

The Areopagus:

Conversations on the Mission Frontier

Recent research has revealed that about 3000 people per day are leaving the Christian faith.¹ Not leaving the Lutheran Church for the Baptist or the Presbyterian Church for the Assemblies of God. They leave the Christian faith for Islam, Buddhism, the occult, atheism, or... Think about that... Between breakfast Monday & tea time Wednesday, the equivalent of the city of Tumut walks away from life in Christ toward eternal death. This isn't those who have never heard the gospel. This is people who have experienced Jesus through the church & said, "No more of that for me." Also in those surveys, it was discovered that about 83% of the general population are never engaged in worship or a vital relationship with Jesus. Many who claim the faith never live it.

I shared these two statistics at the Mission & Ministry Conference during a session called "Moving from complacency to passion." What was that about? Well... First a definition: Complacency is not laziness. I don't believe most pastors or churches are lazy. In fact most are quite busy with programs & worship & visitation of members. Neither is complacency the same as fatigue. Most really busy people seem to have an unlimited supply of energy. In my own experience, I'm more tired after sitting in a Convention or meeting for two hours than I am after spending all day working in the garden. Hard productive work may be tiring, but it doesn't wear you out. Complacency isn't exhaustion.

What is it then? Complacency is that most of us are still reading this paragraph without stopping to weep & pray over those thousands who are daily choosing death instead of life & the more than 8 in 10 in your town who have absolutely nothing to do with Jesus & his love.

We rightly wept & prayed & raised millions of dollars to help ease the suffering of those devastated by the bushfires in Victoria, & our work there is far from finished. But have we wept, prayed, mobilized volunteers & generated mountains of money to reach those who

*"By his divine power God
has given us everything we
need for life & godliness..."
2 Peter 1:3*

face a far greater threat both now & eternally? Have we intentionally developed new ministries or changed how we currently serve so that those who live distant from Jesus' saving embrace might be drawn in? Have we attempted new styles of worship, built relationships with unchurched young families, made our facilities accessible for prams & wheelchairs, updated our air conditioning & toilet blocks, cleaned up the junk around our buildings that we keep saving, "because you just never know..."? Are we still doing church the way our grandparents did church? Have you as a congregation prayed & openly sought Christ's guidance to help you as the body of Christ, "*seek & save the lost*"? Have you asked your pastor why the LCA has grown *smaller* in *every year* of its 40+ year existence & what you can do as a congregation to reverse that trend?

In past Areopagus pages we've looked at how important it is for a pastor to cast a vision for the congregation's mission & ministry that links God's eternal plan to save with the work of the local church. But unless we can agree that *we* are the workers in that eternal plan...everything else we say & do is pointless.

Let me say this simply: We don't need any more programs. We don't need any more new songbooks. We don't need any more sausage sizzles or coffee mornings. We don't need any more resolutions to synod or theological papers on evangelism or mission. We don't need another Pentecost or some trumped up revival. The Spirit's power is already within us by virtue of our baptism into Jesus Christ. "*By his divine power God has given us everything we need for life & godliness...*" When the Holy Spirit told Peter to write "everything" I think he meant it. We have everything we need...except maybe this...

We need to comprehend at the depth of our souls that Matthew 28:18-20 is our mandate...our **only** mandate. Paul, when faced with his own certain suffering & death, said it like this: "*My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned to me by the Lord Jesus - the work of telling others the good news about the wonderful grace of God.*" If we shy away from our only real work in this life, "*the work of telling others the good news,*" who else will do it? Who else will stand between those 3000 & more who every day face eternal separation from God & the great abyss? What can be said of us if knowing what we know about those around us who are in fact "lost," we still do nothing? Paul would say our lives are "*worth nothing.*"

Imagine...the sanctuary your grandfather helped build is worth nothing if those *inside* are not actively seeking to bring in those who are *outside*...the pew your mother paid for is worth nothing if there is no one who will bring an unchurched friend to sit on it...the fellowship hall that cost so much when it was built during the Depression is worth nothing if no one can use it for a weekday ministry to children in your town...They're worth nothing if they all can't be torn down to radically reshape your church for mission in the 21st century.

This is not the Areopagus I was planning on writing. But that was before Jesus broke my heart again for the nearly 50,000 people in Wagga Wagga who have no relationship with him. I wanted to say something about translating your vision into a strategic path for mission...but then I realized we had better get this into the conversation first. Because if we can't get this straight...nothing else we do matters.

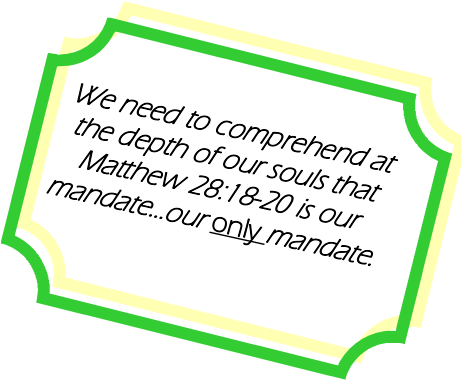
¹*Lost in America*, Tom Clegg

Some Resources:

- a. The New Testament
- b. Church for the Unchurched – George Hunter
- c. Courageous Leadership – Bill Hybels

Questions for congregations:

1. How many adult baptisms has your church celebrated in the last 5 years?
2. If money was not a problem, what new ministry would you start tomorrow?
Start it & ask God to provide the funding.
3. In your circle of unchurched acquaintances, who will you begin praying for that they are drawn into a relationship with Jesus? If you don't know any unchurched people, pray that God introduces you to one this week & deliberately build that relationship.
4. If a stranger walked into your church this weekend, what do you believe they would experience? Invite a non-member friend & then get their impressions.
5. What leads to complacency for mission in your congregation & ministry? Is it fear, a lack of courage to 'have a go', a lack of a vision or resources? What has bred complacency for you?
6. The old LCA slogan for mission was 'to *Love* is to *Care* is to *Act*. What action is Jesus' love & compassion in your heart prompting you to do? When will you do it?
7. We've all seen chooks with their heads chopped off & how funny they look running around without a head thinking they're still alive. Does that image fit your church...lots of running around but no life? If so, what will you do about that?



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