

Unleashing the Kingdom on Toxic Worldviews and Declining Churches

In the 1990s, intrepid Baptist missionaries were discovering biblical values and processes that consistently catalyzed the kind of outcomes that Donald McGavran once called “people movements.”

In 2004 David Garrison published *Church Planting Movements* that shared what the IMB was learning about movements, and momentum and excitement began to build.

Regular readers of *Mission Frontiers* know that over the last 25 years, and especially the last 15, the Holy Spirit has birthed hundreds of these Disciple Making Movements/Church Planting Movements among Muslim, Hindu, Chinese, and Buddhist populations—historically resistant peoples that have become Christ followers in unprecedented numbers.

At the end of 2018 there were more than 660 such movements. The sheer numbers of movements happening in this century reveals that God is very much moving in the world today. But although dispersed pockets of momentum and some genuine movements do exist in North America, Europe, and Oceania (i.e. the Global North), the vast majority of the movements are in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (i.e. the Global South).

Why is that?

This article is based on four years of research by the authors of *The Kingdom Unleashed* to attempt to answer that question.

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Question: *How do you inoculate someone against a disease?*

Answer: *You give them a weakened or dying version of it.*

Question: *How do you inoculate a culture against Christianity?*

Answer: ?

The Church in the Global North has slowly absorbed a dangerous level of humanistic ideas into our worldviews over the last 100 years. These ideas have resulted in a weakened version of Christianity that is powerless to transform communities and culture. For purposes of this article, we will focus on two interrelated categories of unbiblical thinking that have infected many Global North churches: secularization and anti-supernaturalism.

(1) THE SECULARIZATION OF THE GLOBAL NORTH CHURCH

Although evangelicals would reject the idea that they have been secularized, the evidence is clear that many have adopted not only secular approaches to evangelism but even a secularized gospel.

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To understand this, we need a definition of secularism. In the strictest sense, secularism is the idea that religion and government should not interfere with each other. From there, it is a small step to say that religion should play no role in public life—if Christians want to believe and practice their religion in private, that's fine, but keep it out of the public square.

If you ask an evangelical what Christianity is about, the response will typically be that it's about a personal journey with Jesus, that it's a relationship, not a religion. This view is highly individualistic: each person individually and independently must make the decision for Jesus. Family and social relationships may help a bit with evangelism, but it's ultimately an individual decision.

Beyond this, some people will tell you that Christianity also involves personal morality, but not much beyond that. In other words, evangelicals see Christianity as a privatized religion, one that involves “me and Jesus” but does not have much to say to the world except perhaps concerning a few hot-button issues like abortion.

What evangelicals fail to realize is that by viewing Christianity this way, they hold an essentially secularized vision of the gospel. It is highly personal, private, and internal, and thus is irrelevant to most of the questions facing society today.

Secularization is the Antithesis of the Gospel of the Kingdom

In contrast to this, the gospel Jesus taught would be more accurately described as the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus' message centered on the fact that in Him, the kingdom of God had broken into the world and that God was taking back His proper authority over a world in rebellion against Him. That is why Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom included a call to repent: since we are in rebellion against our rightful King, the only proper response is to turn from our rebellion and give Him our undivided allegiance.

This message is inescapably public and political: the most basic confession of Christianity is “Jesus is Lord,” with the unspoken implication that “Caesar is not.” Caesar claimed authority over all areas of life; Christianity said no—Caesar had legitimate authority in some areas but not in others. God and God alone has authority over everything, including conscience, and that authority resides in the person of Jesus, who alone is Lord of all.

Because Jesus is Lord of all, the gospel must touch all of life. It isn't only about personal salvation but about every aspect of who we are and how we live in the world. It includes not just forgiveness of sins and personal morality, but all areas of life—relationships, politics, society, work, recreation, *all*.

That means our presentation of the gospel must include not only the message of forgiveness of sins, but also a ministry of compassion. It must show in practice, through the power of the Spirit, what the kingdom looks like by working to fix what is broken in society and in people's lives.

Global South Movements Advance the Gospel of the Kingdom

Accordingly, two of the most unique elements of Disciple Making Movements are their holistic nature and the dramatic transformation of cultures.

Almost all movements lead with compassionate engagements within a community. These engagements are an expression of Christ's care for people's needs and a living example of the kingdom. As people see this, it opens the door to discipling them to Christ, with a focus on self-discovered obedience to God's Word; this brings the community into greater alignment with God's will revealed in Scripture, which leads to replicating cultural transformation.

(2) CHOOSING KINGDOM VALUES, NOT SECULAR VALUES

Another way secularism has infected the church in the Global North is through the use of secularized approaches to measuring success. Our metrics are often based on the ABCs—Attendance, Buildings, and Cash—rather than on Christ-followers growing in spiritual depth and obedience, disciples making other disciples, or churches planting churches. Our primary goal must be to build the kingdom, not to build our local church—and they are not the same thing.

We must not confuse the kingdom and the Church, especially not the visible Church. If they were the same, the gospel would only apply to Sunday mornings when the Church is gathered; it wouldn't apply to us when we're at work or on vacation or even at home with our family.

The kingdom extends into all these areas because the Lordship of Christ reaches every area of life. The Church exists to build the kingdom, not to build itself. The Church may in fact grow in numbers, but unless that growth is anchored in building the kingdom first, it will never be the kind of growth that engenders movements.

The kingdom of God is not something ethereal. It is a reality, not a metaphor for the Church. Christ followers in the Global South live lives of abundant joy and faith that they carry into all their relationships, all their activities, all their interactions with others. This highlights why Jesus said over and over: "Sell whatever has to be sold to get the kingdom, and make whatever sacrifices are required, to be part of the eternal kingdom of God."

"Seek first the kingdom, and all these other things will be added to you."

"Pray like this:

May the glory of God in heaven be manifested where I live, even as it is in heaven,

May Your kingdom be manifested where I live, even as it is in heaven,

May Your will be manifested in my life and where I live, even as it is in heaven."

(3) ANTI-SUPERNATURALISM BREEDS PRAYERLESSNESS IN THE CHURCH

Secularism strikes at the heart of the gospel Jesus proclaimed, and in the Global North it is combined with its close cousin, anti-supernaturalism.

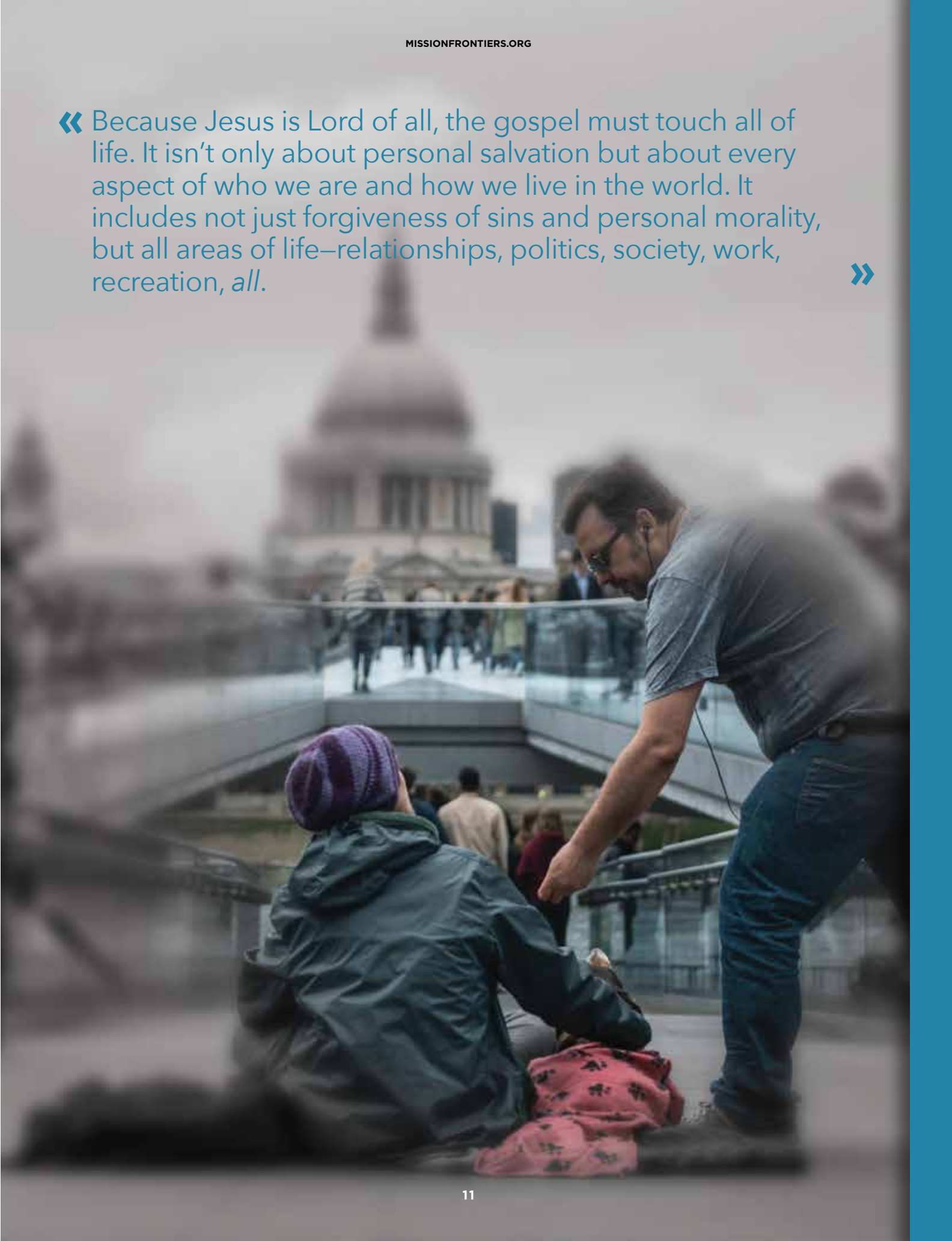
If the idea that many Global North evangelicals have secularized the gospel is difficult to accept, most Christians would reject out of hand the idea that they have an anti-supernatural worldview. After all, they believe in God! But our real worldview is revealed not by what we say, or even by what we think, but by what we do by default. And many Christians and churches in the Global North act by default as if this world is all there is.

Probably the clearest example of this is our prayer life.

Our theology says that through prayer, we have the privilege of connecting with almighty God and that through our prayers we participate with God in governing the universe. Yet according to some surveys, the average American Christian prays four to six minutes per day, including grace at meals.

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Yet in Jesus' farewell discourse, He tells us that He would be with us through the Holy Spirit who would guide and empower our ministry; He even went further by telling us that apart from Him, we could do nothing. (John 15:15b) The question is, given what we see about prayer habits in the Global North, how much are Christians actually relying on the power and presence of the Spirit? Or are we instead trying to accomplish God's purposes on our own, effectively doing them apart from Jesus?

Regular disciplines of abundant corporate fasting and prayer that are the norm in Global South movements are, unfortunately, rare in the Global North.

If you ask almost any veteran of kingdom movements, "How do you start a movement?" they will all say something like: every movement is birthed with much prayer and fasting, and must be sustained also with much prayer and fasting. Every movement is different, but they all have the same fingerprints, and they are the fingerprints of God—definitely not of humans. They all reveal the miraculous in abundance.

So movements frequently launch with intercessors inconspicuously walking and praying through the community to be engaged, and for the team that will engage them. And as new churches are birthed, they are born with a DNA of much prayer.

Some DMM churches have up to 80 days a year of corporate fasting and prayer followed by evenings of breaking the fast together and praying. Often everyone prays out loud at the same time, as passionate prayer and joyful worship is intertwined. These kinds of disciplines are central in the life of movements.

And as a result, miracles of healing, deliverance, and provision are the norm. There is a sense that God is very close, very dependable and abundant in provision. He is the God of the impossible!

And there is some very good news! Many thousands of intercessors in the Global South are praying specifically for the Global North Church, that the blessings brought to their people group by missionaries who came to their countries in the previous centuries, will be reciprocated by their 21st century prayers.

(4) KEEPING ORDINARY PEOPLE ORDINARY

Another way in which anti-supernaturalism and secularism combine is in the tendency of believers to rely on professionals to handle "religious" matters. For example, when they find someone who is spiritually open, their goal is to get the person to come to church so the professional in the pulpit can seal the deal and bring them to Christ.

Similarly, too many families subcontract the spiritual development of their children to the youth pastor rather than performing their God-ordained responsibility to disciple their children themselves. Adult discipleship programs are built around having an expert teach us information rather than personally discovering what God's Word is calling us to do by Spirit-led study of Scripture.

Yet the pattern Paul gives us in Ephesians 4 is that the various leaders in the Church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—are to equip ordinary Christ Followers to carry out the work of ministry. The job of the pastor is not to do the ministry—it is to equip believers to do ministry by teaching, modeling, coaching, and training them.

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This is exactly the approach we see at work in Kingdom Movements in the Global South. Just as Jesus chose ordinary people to be world changers, so today unnumbered disciples are ministering powerfully across the Global South—empowered to do the impossible in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- A grandmother who never learned to read, memorized much of the Bible and became the leader of a huge intercessory prayer network.
- Many thousands of other oral learners have become effective disciple makers and often powerful leaders by using oral Bible resources in Discovery Bible Studies.

- Many ministries have learned how to creatively train blind people, amputees, and others to become productive disciple makers, church planters, and gifted leaders and coaches.
- A carpenter/handyman/farmer, who is also a former Muslim, has used his crafts to enter communities and plant more than 100 churches within 12 years.
- A sports ministry in one African country planted more churches in 2018 than any other service ministry, while on another continent a sports ministry is planting hundreds of churches in restricted access countries every year.
- Many thousands of former sheiks and imams, along with some former jihadists, have become highly effective Disciple Making Movement leaders and coaches. Military and police officers have become church planters.
- Street children are making disciples.
- Everyday business people in restricted access countries have become “invisible” disciple-makers.
- Untold thousands of former Muslims have become passionate and devoted intercessors when they were born again.

(5) USING SECULAR STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE SPIRITUAL OUTCOMES

Another way secularism and anti-supernaturalism show up is in reliance on techniques drawn from the secular, corporate world. Management, marketing, and media consultants tell churches how to organize and run their ministries, how to do outreach, how to target a niche market, and so on, and many churches seek out their advice rather than looking to Scripture to see how Jesus told us to do it. And once again there is often little reliance on prayer: planning meetings begin with a short invocation and continue with a long discussion, a vote, and a short prayer asking God to bless the decision the committee just made.

In contrast, where we see movements happening, decisions are made after long periods of prayer and study of the Scriptures, focusing on Spirit-led consensus and much prayer rather than adopting models, advice and paradigms from the secular world.

To help you see this in specific terms we have included a few excerpts from Chapter 17 of *The Kingdom Unleashed*, “Paradigms That Can Multiply.”

I believe the traditionally conceived forms of ministry cannot move us beyond the current impasse because they have led to the structures that currently exist—and they

continue to sustain them.... We cannot solve the problems of the Church by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created those problems in the first place.... We must thoroughly reconceive how we understand and practice ministry and leadership if we wish to truly be a movement.

—Alan Hirsch, *Serving a Movement*

Jesus’ descriptions of the kingdom of God include images of abundance and fruitfulness, such as catches of fish that break nets and soils, seeds, and plants that bear fruitful harvests. Jesus spoke of yeast’s power to be a medium of transformation and expansion. And He told His disciples that bringing a harvest from every people group into his kingdom would be their kingdom responsibility. He warned His disciples to never bury the resources that they had been given but to multiply them according to their capacities.

When we look at the Church in the book of Acts, we see rapid expansion through families and social networks, extending into new, unevangelized areas—exactly the kind of expansion that we see in the Global South today. To recover that kind of growth, the Church in the Global North will need to change its entire approach to ministry and even its vision of what the Church is about.

The structural problems that hinder movements in the Global North begin with **un-biblical worldviews** that are tainted by latent secularism and anti-supernaturalism. These worldviews have consequences because they lead to **ministry paradigms that do not achieve God’s intended outcomes.**

« The job of the pastor is not to do the ministry—it is to equip believers to do ministry by teaching, modeling, coaching, and training them. »

The following chart contrasts typical Global North churches and ministries with Kingdom Movements in terms of:

- **the worldview assumptions** as related to biblical values and teachings
- **the ministry paradigms** that flow from worldview assumptions, and
- **the kinds of outcomes** that flow from the different paradigms.

THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

Traditional Ministry Assumptions	Kingdom Movement Assumptions
<p>In some traditions, the kingdom of God is primarily a future, eschatological event, and the object of evangelism is to make converts, who over time become faithful disciples.</p>	<p>The kingdom of God is the present and observable manifestation of Jesus' reign on earth. The object of evangelism is to advance the kingdom of God by training disciple makers who will establish new churches.</p>
Traditional Ministry Paradigms	Kingdom Movement Paradigms
<p>People generally become a Christian by exposure to biblical teaching and lifestyles in a home, or exposure to professional pastors and leaders at a church.</p> <p>Grow the church centrally and incrementally through programs, winsome facilities and a welcoming spirit. Church planting is typically one-by-one.</p> <p>Churches celebrate milestones of growth and decisions for Christ.</p>	<p>God raises up ordinary people who become disciples of Christ primarily in relational contexts with a lifestyle of consistent obedience to God's Word as the key objective.</p> <p>Grows in the overall community by strategic multiplication: making disciples who make disciples and planting churches that plant other churches as a normal progression of the Spirit-filled life.</p> <p>Churches celebrate spiritual and social transformations, which power multiplication in places of former spiritual poverty.</p>
Expected Outcomes	Expected Outcomes
<p>Add new members to our church. Maximize the natural appeal to the demographic profile of the local church.</p>	<p>The result of disciple-making is multiplying disciples. The priority is planting new Discovery Groups that become churches among the social segments or places where the gospel has never gone or thrived.</p>

ABUNDANT PRAYER

Traditional Ministry Assumptions	Kingdom Movement Assumptions
<p>Most traditions believe that God can and does perform miracles, but expectations tend to set limits on how to pray and what is considered possible.</p> <p>Prayer styles and liturgies often represent the culture of the denomination and the traditions that are to be preserved. For many traditions, prayer is for miraculous interventions that facilitate spiritual transformation, and rapid replication is not an expectation.</p>	<p>Prayer is both petition and proclamation which declares that Jesus' authority is more powerful than the gates of Hell. Prayer, by definition, is inviting the supernatural to earth.</p> <p>Rapid reproduction based on prayer and discovering and obeying the Bible is common but does not typically replicate any single organization's traditions. Local churches are free to identify as the Holy Spirit leads them.</p>
Traditional Ministry Paradigms	Kingdom Movement Paradigms
<p>It is risky to pray publicly for things that can only happen if God obviously intervenes.</p>	<p>Prayer for things that only God can do is the norm.</p>
<p>Strategic planning meetings and prayer meetings are separate events.</p>	<p>Prayer informs strategy, and strategy shapes more prayer.</p>
<p>Calls for corporate fasting and prayer are rare.</p>	<p>Each year, dozens of days of corporate prayer and fasting are common. Regular prayer meetings are often celebrations of kingdom advances, healings, and deliverances.</p>
Expected Outcomes	Expected Outcomes
<p>Ministry outcomes are created by great knowledge, great leadership, great funding, and great execution of programs. Prayer may also be helpful.</p>	<p>Ministry outcomes are primarily created by abundant prayer that results in mobilizing and empowering Christians to fulfill all of the functions of the Church.</p>
<p>Churches are unlikely to take risks that would obviously require divine intervention lest it discourage people if it does not happen.</p>	<p>There is a direct relationship between taking risks in prayer, and the process of growing in faith and experiencing the fullness of God's Spirit. All Kingdom Movements report abundant healings, deliverances and signs and wonders.</p>

MAKING DISCIPLES	
Traditional Ministry Assumptions	Kingdom Movement Assumptions
Discipleship is knowledge-based. Obedience is assumed to follow.	Disciples discover God in His Word and choose to obey Him out of deep love of Christ.
People come to Jesus as individuals, not as part of larger social networks.	Disciples are intertwined within families and networks and are typically not extracted unless they are in danger. Even then, with prayer, God sometimes redeems the situation for the family to become disciples.
The gospel is typically presented by one outsider to many strangers.	The gospel flows relationally from one family member to friends, family, and networks. Everyone is expected to present the process of becoming a follower of Christ.
Gospel presentations are driven by a range of informational and preaching models by an expert to a group of seekers.	Discovery of God's Word is achieved by interactive group processes with group accountability for sharing what they learn (and experience) with lost people.
High control: Outsiders orchestrating things themselves.	Disciple-making by a cultural insider results in high trust. Leaders allow others to be catalysts rather than trying to control the movement.
Goal: good church members.	Goal: transformation and fruitfulness
Traditional Ministry Paradigms	Kingdom Movement Paradigms
Outsiders use personal evangelism or crusade evangelism leading to individual decisions.	Evangelism is a process whereby an unbeliever discovers God and shifts allegiance to Christ in the context of Discovery Groups that become self-replicating churches.
Convert, then disciple	Disciple to conversion
Churches make disciples through preaching, education, and training.	Disciples are made in spiritual relationships through ongoing Discovery Groups, mentoring, coaching and making other disciples.
Expected Outcomes	Expected Outcomes
Orthodoxy and Christian character.	Obedience, transformation, and fruitfulness
Start the way you want to finish. Bring people to church to convert them, then disciple them in church as well.	Start the way you want to finish. If seekers see themselves as disciple-makers and church-planters, they naturally replicate what was done with them.
HOLISTIC KINGDOM MINISTRY	
Traditional Ministry Assumptions	Kingdom Movement Assumptions
Focus on evangelism OR compassion is common. Some churches or ministries attempt both, but few are great at both.	Holistic focus on both evangelism AND compassion is normal.
Church members are encouraged to be involved in approved church ministries.	Every local church and Christ follower is responsible to serve both of Jesus' kingdom mandates: (1) compassionate service and prayers for God's healing, and (2) being a transformed disciple and discipling others.
Traditional Ministry Paradigms	Kingdom Movement Paradigms
A relatively small percentage of compassion ministries consistently leverage the good will they create to make disciples and plant churches. A relatively small percentage of proclamation ministries lead with healing or compassion ministries.	Evangelism, disciple-making, healing, and compassion are so deeply intertwined that they cannot be separated.
Expected Outcomes	Expected Outcomes
Compassion ministries will help alleviate some problems in the community. Proclamation ministries will result in some people coming to Christ as a result.	Holistic transformation of individuals and communities is the natural result of disciple-making.



The above are only a few of the worldview issues that we discuss in *The Kingdom Unleashed*, but they set up a critical question: Which of the above models seems to be the most faithful to Scripture? Which ones result in more glory given to God?

These *different worldviews* lead to *divergent ministry paradigms* that in turn lead to *polar opposite outcomes*. And in this case the Global North Church struggles under the crushing disadvantage of secular and anti-supernatural worldviews.

Certainly, the kingdom values Jesus taught were counter-cultural when He spoke them in the first century. And they are wonderfully counter-intuitive still. But they have always been true.

WE CHANGE OUR WORLDVIEW AS WE CHANGE OUR ACTIONS

While there are many other elements of the worldview that could be addressed, secularism and anti-supernaturalism are good places to start. So what can be done about them?

As noted above, worldviews are revealed by what we do by default. It is counter-intuitive in many ways, but the way to change your worldview is to change your default actions, and the only way to do that is to act consciously and intentionally rather than falling back into habitual responses.

As a starting point, we suggest four places to begin, ideally in a context of discovery and accountability with a couple of other people.

First, put far more emphasis on prayer. Take more time to pray on a personal level and find like-minded Christ followers and meet together to pray. Use Scripture as a guide: that's one of the purposes of the Lord's Prayer, and the great prayer warriors throughout history have used Psalms to give them words and thoughts to express worship, thanksgiving, confession and requests to God. Consider committing yourself to disciplines of fasting and prayer for God to use to advance His kingdom.

« We cannot solve the problems of the Church by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created those problems in the first place.... We must thoroughly reconceive how we understand and practice ministry and leadership if we wish to truly be a movement. »

Second, when you spend time in Scripture, put more emphasis on hearing what God is asking you to do through the passage than on simply learning it. Scripturally, discipleship is based on obedience, not knowledge (though knowledge certainly has its place). In some cases, this may be a result of obeying something explicitly taught in Scripture, though in others you may have to rely on the still, small voice of the Spirit in your heart nudging you in a particular direction. Whatever it is, do it quickly: Indonesian Christians talk about a 48-hour rule, which says that if you do not obey what you've heard within 48 hours, you will lose whatever insight and growth you might have gained from your study.

Third, study carefully Jesus' instructions to the Twelve and the Seventy-Two before he sent them out. Be sure to look at the context as well (e.g. Matt. 9:35-38) and consider what it means for our own attitude and preparation as disciple makers. Think carefully through how you might be able to apply what He is telling you in your own context.

Lastly, take risks. If we are not willing to risk rejection, we can't follow Jesus' instructions because He told His followers

they would be rejected. If we don't pray big prayers, we won't see big results. If we do not obey when it could cost us something, we won't see God's blessings on our work to anything close to the degree He wants to bless us.

If we do these things, if we take conscious and intentional action on them, it will over time shift our worldviews and align us more closely to a truly kingdom-centric vision. And that will create the context where movements can begin and flourish where we live. 