What Can Local Churches Can Do to Recapture Its Primary Mission of Making Disciples?

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Abstract

This study will present a comprehensive look at what the Church of Jesus Christ needs to do in order to recapture its primary mission of making disciples. If you were to ask the average individual in our society what the definition of church was, you'd probably receive the following answers: "a building, a place where they hold funerals and weddings, something that is irrelevant today." What is even more drastic, is that most individuals, including many Christians, have no idea what the purpose of the Church is. As a result, the Church in our society has lost an enormous amount of influence, as many people and especially those of this generation, look to various other worldviews, opinions and religious belief systems, to find meaning and purpose.

After reviewing a number of books and scholarly articles by church leaders and Christian authors surrounding the subject of the Church in a post Christian society, I have concluded that there are four areas that the Church needs to visit and address in order to recapture its primary mission of making disciples. Those areas include 1) leadership, 2) people development versus program development, 3) evangelism, and 4) becoming missional versus remaining attractional. Throughout the paper I will discuss how the Church has ended up where it is now and how to correct her course.

For many years the church landscape in America has been vast and deep. It is not uncommon for cities around the country to be populated with hundreds and in some cases, thousands of churches. Factors including denominationalism, Christian missionary efforts, and various church and ministry planting endeavors around the world, has allowed the story of Christianity to be spread far and wide. Plus, with the advent of the internet and social media, Christian leaders and teachers can now get their messages out to any location that possess an internet connection. Mehlhaff (2008), writes, "Social-networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace are redefining the way many Americans build and maintain relationships- and also how their churches communicate…church leaders are realizing that the sites can be useful tools for youth ministry, college groups and other church groups, enabling members to reach each other reliably and swiftly." In addition, Detweiler (2016) states, "The rise of Global Pentecostalism and Prosperity Christianity is attributed to more adaptive media-savvy ministers than mainline Protestants wedded to a word-based hierarchy."

The message of Christianity has also spread as a result of an increase in the accessibility of its sacred book, the Holy Bible. According to Granquist (2017), "Millions of Bibles are sold in America every year and it has been the best-selling book in this country since its founding. It is a core text that has shaped American history and life…" Carter (2002) writes, "The Bible addresses the origins of human life, sibling jealousy and hatred, betrayal in love, spousal relationships, faithful friendship and self-sacrifice for other human beings, justice for all kinds of crimes, the desire for wealth and power, and the meaning of death." For many years, the bible was only available in printed formats. However, through technological advances, it is not only available in print, but also "…in digital format on smartphones, tablets, computers, and audio book format." (Ferebee, Davis, Sharp and Beyer, 2015).

Another factor that has increased Christianity's influence, is the increased availability of structured worship, in various spaces and times, in locations away from the main church building. Some churches offer worship experiences at different times and areas throughout the week, at places called campuses or satellite locations. The purpose of an additional campus or satellite site is to offer flexibility to current and potentially new congregants, while anticipating and/or accommodating growth. One researcher notes, "Flexible thinking and multiple locations will free you to grow at God's pace. Tying yourself down to one spot only creates a growth-restricting obstacle." (Moore, 2002, p. 116).

Some churches have even made the leap of forming "internet campuses" of their ministry, in order to connect with those who seek to explore their faith via the internet. When writing about the impact of an internet campus, one author shares that, "Virtual pilgrimages and prayers will never rival the experience of real, live communal prayer, yet the uniqueness of online prayer experiences lies in their accessibility. (LaReau, 2001). Another writes, "Today hundreds of thousands gather from around the world to experience various expressions of church online… through technology internet pastors and volunteers are welcoming people into the virtual service through chat "rooms." They pray with each other in virtual prayer rooms and share the concerns of their everyday lives." (Mullins, 2011).

Another good motive behind the idea of campus sites and satellite locations for churches, which has helped to bring Christian teachings and values to communities, is to aid parishioners in getting used to the idea of naturally expressing their faith in their immediate surroundings. This has given steam to what is known as the "house church" movement, which attempts to mirror the acts of the Early Church, as recorded in the Book of Acts in the Holy Bible. "From the rise of Christianity to about 150 C.E., Christians exclusively met in private homes in dwelling

rooms that were also used for other domestic purposes. The household model thus strongly influenced the social life, the organizational and leadership structures, and the ecclesiological concepts of early Christians, as well as their missionary outreach." (Lampe, 2006). Atkinson and Comiskey (2014), write, "As the apostles proceeded to carry out the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20), they utilized a two-fold approach of meeting in the temple courts for large-group meetings and in the homes for more intimate small-group encounters. Very quickly, the house church became the definitive expression of church in the early Christian movement." Having house churches in residential communities allows Christians to be have a constant presence and witness to their neighbors who may have serious needs. They allow congregants to express the Christian virtues of love and service to those who need it the most.

Although Christianity is one of the most influential spiritual belief systems in the world, it is facing challenges to grow. Bellofatto and Johnson (2013) report that, "Christianity is declining as a share of the population in Northern America, while the number of unaffiliated - both religious and nonreligious - is on the rise." According to Dreyer (2015), "For all the flurry and activity across the West, in particular the U.S. and U.K., church members have continued to decline…the church stands embarrassed by its own inability to respond in an appropriate manner to the growing crisis."

One of the reasons for those challenges, is the changing mindsets of the American public. Our society is increasingly becoming less interested in Christianity and what the Church has to offer. "Growing disillusionment and skepticism are one of the features of contemporary society. A quick search on the Internet reveals a vast array of websites by sceptics, for sceptics. Much of what was once regarded as 'holy' is subjected to deconstruction and logic, including the church." (Dreyer, 2015). McLaren (2002), describes our culture as, "…a culture dominated by science,

consumerism, conquest, rationalism, mechanism, analysis and objectivity." (p. 53). According to Fazzino (2014), "As the cultural and social milieu changes, so do people's religious preferences, allowing the emergence of a robust 'spiritual marketplace' for religious consumers…" "As a result, individuals and churches experience a slow spiritual deadening over the years, unless some sort of renewal/revival dynamic arrests it." (Keller, 2012, p. 55).

With such a drastic crisis occurring in churches and ministries in the United States and around the world, church leaders are faced with the following question: what can local churches do to recapture its primary mission of making disciples? Local churches have excelled at many things including, filling large sanctuaries each weekend or, putting on big events and concerts complete with state of the art sound and media. There is no question that the local church has made a mark on culture in regard to its sheer presence. However, what is questionable, is our attention to honoring Christ's, who is the head of The Church, instructions to make disciples of all nations. Many church leader have concluded that we are failing in this area. Coleman (1994), writes, "It is time that the church realistically faces the situation. Our days of trifling are running out. The evangelistic program of the church has bogged down on nearly every front, especially across the affluent Western world. (p. 37).

Therefore, researching and gathering such data, is important and for at least two reasons. First, according to scriptural text, before Jesus ascended to heaven, one of the final instructions He gave to His disciples, which should be the Church's primary mission, was to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus made it very clear that He intends for His Church to grow and the way that it grows, is not through people simply being converted and/or filling pews on Sunday, but by becoming

disciples. Then, those disciples then go and teach others to follow Jesus, making more disciples. In essence, this is discipleship, and according to Strawn (2013), "Given Jesus' instructions to His disciples in Matthew 28:19 ("make disciples of all nations," ESV) perhaps it is most appropriate that Christians take a serious look at their efforts in fulfilling His command." Brundell (2008), writes, "It is significant that Jesus did not tell us to go out and make instant converts. . .rather, he told us to 'make disciples of all the nations'…discipleship is a process, a journey, a very subtle journey with many twists and turns, a journey that is very personal and particular to each individual." The data from this research is needed to help teach parishioners how to fulfill the mandate that Jesus gave to His church.

Second, this research is also needed because the data brought forth will help church leaders in developing new methods and strategies for making disciples. If the local church is going to recapture its primary mission of making disciples, then it will need to change some of its methods of attracting, reaching, growing and discipling individuals. In any industry, including sacred and secular, when outdated methods or processes are used, goals are not met, and the overall mission of the team suffers. This is especially true for local churches. Coleman (1994), challenges local churches by asking, "Are our efforts to keep things going fulfilling the great commission of Christ? Do we see an ever expanding company of dedicated people reaching the world with the gospel as a result of our ministry? "Moore (2002), continues, "Surprisingly, many new members of rising generations of Americans live in ignorance of Jesus Christ…we need a new approach, because the old way maintains the status quo, thereby diminishing the overall size and influence of the church. (p. 22).

My initial research in investigating what the local church could do to recapture its primary mission of making disciples, included conducting a literature review of 25 relevant

books and scholarly articles, all published between 1992 and 2019. Each article was authored by individuals working in various levels and platforms of church leadership, including pastors, professors, conference speakers, or other researcher. As I read through the literature, processing and balancing the various ideas, opinions and thoughts, I was able to conclude that the Church at large needed to take action in at least four areas, in order to recapture its primary mission of making disciples. Those areas include, 1) leadership, 2) people development versus program development, 3) evangelism, and 4) becoming missional versus remaining attractional.

The first area we will discuss is leadership. In his book, *Deep & Wide*, pastor and author, Andy Stanley shares how he launched North Point Ministries in Atlanta, GA, one of the largest churches in the country. Each Sunday, more than 33,000 people attend one of North Point's seven Atlanta area churches, or campus sites. In addition, North Point has planted 25 churches outside the metro Atlanta area. In *Deep & Wide*, he writes about, "…how to make your church more appealing to the people who are put off by all the shenanigans that give church…a bad name." (Stanley, 2012, p. 12). He contends that one of the reasons that the Church has lost much of its influence, is because of its tendency to only allow in those who we deem acceptable. He writes about how he wrestled with questions like, "Who is the church for? Who gets to participate? How good do you have to be? Which sins, if any, disqualify a person? Can the church welcome sinners? What about unrepentant sinners? How much baggage does a person have to leave at the door before being admitted? (Stanley, 2012, p. 72). Dealing with these questions, combined with a desire to impact his community while fulfilling the Great Commission, caused ~~Andy~~ Stanley to create a powerful mission statement with his team; creating churches that unchurched people love to attend.

As scholars we use last name to maintain a professional tone.

Stanley goes on to share how him and his team have developed a method of making disciples that is extraordinary and at times unpopular with other pastors and church leaders. Nonetheless, he has not allowed this to deter his passion for helping everyone he can to genuinely follow Jesus Christ. This requires confident and strong leadership. It also necessitates being able to go in a different direction, even when the popular thing to do means staying the same course. What appears to fuel his convictions, is his understanding of the word, ekklesia, the Greek word that Jesus used as a picture of what His church would be. The ancient Greek word, ekklesia, rivals the common day perception of church as simply a building, or somewhere we go. " Ekklesia simply means assembly, and the word was originally used in Classical Greece to designate a democratic-like institution, in which all free men had a say in the public affairs of the city." (Runesson, 2014). Speaking of the early church, Wood (2003), writes, "...they are ekklesia - called out - for a common mission that could not be accomplished individually."

Stanley asserts that, "There have always been and will always be church leaders who refuse to define church in terms of location alone. There will always be leaders who view the church as a movement with a divinely inspired mission." (Stanley, 2012, p. 66). With this observation, Stanley points to the need for leadership to take the reins in helping the church to regain its primary mission of making disciples. Leaders are always at the forefront of birthing change in any organization, on any team, or within any culture, and that change requires action. "Leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually od moment to moment cannot be scripted. To be effective, you must respond to what is happening." (Heifetz and Linksy, 2017, p. 73).

Helping local churches to recapture its primary mission of making disciples also requires an emphasis on emotionally healthy leadership, which leads to emotionally healthy churches. When churches are healthy, one of the byproducts is growth. "It is true that a church will never be totally healthy, just as in life there is a constant threat of disease-causing germs. However, the pastor/leader and congregation must seek to make health a priority…as church leaders, it is our responsibility not to grow the harvest, but to create an environment whereby God can bring about His harvest and grow His kingdom." (Mills, 2016). In, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives,* Scazzero and Bird (2003), share that, "…the overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership. In fact, the key to successful spiritual leadership has much more to do with the leader's internal life than with the leader's expertise, gifts or experience." (p. 20).

The second area that the church needs to consider when hoping to recapture its primary mission of making disciples, is learning to place people development ahead of program development. This essentially means that the church must once again make the emphasis of building people more important than building programs. When the church places the development and discipleship of people as its goal, there will be tangible fruit seen within the community of the church. On the opposite end of that spectrum, when a church places the development of programs (budgets, buildings, infrastructure, etc) as its goal, maintaining those programs becomes the bottom line, and people unfortunately fall through the cracks. According to McNeal, (2009), "The program-driven church has created an artificial environment divorced from the rhythms and realities of normal life. Its claims that participation in its consuming activities will result in spiritual growth is preposterous. It cannot deliver on the promise because its premise is false." (p. 93).

In many churches today, the focus is heavily tipped in the direction of growing the congregation, versus growing or, caring for the people. There is a big difference. In, *Ordering Your Private World,* Gordon MacDonald, (2003), writes, "Almost every pastor is judged on the basis of whether he/she has a vision. And this usually means a vision of how the church can grow, grow, grow. The pastoral care of the people – which for hundreds of years has been the aim of the church – is less important to the gathering of people. (p. 35). When churches adopt a vision to simply grow by any means necessary, it stops becoming a church primarily and has crossed over into the realm of a business. While leading church and/or ministry requires business acumen, the church is hardly to be considered a corporation. According to Peterson (1992), "When we embrace the business model, we are forced to define success numerically. We think cost-results, asking, what do we get for our money, for our effort?" (p. 116). As previously stated, leading a ministry does require business acumen in order to assure that finances are stewarded correctly. Some churches receive millions of dollars in monetary contributions each year, which requires conviction, discipline, the ability to ser a budget, oversight of staff, etc. These are all business skills that are needed in churches and ministry organizations. "It is true that there is a business side to church affairs. There has been ever since Acts 6. But the business side cannot be the controlling factor." (Peterson, 1992, p. 115).

As a result of churches becoming more concerned with building and managing programs, versus building people, and shifting their methods to be more business driven versus being Spirit driven, The Body of Christ has lost much influence. With the loss of influence has also come the loss of the privilege of speaking into the culture. Therefore, our churches are mostly filled with people who already Christian and sadly, even many of them are leaving the church. Bellofatto and Johnson (2013), report that, "The number of Christians who are not affiliated with any

particular church tradition is growing…the religiously unaffiliated include not only agnostics and atheists (the nonreligious) but also a growing number of Christians who have chosen to disaffiliate with institutionalized Christianity…"

The third area where churches need to focus on, in order to recapture its primary mission of making disciples, is the area of evangelism. There is a lack of evangelism in the American church. However, Jesus made it clear to His disciples that He expected them (His Church) to, "preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15), and they did. Coleman (1994), writes, "It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow Him. This revealed immediately the direction His evangelistic strategy would take…men were to be His method of winning the world to God." (p. 27). According to Abraham (1994), " The seeds for evangelistic activity are very clearly rooted in the earlier Jewish tradition…evangelism clearly took place within the Jewish circles that originally gave birth to Christianity…" Veronis (1997) writes, " On Pentecost, when the Church received the Holy Spirit in a powerful, intense, manifest manner, the first apostles took to heart the command to become witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. - (Acts 2,1:8)"

If evangelism was so firmly rooted in the practices of the early church, why it is not a priority in the church today? Ultimately, there could be many reasons why so many local church leaders refuse to take this command seriously. However, the main reason is clearly rooted in a lack of desire, as other things have become more important. Coleman (1994), shares, "…why is the contemporary church so frustrated in its witness to the world? Is it not because the among the clergy and laity alike there is a general indifference to the commands of God, or at least, a kind of contended complacency with mediocrity? Where is the obedience to the cross?" (p. 59). As a result, many of our churches have become "Christian bubbles" and "church country clubs" where

only certain people are invited to become a part of. This ought not to be, as Jesus made it clear that He came to call sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:32). As we process that truth, Stanley (2012), shares the following questions, we must all ask ourselves; "...who is the ekklesia for? Who gets to participate? What are the requirements for membership? How good do people have to be? How good must they continue to be once they're in? Is the church for church people? If so, what exactly does that mean?" (p. 68).

Church leaders have suggested that evangelism in the church is most effective when it is expressed in three forms which are, global, local and personal. The goal of each form is to simply be an ambassador and witness for Jesus Christ and His Church. Global evangelism takes place when leaders within the universal church take steps to reach and influence the world for Jesus Christ. Such a movement could be made up of solely Christians leaders, or could include other societal members, including those from the business, educational and political realm. An example of this kind of campaign is seen post World War I when church and political leaders from around the world came together to form an ecumenical or universal body. Canon (2003), writes, "War and its accompanying chaos prompted Christian leaders to define a new global order, one based on a "just and durable" peace and centralized around human rights. Churches, missionary societies, and new Christian communities came together under the guidance of political and religious leaders to form the basis of a post-war world organization." To these leaders, war served as a violent reminder that the world was changing and that the influence of Christ was waning. Accordingly, they took bold steps to try and assure that Christ would be represented in the nations.

Local evangelism is defined as, any Christian outreach work, completed by a local church or ministry, within a city or town. When a local church, ministry or group of Christian believers

engage in any activity that ministers to the neighbors of its community (feeding the hungry, tutoring at a local school, assisting the homeless, etc), this is seen as local evangelism. Planning and/or engaging in these kinds of projects gives the church influence with the unchurched. It opens the door for potentially fruitful, one on one friendships and relationships where they are needed most; outside the walls of the church, on the turf of those who are not in relationship with Christ. "If we are to get mainstream, unchurched Americans, we must take the initiative and meet them on their turf." (Peterson, 1992, p. 119).

Personal evangelism takes place when the individual Christian is involved in serving others out of personal conviction, or when sharing about their faith in Jesus Christ. Czegledi (2002), writes, "Telling our stories is an easy and non-threatening way to communicate our Christian faith and experience…Christians are called to share their faith, witnessing to God's activity in their lives." For those who feel ill equipped to share their faith our Lord, there are many resources that communicate practical methods to do so. An individual also needs to keep in mind that God's Spirit is at work during times of personal evangelism as well. He is, in essence, working on the heart of the one giving, as well as the one receiving. According to McLaren (2002), "The Holy Spirit factor reminds us that evangelism is not simply the transmission of information, it is a mysterious encounter between human beings (and human cultures and institutions too) and the Spirit of God, who loves, surrounds and pursues them gently." (p. 141). "It is the Spirit of God who enables one to carry on the redemptive mission of evangelism. Jesus underscored this truth early in relation to His own work by declaring what he did was in cooperation with the Spirit of the Lord." (Coleman, 1994, p. 65).

The fourth and final area that the church should focus on, in order to recapture its primary mission of making disciples, is the area of becoming more missional versus attractional in its

ministry approach. Attractional ministry attempts to attract people from the surrounding community to come into the four walls of the church. This model, "…is based on non-Christians coming or being invited into the programs and ministries of the church. They come into hear the preaching, to participate in programs that minister to their felt needs, or to attend baptisms, weddings and funerals." (Keller, 2012, p. 257). It is a method of ministry that holds to "…a view that attempts to persuade people to act in a certain way. It is also centripetal in nature- an effort to funnel people from the surrounding community into the church where they will discover, Lord willing, the desires of their hearts." (Hill, 2015). While an attractional approach to ministry has allowed some churches to grow in number, it is an unhealthy approach, which does not promote healthy biblical discipleship, as it encourages parishioners to become consumer driven, only concerned with their own needs. As reported by Richardson (2013), "…the attractional church of the West tends to think of people as consumers, reinforcing the pervasive practice of church shopping and turning pastors into commodities paid to provide the religious goods, services, and experiences that congregants can consume."

As our society has becomes more diverse, pluralistic and accepting of various religious and spiritual belief systems, the attractional church has lost major influence. According to Keller, (2012), attractional ministry, "…is now an obsolete model, though it still works in more traditional parts of the West and with the shrinking body of "Christianized" non-Christians." (p. 257). Hill, (2011), writes, "Occasionally the attractional approach works. Many of us have a story about someone who stopped, looked, listened and came in…But there's a danger here: when a story becomes an anecdote to justify a strategy, it soon becomes a deterrent to congregational efforts at becoming truly missional."

A missional approach to ministry, is essentially, "…an incarnational model, where Christians live geographically close to each other, create a thick and rich community among themselves, and then become deeply involved in the civic and corporate life of their neighborhood or city." (Keller, 2012, p. 257). Unlike the attractional model, missional ministry places a heavy insistence on going beyond the surface level, in order to build authentic relationships, while helping one another follow Christ as Lord. Richardson, (2013), shares, "The missional church is an incarnational (versus attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context. The missional church is not just a Western church, either. In its many global and giocai expressions, the church engages its context incarnationally and contextually." Missional ministry is much better suited to engage, influence and reach this emerging generation, as its design places a deep value on meeting people right where they are, on their own turf. "In a missional approach, as the church engages the world, it finds Jesus, whose home is in the streets or wherever He has to go to connect with the people He is pursuing, meaning everybody." (McNeal, 2009, p. 44). When we as the church accept our mandate to become more missional minded, and in turn begin to walk in that calling, an unbelievable amount of potential is released. "Thus every person whom we touch and influence through spiritual friendship will become one less person who is "part of the problem," and one more who is "part of the solution," using his or her, time talents and treasure to help the world become the kind of place God desires it to be…" (McLaren, 2002, p. 142).

In order to test the claims of each of these experts, the method of qualitative research that I will be using is an ethnographic study, on three separate congregations. According to Watson, (2011), "Ethnography is…a way of writing about and analyzing social life which has roots in both the sciences and the humanities…it prioritizes close and intensive observation in the

very good!

gathering of information and insights…" I feel like there is a need to study at least three separate congregations, in order to perform balanced, well-rounded research on this subject. Each congregation would be treated as a separate group, having its own philosophies, experiences, rules for doing things, etc. I believe that this would be the best method to use, as time would be needed to study and watch the various aspects of a church's life. One would need to spend time getting to know the senior and mid-level leadership, in addition to the lay leaders and parishioners. As reported by Scott and Garner, (2013), "The ethnographer goes to a special place, the field, and spends time there observing the culture and writing about the people." (p. 196).

This research method would present a certain degree of challenge for me. For one, I am an ordained pastor and could potentially become critical or judgmental towards a congregation, or its leadership, that I concluded had lost its primary mission of making disciples. Therefore, I recognize my need to process and resolve and preconceived notions beforehand. Scott and Garner, (2013), write how, "…ideas and preconceived notions could become a source of data corruption down the road. In short, unless you subject to your own biases to critical scrutiny, they could spell the demise of your ethnographic project." (p. 199).

Another challenge would include successfully formulating a broad list of interview questions, for an individuals with varied backgrounds and understanding of scripture. My subjects would include senior leaders, mid-level leaders, paid staff, lay leaders and parishioners of multiple churches that vary in size, philosophy, mission/vision, goals, etc. The purpose of these questions would be to help with understanding the beliefs, culture and vision of that particular church. Since so many churches differ along denominational lines, cultural preferences, interpretation of scripture, etc., the list of interview questions would be extensive and need lots of fore thought. Just as Scott and Garner, (2013), report, "…ethnographic research

requires a great deal of planning, and an equally great deal of midstream adjustments to your research questions, hypothesis, goals and objectives, relationships with informants in the field, and creation of data." (p. 198).

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