

Introduction

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods, and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

When Christianity Makes an Impact

There are several significant actions in this passage that describe the nature of the early church. Striking among them are: 1) they would sell their possessions and distribute to all in need, 2) they had the goodwill of all the general population, and 3) they attracted new believers and the church grew. It is the premise of the author that this is a Missional model for pastoral care and possible church growth.

It is told by historians in the first century that citizens of the empire would remark: “See those Christians and how they love others.” The early believers practiced an ethic of love and care for all people, not just their own. In a culture that left the widow, orphan, and disabled to care for themselves, they selected members of their faith community called deacons to provide care for the unfortunate. In many ways, this was the beginning of the first social service

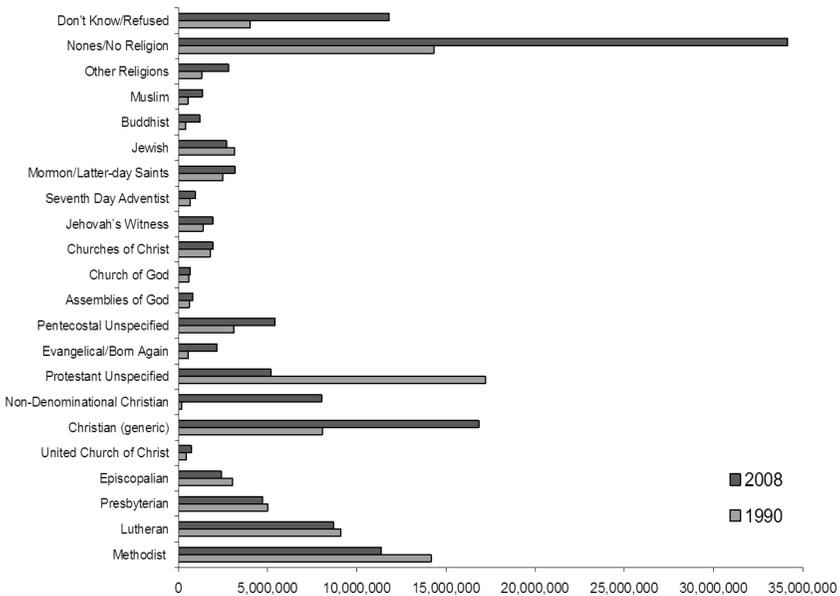
movement. This is one of the reasons that Christianity grew like wildfire during the first three centuries, in spite of persecution by the Roman government. Christians were known for practicing a different lifestyle, living by a higher standard suggested by Jesus when he called his followers to love others and be servants of all.

The works of charity that Christians accomplished in the Roman Empire continue to be one of the greatest stars in the Church's crown. . . . Hospitality to strangers was important in a day when inns were not desirable places. Ancient society did not provide care for orphans but allowed them to be raised for prostitution or other disreputable occupations. Christians made these unfortunates the object of their concern. Since the only hospitals in existence were private or associated with religious cults, Christians also took care of the sick. During plagues in Carthage and Alexandria around the middle of the third century, the Christians cared for the suffering even after the pagans had abandoned them.¹

One can cite examples throughout history where this pattern of community care was followed by a rise in the number of conversions to the Christian faith. It was the church that responded to the early plagues, caring for the sick and burying the dead. Following World War II, it was Lutheran World Relief that brought comfort to many of the victims of war by providing food and shelter throughout Europe and in the United States as well. Churches swelled in numbers during the late forties and throughout the fifties, in part because of this kind of community outreach. In present-day China, the Protestant Church there has been the one to provide AIDS education and medicine, establish health clinics in rural areas, and build nursing homes to care for an aging population. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of new Christians. In light of these examples, we are compelled to ask: *"How do congregations of today relate to social issues, economic injustice, and the political leaders of the day and how can that make a difference?"*

The Perfect Storm

We are facing enormous cultural shifts and challenges in the USA. From 1990 to 2010, those who identified themselves as Christian dropped from 86 percent to 69 percent. At the present rate of change, some believe most Americans will be non-Christians by the year 2035. While 50 percent of those over forty-five attend church, fewer than 30 percent of those under forty-five attend. Just one-third of adults in their twenties and thirties claim to be committed Christians. Yet 80 percent of them claim that religion or spirituality is important in their life.²



The NONE category now far eclipses all the other religious groups in the US.³ In her book *Belief Without Borders*, Linda Mercadante reports that there are now more NONES in America than all the Protestants put together. She cites statistics that between 1990 and 2000 the number doubled from 14.3 to 29.4 million. And by 2010,

46 million or 20 percent of all Americans had no religious affiliation.⁴ Why are they shunning organized religion?

Let's look at a study of the beliefs of the NONES; this includes all ages of those who are unaffiliated, not associated with any religious organization. 1. Religious people are hypocritical, judgmental, and insincere. 2. Religions are partly true, but none are completely true. 3. Religious organizations are too focused on rules, not spirituality. 4. Religious leaders only want money and power. 5. Religious people are anti-science.⁵

Linda Mercadante has studied the beliefs of the NONES or unaffiliated and shares her conclusions. She indicates that the largest percentage is among young adults, estimating that as many as three-quarters of them identify in this category. She indicates that young people are now more religiously unaffiliated than earlier generations were at the same age. It cannot be denied that "a growing number of Americans have ceased to identify with, contribute to, or remain devoted to any particular religious tradition or faith community."⁶

She goes on to say that while this trend may seem to indicate we are becoming more secular in America, something else may be happening instead. A significant number of NONES are looking to develop their own spirituality apart from traditional structures. Spirituality tends to refer to the interior life of faith without the trappings of organized religion. She concludes that we are in a time of widespread openness to spiritual things and a new willingness to sacrifice time, money, and effort to find a connection to something larger than ourselves. What is important to these seekers is that belief, experience, and behavior go together. Most agree that to be authentic and to have integrity, one should be living out what one believes. Churches would do well to model the early Christians in the Book of Acts by serving the needs of their surrounding communities,

providing care for those in need if they are to reflect this authenticity.⁷



The changing religious and spiritual landscape calls for a major paradigm shift in the way we understand the role and task of the local congregation. Church leaders need to wake up before it is too late; they must seek to be in mission rather than in maintenance if they are to make an impact on their neighborhoods and the wider world. They need to realize the church is the only organization that exists for reasons other than its own self-preservation.

There are two bodies of water in Israel. One is the Dead Sea, so called because there is no outlet for the water it receives. It only takes, so cannot sustain life. The other is the Sea of Galilee, teeming with life and emptying into the Jordan River and giving nourishment to the land. As a church we are to exemplify the latter. Jesus calls us to give ourselves away in love for the sake of the world.

An Expanded Definition of Pastoral Care

Today's missional frontier is challenging, transforming, and reinvigorating. There are many exciting stories about Christians and congregations with new and renewed energy for God's mission. Our understanding has been informed and inspired by the growing number of church leaders and literature addressing this new era of mission. The author has worked alongside other pastors, lay leaders, and seminary students who are also developing a new missional imagination. We have seen how congregations and church structures are adapting in this time of unprecedented change and opportunity. Yet, one important area of congregational activity has been undeveloped and, in many cases, overlooked: the relationship between the renewed missional calling of the church and the tradition of pastoral care.

Pastoral care has been traditionally understood as pastoral acts administered to individuals or small groups—usually within congregations or church-related institutions—by an ordained or lay religious practitioner. As congregations in the twenty-first century begin to reclaim the missional nature of the church, this view must be broadened to also include care and concern for the needs of the larger community. A *missional perspective* does not diminish or abandon the fine traditions of pastoral care, but engages them within this wider perspective. A *missional perspective* believes that good pastoral care leads to mission and that mission is undergirded by good pastoral care. A *missional perspective* of pastoral care embraces the notion that all of God's people—not just trained professionals—are called to partner in God's healing and redemption of the world. A *missional perspective* sees pastoral care and mission as inseparable.

This book is designed to assist pastors and church leaders in assessing their congregation's readiness for mission in the form of

community care and making the cultural shift from membership to discipleship. The first chapter will focus on reclaiming God’s vision for the church as a partner in the healing and redemption of the world, as we seek to expand the definition of pastoral care that includes God’s missional imperative. Chapter two reflects on the changing paradigm for pastoral care in the twenty-first century within a biblical and theological framework. Chapter three deals with the challenges of change and how congregations might begin to cultivate a *culture of care*. Chapters four and five look at *contexts of care* and *components of care*—considering where and how congregations create communities of care. Chapter six offers guidelines for developing a congregational approach to community organization. Chapter seven discusses the power of ritual to bring healing and transformation to individuals and communities. Finally, chapter eight provides some practical guidelines for mapping congregational assets, strategic planning, and developing a vision for mission.

The following are key questions I have tried to address and encourage congregations to wrestle with. *What are the gifts God brings to communities through missional pastoral care? And how will we adapt our practices to participate in God’s mission?* All of this leads us to explore in this book what the relationship is between pastoral care and the “Missional Call” of the congregation. And, finally, what does it mean to adopt a new definition of pastoral care that includes care for the community around us?

Notes

1. Edward A. Engelbrecht, ed., *The Church from Age to Age* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 58–59.
2. Kenneth Inskip, ELCA Research and Evaluation, Trend Report for 1990–2010.

3. Ibid.
4. Linda Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.
5. Kenneth Inskip, Report to Covenant Cluster, February 20–22, 2014.
6. Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 2.
7. Religion News Service: <http://religionnews.com/2015/04/02/future-map-religions-reveals-world-change-christians-muslims-jews/>.