



# Mission Moments

Center for U.S. Missions

*Following Jesus into the U.S. mission field*

## MISSION: CULTURAL and COUNTERCULTURAL

By Mike Ruhl

In the motion picture *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, the elven queen Galadriel makes this melancholy statement: "The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was, is lost. For none now live who remember it." Those saddened words shed some light on why so many American churches struggle with being effective (kingdom results) in the United States mission field. It is important that this struggle be both acknowledged and understood - and not simply used as a bludgeon to shame the Body of Christ.

Missiologist David T. Olson (*The American Church in Crisis*) claims: "The church needs to discover which century it is living in. Many churches are living in the wrong century. Some of them might have spectacular ministries if they were operating in the 1950s ... other churches act as if they are still living in the 1980s or 1990s. All of these churches are trapped in the last century." Olson goes on to point out that "our churches must engage with three critical cultural changes: (1) Our culture used to be Christian, but now it is becoming post-Christian (2) Our culture used to be modern, but now it is becoming postmodern and (3) Our culture used to be mono-ethnic, but now it is becoming multi-ethnic."

When the Holy Spirit is not stifled, the Christian Church has enormous adaptive ability to interface and connect with unsaved people in virtually all cultures in the world. But when that same Holy Spirit that was manifested at Pentecost is ignored, the church engages and occupies itself with its own internal 'church culture'.

As if that tension were not enough to paralyze effective mission in many congregations, consider this additional dimension. Even when the Christian congregation lives out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that unsaved people in the culture do connect with the good news of Jesus Christ, the church is to be by its very nature ... **countercultural!** Simply contemplate some of the issues in the up and coming presidential election in the United States (you already know what they are) - and note the legal endorsement by some states of concepts which are clearly contrary to the Holy Scriptures. Do you see it? The church 'dances' between those two polarities. For if the witness of the church is overly *countercultural*, few people will hear and receive the Gospel message. And if the church over-identifies with the culture in order to gain a hearing of the Gospel, then the Gospel is diluted and loses its power to transform lives.

We hear and feel and understand that tension, beloved Body of Christ - and we pray for one another in this mounting tension that is experienced by many Christian churches. As we move forward together into the United States mission field, we are mindful of the "sending words" of the "sending Christ" as he sent out the Seventy Two Disciples into the mission fields of the ancient world: *Therefore be as shrewd as*

*snakes and as innocent as doves* (Matthew 10:16b). That tension and those words will be with us until our Christ returns at the Last Day.

#### Questions for Reflection

1. As you reflect on the ministry of your church is it designed to be effective in sharing the gospel of Jesus in the 21st Century? What evidence do you have to support your answer?
2. As you scan the environment around your church who is there? What is important to them? How do you know?
3. Who are the culture watchers in your church?
4. How does your church maintain the balance between being culturally sensitive and countercultural?
5. What will you do to help your church understand the current culture and reach it with the gospel?

#### Recommended Reading

[The American Church In Crisis](#) by David T. Olson [book] - This book is referenced in the article above. It provides great insights into the church and what is really happening in America.

[The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating The Missional Church](#) by Alan Hirsch and Leonard Sweet [book] - Alan Hirsch invites the church to rediscover what worked in the early church in spreading the gospel.

[They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations](#) by Dan Kimball [book] - An overview of the six most common objections emerging generations have with church and Christianity along with the biblical answers to these objections and examples of how churches are facing this challenge.

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