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Focus On Mission:
Transformative Christian
Leadership Series

MISSION

KENT R. HUNTER

with TRACEE J. SWANK

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Contents

Introduction	1
Transformative Faith: Lessons for Today's Church	4
Beyond the Machine: Rediscovering the Church's Missional Focus	6
From Consumers to Disciples: Rekindling the Fire of Mission	8
Sent Forth: Embracing the Mission Beyond Church Walls	10
From Busywork to God's Work: Reviving the Movement of Jesus.	12
Beyond Judgments: Compassionate Ministry in a Diverse World ..	14
Connecting Hearts: Clear Communication in Ministry	15
On Fire for Mission: Embracing Divine Enthusiasm	17
Transforming Outreach: From Spiritual Selfishness to Effective Mission.....	19
Faithful Followers: Empowering Disciples to Transform the Church	21
Apostolic Mission: Reclaiming the Church from Cultural Drift	23
Faith Without Risk: Are We Playing It Too Safe in the Church?.....	26
Losing Focus, Losing Mission: Why Churches Decline	28
More than a Building: Living as the Church God Intended	30
Strategy and Flexibility: The Key to Fulfilling the Church's Mission	32
The Great Commission Reset: Moving from 'Come' to 'Go'	33
Thinking Like Jesus: Unlocking True Mission Success	36
Conclusion: Small Group Study.....	38
Study Questions	40
About the Authors	45

Introduction

How would you describe the purpose of your church? Is it a place of *worship*? Most Christians would agree with that.

Is it a place of *ministry*? If so, what does that mean? Does it refer to an organization that “ministers” to those who attend? Of course—that would be accurate.

Do you consider your church to be a platform for *mission*? Jesus said to His disciples, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,” (John 20:21 NIV). Would you describe yourself as a *missionary*—one who is sent by Jesus to reach your world?

Many churches have an “evangelism committee.” Most often, they plan and discuss mission topics. Yet, rarely are they involved in developing the mission activity of the members of the church. When it comes to “mission,” in many congregations, the majority of members would reflect, “That’s the job of the pastor—and the staff.”

How Would You Describe Your Mission?

If you ask most church members, they would reflect a disconnect about their personal role in mission. Some would reflect, “That’s the job of a committee or the staff.” What does that reflect?

Part of the answer is that many Christ-followers have a *centripetal* view of their involvement in church. They talk about

their involvement in worship or some project at the church. And that is important! Yet, there is a key ingredient of spiritual vitality that is subconsciously ignored by many believers. It is the *centrifugal* aspect. This is called “the mission side of your church.” It is the opposite side of “you all come.” It is the dynamic of “you all go,” directed to all followers of Jesus. Scripture says it well in John 20:21 (NIV): “Therefore go and make disciples.”

The Concept of Divine Purpose

When we consider the primary purpose of Jesus, the focus is on the goal. The goal is captured in these words: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,” (John 20:21 NIV).

When you invite someone to church, you are experiencing the ministry of “you all come.” That is a powerful invitation that can change the eternal destiny of those you invite. If that was exercised by most people—in most churches—the Christian movement would explode with growth. So, why don’t more Christ-followers reflect that mission?

If you interview believers, many have a centripetal worldview to invite others. However, most have yet to personalize their mission opportunities. Only a small percentage operate from a “go mentality.” The result? Churches are plateaued or declining. When you ask church members about mission, many respond, “That is the pastor’s job; that’s why we have a staff.” The movement stalls.

What about your church: mission or maintenance—or both? “Go, make disciples,” or simply “attend church”? Are we consumers or missionaries? Is “outreach” the effort of the staff or the opportunity for every member? When you look into the

mirror, will you say, “I am a missionary. My mission field includes the unchurched people in my social network”?

What is God saying to you? And what are you going to do about it?

Transformative Faith: Lessons for Today's Church

Years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. led a civil rights movement. The tipping point of that movement was the march on Washington August 28, 1963.

This movement had some similarities for what Jesus described as His mission. The Christian movement is engineered for people to be transformationally changed and to collectively change the world: one person at a time, one community at a time, one nation at a time—to the ends of the earth.

The civil rights movement had several elements that the Christian movement would do well to emulate: (1) It was organized as a movement. Many churches today have become institutionalized, program-oriented, safe, risk-averse, building-bound, competitive, isolated, inward, and indulged to remain content. (2) Martin Luther King Jr. focused on *values*, what are important; appropriate *attitudes*; foundational *beliefs* (“all men are created equal”); *priorities* (what are nonnegotiable issues that must come first); and *worldviews*—how we understand the world and how the world works—or should work.

Today, many churches are focused on the color of the carpet, budgets, Vacation Bible School volunteers, Sunday school material, and a great sound system for worship. These are important issues, but they are not Jesus' focus. They are the *means* to an end, not the consuming “end issues.”

Martin Luther King Jr. gathered a unified cohesive group across denominations, races, regions, and political parties. He focused on the *cause* and gathered those who agreed to disagree on other issues. Why? Because the *cause* was nonnegotiablely important.

Churches are often sectarian, isolated, and postured in turfism. Martin Luther King Jr. was a visionary. He provided a vision: “I have a dream.” Every church has some visionaries. The divisive posture of unhealthy Christianity, however, allows misguided critics to undermine rather than support visionaries. There is a spirit of competition rather than cooperation. There are “shooting stars,” anxious to occupy center stage, riding on the next latest and greatest fad.

All too often, Christians lose mission connection and then live in a fog of identity. Are you driven by the mission focus of Jesus?

Beyond the Machine: Rediscovering the Church's Missional Focus

Many church leaders are caught in a whirlwind of maintenance ministry. Churches become layers of bureaucracy and a raging storm of programs and activity. Pastors and leaders—those in the eye of the storm—are caught in the rage of the machine. *Maintaining* the machine saps almost every ounce of energy.

Then, one day, perhaps only for a few minutes, there is a revelation moment, somewhere, somehow: The church leader ponders and wonders, “How have we engineered a monster that devours so much time, energy, and money? Often, there is nothing left—not an ounce of energy—for mission. Nothing is left on the table of discipling. Nothing remains in the tank to fuel the passion that drove Jesus to the cross, the resurrection, the mission.”

The agenda somehow gets shifted from mission to maintenance. The body of Christ, in this corrupted form, demands feeding. Almost every ministry moment is focused on the appetite for feeding the flock. The result? Ignoring those who are starving for eternity.

In 2 Corinthians 9:10, Paul writes: “God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you’re ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done.” These are powerful words: “God can....” Yes, indeed! God can astonish you—and your church—with anything and

everything. When you have the heartburn that torched Jesus to reach the lost, when He mounted the throne of the cross, there's no doubt He was single-minded. Focused on people far from God, He was clearly not tied up in politics or potlucks.

Jesus set the bar—provided the standard: "...more than just ready to do what needs to be done." Not maintenance, but mission—that's what drove Him. It drove Paul and the apostles. It drives missionaries. It drives some pastors and church leaders. And the results? The fruit of mission is the growth of the Church—a win for God and, for some others, the subtle movement on the road to maintenance. Even in the Church, sometimes success leads to failure. Why? Some church leaders lose the movement and fall into paralysis by program. The Christian movement moves by multiplication. Multiplication moves by discipleship. Scripture calls us the priesthood of believers.

The result is not the machine requiring maintenance but the movement with DNA of multiplication.

How does all this maintenance occur? In one word: "control." Well-meaning Christians succumb to the "rage of the church machine." Ministry—and the mission—become institutionalized tradition. To return to movement feels risky. Yet, the end of the day, we simply trust God. It is then that God's people move the movement!

From Consumers to Disciples: Rekindling the Fire of Mission

In many churches, the believers are willing to pitch in and serve. Most congregational leaders can harness workers to usher, greet, help in the office, run a VBS, teach Sunday school, and paint the nursery. Most Christians are willing to do anything—but share their faith with unbelievers.

Christians often relegate the “outreach stuff” to the staff. This includes faith sharing, discipleship, mission work, etc. Most congregations are well-oiled machines. They resemble an organization yet fall short of what Scripture calls the “body of Christ” on mission.

Most congregations operate with about 30 percent of the members involved in some ministry effort. The remainder are “nice” Christians—yet, primarily, consumers.

In the letter from James, there is the faith/works teaching. James writes, “I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, ‘Sounds good. You [pastor/staff] take care of the faith department; I’ll handle the works department’” (James 2:18). He continues in the same verse, “Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.”

Another way to look at this dilemma is the difference between theory and practice. For many Christians, faith is an academic exercise. They read or study the Bible, listen to preaching, follow some rituals, and “grow.” Nowhere is this so lopsided as it is for Christian mission. It is a consumer-oriented faith approach. The end result? The Christian movement stalls.

This cycle is clear throughout the history of the Christian movement. A revival occurs, and people experience white-hot faith. The heat of the faith penetrates others. The faith becomes a movement. But an odd thing occurs after a few generations. Consumer Christianity takes over. The body of Christ slowly becomes an intellectual corpse. As the saying goes, “God’s people are so heavenly minded, they are no earthly good.” The movement stalls.

James refers to the picture of congregational health in 2:25-26: “...that seamless unity of *believing* and *doing*.” He adds, “The very moment you separate body and spirit, you end up with a corpse. Separate faith and works and you get the same thing: a corpse” (James 2:26).

You know what is unique about churches? Many become corpses long before they turn out the lights and sell the building. No wonder “new life” from a mission perspective is called a “revival!”

Sent Forth: Embracing the Mission Beyond Church Walls

Do you ever regret something you did? Are you ever challenged by what occurs in the world—in politics or public behavior or by what you see on the news?

In Romans 10, Paul talks about something no one ever regrets—a pretty bold and sweeping statement! In verse 11, he says, “No one who trusts God like this—heart and soul—will ever regret it.” Wow!

Churches have cycled into a mediocrity of ineffectiveness since the first century. In “old” Christian areas of the world, like in Europe and North America, it appears that Christians are racing toward the finish line of extinction!

However, where Christianity is “new,” in fresh expressions, the Church flourishes. Don’t point the finger at God, or “evil,” or “sin in the world.” Instead, take a long, hard look into the mirror—and ask God to shock the hell out of you.

Does that sound impolite? Well, you know: The Enemy attends your church. Not to worship but to disrupt. It’s not always obvious. In fact, it is usually subtle. Subversive. Often the Enemy uses the narcotic of self-indulgence. The approach is to turn church people inward, comfortable, and compliant. The strategy is to comfortably corrupt believers.

The Enemy's strategy is to give you the twisted idea that church is a facility rather than a movement, the destination rather than a launchpad. He has a "you all come" strategy rather than outreach—to invite someone to church. He wants you to forget the "go" approach, to make disciples. So, the only time believers go is to the bathroom! Paul says, in Romans 10:14-17, "But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?" Oh, yeah, turn the "who" strategy around—that's the way the Enemy destroys the power God put into your church. What about you? Are you "sent" every time you leave church? Are you always "on mission"?

From Busywork to God's Work: Reviving the Movement of Jesus

If you were the enemy of the Christian Church, the body of Christ, what would be your strategy to destroy it? Remember, if you were too obvious, you'd get the attention of believers. You'd "show your hand." There would be immediate resistance.

In truth, a more subtle approach is more "effective" to cripple Christ's body on earth. How does the Enemy cripple your mission effectiveness?

The Enemy is strategic. He works to turn the movement into an organization. He removes the multiplication factor. His approach? Cripple, but don't go for the kill. After all, the Enemy tried death—and, surprise, got a resurrection!

In Ephesians 4:7-13, Paul focuses on one of the most strategic spiritual elements: multiplication. He says there are special gifts given to "leader types" in the body of Christ. Some of those are apostles, others prophets, some are evangelists, and still others are pastors and teachers. What is their strategic role? *To equip God's people to do ministry.*

Wow! The miracle of multiplication, the momentum of movement. Jesus modeled the equipping approach: on-the-job training, apprenticing, called discipling. The end result? Church members? Much more! Disciples who become disciplers—multipliers. The breakthrough of geometric progression! Take a

sheet of paper, fold it fifty times, and that thin sheet would almost reach from here to the sun. That's geometric progression. Fold it once more, and it would reach from here to the sun and back again! This multiplication is the genius of the movement leader, Jesus.

Enter the subtle, subversive, clever Enemy. Reduce geometric progression to simple addition. Make Christians busybody volunteers. Wear out the leaders by swamping them with ministry. Cripple potential disciplers with busywork that is *good stuff* but not *God stuff*.

Make the "body of Christ" an organization. Create an evangelism committee—so pew-sitters never discover the power of relationships to reach unbelievers in their social networks. Ah, but we're smarter than the Enemy and leader of Hell, right? We have the Kingdom Manual. We get our Leader's plan, right? To fill the earth, God said, "Be fruitful and multiply." To fill heaven, Jesus said, "Be fruitful and make disciples."

Beyond Judgments: Compassionate Ministry in a Diverse World

What do you do with the couple that comes into the church office and says, “We’ve been living together for two years. Will you marry us?” Or the gay person? Or when people walk into worship dressed in ways that don’t match our traditional idea of “church clothes” and even carry their coffee cups right into the sanctuary? Are they causing offense? An offense is an issue of the heart, which you can’t see. So be careful about your judgments. (Luke 12:10). Mission is messy!

Connecting Hearts: Clear Communication in Ministry

If you have the heart of a missionary, you want to reach others for Christ. This is a big part of the mission, the purpose of the Church. You don't want anything to get in the way. That includes using words no one understands or ancient words that no longer apply to everyday life.

Language is alive! It grows and changes all the time. But some Christians continue to use those words in worship that a newcomer or non-Christian would never understand. The whole idea of Jesus coming in the flesh is so everyone could meet God personally. No roadblocks!

Everyone has a “heart language.” It's the language they make love in. It's the language they dream in. Our Savior doesn't want any barriers to hinder the powerful message of God's love.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul addresses the issue of speaking in tongues in worship. The underlying, universal, mission-sensitive issue is this: In worship, or in any conversation where an unbeliever or new Christian may be present, always use language the “outsider” can immediately understand. The challenge? Language changes from one era to another.

If you have a heart for lost people—like Jesus did and directed His followers to have—you will work hard to speak the language of the outsider. The more mature Christian always subordinates

his or her preferences for the sake of the less mature or non-Christian.

So, why in the world would we perpetuate words like “Thee” and “Thou” and “Thy” in the Lord’s Prayer?

This is Paul’s rationale in 1 Corinthians 14:1. “Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it.... Most of all, try to proclaim his truth.” In verses 4-5, he says, “...proclaiming God’s truth to the church in its common language brings the whole church into *growth* and *strength*” (emphasis mine). Paul concludes that everyone should hear about God’s love in language they understand. Could this be any clearer? Quit using “feel-good” language that new believers don’t understand! Very few people, when showing love to their spouse, says “I love thee.” If they did, the relational mood would immediately disappear! If you want people to fall in love with God, speak like Jesus did: in everyday, simple language.

On Fire for Mission: Embracing Divine Enthusiasm

Ever notice that some people seem to be on fire for mission? They're excited to reach out and make disciples. It could be said that they have the enthusiasm of Jesus that took Him to the cross. You could say that the disciples, now apostles, had it too. The Apostle Paul had that enthusiasm as well. What is that?

The word "enthusiasm" is from the Greek, which actually means "in God." It's like the presence and power of God had overtaken the disciples. This is the way the Holy Spirit works in groups of Christians and churches. It's God's movement, causing an awakening among Christians, which is usually followed by a revival.

And if you aren't careful, you could wonder if these people were crazy. Think of what Paul says to the church at Ephesus: "And so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head, the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8).

Some Christians, some churches, and whole denominations act like they are related to koala bears. They sleep! Koalas are in an almost continuous state of being drugged by what they consume.

There have been massive movements of spiritual awakening all over the globe. During every one of them, there were many other Christians and whole churches that slept right through it.

What about you? Are you open for a massive move of God in your church? Wrong question! The first question is: Are you first open for a massive movement of God in *you*, in your personal world?

Do you think it's wrong to encourage people to get crazy for God—in the biblical sense of enthusiastic? Can it be OK to pray for revival, even though you know it will likely begin with you?

Such prayers are dangerous—in a very good sense. By “dangerous,” it means that God will stretch you to new levels in your relationship with Him—and new levels of usefulness for His Kingdom. That will take you out of your comfort zone for sure! God will use you to start a mission-minded holy infection among others. That becomes a movement of God in you, through you, in others, through them, and through your church.

Paul continues in verses 9-10 of Ephesians 3: “Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about” (ready for this?) “even among the angels!”

Can you believe it? Paul concludes, “When we trust in him, we’re free to say whatever needs to be said, bold to go wherever we need to go” (verses 11-13). Are you ready for that divine adventure?

Transforming Outreach: From Spiritual Selfishness to Effective Mission

Every church, every knowledgeable Christian, should get this: Our mission is to reach others for Christ. The Great Commission is the purpose statement for most churches and denominations. That commission in Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV) is familiar to most believers: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”—toward the goal of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

What many believers do not understand is *how*. How do we make disciples? If you say, “Go, baptize, and teach,” you’re right—partly right.

Most Christians miss the *posture* of mission that works—the platform that is effective, fruitful mission. Yet, we often miss the model, style, and approach: the *medium*. And that greatly diminishes the power of the *message*.

That *medium* is called the “incarnation”: Jesus became like us in every way—except sin. This is the mission principle most Christians miss, and it diminishes our effectiveness. It is part of the power of the word “go” in the Great Commission.

Many Christians think outreach is all about inviting others to church—to worship. Yet, that is not a “go” strategy. That is a

“y’all come” strategy. This limited approach greatly reduces the effectiveness and power of our mission.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul writes, “...I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people ... —but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I’ve become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life.”

Here is the mission principle: The more mature Christian always subordinates his or her preferences to those who are less mature Christians—or unbelievers—in order to share the Good News effectively. So, what does that say about parents who drag their kids to worship so the family can “worship together”? The kids sit in seats that don’t match their bodies and are expected to pay attention to a message that doesn’t match their attention span or comprehension level. If you insist that your family be together in worship—which is not a bad idea!—then go sit on the floor with your kids in the children’s church or join them in Sunday school. What about the use of old English words and ancient songs that “feel good” to believers but are foreign to new Christians or unbelievers?

We practice spiritual selfishness and arrogance and wonder why we have lost our kids and much of our nation. Even if we intellectually get the mission, we slaughter the medium on the altar of self-centered rituals. Jesus gave up a lot to reach this world. What will you do to effectively reach those who don’t know Him—yet?

Faithful Followers: Empowering Disciples to Transform the Church

After comprehensive studies from consultations with over two thousand churches, there are some universal observations. Most churches—and church leaders—get the primary mission: to promote and expand the Christian faith. That’s great, as far as it goes.

However, there is significant lack of clarity about two strategic approaches. The end “product” is relatively clear. Yet, there is frequently confusion about *how to get there*. The *strategy* is where there is often confusion.

Most Christians understand grace. “We are saved by grace through faith. Christ paid for our sins on the cross.” However, how do we *do mission*? What are the strategic elements? Some Christians are stuck in “works” and don’t know it. The end result is that the movement of faith gets caught in works righteousness.

It is tempting to concentrate on what we “do” with little focus on *who we are and who we become*: the discipleship process.

Jesus never gave an order to “grow the church.” Instead, He focused on faith. In dialogue with the disciples, Peter expressed that faith. He was answering Jesus’ question from Matthew 16:15: “Who do you say I am?” This was Jesus’ spiritual maturity question. Then Jesus said, “This is the rock [solid faith]

on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out” (Matthew 16:18).

The Apostle Paul understood. In Romans 12:3, he clarifies that believers don’t contribute goodness to God. The point? God does it all. How? It’s all about who God is and what He does for us, not who we are or what we do for Him. Consequently, Jesus didn’t ask us to grow the Church. He does that. He does ask us to do something strategic: Make disciples. Disciples are not simply church members—participants in an institution. They are not “just” worshippers either. Jesus’ ministry is about making disciples.

Christ-followers are called to focus on discipling people—the way Jesus did. God uses disciples to grow His Kingdom. It’s the truth: We work too hard at the wrong strategy.

What if we reduced all the busyness of the Church and focused on growing people in the Scripture? What if we helped others to know that they are, by definition, missionaries 24-7? In the process, they would come to see themselves as “ministers.” On the basis of Ephesians 4, those who have leadership gifts—like apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher—have one main job: Equip God’s people (all of them) for the work of ministry. Everyone is led to discover their spiritual gifts.

After several years, your church doesn’t grow; it multiplies! Now your church experiences a revival! Now Christianity becomes a movement! Now, Jesus Christ is, literally, the head of His body, the Church! If you’re going to work hard, which is not a bad thing, do what Jesus did. Quit trying to grow the Church. Grow disciples and watch God grow the Church!

Apostolic Mission: Reclaiming the Church from Cultural Drift

At times, the Church has drifted from the world of the Kingdom—the world ruled by the King. God’s people incorporate approaches that drift from Kingdom principles. The result reflects unhealthy churches.

Several clarifications are in order: (1) Big-box churches that run like a major corporation: Many of these reach thousands for Christ, with genuine spiritual growth and authentic salvation through faith in Jesus. This is not disputed. In areas of drift, could they be even more healthy, more productive? Absolutely! (2) Can we learn from business and technology and put best practices to sound theological culture? Of course! This is an “apostolic declaration.”

From antiquity, rulers (emperors and kings) had ambassadors. Some trained to go to conquered territories where the new king set up his culture but people were drifting from that culture. They were wandering from the values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and worldviews of their new king. From antiquity, kings and emperors sent special ambassadors to help reclaim the cultural drift of the people. These ambassadors, long before the New Testament, were called “apostles.” This is what many of the letters in the New Testament, written by “apostles,” were all about.

In John 18, Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the ‘King of the Jews’?” (verse 33).

Jesus replied, “My kingdom doesn’t consist of what you see around you.... I’m not that kind of king, not the world’s kind of king” (verse 36).

How do we sort out what is Kingdom thinking and what is worldly drift? The best way to do that is by measuring what we do or don’t do—according to the values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and worldviews of the King, Jesus.

There are some obvious areas that may reflect where churches have drifted. (1) *The big idea is to get as large as you can as a church.* Not necessarily. The Kingdom idea is to multiply churches. (2) *The staff serves in ministry because they have the educational degrees to be “professionals.”* No, in the Kingdom of Jesus, ministry is done by everyone, “the priesthood of all believers”—using their spiritual gifts. The leaders (staff and other unpaid leaders) are called in Ephesians 4:11 to “equip others to do the work of ministry.” (3) *The concept of inviting people to church.* Yes, however, in the Kingdom of King Jesus, the most important approach is to take church to people. A great teacher can attract many, but that is not a sustainable approach, especially when that great teacher dies. (4) *Evangelism is the way to reach people.* No, Jesus says only some people have the gift of evangelist. But to everyone, Jesus said, “You shall be My witnesses” (Acts 1:8 NASB, emphasis mine). Being a witness is simply to tell what God has done in your life. That makes the conversation over coffee more important than inviting people to church to worship a God they don’t yet believe in. (5) *Decision-making in the church is supposed to occur through votes, elections, nominations and boards.* No, Kingdom choices are driven by God’s will. That’s

why, even though many churches don't practice it, many Christians still pray, "Your will be done, on earth [in our church] as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 NIV).

These and other elements are evidence of drift. If you read the New Testament letters from the apostles through the lens of drift, you will see already that these young churches were already subject to drift. Is it any wonder that Paul would write to the Christians in the secular surroundings of the Roman Empire and tell them, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind"—the way you think (Romans 12:2 ESV). There is such an impact by a secular culture that the subtle strategy of the enemy is to deter Christian thinking. The result is drifted thinking that leads to a drifted church. The end result is increasing impotence for making disciples. The end result is a nation losing its spiritual foundation. The end result of that is the deterioration of civilization as we know it.

Faith Without Risk: Are We Playing It Too Safe in the Church?

When that spiritual terrorist, Saul, met the Master on the outskirts of Damascus, Saul discovered he was blind. Some people against the Christian movement apparently need to be shut down to get their attention.

Saul was instructed to go to Straight Street, to the house of Judas from Tarsus. He must have been led there by his companions. Do you think they were aware that they were leading Saul to step into the calling of a missionary? Probably not.

You can point many people to Christ and many believers to the mission of the movement. And, really, you have no idea. You never know what God will do with people. It doesn't matter. You're not in charge.

Meanwhile, the Master spoke to Ananias, a resident of Damascus and a disciple, a follower, of Jesus. The Master told Ananias to go and pray for Saul to be healed. Ananias responded, "Really? Are you kidding me?" (...Well, something like that! Acts 9:13-14: "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem!")

How would you feel, helping a terrorist? Saul's ruthless reputation was well known. Believers were terrified of this man who was known for his "reign of terror" against the believers in Jerusalem (Acts 9:13-14).

Why are so many Christians in churches risk-averse? Most people in business are more likely to take risks—for money. Get believers in a church meeting, and it seems they leave their spiritual backbones at home. What happened to the Christian protocol: "Faith is ... assurance about what we do not see"? (Hebrews 11:1 NIV). If you are too afraid to risk, so petrified to fail, what does that say about your faith?

If you are convinced it is God's will, would you move forward, blind of the risks, challenges and, oh yeah, the cost?

Ananias sucked it up (that is, trusted the Master), and Saul got his sight. What about you? Would you pray for a blind man to be healed? Really?

Losing Focus, Losing Mission: Why Churches Decline

If you don't know your "why," you've lost your way. For Christians and their churches, this is a big deal. The "why" issue goes to purpose: What is the primary purpose of your church?

Our research includes almost 1,800 churches in the United States and Canada—from eighty different denominations and networks and from nondenominational and independent churches. We ask the question of everyone in the church: "What is the primary purpose of the church?" There are four choices to choose from: (1) to follow the Golden Rule; (2) to be the moral backbone of society; (3) to make disciples; and (4) to provide a place of fellowship, to share God's love with one another.

Guess what? "Fellowship with each other" gets the majority of the responses! This, in spite of the objective given by Jesus in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19): "make disciples." It is also what He modeled! About 57 percent of Christians, on average, see the church as their spiritual "country club." Why?

Paul, when writing to the believers at Ephesus, says, "I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning." In what? "In knowing Him personally, your eyes focused and clear." Why? "So that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do..." (Ephesians 1:15-19).

It seems like many of God's people have lost their focus—lost their “why” about what it means to live life as His followers. When you lose your “why,” you have lost your way.

Paul continues in verses 20-23, reminding the Ephesian Christians that Christ is in charge forever. He rules the Church. Then Paul makes the key issue very clear. He says, “The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.”

The Church *is* Christ to the world. Wouldn't you think the Church should do what Christ did? Shouldn't we have priorities that Christ had? Have values like Christ had? Have the mission Christ had?

So, is Christ *really* the Head of His body, *your* church? Or has the world pushed the mission to the periphery? Is that why so many churches are in decline?

More Than a Building: Living as the Church God Intended

When I was a little kid in Sunday school, I learned this little Christian rhyme: “Here is the church, here is the steeple; open it up and see all the people.” Cute, but misleading. The church is much more than a building with a steeple.

It seems many Christians are misled about what it means to be Church. It’s easy to associate the Church with bricks and mortar, paint and glass and steel, a place. Scripture uses several metaphors—picture language—to describe the entity called “Church.” And all of those metaphors represent a living organism—not a location, not a facility. Each metaphor provides a different layer of meaning to this extraordinary, complex, unique, miraculous, living, breathing, reproducing organism.

In Romans 12:4-5, Paul relates “Church” to the human body with many parts. You and I and all God’s followers—Christians—are the parts. Each of us gets our meaning—our reason for being a unique Christian—from the body: from the Head, Christ. We don’t ever give the body meaning from ourselves. There are people who try that, but they’re off base. We don’t give the meaning, what it means to be Church; we receive it. It is always the body that defines us. Christ is always defining His body, the Church. Or He should be! It is never us defining what the Church should be or do. Sadly, you see it a lot. And it’s killing the Christian movement.

Paul says God chooses us—we don't choose Him. God directs us about where and how we serve; we don't choose—ever! So, what do we do? We only discover what God wants for us. It's called "seeking God's will for our personal lives." That's why it's called a calling. We don't call God; He calls us. How arrogant to think you could look at service in the church like a job fair, saying, "I wonder what I'd like to do?" If you did that, you'd be playing God—an infraction already defined in the first commandment! Our meaning and function come from the body.

If you separate from that notion about the body, it is like your finger or toe being chopped off. Those fingers and toes become useless. So, Paul pleads with us, "...let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be" (Romans 12:4-6). Put away envy and pride. You shouldn't be envious of anyone else's meaning or position, and you have no reason to be proud about your spot in the body. You are not special by yourself! As part of Christ's body, He makes you *enormously* special. Quit trying to be something you aren't. Discover the spiritual gifts God has given you and focus your life on them.

Strategy and Flexibility: The Key to Fulfilling the Church's Mission

Most churches, in theory, state the biblical goal: to make disciples.

They get enthusiastically pumped up on strategy—the way to obtain the goal.

A changing world requires changing strategies. Jesus calls for us to be shrewd managers (strategists). Jesus calls us to be streetwise, allowing “every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival,” or flexibility (Luke 16:1-9). This reflects changing architecture, church location, language, worship, style, outreach approaches, and everything—everything but the Word of God. Everything else changes. It must change, or it roadblocks the mission.

The Great Commission Reset: Moving from ‘Come’ to ‘Go’

The word “mission” means “sent.” As Christians, we are sent with the power of Jesus. Jesus said, “Receiving someone I send is the same as receiving me, just as receiving me is the same as receiving the One who sent me” (John 13:20).

Every church, it seems, has a “mission statement.” Usually it quotes the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20. Ironically, the Great Commission begins with the word “Go.” However, the posture of many churches is: “You all come.”

What does this actually look like? It’s all about: “Invite someone to church.” We even ask people, “Where do you attend church?”

The “sent” aspect of Christianity is totally different. “Take ‘church’ to people.” Saying it another way, you would ask a Christian, “Where do you go *from* church?”

In truth, research shows that only between 40 and 50 percent of Christians in churches know what the “Great Commission” is all about anyway. We have lost sight of our primary purpose. It’s as if Ford Motor Company forgot that they made cars.

This is killing us! It destroys our effectiveness as a Christian movement. We perpetuate this concept that Church is a destination. In the New Testament, Church is positioned more like a launchpad, an equipping school, a mentoring platform.

Yet, we focus on church “members.” Think about it: Members go to church. Disciples go to work. Missionaries go to school—they are lifelong learners of Scripture—and go to the lost, particularly in their own social networks. A missionary is someone who is sent. A missionary is one who gets the Great Commission.

According to Jesus, the idea of Christian community—Church—is the means to a greater end, not an end in itself. To be an end in itself, Church becomes a dead end. But as a means to an end, that end is missions. We come to church for one reason: to go. Your personal mission field is the sum total of those who are unchurched in your social network. According to the priesthood of all believers, this is the mission of every person in your church. According to Ephesians 4, the staff of a church has one primary role: equip the people for the work of ministry in all areas, including missions.

You have unbelievers in your social network your church staff members will never meet. Think about this: If everyone in church did mission every week, they could accomplish more in a small percentage of their spare time than staff could working eighty hours a week! Don’t you think it’s time to get back to God’s New Testament plan?

In the Old Testament, the approach was *centripetal*. This is like the swirl of water going down the drain. If you wanted to meet God, He was in the temple, on the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem. So, if you wanted to meet God, you went on a pilgrimage to the temple. It was a classic “you all come” approach.

However, in the New Testament, Jesus turned that around. In the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament plan, the New Testament, the new covenant, the new approach was to *go*. The approach went from centripetal to centrifugal, like putting a

heavy object at the end of a rope, twirling it around, and then letting go. That's what God does. He equips people to go. This is why the Great Commission begins with the word "Go."

The effectiveness of the true mission of the Church depends greatly on Jesus' 180-degree revision of the movement. Jesus who is the Light of the World (John 8:12) told His followers, "**You** are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14 NIV).

Why would Jesus make this dramatic change? Most likely it's because once God sent the Savior of the world and He did the job on the cross, the only strategic approach that's going to work is by geometric progression: everyone multiplying themselves, reaching others who become Christians—who multiply others. That's the *norm* for Christianity, not the exception. But in reality?

In reality, most churches today follow the Old Testament pattern. Their heart is Christian, but their strategy is Jewish. If your Christian congregation is to reach its potential for mission, you need to let God turn your church inside out.

Thinking Like Jesus: Unlocking True Mission Success

The response among many Christians who get the “wake-up call” that their church is declining is this: “Do more, work harder, and try the next, latest, greatest, hyped program.”

Churches go through program after program for years and, essentially, are no different. Are those churches seeing some results? Sure. But they are not transformationally changed. So, the results are *limited*. This is not the profile of the New Testament Church. Nor is it a reflection of the great movements or revivals of Christianity throughout history. It *adds* to the Church but does not *multiply*. The Church grows but doesn’t “explode” with exponential growth.

The real issue is that mission effectiveness is directly tied to spiritual health. Spiritual health is a product of spiritual maturity. In John 15:11-15 Jesus follows His discourse about the vine and the branches. In verse 8 He says that we produce fruit when we mature as disciples. In John 15:11-15, Jesus says, “I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature.” That is the second time He talks about maturing.

Bearing fruit—successful harvesting, effective mission—is tied directly to spiritual maturity. Jesus continues by saying, “I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand

what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends..." (15:11-15).

In verse 16, Jesus says, "You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil."

Our purpose is to focus on eternal fruit. As mature disciples, we get what Jesus is thinking and planning. We think like Jesus. We plan like Jesus.

The truth is, when we think and plan like Jesus, when we have His missional DNA, mission effectiveness reflects church health. Revival breaks out. Revival is the exponential, explosive growth of Christianity that defies rational explanation. It is, in reality, miraculous because we experience the same revival that occurred in the first century. It's not a program. It's an inside job. Inside of us. It is who we are, not what we do.

Conclusion: Small Group Study

As you consider the mission of the Church through the lens of these readings, the central theme becomes unmistakable. Jesus designed His movement to grow through ordinary believers who live as people sent into their everyday relationships. The early church did not depend on programs, committees, or buildings. It depended on disciples who believed that following Jesus meant going where He sent, loving who He loved, and multiplying what He started. The same calling rests on us today. Mission is not an optional activity for a few highly gifted leaders. It is the identity and purpose of every follower of Christ.

It is easy to slip into maintenance mode, focusing on familiar routines and comfortable ministries. Yet Scripture consistently calls the Church to rediscover the outward movement of the Gospel. The health of a congregation rises or falls on its willingness to think like Jesus, embrace flexibility, and follow the Spirit into new opportunities. When believers grow in spiritual maturity, fruitfulness becomes the natural result. Movements ignite not through trying harder or adding more programs but through aligning our hearts with the purpose of God and responding with obedience and courage.

As a group, your next step is to practice what you have been studying. Choose one simple way to engage mission in your daily lives this week. Begin praying for the unchurched people

in your social networks. Look for moments where hospitality, compassion, or spiritual curiosity open doors for conversation. Talk with one another about what you see and where God may be nudging you to take risks. Small actions taken consistently can reshape the culture of an entire church.

Finally, continue this journey together. The mission of God is too large for any one person to carry alone. The remaining sections of the *Focus On Mission* series will guide you deeper into practical tools, healthy mindsets, and biblical patterns that strengthen your ability to live as a sent people. Commit to walking through the rest of the series as a group. Let it shape not only your understanding but also your lifestyle. Movements grow when ordinary Christians step forward with extraordinary obedience.

Study Questions

Where do you see your church operating more like a destination than a launchpad for mission, and what small changes could shift that posture?

Which barriers keep average believers from seeing themselves as missionaries in their everyday relationships?

What creative or entrepreneurial approaches could your group try to connect with unchurched people in your social networks?

In which ways has maintenance ministry replaced mission in your church, and what would it look like to reverse that trend?

How can you personally practice greater flexibility in ministry strategy while staying anchored to the unchanging message of Jesus?

What is one bold, faith-stretching risk that God may be inviting you or your group to take in order to reach others?

How will you hold one another accountable to taking these next steps and continuing through the rest of the *Focus On Mission* series?



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①

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②

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③

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About the Authors



Dr. Kent R. Hunter is the founder of Church Doctor Ministries. He believes that God has called him to help Christians and their churches become more effective for the Great Commission, to reach unbelievers and to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. Dr. Hunter is the author of more than 40 books. He has consulted more than 1,800 churches from 80 denominations, as well as nondenominational and independent churches. He developed the SEND Movement, which trains congregational members to become missionaries to those who are unchurched in their social networks. Kent writes the bimonthly Church Doctor Report, found on www.churchdoctor.org. Kent lives on a tree farm in northeast Indiana with his wife, Janet. Kent and Janet have two grown children, Laura and Jon.



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