



Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

January 2009, Vol. 2 No. 10

[Forward this Issue](#)

Use this link to forward the Missional Journal to a friend.

Click below to access past Missional Journals

[Archived Missional Journals](#)

Blog with Dave

[Share Your Thoughts](#)

Quick Links

[Biblical's Website](#)

[C4ML at Biblical](#)

Houston We Have a Problem

Using these words[1] the Apollo 13 astronauts announced to the world that the 1970 lunar landing expedition was in trouble. Although the crew returned safely, the mission was lost and even greater disaster only narrowly averted. If you remember those suspenseful days, or if you saw the 1995 movie with Tom Hanks, you realize that the initial announcement made to the NASA Space Center vastly understated the seriousness of the situation.

For the last decade, leaders in the missional movement have been sending us an urgent message: We have a problem! And the problem is serious! It threatens to compromise the mission; or rather we should say it has compromised the mission. The church in North America is in decline, even though Christianity world-wide is growing extraordinarily.

David T. Olson's recent book *The American Church in Crisis* (Zondervan, 2008) reinforces the sense that something is amiss in our space craft. Consider just a few points:

- Ever since 1939 polls have indicated that on any given Sunday about 41% of the American public attends church. But Olson presents evidence that actual attendance is really 17.5%. If we measure the category of "regular participants" (those attending church three out of eight Sundays), the segment of church-going Americans only rises to 23% (pp. 26-29).
- During the period from 1990 to 2006 church attendance on any given Sunday remained steady at approximately 52,000,000 people. However, during this same period the population of the United States increased by a similar 52,000,000. In other words, church attendance has not kept pace with population growth (pp. 34-36).
- While the evangelical wing of the church shows stronger growth than Protestant mainline churches or the Roman Catholic Church, it still declined in 22 states during the period from 2000 to 2005. In the period from 1990 to 2005 evangelical churches *almost* kept up with population growth (pp. 36-38).[2]
- And lest those of us in the evangelical tradition begin to feel smug about our "success," we should recognize that a significant

If you are interested in supporting
our vision for seminary education
click below

[Institutional Advancement](#)

[Planned Giving](#)

copyright © 2007 David G. Dunbar

portion of the growth in evangelical churches comes from mainliners and Roman Catholics who "switch in" at a higher rate than evangelicals who "switch out." (pp. 58-59). Obviously this kind of growth has no impact on the larger, un-churched population.

There is a wealth of specific material in Olson's book that is beneficial for anyone concerned about the health of the church and the progress of the gospel in North America. Here are my preliminary observations:

1. **There really is a problem!** While we can and should celebrate examples of healthy and expanding church life, we must not deceive ourselves about the overall situation. If actual church attendance is less than half of what was previously reported, we have a problem. If no branch of the church is keeping up with population growth, we have a problem.

The crew of Apollo 13 returned safely because everyone on the shuttle and everyone on the ground agreed on the seriousness of the situation. They then called together the best and the brightest within NASA to devise a solution.

How about a similar approach for the church? I have encountered lots of bright and committed Christian leaders who are disinterested in or even offended by the missional movement. Some feel that missional concerns are a passing fad. Some are disturbed by the "negativism" of our analysis of the church and suggest that we lack a proper regard and affection for the body of Christ.

But if the picture presented by David Olson is even *close* to being realistic, we need to drop our defensiveness, put aside the multitudinous distractions of ministry, and focus our best leaders on a problem that shows no signs of going away. Then and only then can we make some real progress.

2. **Conversion is integral to mission.** During the period from 2000 to 2005 the evangelical wing of the church experienced a modest increase in attendance that contrasts with the pronounced attendance decline of mainline and Roman Catholic churches. Olson details a number of factors that contributed to the relative success of evangelical churches (pp. 50-58).

I offer (without specific evidence) one that he does not list: *evangelical churches teach a message of personal conversion.* This, along with a deep love for the Bible, constitutes the basic identity of historic evangelicalism. I have suggested in earlier issues of *Missional Journal* that the whole church, including those of us in the evangelical wing, need to "hear the gospel again."^[3]

But on this important point I think we have heard this message pretty clearly: the gospel changes lives. It does so because salvation is God's rescue and salvage operation for the lost and the hopeless. This belief is grounded in the inter-woven themes

of creation, fall, judgment, redemption, and renewal. The purpose of God is nothing less than a new creation under the lordship of Jesus who is the prototype of the new humanity. The gospel calls us to a reconciled and reconciling life as we follow Jesus into the world (2 Cor. 5:11-21).

This message must not be muted or silenced in the missional discussion. David Fitch raises a thoughtful challenge on just this point: "The emphasis on the Mission of God, that God is working everywhere outside the church and all we need do is join in, might lead some to imply that there is no specific realm of Christ's Lordship where disciples of Christ must enter and explicitly submit their lives into Christ's rule." [4] Fitch does not think that the missional movement has succumbed to this temptation, but he calls us to vigilance. I agree!

3. **Church planting is not optional.** About 4,000 new churches were planted each year from 2000 to 2005. However, this increase was offset by about 3,700 yearly closings during the same period, so that the net increase was approximately 300 churches per year. Olson calculates that the net increase needs to be more than ten times that number (3,205) to keep up with population growth (p. 146).

Add the fact that new churches more effectively reach people than older congregations, and that congregations parenting new churches see more growth, and I think we have a very strong case for all churches to turn their attention to church planting. Moreover, it is probably easier to plant a new church than to revitalize one that is failing. So let's get to work! Missional congregations (or denominations) must increase their commitment to launching new churches.

I do not say this glibly. Having been intimately involved in two church plants, I realize that it is immensely challenging work. Resources are tight, people get stressed, internal conflicts demoralize, external opposition hinders, and leaders sometimes fail.

But look at the flip side. There is a spiritual exhilaration in church planting that comes from seeing the work of the Spirit in the lives of those newly committed to Christ. There is joy in watching the fresh appropriation of old truths. And there is satisfaction in investing our lives in the growth of others.

Effective church planters deserve our prayers, encouragement, and financial support. Humanly speaking they are the church's best hope for the future. May their tribe increase.

So, coming back to our illustration, our ecclesiastical space craft has a problem. If we can't admit there is a problem, we have little hope of addressing the situation. On the other hand, all is not lost! God is more concerned about the mission than any of us. Though the circumstances

are critical, the Lord is with his people. Do we have the commitment to follow?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

[1] Astronaut James Lovell actually said "Houston, we've had a problem."

[2] The percentage of Americans in weekly attendance at an evangelical church was 9.2% in 1990 and 9.1% in 2000 and 2005.

[3] [Missional Journal 1.10](#)

[4] <http://www.reclaimingthemission.com/conversion-a-casualty-of-missional-theology-my-recent-ct-article>