

## The Gospel of Mark and Congregational Transformation

### GO! BE THE CHURCH "Mission Evangelization as a Strategy for Congregational Transformation" Week One: An Introduction

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**35** *Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. **36** *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. **37** Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; **38** therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'*"  
(Matthew 9:35-38)*

Since its beginning, Christianity has been unapologetically evangelical and missional. The church of Jesus Christ, as we understand it, does not *have* a mission. It *is* God's mission—God's means for reaching every living soul with God's offer of reconciliation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This evangelical and missionary spirit, in a global context, is strong. Missionary opportunities abound and the laborers are plentiful. In Africa alone, the number of

Christians has increased from nearly 9 million in 1900 to approximately 350 million today. The number is projected to reach 700 million by 2025. Membership in the Methodist Church in Cuba has more than tripled in the last 15 years. In the year 2000 alone, 200 new Methodist congregations were started in Cuba and in the months between April 2001 and November 2002, 700 new Methodist congregations began. It appears that where the political and economic climate would seem unfavorable for growth, the Church, nevertheless, flourishes.

The "main line"\* denominations in the western world—Europe and America—demonstrate an exception to this growth. Here, population growth greatly surpasses growth in church membership. In the state of Florida, 70% of the population is unchurched. This condition is due, not just to the rapid population growth, but to the fact that as many as two-thirds to four-fifths of all congregations in the state founded before 1960 have either ceased to grow or are declining in numbers. "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few."

**Why do you think the Church is flourishing in countries where the political climate and economic situation SHOULD oppress and depress the Church?**

\* The term "main line" came out of Philadelphia where the large, protestant churches could all be reached by riding the trolley down Main Street on the Main line.

**Why, in your opinion, is the Church declining in countries where freedom and affluence SHOULD help the Church flourish?**

We ask ourselves, why are these older churches maintaining or declining? A significant factor has been the entrenchment of the “*Christendom*” model for being the Church. Prevalent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this model is characterized by a focus on the church as a religious institution rather than an evangelical and missional endeavor rooted in the person of Jesus Christ.

Christendom congregations see themselves as:

- served by a professional pastor who they have, to some extent, “hired” and can “fire” if he or she does not live up to expectations,
- engaged in programming that is largely focused on meeting the needs of members and their families,
- entitled to the benefits of membership (visitation from the ordained leadership when sick or shut in or when they want a connection with their minister in their home; weddings; funerals; pastoral counseling; telling the pastor what to preach about and what hymns to sing; sometimes even designate their own pew, etc.)

- “Silo” thinkers, treating Christian faith as isolated interest areas (evangelism, social action, youth ministry, buildings and grounds, finance, music, Christian education, etc) each requiring the special attention of a separate committee, a chairperson whose name appears on the Nominating Report at Charge Conference, and whose work is approved by the Official Board.

This inward focus fails to take seriously the rise and power of secularism and the fact that our society no longer considers itself to be Christian (which, for a long time, was assumed). This is a significant challenge to the Church.

“The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God” (I Peter 4:17). The *Christendom* model for being the Church is failing to reach the lost generations that do not see the relevance of Christianity or the benefits of membership in a church.

**Why do you think the majority of congregations in Florida founded before 1960 are either on a plateau or are declining numerically?**

**Out of your own experience or observations, give an example of a church stuck in the Christendom model.**

A growing number of new **and** established congregations have moved from a Christendom model to a **“Missionary”** model for being the Church. Some of these churches are large and imposing; others are small or mid-sized. But, no matter the size, they all share similar characteristics:

- These congregations have a vision to reach and serve, not each other, but the communities in which they are located.
- Outreach ministries abound, the result of committed disciples of Jesus Christ hearing and responding to a call to serve.
- Their ministries reach out beyond their local communities to embrace people in need around the world.
- These churches are led by spiritual leaders who see their primary role as equipping the laity for the work of ministry.
- Ministry occurs not only as a profession for some, but the calling of every baptized Christian no matter their occupation.
- People are assisted in discovering their spiritual gifts and call. Then they are encouraged to pursue the training required to use their gifts and fulfill their call.
- There are very few “entitlements” of membership. In fact members give more and work harder than those who are not yet members because...
- ...missionary churches see themselves existing for unchurched people. They are inviting and welcoming and they offer unchurched people the opportunity to learn and practice the Christian faith.

- These congregations are committed, not to adding members, but to “making disciples.”

**Out of your experience or observations, give an example of a church operating out of the Missionary model of being the church.**

**Why would people choose to be a member of a congregation where the unchurched may be “entitled” to more than they are?**

One year at the annual gathering of the Florida Conference, Rev. Terri Hill, as the Bible Study leader, shared a story illustrating the nature of the Church’s call. She said that every morning, as the Jacksonville District Superintendent, she went to her office early, sat comfortably with a cup of coffee before a large map of the District, and prayed for each church on the map. The churches were each marked with a push pin. One morning she “heard” God speaking powerfully to her **s**pirit

saying, “This is good, but now I want you to pray for the people *between* the push pins.”

The challenge facing the leadership of the Florida Conference is to guide and support evangelical and missional efforts in local congregations that will reach the people *between* the push pins. The Conference will continue to make new church development a priority. But equally important is the need to guide and support established congregations in a process of congregational **redevelopment** or **transformation** empowering them for effective ministry through a new identity as missionary congregations. Part of the strategy for transformation is an effort to educate and, in some cases, remind Christians what scripture tells us about the purpose of the Church and the mandate of the Great Commission. This Bible Study is a place to begin.

Each chapter is a movement of the call to and growth in discipleship that makes congregational transformation possible.

They are:

1. Proclaiming the Good News
2. A Commitment to Christ
3. Acts of a Disciple
4. The Transforming Power of the Good News
5. Disciples Witness to Their Relationship with Christ

In this Bible Study, we will cover each of these, one week at a time, within the context of the Gospel of Mark. You will be asked to read the daily assigned chapters in Mark and the corresponding chapter in this study guide in preparation for the week’s Bible study gathering. After

each daily reading there will be a question or two for you to reflect upon. Come to the Bible Study prepared.

We have chosen the Gospel of Mark because Mark communicates the urgency of the mission like no other gospel writer does – an urgency to teach his disciples to embody the Kingdom of God. He does not waste any time getting to the heart of the matter. There are few details in Mark. He skips any mention of Jesus birth or childhood and begins with his ministry. Mark 1:1 says, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” You can almost hear him saying, “Let’s get to it!” You will also notice that Mark uses the words “*immediately*” or “*at once*” quite often and he tells the entire story in only 16 chapters.

The Gospel of Mark is recognized by most Biblical scholars as the first Gospel written using oral and written fragments from first century Christian communities. It appeared in the years AD 65-70 as more and more eye witnesses to the ministry of Christ were dying and Christ had not returned in their lifetime as the early church believed he would. These were times of persecution and great uncertainty. Jerusalem was ravaged by the Romans in AD 70. Herod’s Temple was all but totally destroyed. The Jerusalem faith community was scattered through out the Roman Empire as they ran from persecution and total annihilation. When the faith communities scattered, new churches began and the Christian faith spread.

The author of the Gospel of Mark is unknown but tradition tells us that the writer was a young man – perhaps a teenager - at the time of Jesus’ Ministry and was one of the followers that waited in the Upper Room for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The urgency in Mark equals the urgency many feel for the future of the Church today **and** for the future of those who live between the push pins and die every day without the life-giving relationship with Jesus he offers all of us. It is the urgent need to see more and more congregations become dynamic centers of Worship sending dedicated, committed disciples into the world that birthed the creation of the Office of Congregational Transformation, this Bible Study, and a number of other opportunities to be a Missionary Church. We are delighted you have chosen to participate. Now, let's get to it!