

## INTRODUCTION

Jesus often talked in parables that were easily understood by workers in an agrarian culture, and the metaphors He used have applicability in today's society. In Matthew 9:37-38 Jesus spoke about the humanity He encountered:

Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"<sup>1</sup>

The potential harvest for Christ remains, but the harvest workers are still scarce. If Christians are to fulfill the charge Jesus gave in the great commission, they must increase the number of harvest workers. To do so, the church must examine why the scarcity exists.

An examination of the history and demographics of the twentieth century church reveals a significant shift in society's view of the church and its activities. Malphurs describes this change:

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the future looked bright. The majority of people who attended church were born in the 1910-1930 era, people whom Lyle Schaller describes as "the most church-going generation in American history." In general, America was a church culture. On Sunday mornings, most people were found in their denominationally loyal churches; it was the accepted thing to do. If people weren't seen in church on Sunday morning, chances were good that they

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message; The New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996), 30.

had stayed home and slept in, which society considered to be “frowned upon.” If you were to be considered a person of character and quality, you went to church regularly. The 1940s and 1950s were the “heyday” for the church, and the promise for the future was bright for bringing Christ’s message to the lost.

Unfortunately, in the latter half of the century (in particular the 1980s and 1990s), this promise was not realized. Storm clouds have moved in and darkened the bright horizon of American Christianity. Rather than sending missionaries out from America and winning the world for Christ, America itself became a mission field. In 1988, church growth expert Win Arn wrote that “Between 80%-85% of all churches in America are either plateaued or are declining.”<sup>2</sup>

What has caused this change in American Church life? Logan writes, “We pray not, because we care not,”<sup>3</sup> and this may explain the root of the problem. Church attendance and involvement are no longer the norms or expectation in American society, and missing worship on the Sabbath no longer carries negative social consequences.<sup>4</sup> It has become socially unacceptable to express disapproval of other’s choices or to appear intolerant of other people’s life choices.<sup>5</sup> As this trend grew in the latter part of the twentieth century, the American church drifted from the center of American life to the margin, and the church exists now in a post-modern era and a post-Christendom culture.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Comprehensive Guide for New Churches and Those Desiring Renewal*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1998), 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Logan, “Church Planting Basics” (lecture, MG707 Church Planting: Starting and Birthing New Churches, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 4 November 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Eddie Gibbs, “Decline of Traditional Denominations” (lecture, MG731 Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 21 January 2003), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 23-27.

The rules and customs that supported the church in the first part of the twentieth century have changed or no longer exist. The mainline church must overcome outdated thinking to embrace healthy change. In the same manner, the institutional church must change how it views the world, eliminate obsolete practices, and craft responses, which will work effectively in a changing modern society.<sup>7</sup>

To attain relevance in the post-modern world, the church must understand the new societal worldview in which it operates. For example, postmodern thinking advocates a transition from centralized top-down hierarchal approaches to a flattening of the authority pyramid based on networking. Whereas change in the modern era was more incremental and predictable, postmodern times demonstrate chaotic change with less predictability. Planning is necessary, but chaotic change accelerates response rates and limits long-range planning effectiveness. The stability of the modern era brought confidence in human ability, but postmodern unpredictability and continuous change create pessimism as dependability declines. As networking replaces centralized decision-making, change often starts on the periphery.

“The world is moving forward, and it won’t stop and wait for the church to catch up.”<sup>8</sup> Smith believes the church resists change, and when it responds, it often uses

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13-18.

<sup>8</sup> Chuck Smith, Jr., *The End of the World . . . As We Know It*. (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 25.

irrelevant and incremental techniques. The church, therefore, needs to learn to respond more quickly and boldly due to the implications of this postmodern cultural shift.

Roof maintains that the impact of the modern worldview upon faith and life is profound.<sup>9</sup> Because modernism, which pre-dated postmodernism, has little or no place for revelation, the experiential dimensions of faith were stifled. Its excessive emphasis on individualism severed the connections to place and community, and modernity brought about compartmentalization in which work and life became increasingly separated. As human reason took precedence over divine truth, ethical values were diluted, and the synthesis of moral, religious, and civic values began to disintegrate. The optimism for the community was lost to optimism about the individual's potential, and the focus on individual needs undercut an earlier, common value for the community. As a result, isolationism became endemic, consumerism filled a religious function, and the message of Christ was drowned out by societal noise.<sup>10</sup>

Sweet contrasts the modern and postmodern eras, and characterizes the present era as fluid and ever-changing:

In the modern Era (there) was a rage for order, regulation, stability, and fixity. The Postmodern Era is a rage for chaos, uncertainty, otherness, openness, multiplicity, and change. Postmodern surfaces are not

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<sup>9</sup> Wade Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 62-65.

<sup>10</sup> Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 45.

landscapes but wavescapes, with the waters always changing and the surface never the same. The sea knows no boundaries.<sup>11</sup>

These unbounded wavescapes produce relativistic thought in which no absolute standards are accepted.<sup>12</sup> Christianity is no longer the dominant religion of the land and some suggest pluralism, tolerance, and political correctness have taken center stage. Christians fear being labeled as “intolerant” or “judgmental.”<sup>13</sup> I believe these changes can be attributed to the church losing sight of its mission. Arn compiled statistics on North American demographics at the end of the twentieth century: in a population of 240 million people, 96 million (40%) had no religious affiliation and 73 million (31%) were Christians in name only.<sup>14</sup> With these statistics in mind, Malphurs challenged the church to re-examine its practices, understand how the church implements its faith, and determine if the practices are effective in a post-modern society. This does not mean the elimination of all current church-designed approaches, but it demands a continuous re-evaluation of its methods as the church adapts to a society that changes constantly. If the church develops practices that encourage apostolic discipleship, the author of this paper believes the church can produce positive results.

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<sup>11</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church* (Loveland, CO: Group, 1999), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 14.

An examination of twentieth century trends suggests the church gradually changed from a dispersed community of believers to believers gathered under the one roof of the church building.<sup>15</sup> The church became stationary, tied to a physical location. Going to church meant traveling to a building rather than traveling to the field as an apostolic disciple harvest worker. The thesis of this paper is that biblically and theologically sound strategies can be developed that mature, mobilize, and equip Christians for apostolic discipleship. Apostolic discipleship suggests God's people sent out on mission exemplifying Jesus through works of service. The potential harvest is just as great, but the number of harvest workers has declined. If the declining trends are to be halted and reversed, the modern church must undergo significant changes. New approaches are being developed to help transform the church and are the subject of this paper.

American business culture analysts suggest the greatest opportunities for improvement and advancement come in times of crisis or great chaos for those who see the opportunities.<sup>16</sup> If this new reformation becomes effective, the church may be on the verge of productive times. This paper describes methods to realize that potential, and the methods are identified as apostolic discipleship. The methods are designed to implement a contextually informed, biblically based strategy that produces mature, equipped disciples for service in the church and community.

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<sup>15</sup> Neil Cole, "Multiplication Movements" (lecture, MG707 Church Planting: Starting and Birthing New Churches, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Jim Collins, *Good To Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 213.

For First Lutheran Church, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, this apostolic discipleship is in process and it began with adoption of a simple mission statement: “To know Christ and make Him known”. This paper describes a strategy that makes, matures, mobilizes, and multiplies disciples for apostolic ministry grounded in the local church context and rooted in scripture.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section informs the reader of the context and explores the decline of mainstream, Protestant American denominations in the twentieth century, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), and the First Lutheran Church (FLC) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

The second section concentrates on specific biblical and theological assumptions that underlie a strategy for the maturation and mobilization of disciples into apostolic mission. The paper outlines a theology of spiritual formation in response to the question: “What does a mature disciple look like?” A theology of mission is proposed based on New Testament concepts regarding the nature of an apostolic-discipleship mission.

The third section provides practical strategies for maturing and equipping disciples into apostolic discipleship, and it redefines pastoral, program, support staff and congregational leadership roles for effective equipping and a yearly revision and action plan process. It presents two primary processes: a discipleship journey and the mobilization of apostolic disciples. The implementation of these processes and an evaluation tool conclude this section.

These three sections in their totality will demonstrate that the purpose of this ministry focus paper is to present a contextually informed, biblically-based strategy for the maturation of First Lutheran Church congregants equipped for apostolic mission.