

## **“MISSIONS” MISSION DRIFT?**

**By Bob Young**

I hope the title of this article grabs your attention. Is the mission work of the church experiencing mission drift? Measured by money invested and the number of people going on short-term mission trips, the church is doing more “mission work” than ever before. But the results, measured by people brought to Christ and churches established, do not match. Perhaps our “mission work” has experienced “mission drift.”

The concept of “mission drift” did not originate in a church context, but was used to describe how businesses get off-track from their original mission. The application in the church is not hard to make. Can the lack of mission results be explained by mission drift? Has some of the mission work of the church lost sight of the original purpose?

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSIONS**

“God had one Son and He made Him a missionary” (David Livingstone). Jesus’ last command was to go make disciples. The apostles were obedient and went. The story of the early church is the story of a church that went forth carrying the message.

Somehow, we have created a mentality in the modern church that says “going” needs a special calling. Jesus gave the command; the command is clear and the command is simple. The early church obeyed. We do not need a special calling to go, we should instead seek a special calling and permission not to go—to “stay”! How is it that the church is vocal about obeying his commands, yet seems to skip over the very last command he gave in the Great Commission? Last words are powerful and remembered. Jesus’ last words were intentional and specific. As Jesus left heaven and came to a lost and hurting world, so we are commanded to leave our comfort zone and go to a lost and hurting world.

In more and more churches, we find Christians who focus on themselves, their needs, their education, their hopes and dreams. Too few are breathing missions and setting their ambitions on fulfilling the Great Commission Jesus gave us.

### **A BASIC DEFINITION OF MISSIONS: SENDING WITH A PURPOSE**

The root of the word “missions” relates to sending for a purpose. Thus, “missions” is sending people to new places—crossing oceans, crossing borders, crossing cultures—to reach the unreached. Missions requires both sending and a purpose. A missionary is sent for a purpose. The purpose for New Testament missions is sharing the good news.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray that workers would be available to be sent (Matt. 9:35-38). The workers Jesus prayed for were harvesters, those who would reap the results that come from the Good News. Jesus’ prayer is not only for workers, but for workers who will seize the opportunity presented by the harvest. There is a vast difference between simply sending a worker and sending a worker that fits the description Jesus gave. The church is sending more workers than ever before with less results, because the purpose is not always clearly in view.

### **EVERYONE WHO IS “SENT” IS NOT NECESSARILY A MISSIONARY**

Since “missions” involves both being sent and having a purpose, simply sending someone does not make them a missionary. At the Pan-American Lectureship in Quito in 2008, Phil Slate suggested that the first question churches should ask when they receive a request to help with a mission work or mission trip is this: What will you be doing? Not everyone wanting to go will be able to advance the gospel and the work of the kingdom. In the biblical model, a missionary is someone sent to advance God’s eternal purpose (mission) in this world. Ephesians says that purpose is to bring everything and everyone under

the Lordship of Jesus (1:9-10). Some have been sent but are not actively involved in bringing the lost to Jesus and establishing churches.

We who have intently focused on seeking Bible instructions and examples to guide our actions have not been as diligent in applying the biblical model to guide our mission efforts. A good question to ask about any missionary effort supported or sponsored by a local church is: Where in the Bible is the authority for this kind of mission work?

#### MISSIONARY EFFORTS TEND TO REFLECT LOCAL MINISTRY EFFORTS

The mission question (“mission drift”) that I am raising begins in the ministry programs of local churches. Much of what occupies the time and efforts of local churches is not overtly evangelistic or spiritual. It is good to be concerned with the needs of people in our world, but the most pressing need in our world is the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the “mission work” we do is not intentionally inserting the saving gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of people, why are we doing it? If the “ministry” of the local church is not intentionally bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to the lives of others, why are we doing it?

To change our mission focus, we must change our ministry focus in the local church. Church members must be taught “soul awareness.” What do we see when we meet another person? What descriptions do we use? Do we describe their circumstances, their past, or other details of their life? Are we aware above all else that every person is a “soul” loved by God? Do we see souls? Until we see souls, we are going to struggle in making the first thing the first thing and fulfilling God’s eternal purpose for the church.

#### WE MUST SEE AND FOCUS ON THE “JESUS CRISIS”—WE NEED EVANGELISTS!

We can bemoan the advance of religious groups around us while we are generally stagnant or declining as a group, and we can justify our own lack of results by claiming that people are not receptive to the pure gospel message, but my own experience says otherwise. When a new church can open up down the street and have hundreds of members after a year or two, simple observation says that there are interested people all around us.

I believe there are people interested in the gospel in many parts of Latin America, because thousands are being baptized annually in congregations of the churches of Christ across Latin America. The problem is that these results are occurring in a limited number of congregations, and such growth is not the common experience of all congregations.

Our problem is that we cannot see the real problem. The problems we see will determine the solutions we propose. If we do not see the problem of lost souls, we will not make the saving of lost souls a priority. If we see poverty, medical problems, lack of education, and other physical, social, or relational needs as primary, we will spend a majority of our time and resources on those problems rather than addressing spiritual problems.

#### MANY “MINISTERS” ARE NOT EVANGELISTS

Too often on the home front and in the mission field we are supporting local ministers instead of evangelists. There is limited accountability. During my 25+ years of full-time local church work, I felt that I was largely responsible for the growth of the local church. I saw myself as an evangelist, a person with primary responsibility for reaching new members and bringing the lost to Jesus. (In fact, I discouraged the idea that I was “the minister.”) The use of the description “the minister” suggests that others are not ministers (servants) and that others have no obligation to serve. I was an evangelist or the preacher (in the sense that I was the primary pulpit presence). I typically stepped out of the local pulpit at least once a month to give way to guest speakers who could help advance the outreach of the church with special projects, needs, and presentations. I tried to be aware of the fact that the work should not be built around me; effective works are built around loyalty to Jesus. Because I saw the need

for more workers, I encouraged the development of the members, leaders, teachers, deacons, and others servants. In the mission field, one result of supporting “ministers” is that churches have not been encouraged to move forward in naming leaders, pastors, elders, deacons, and teachers from within the congregation.

**REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS FOR MISSIONS—NEW CHRISTIANS AND CHURCH PLANTING**

I remember a conversation with my cousin, recently deceased. He was a member of a Restorationist church. He did not understand why the mission program of his local church sent financial support year after year to missionaries as they worked to establish a church. His question to me was this: Why cannot a Christian go forth with support for five years and establish a healthy church so that he no longer needs “mission support”? He was talking about U.S. missions, and one can argue with his arbitrary number of five years, but his point is well-taken.

**A CHURCH PLANTING AND MISSIONS MODEL**

Evangelism is the process by which churches are planted. Evangelism must continue when a local church already exists. This basic model can be visualized as a church (large circle) establishing one or more distant churches (smaller circles). This process requires time—usually a minimum of five to seven years is needed to establish a solid base for a new church. I am grateful for those who send and for those who are sent. The urgency of the task reminds us that we must be diligent and efficient—planting and maturing new churches, and repeating the process again and again.

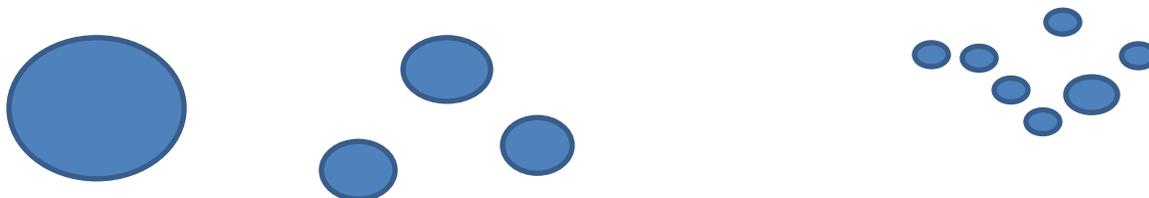
As is seen in the graphic, usually the new circles will not be as large as the originating circles—at least not at first. Also, the new circles are often isolated geographically from other sister faith communities.

**GRAPHIC #1**  
**First Generation Church**                      **Second Generation Churches**



The contemporary church must grasp this vision! But the contemporary church must also grasp a larger vision. “Missions” includes facilitating the same process in the newly established churches. One goal of missions is to eliminate the need for distant sending and cross-cultural sending in favor of local sending within one’s own culture. The goal is that the new churches learn to plant churches within their own region and culture. The new circles become self-duplicating.

**GRAPHIC #2**  
**First Generation**                      **Second Generation**                      **Third Generation**



The second graphic is not possible until the second-generation churches become strong enough to duplicate themselves in new church plants. The churches have to grow numerically. This occurs through evangelism. Just as the Bible describes new Christians as babies in Christ, in a parallel sense

these new churches are baby churches. They cannot yet walk. The churches have to grow spiritually. They must learn to walk; they must learn to do what healthy churches do. They must learn to multiply themselves. They must learn self-duplication and self-propagation.

A good question for any church serious about mission work to ask itself is, “What are the results?” How many new church plants? How many new Christians? How many developing, healthy congregations? How many leaders capable to helping local churches become missionary churches, duplicating themselves by establishing new churches? After 15-20 years of mission work, the results should be seen in third or fourth generation churches.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF HELPING NEW CHURCHES MATURE, FUNCTION AND EVANGELIZE

An important dimension of missions is the work of deepening the spiritual life in new churches to develop healthy, missional churches—strengthening them, growing them, and equipping them to continue the “missions” process. Reaching new locations, new people and new ethnic groups is essential, but it is equally important to mature those already reached so they can duplicate and continue the process in their own context.

Helping new Christians mature spiritually focuses on questions such as these: Do those reached know what they believe in? Do they study the Bible? Would they be able to reproduce into a new generation of believers? Are they becoming like Jesus?

When I look at the mission work that we read about in the New Testament, I see three aspects of mission work—evangelizing the unreached, planting new churches, maturing those churches and deepening the faith experience of the new Christians and new churches, so that they become mission churches. After a new church is established, the first two are primarily the work of the indigenous church. An important part of missions is maturing Christians and developing healthy churches, and that usually requires outside assistance.

#### SUMMARY

- The purpose of this article is to warn against “mission drift”—the possibility that mission work in the church is losing its “mission” focus on saving lost souls.
- Missions is important.
- Missions means sending with a purpose; the biblical purpose of missions is evangelism. No New Testament model exists that did not focus on evangelism and planting churches.
- Those who are sent must recognize and work toward the biblical purpose for going.
- When mission efforts are not focused on evangelism, it is often because the ministry of the local church is not focused on evangelism.
- The “Jesus crisis” in our world demands that we send forth those who will share good news.
- Too many local ministers are not evangelists who work diligently in sharing the good news.
- A reasonable expectation in mission work is that evangelism will occur and that churches will be planted and matured.
- The church planting missions model described in the Bible is multi-generational so that new churches become healthy, missional churches that duplicate themselves. That is, first generation churches produce second generation churches that in turn produce third generation churches.
- To make this happen, Christians and churches must be matured spiritually so that they can function in healthy ways in new evangelistic endeavors and new church plants.