

Five Critical Challenges to Making Disciples in a Post-Christendom USA

Elaine A. Heath

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As I write this chapter I am sitting in my living room, gazing out the window where a few neighbors are raking leaves. We are a study in diversity. Though Garland, Texas is predominantly Hispanic, some of our neighbors were born in India, some in Africa, and others describe themselves as fifth generation Texans. The cars on our streets run the gamut from Lexus to rust bucket. We are black, white, brown, straight, gay, old, young, educated, and illiterate. Economically our block is mostly middle class, but this pocket is surrounded by what real estate agents call “a changing neighborhood,” code for “if you want your property values to go up in the years ahead don’t buy here.” A few streets over, many of our neighbors live below the poverty line.

Garland is part of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, a teeming microcosm of a globalized, increasingly diverse United States. Here in our city we share all the challenges, opportunities, and questions that are facing the nation as a whole. Residents in our community struggle with problems of immigration, inadequate healthcare, and economic crises. Home foreclosures in my neighborhood are at an all time high. Families throughout our city pray for their children who are soldiers fighting in the Middle East. Next door to them other families pray for their loved ones at risk in the same regions—their parents, siblings, and friends whose homes and businesses are now bombed out ruins. My neighbors and I are engulfed in a culture of rapid change, uncertainty, and plurality of every kind.

So it is that when I survey the ecclesiastical landscape of my own city, I see the same challenges that face congregations from coast to coast as the church in the United States struggles to make sense of its context. We live in the midst of massive cultural shifts brought about by globalization, rapidly changing communication and information technology, consumerism, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor with a shrinking middle class, and unprecedented threats to the entire biosphere due to war, pollution, disease, poverty, and disasters related to global climate change. Linked to these tectonic shifts is the fact that Christendom—the marriage of the church with secular power—is all but over. We are in a post-denominational, post-Christendom United States. Even in Dallas, the buckle of the “Bible Belt,” the church is irrevocably moving to the margins of society. There we will no longer enjoy the privileges of Christendom, but we will have the opportunity to become a prophetic people once again. From the margins we will experience new opportunities and challenges in making disciples.

Five Critical Challenges

The biggest challenge to the church in the United States today is to recover its missional identity so that congregations understand and embrace their disciple-making vocation. Missional identity and practice are grounded in a two-fold stance of contemplation and action. Disciple-making requires that we become deep listeners, both to the culture around us and to the Holy Spirit. We cannot make disciples if we do not know the culture, cannot speak the language of our neighbors, and will not discern what the Spirit is saying to the church. In order to retrieve a missional identity and become a church of contemplation and action, we will have to engage five critical challenges.

Buildings. The first challenge is to overcome the deeply ingrained belief that the church is a building where Christians gather for religious programs and activities. Related to this erroneous belief is the conviction, especially among mainline Christians, that a congregation is not fully established until it owns a building identified as “the church.” The belief that a church is a big building with pews, programs, and professional clergy who carry out the ministry has led to an “attractional” model of ministry in which evangelism is understood to be a process of attracting “unchurched” people to come to the building called “church.” There they will hear sermons and music that will attract them to Christ. Once they are “churched” (regular attenders at the building) they will financially support the programs, clergy, and building called church.

There are many theological problems with the building-centered attractional model, beyond its ineffectiveness in taking the gospel to “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth.” The most basic problem is that the Bible teaches that the church is organic, the Body of Christ, the people of God who are created, called, gifted, and sent out in partnership with God in God’s mission to the world. From Genesis to Revelation the message is clear: the ecclesia is a God-gathered people, not a building, and our identity is rooted in God’s redemptive, healing mission. Churching people does not necessarily make disciples of them. Sometimes churching inoculates them against real discipleship, with its costly demands and rigorous expectations.

The word “mission” means “sent out.” The disciple-making church of tomorrow will return to the biblical understanding of church as the people of God in mission to the world. There will be a de-emphasis on owning and maintaining expensive buildings, and a new emphasis on Christians mobilizing for worship and service in smaller, often multi-purpose spaces such as homes, office buildings, community centers and the like. The use of borrowed space for worship

will increasingly be seen as a responsible, God-honoring practice. The former practice of building massive edifices to house worship for thousands of church attenders will come to be seen as theologically misinformed. Instead there will be a turn to a “tabernacle” theology in which God’s people are on the move in mission, thus in need of flexible, fluid ministry space. Thus the very space in which worship and teaching take place, will reflect missional ecclesiology, the church’s self understanding as God’s people sent out into the world with the good news.

Budget. Part of what will drive the move to smaller and more flexible meeting space for the missional, disciple-making church will be a more rigorous practice of stewardship. That is, as missional Christians look at their ministry budget, they will increasingly find ways to minimize the amount of money spent on themselves and their own comfort, in order to maximize their financial resources for mission. They will embrace a kenotic, self-emptying identity that will help to heal the spiritual wounds inflicted on the world by power-hungry, mammon-intoxicated Christendom. By meeting in homes or other borrowed space for worship, or by sharing a building between two or more congregations, disciple-making churches will free significant financial resources with which to provide ministry among their suffering neighbors. This will be seen as a mature choice. Some congregations will choose to convert their large, urban church buildings into mission centers with seven day a week ministries to hurting people.

The stewardship of money will be taught and practiced within a context of stewardship of God’s creation, including a deep commitment to heal the environmental wounds that are a consequence of rampant consumerism. The missional, disciple-making church will practice a modest, sustainable lifestyle in relation to its life as a congregation and individual practices of Christian stewardship. The disciple-making church will take seriously its responsibility to shape

environmental healing with theological discourse, and with a praxis of sustainability. Whereas in the twentieth century evangelism was overwhelmingly separated from social justice ministry, in the missional church of the future these two will reunite so that the good news of salvation is proclaimed holistically. Disciple-making will therefore include both spiritual formation and justice formation, and these will have a central place in the church budget.

Bivocationality. In keeping with missional ecclesiology, a kenotic stance, and more holistic practices of stewardship, the disciple-making church of the future will show preference for emerging leadership models that are more adaptable to the development of networks of small faith communities. In short this will mean that churches will move away from the dominant model of pastors earning a living by leading congregations that can pay them a fulltime salary with benefits, toward teams of bi-vocational pastors leading networks of small communities.

In mainline disciple-making churches there will be an intentional retrieval of leadership practices from the apostolic, first century church as well as from early Methodism, and the underground church in twentieth century China, all of which bear wisdom for our rapidly changing cultural contexts. These leadership models will enable the church to deploy itself to a wide array of neighborhoods, particularly among those who are economically, and in other ways, disadvantaged. These models will make more sense in equipping a missional church that is arrayed as networks of small, praying, active communities in which members participate in mission.

Bi-vocationality will increasingly be seen as a preferred missiological strategy for leadership rather than as a temporary situation until a church becomes “successful” with its own building, a fulltime pastor who does most of the ministry for the church, and so on. Because of this shift toward bi-vocationality, new models of theological education will emerge in order to

equip Christians for bi-vocational leadership. Theological seminaries will be challenged to adapt to the new leadership needs of the church, including a move toward more web-based classes, non-degree programs for comprehensive theological education for lay people, and the adaptation of curriculum in traditional masters degree programs so that students are better equipped for missional leadership in emerging contexts.

Boxes. The flexibility and creativity that will be necessary for these new leadership models and new forms of theological education to emerge, will generate increasing pressure within what are currently rigid systems of ecclesiastical polity and theological education in mainline denominations. Indeed that pressure is already at work, evident in the growing number of churches who can only afford a part-time bi-vocational pastor. Beyond economic factors, though, today more and more evangelical pastors in the United States gain their theological formation not from traditional seminaries, but from alternative means, including “teaching churches” that have become regional training centers for ministry.

In the last century the bureaucratization of all mainline denominations resulted in clearly marked boxes for church, academy, and mission. These boxes are now becoming permeable, a trend that will only increase for those denominations that determine to cultivate missional churches. Thus the missional, disciple-making church will increasingly be marked by hybridity in the mutual work between church, academy, and mission. Larger mainline churches that remain viable will do so in part because they become much more focused on leadership development for God’s mission rather than for institutional survival. This will be done in tandem with seminaries. Similarly, theological seminaries that survive and thrive will do so because they are much more in partnership with healthy, missional churches as an integral part of their program. The use of decentralized, contextualized learning environments outside of the seminary will be critically

important to the vital seminary. In summary, the boxes that currently stifle the emerging work of the Holy Spirit in terms of church polity and theological education, will give way to hybridity for disciple-making churches of the future. So will ossified systems of ordination. The Holy Spirit will not be bound.

Boundaries. During times of great cultural change, as Phyllis Tickle notes in *The Great Emergence*, what is always at stake and what is always challenged as the new work of God to emerges, is the location of ecclesiastical authority. Ordination is a traditional bestowal of positional authority for persons who are called to pastoral leadership that includes ministries of word and sacrament. Over the past five hundred years ordination in mainline denominations gradually came to require advanced theological degrees and was predicated upon the expectation of ministry as a profession and a career. Ministry was to be under the supervision and much of it carried out by professional clergy. It was and still is a system with rigid hierarchies of power where congregants formed the base of the pyramid. Boundaries were clear. The clergy were a gated community presiding at the front of the building called church. This pyramidal structure will not remain in its current shape as cultural emergence continues, with its flattening and decentralization of authority. As a result, the meaning of ordination and what “counts” as a gift and call toward ordination, will undergo change. The gated community is losing its fence.

While ordination isn’t going away, and will continue to have a necessary place in the church, in disciple-making churches of the future, ordained clergy will function much less as ministry professionals and much more as equippers of the saints. Ordained ministry will be seen in a more biblical light as equipping, leading, and facilitating the priesthood of the believers. A growing permeability of boundaries will be experienced in what “counts” as ministry, both for ordained and non-ordained Christians. This shift will be deeply connected to the trend toward bi-

vocationality, toward networks of smaller, missional congregations, and in the increase of disciple-making and justice oriented ministries led by non-ordained persons.

A Lesson from the Five Friends

The story is told in Mark 2:1-12, about five friends with a stretcher who could not get through a crowd to Jesus. The friend on the stretcher was paralyzed, an infirmity that was both spiritual and physical. As the four who were mobile looked at the hindrances to their healing mission, they devised an extraordinary plan. They would open a hole in the roof above the room where Jesus was teaching. They would lower their friend down into the center, right in front of Jesus. In this way they would remove the obstacles and make it easy for their friend to encounter the Great Physician. The friends followed through with the daring plan and the outcome was a new disciple who was healed of his affliction and forgiven of his sin.

These friends represent disciple-making Christians whom the Holy Spirit is calling to open a hole in the roof of the church. They demonstrate the kind of resourcefulness, persistence, and deep faith of missional Christians of the future who will understand, engage, and overcome the five obstacles to disciple making in a post-Christendom American church. Such Christians will be risk-takers, innovators, and intercessors. They will be people of contemplation and action, a new cadre of apostles sent out by the Holy Spirit with the good news of Jesus' love. The opening in the roof of a post-Christendom church is already at hand, evident in a host of grassroots renewal movements within and beyond the mainline church. Significant among these are the new monasticism and the emergent conversation. Both of these movements involve missional Christians moving the church out of the church building and into the secular world, especially the abandoned places of empire. The retrieval of contemplative practices and a rule of

life, coupled with a commitment to inhabit the neighborhood and love and serve the neighbors who also live there, are common to emerging and new monastic communities. In other words, a renewal of a sense of geographic parish is afoot. Both of these movements take seriously the massive cultural shifts in the United States, and are grounded in missional ecclesiologies. The new monasticism in particular is well suited to engage the mainline church and to work alongside and within it, to help the church reclaim its missional vocation.

Other signs of life are evident in some of the large congregations that are becoming mission training centers for clergy and laity, as well as their move toward decentralization and forming networks of smaller, missional communities that reach out in disciple-making ministries of various kinds. Ginghamburg Church in Dayton, Ohio is a good example of a large United Methodist congregation that is pioneering the way forward for other large churches to follow. In Ginghamburg and other churches like it, the thrust toward disciple-making is not about creating larger church membership rosters or shoring up a foundering institution. Instead, disciple-making is about participation in the kingdom of God. Membership is a commitment to missionary life.

The World is Our Parish

When I began this chapter I noted the ways in which my city is a microcosm of the United States as a whole, with all the challenges of a rapidly changing, globalized culture. In discussing the challenges and opportunities of the church in the United States that increasingly finds itself moving toward the margins of society, I mentioned the importance of the first century church, early Methodism, and underground church of twentieth century China. Two of these sources of wisdom come from Christianity outside of the United States. The third, early Methodism, came to North America as a missionary movement from England. The fastest

growth in Christian disciple-making today is outside of the United States, primarily in the southern and eastern hemispheres. It is clear that the post-Christendom church in the United States must look beyond our borders to learn how to be missional once again.

At the same time, in God's global parish, it is important for the rapidly growing church in nations that are moving through their own industrialization and modernization, to learn from the story of the church in the United States. The alignment of church with secular powers—Christendom—ultimately leads to the death of missional ecclesiology. Thus the temptation to wed secular power to ecclesiastical goals must be resisted at all costs. Whenever the church has been most vital, most prophetic, and most effective in disciple-making, it has been the church in the margins. It has also been a church grounded in contemplative ways, listening to and cooperating with the Holy Spirit.

As the church in the United States regains missional vitality, the gifts it will offer back to global Christianity will be incarnational, inherited wisdom from more than two thousand years of faithful witness from saints from "every tribe and nation." Out of this shared, lived heritage, God's church will continue to make disciples in a global parish.