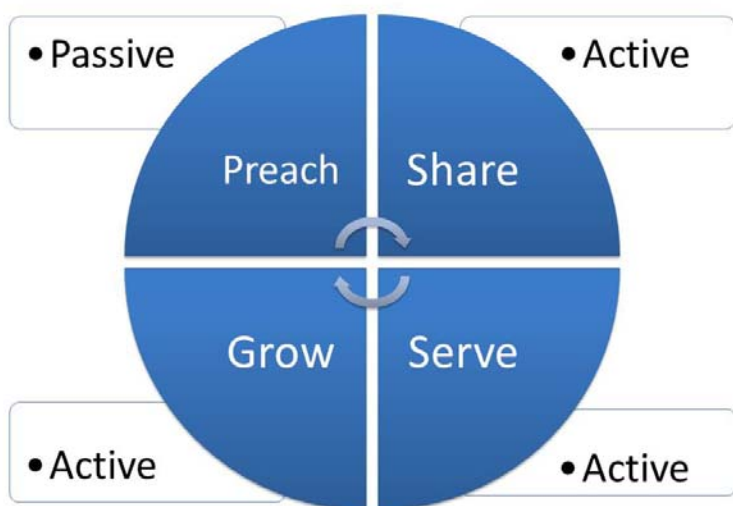
22. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 19.

23. Ibid.

24. Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty,” in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1947), 23.

programming in order to lure more people into the building to hear the preaching of the Word of God. The result of the local church initiatives was certainly not unbiblical – but, as we shall see, it was unbalanced.

Manfred Brauch explains that the church is actually “an extension of a reality already begun in Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁵ In other words, beyond preaching, Brauch suggests that Jesus empowered the Christian Church community to witness (share in Christ), to restore (grow in



Christ), and reach out to human need (serve in Christ) by calling Christians “together for a particular purpose.”²⁶ More specifically, the book of Acts states, “You shall be My witnesses” (Acts 1:8, NASB). In other words, the church is to *share* their faith in Christ. Next, Jesus explains that He

came to set people free from oppressed bondage (Luke 4:18). Accordingly, the church is to follow Christ’s example and help others *grow* in Christ (Luke 4:18). Finally, Jesus reaches out to hurting individuals setting the example for the community of believers to purposely meet the practical and concrete needs of others (Acts 4:34, 35; 6:1–6). Thus, believers are to *serve* in Christ.

Like any living organism, when a church becomes unbalanced, it becomes unhealthy. Unfortunately, the imbalance in the current church environment is particularly dangerous. Let me

25. Manfred Brauch, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 459.

26. *Ibid.*

explain. Of the four integral ingredients of church life – preaching, sharing, growing, and serving, the one currently most emphasized, preaching, allows believers to remain quite passive. In fact, Hirsch suggests between 80-95% of church attenders are not active in ministry at all, but instead, attend church as passive consumers.²⁷ Alternatively, when believers are sharing, growing, or serving, it is impossible for them to remain passive because all these activities, by definition, require action. The unfortunate results of the imbalance are devastating. As detailed above, the church’s impact and participation slowly decline as members intuitively sense a lack of purpose, and preachers simply burn out. Furthermore, the world views the church as an institution that focuses primarily on preaching at people, but sees very little sharing, growing, or serving by the passive members. The unfortunate situation creates a very unattractive perception in the minds of outsiders regarding the local organized church. This explains some very startling statistics. First, although few young people are returning to church after leaving High School, their interest in God and spirituality are as high as any generation, and “for more than a decade, young people have been the most spiritually interested individuals in America.”²⁸ Furthermore, recent research suggests, “The average non-Christian population generally reported a high interest in God, spirituality, Jesus and prayer that, taken together indicated that a significant search for meaning was going on in our time.”²⁹ However, when asked about the church, “the average non-Christian described a high degree of alienation. It seems that at present, most people report a ‘God? Yes! Church? No!’ type of response.”³⁰

27. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 43-44.

28. McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation*, 13-15.

29. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 34.

30. Ibid.

A number of important observations and lessons are now available. First, humanity's desire for a relationship with God has not changed. Similar to people during the time of the early church and the Chinese persecution, people continue to be interested in a relationship with their Creator. Second, during times of persecution it was practically impossible to overemphasize preaching in relation to other church elements because meeting with large groups of people was illegal. Third, although a certain amount of preaching activity at a local level certainly occurred in both the early church and the Chinese movement, the smaller gatherings encouraged sharing, growing, and serving and practically forced the assemblies to *be* the church as opposed to "going" to a church – a dangerous act that could lead to imprisonment and even death.

MAXIMUM INTENTIONALITY WITH MAXIMUM IMPACT

The solution to the epic problem of the local church is now obvious – maximum intentionality within a balanced church paradigm. A balanced church continues to maintain the importance of preaching while significantly increasing the areas of sharing, growing, and serving. David Platt's *New York Times*' Bestseller, *Radical*, proposes a similar solution by suggesting maximum intentionality in three areas: evangelism (sharing in Christ), discipleship (growing in Christ), and missional activity (serving in Christ), all within an environment of decentralized "multiplying communities."³¹

The idea of deploying decentralized communities is not new. In fact, thousands of churches utilize small group ministries in an attempt to solve many of the challenges identified. Willow Creek Community Church, a mega-church in Barrington, Illinois, was the forerunner in the development of small group ministries with the purpose of increasing integration and retention of members. Due to the influence of Willow Creek, thousands of churches followed

31. David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 85-106.

suit. Unfortunately, after decades of small group ministry at churches across the nation, the results are less than stellar. First, the Protestant church in America over the last number of decades continues to decline with little active involvement in discipling, evangelism, and serving. However, more troubling, are the results of the Reveal study performed in conjunction with Eric Arnson, a research strategist and former partner at McKinsey & Company, which is a leading global strategic management-consulting firm.³² Specifically, the research concludes, “Involvement in church activities does not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth.”³³ In other words, the amount of involvement in church programs such as small groups, worship, Sunday School, or parking cars have little to no correlation to life transformation.

Without question, twentieth and early twenty-first church initiatives, programming, and activities are not working in terms of kingdom advancement or transforming lives. Accordingly, the notion of church must be redefined. An entire shift in paradigm regarding organizational structure must occur that provides maximum intentionality in three areas: evangelism (sharing in Christ), discipleship (growing in Christ), and missional activity (serving in Christ). Furthermore, the deployment of decentralized missional communities must occur for maximum impact. This approach creates an empowering environment where participation reverses and 80-90% of members become active instead of passive. In addition, the approach aligns with all the major kingdom movements of history. The fancy name for these communities is “Decentralized Evangelical Missional Communities” (DEvMC). However, we call them Freedom Communities. What exactly are these communities and how do they work? These questions and many more are answered in the next article – “The Epic Solution.”

32. Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2007), 110.

33. *Ibid.*, 33.

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