

Make the World Your Parish: Applying the Great Commission to Your Church

The Great Commission lies at the heart of the Christian faith. But how can a typical church think of global missions when there are so many local challenges to contend with? In this essay from *Make the World Your Parish: Increasing Your Global Influence for Christ*, Reggie Weems challenges pastors to encourage their congregations--big or small, rich or poor--to embrace a truly global attitude toward discipleship and outreach.

A proper interpretation of Matthew 28:19 makes missionaries of every Christian who lives in your town or city, or leaves your local church and moves to another city, country, or continent. It also reinforces the need for local congregations to send missionaries around the world with the saving message of Jesus's gospel. As the local church becomes aware of a place where no disciples are, it sends disciples to disciple those people.

Foreign missions is simply an extension of the local church's obedience to Matthew 28:19. This ultimately makes the Great Commission the missionary text we have supposed it to be but failed to understand and properly apply in the local context. The local church must ask itself hard questions about raising up a generation of disciples who, no matter their vocational, social, or geographic contexts, are fulfilling the imperative to make other disciples. If it is not being accomplished locally, it will not happen globally. The global success of the gospel is entirely dependent on living out the Great Commission locally.

Every believer is a disciple, and every disciple is a missionary, everywhere and all the time.

The real question for every person who sits in a pew on a Sunday is not, "Am I a witness for Jesus Christ?" but "What kind of witness am I for Jesus Christ?" It is not a matter of "Do I witness for the Lord?" but "Where (and how) do I witness for the Lord?" Being a witness is simply a matter of being an authentic Christian. As strange as it may sound, focusing the Great Commission on the foreign field has undermined the local church's potential for global success.

Foreign mission endeavors are simply active obedience to the Great Commission in a different geographical location from one's natural or sending church. However, the presence of missionaries on foreign fields does not necessarily imply obedience to the Great Commission by the church in the sending country. Just like Christians, many churches are happy to allow other congregations to supply missionaries to the foreign field while its own members live ignorant of personal responsibility to Matthew 28:18–20. Where there are no disciples, every church must send disciples to disciple, either from its own fold or in cooperation with other churches or agencies. But we should also recognize that those who leave for foreign fields will not actually disciple there if they do not live as disciples here. Mission begins in the local ministry of every church. The "here" of discipleship ensures the "there" of discipleship. The Great Commission is all

about "here," wherever your "here" might be.

My own church is considering extending its mission reach to Italy. Our congregation is already praying that God will move some of our members to Italy. You should pray that God will move your congregants to places where the church does not exist or needs support. Many of our congregants possess vocations that could be worked anywhere in the world. If this is true, why live where the gospel has already permeated a community? It is true that God has gifted us with vocational skills and knowledge to care for ourselves and our families. Our vocations fund our lives financially and in other ways as well. But Christians cannot allow the financial aspect of a job to dominate their thinking. As Christians, do our vocations only move us toward retirement?

A plumber who is a Christian in Johnson City may be just one of hundreds of Christian plumbers. But an evangelical, believing plumber in Bologna, Italy, will probably be one of only a few. A teacher committed to Christ in Johnson City is most assuredly only one of hundreds in the city. But a teacher who is a Christian in Milan, Italy, may be one of only a few. And on it goes. Many of the people who weekly sit on our pews could move somewhere where the gospel is not yet heard or the church is struggling. They could employ their vocations, which are really ministry platforms, in tent-making ministries whereby they support their families and showcase the gospel in their businesses, homes, communities, or schools. Your church needs to pray that God will mobilize its membership globally.

The church should not simply let people go to be missionaries; the church should send disciples to live missionally elsewhere. Your church leadership should be praying about and looking for people who are disciples in your local context: people who have vocations that can transfer anywhere where the gospel is absent or anemic.

In fact, you might follow the following simple outline below to move your people from outside the context of your local church into the world:

Praying (Matt. 9:38). As mentioned above, your leadership should be praying for members to become foreign missionaries. Corporate prayer times in which you lead your people to pray that God would call members of your own church into foreign missionary service are also profitable.

Teaching (Matt. 28:18–20). You should also be teaching on how to live missionally. Every sermon and series should have some practical aspect concerning the daily application of truth to our professed Christianity.

Identifying (Acts 13:2). Your leadership should be identifying those members who evidence a discipling mentality.

Questioning (Isa. 6:8). Those people you identify should be questioned about future deployment to an intentional field of service either locally or on foreign soil.

Recruiting (Matt. 4:19). People considering a call to a foreign field as display agents of God's grace should be formally gathered into a particular small group whose sole purpose is to help

members discover God's will concerning this matter. This formality lends itself to recognition, accountability, discernment (on their part and that of the church) and training.

Training (Titus 2:12). Those whom your leadership has identified could then be specifically trained for further development of this possibility.

Deploying (Acts 13:3). Ultimately, these people can then be deployed on the foreign field, either through a formal sending agency or sponsored by your church or a consortium of churches.

Resourcing (Phil. 4:10). Never send to the field a missionary whom your church does not regularly and sufficiently resource on many levels.

Inspecting (Luke 10:17). Ensure that these dear people are held accountable for their missionary status and any support afforded them.

Rewarding (Acts 8:39). Finally, those deployed should be rewarded for their sacrifice, and the leadership should regularly remind the congregation of that service and the church's essential cooperation in the success of that endeavor as its participation in the fulfillment of Revelation 5:9 and 7:9. Remember, you get what you reward, and the pulpit is the most powerful place for advertising what you desire of your people.

The Holy Spirit has adequately resourced every local church with the gift of all the people essential for successful ministry. It may be that pastors or leaders have not appropriately discerned, accessed, or disciplined their people, but every local church has what it needs to thrive. God will replace the leadership you invest elsewhere in his service. We often tell our people that God will provide their needs as they financially invest in God's work, but we never consider that principle with a church-wide mindset. The church should invest its finances globally. It should also invest its people and material resources. It is an insult to a gracious God to lord it over his resources as though he will not resupply the local church with what it needs as we share in the work of God around the world.

Sending disciples to places where no disciples currently live does not necessarily mean that a church has to send its own people, for many churches simply cannot individually support a person or family in a foreign field. Local churches can cooperate with mission agencies to send their people around the world with the life-saving message of the gospel. Churches within communities or cities could join together to sponsor missionaries, vocational or otherwise. Sadly, a competitive spirit often drives a wedge between congregations. Yet the possibilities for such cooperation are limitless if we will only remember why the local church exists and think beyond the local church toward the globe. We cannot be selfish with any of God's resources, especially people. This requires a Great Commission mindset and Great Commission living. It can revolutionize a congregation.

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