

Startling Church Trends and What We Need To Do About Them

By **C. ANDERSON**

C. Anderson is an experienced field practitioner and leader. The past 27 years, she served in Asia with YWAM Frontier Missions. Anderson trains and coaches both international and indigenous church planters toward the launching of Disciple Making Movements. She blogs weekly about DMM related issues at dmmfrontiermissions.com. Other articles on member care, language learning, visa stress, etc. are available at missionarylife.org. Her 30-day devotional for church-planters, *Faith to Move Mountains*, can be purchased on amazon.com.

Reclining on my couch with a glass of sparkling water, I watched it, relaxing after a long day. I was listening to Carey Nieuwhoff's Leadership podcast. He was interviewing Thom Rainer, author, researcher and former CEO of Lifeway. Suddenly, I sat straight up, fully alert. They'd said something that startled me straight out of relax mode.

Carey asked him what the recent major trends in the church were. He mentioned the top three. All were quite interesting. The one that riveted my attention, however, was the decline of evangelism. If you are concerned about lostness, hearing about this trend is like being confronted with a massive, red flag waving wildly in front of your path.

Trends in the American church often get exported to the rest of the world. What impact on the global Church will this trend away from evangelism have?

Rainer is a knowledgeable trend-watcher of the church in America. For him to say this was not only a trend, but one of the top three trends in



the American church today is deeply concerning. Watch the full episode on YouTube if interested.

Mission Frontiers has a wide global audience. My work and ministry are not focused on the USA context either. As an American citizen, though, this greatly troubled me to hear. While not necessarily surprising, it is very disturbing. Trends in the American church often get exported to the rest of the world. What impact on the global Church will this trend away from evangelism have? What effect is it perhaps already having?

Some *Mission Frontiers* readers are from Western nations. For those of us who are, we must be serious about not exporting this trend abroad! For non-Western readers, be aware and careful not to adopt it! Recognize its deadly nature, not only to the fulfillment of the Great Commission, but to the ongoing life and health of the Church.

Disciple-making Begins Pre-Conversion

As Disciple Making Movement practitioners, we understand that evangelism and disciple-making cannot be separated. We disciple people into the kingdom. Disciple-making begins prior to a shift of allegiance to Christ. I like Bobby Harrington's definition of disciple-making, which is "entering

into relationships to help people trust and follow Jesus, which includes the whole process from conversion through maturation and multiplication.”

Having said this, abundant Gospel sharing/seed sowing and bold witness are important characteristics of DMMs and CPMs. (See Garrison’s *Church Planting Movements Booklet*—Chapter 3, p. 33 where it is listed as one of the 10 Universal Elements). Without active evangelistic efforts, DMMs and CPMs do not break out and grow. I am often asked why there are not more movements in the West. This trend away from evangelism is one answer to that question. Again, let’s not export that way of thinking abroad!

Failure of Attractional Models of Evangelism & Disciple-making

Attractional models of evangelism and disciple-making are failing miserably in the West. Even the few seeing limited success struggle to disciple those who come to faith through them. To reverse these trends, we must intentionally move away from models of evangelism that rely on professionals and events. Instead, inspire and equip every believer to make disciples. Only as we do this will we see new disciples multiplying organically as we desire.

A Gifted Evangelist Who Stopped Leading People to Christ

We sat on the floor looking at generation charts. The Asian disciple-maker I was meeting was excited to share with me and my colleague about new groups that had recently begun. As coach/trainers, we were too! Using a simple gen chart as a diagnostic tool, we asked several questions. One of our queries was about how many of the people in the groups were new believers. “Only two,” she answered. “Hmm. That’s interesting,” I thought. There were lots of new groups represented by circles on the paper. “What is your main way of sharing good news?” I asked.

“Oh, I used to lead people to Christ all the time. Now I make disciples.” What?? That seemed a strange answer until I realized what she meant. Instead of focusing on lost people, she was now focused on discipling the saved.

My heart sank as understanding flooded my mind. What had caused this effective soul-winner to stop reaching out to lost people and instead to only

start groups among the saved? If she as a DMM practitioner was not modeling bold witness and Gospel sharing, those she disciplined wouldn’t either.

Thankfully as we continued our session, a shift in her thinking came about. The next week, she returned to her practice of doing evangelism. She led two people to Christ and started one new group within a few days!

This is an example of a trend away from evangelism even in a DMM practitioner! How much more do we see this in legacy/traditional churches? Jesus’ command to His followers hasn’t changed. He still tells us to go everywhere and share with everyone!

Jesus said to His followers, *Go everywhere in the world, and tell the good news to everyone.* (Mark 16:15). Emphasis mine.

Eight Possible Causes for the Trend Away from Evangelism

Before we dive into possible options for a trend reversal, it may be helpful to pause and reflect on why we are in this situation as the American church. I won’t pretend that this is an all-inclusive list. They are, however, some possibilities to consider as we explore this issue’s cause.

- 1 In our distaste for hellfire and brimstone preaching, we have de-emphasized the reality of lostness.
- 2 We’ve bought into the lie that evangelism is difficult and the role of specialists.
- 3 Many leaders are disillusioned with unsustainable formulaic evangelism models of the past (Romans Road, Evangelism Explosion, etc.). This has made previously effective evangelists stop sharing Christ or resist anything to do with evangelism.
- 4 Western culture tells us religion is a private matter and it’s rude to talk about it. Bold witness has become far more counter-cultural than in the past.
- 5 There is a lack of confidence in Gospel sharing due to a lack of equipping believers on how to witness—even among the clergy. Pastors and missionaries do not model a lifestyle of bold witness. As a result, their disciples cannot replicate it in those they disciple.

- 6** Churches are Sunday morning attendance oriented, rather than calling people into vibrant communities of fervent Jesus followers in deep relationship with one another. Friendly accountability and a context of growing obedience to Christ are rarely present. Small groups that meet are almost always inward rather than outward-focused.
- 7** Church gatherings focus on what we gain (great worship, entertaining and inspiring preaching, great programs for kids), rather than on equipping disciples to serve Christ and the world.
- 8** Many Christians in the West are more fearful of offending people with their witness than they are that people will continue to live their lives apart from Christ (present hell), or will enter eternity apart from Him (eternal hell). We don't believe we have the answer to brokenness enough to share it.

I'm sure you could add to this list. These are just thoughts to stimulate further pondering on this issue.

More important, however, is what we can do to reverse this trend.

Eight Ways to Reverse the Anti-evangelism Trend and to Be Sure We Don't Export It

1 Decide that it must be reversed.

Recognition of the seriousness of this problem is the first step to change. If pastors, leaders, and mission agencies do not see this as a critical issue, little will be done. Do we see the red warning flag waving? Pray with me that the Holy Spirit will bring revelation and conviction in this area.

2 Stop promoting/exporting a megachurch, super-star preacher, model of church.

This is far more easily said than done. The megachurch model has become a dominant model of church success in American culture. We must engage church and denominational leadership in conversations that examine its effectiveness. In spite of the fall and failure of many in super-star church leadership, we continue to believe that this model is the right way forward. Is it? Are we even asking ourselves these questions?

Our cultural addiction to "bigger is better" stands in the way of honest evaluation. We want super-stars to follow and admire. Being entertained is far more culturally

attractive than showing up in a small group. Doing life with a bunch of ordinary people who chew their food loudly, have annoying habits, or coffee breath doesn't have the same appeal.

Can we be discipled by those we do not even know? Sure, we can gain knowledge and inspiration from them. Disciple-making, however, takes place in the context of genuine relationships of trust.

We won't change the megachurch, and that's not our mission. Can we at least agree not to export it to the rest of the world as the church model of choice?

3 Teach, preach, and speak often about the reality of lostness.

Let God's heart for humankind's brokenness grip your heart afresh. Ask God to show you how He feels about the lost. Read and meditate on the lost parables in Luke 15. Teach and preach them.

Get out of your church or agency office and spend time with those who are apart from Christ. Understand the issues they face and the levels of pain and brokenness they encounter. Talk often of your own brokenness and how God found you. "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me," sums it up so well. How can our music reflect the need of the lost and the power of salvation in fresh ways?

4 Pastors and leaders engage in active, regular Gospel sowing and talk about it. Stretch yourself if this isn't a practice in your life. Create a cultural norm among those you are discipling related to bold witness.

One of the most significant factors to catalyze change is the power of peer groups. When the culture in a group of people can shift to regularly celebrating the sharing of the Gospel with others, when that becomes normative, it's far easier to shift worldview in that direction. Share vulnerably and openly both success and failure stories about starting spiritual conversations.

Organizational culture develops top-down, not grassroots up. David McNally says, "Culture is influenced significantly by the values of the organization's leadership. These are not the written values, but the 'lived' values." If pastors and agency leaders never share Jesus with others, church members won't either. Get everyone talking about Gospel sowing and celebrating together. Frequently champion stories of bold witness and of engagement with the lost.

5 Emphasize the role of ordinary believers in making disciples.

While it's important that senior church and mission leaders actively engage, it must go beyond that to reverse this trend. How can you help those you disciple to realize that they can be effective witnesses?

Demystify evangelism. Make it simple and doable in people's minds. It is as simple as asking a neighbor a question like: "What are you doing this weekend? Last weekend I went on a spiritual retreat. Have you ever done something like that?"

Or, "If God were to do a miracle for you, what would it be? Could I pray with you for that?"

Or, "Hey, a group of us are getting together to learn more about how to have successful relationships at work. We are reading and talking about some passages from the Bible related to that. Would you like to join us?"

6 Encourage new groups to form around new believers, rather than bringing them to the main meeting/building church.

We have conditioned people to think that evangelism equals inviting someone to attend church. There is nothing wrong with this, but it is not the most effective way to make disciples. Instead, motivate and equip people to have spiritual conversations, invite people to learn more, then start groups of disciples in their own homes or workplaces.

Though this seems more difficult at first, it is far more fruitful. Begin with a group of "early adopters" that you train and mentor. As they see fruit, others will come along too.

7 Vision cast for the lost every time you meet.

Both in normal church services or organizational meetings, look for creative ways to highlight the lost and unsaved around you. Cast vision for how God wants to bring hope, life, and transformation to them. Intentionally cultivate a heart for lost people in the hearts of those you are responsible for training and discipling.

One of the easiest ways to help people develop a heart for lost people is to get them to pray for them. Use tools like the 30 days of prayer for the Muslim world. Organize prayer walks in the communities near you. Train everyone to have a Lost list they pray for regularly (people within their friend and family circle).

8 Make it the normal expectation of every Jesus follower that they will make and multiply disciples.

Continue to intentionally shift culture and behavior in your organization, church, or team. Do this until it is normal for everyone who says they are a believer to also be an active disciple-maker. This doesn't mean they intellectually assent to the idea of disciple-making. It means they actually are practicing it. Eventually, as disciples are faithfully learning and growing in skill and obedience, momentum will grow, and multiplication will take off.

Today I'm calling you to a decision. Will you choose to grow as an active evangelist and disciple-maker?

Take Action Today and Choose to Swim Upstream

Reversing a major trend in the church is no easy task. It requires many people to choose to "swim upstream" and go against the cultural flow of the American church. For those of us working abroad, we are still greatly influenced by American church culture. It comes to us through the internet, through podcasts and many other forms of media.

Today I'm calling you to a decision. Will you choose to grow as an active evangelist and disciple-maker? Remember that I said we cannot separate the two? Will you train and influence those around you to engage in reaching the lost in more active and intentional ways this month?

What is one thing from this article that you will apply and put into practice immediately? Find a friend or colleague. Share this article with them and talk together about what you will do this month to "swim upstream" regarding this trend away from evangelism.

Last, bring this issue to a group of prayer partners or intercessors in your organization or church. Ask them to pray for this trend to reverse and for a passion to share the love of Jesus to grip the hearts of not only American Christians but all of us worldwide.

Trends can change. With faith, let's work to see the day when a trend toward intentional disciple-making by every believer is being reported on Christian leadership podcasts and in other Christian media. ❏