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## Old East Side's Daunting Challenge: The "Cultural Enclave"

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**Old East Side's Daunting Challenge:  
The "Cultural Enclave"**

**George G. Hunter III**

I recently sent a manuscript to Abingdon Press for publication in Spring, 2003, provisionally titled *Reaching Out, . . . Farther: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry*.<sup>1</sup> The book profiles a (not so) hypothetical local church, "Old East Side Church," as a prototype of the stereotype, i.e., a representative church that is rooted in a seventeenth or eighteenth century European way of doing church, that preserves its traditions, cares for its members, and expects next year to be 1957. Which means that Old East Side Church is strategically positioned if 1957 ever comes back around; but if it doesn't, Old East Side is on a trajectory to become the Amish people of the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e., a people who, for whatever reasons, perpetuates an old and quaint way of living out the faith in a vastly changed culture.

The book invites churches like Old East Side to become "apostolic congregations." The ideas that drive my "apostolic ministry" project include the following: The Church, in continuity with the early Apostles and their churches, is called to reach out to lost people who need to be found, and is entrusted with the Gospel to give it away. No church is called to serve just its own members, or to reach just its inactive members, or the people on the church's fringes, and the other people the church can find who are more or less "like us." In the context of the new "Corinthian" urbanization of North America and Europe, churches are mandated to serve and reach people in three categories: 1) secular people who have little or no Christian background, 2) the peoples of many tongues and cultures now populating our cities,

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and 3) the groups of people deemed “impossible” or “hopeless” by establishment people—down-and-outers, up-and-outers, and all the people that no other church seems to want.<sup>2</sup> Outreach ministry involves adapting to the needs, the culture, and often the language, of each target population. It involves serving and communicating in many ways. Supremely, outreach ministry is the privilege of the laity. Our people’s assignment, from Jesus Christ, is to penetrate their community as salt and light, as His Ambassadors.

On the weekend that I was finishing the book, the “faith and values” section of the local Saturday newspaper carried an Associated Press feature story about Rev. Jerry Falwell’s bold plans to expand his church and college, in Lynchburg, Virginia, into a 4300 acre Christian community. “Liberty Village” will include a kindergarten, a school, apartment complexes, recreation centers, a golf course, restaurants, shops, and a 1,135-unit retirement center, among other services and ministries. Falwell envisions a day when church members will “never have to leave this place.” Liberty Village will serve Christians from “birth to antiquity.”<sup>3</sup>

Jerry Falwell’s plan for a cradle-to-grave community is only the most recent, and perhaps the largest, of similar projects in churches of many denominational traditions. For three decades or more, some churches in most denominational traditions have been multiplying facilities beyond the traditional sanctuary, offices, and Christian Education building, and multiplying on-site ministries, services, and activities for involving their people.

Wonderful ideas sometimes have unintended consequences. I submit that the unintended consequence of this trend is proving to be the *de facto* creation of “Christian ghettos”—which isolate more and more Christians from more and more pre-Christian people. Think about it. Every Christian kid who attends a “Christian school” is one less Christian kid attending the public school. Every fitness buff who works out at the church’s exercise facility is one less Christian befriending people at Gold’s Gym. Every couple living in a Liberty Village apartment is one less couple meeting lost people in another Lynchburg apartment complex. The cumulative effect of shifting the location and time of a church’s members from the world to the church’s campus is enormous. With this trend, more and more school classes, PTA’s, YWCA’s, health clubs, apartment buildings, neighborhoods, and organizations, clubs and associations of all kinds, will lack a “critical mass” of Christians; the influence of the remaining non-

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ghettoized Christians will be reduced, and the contacts of Christians with pre-Christians will be fewer, and thinner.

Actually, the idea of building large-scale Christian communities is not new; for centuries, medieval parish churches served as the community center for the village people's whole life. Falwell's Dream has more precedent than the Associated Press writer was aware of. It is possible, however, that a good idea in eleventh century Europe might not be a good idea in twenty-first century North America. An English writer once observed, "Time makes ancient good uncouth." Likewise, a strategic response to one set of conditions can be a counter-productive response to a very different set of conditions (or to different conditions as perceived).

The Medieval Church did not understand itself to be in a pagan mission field. Church leaders believed that, following Constantine, they'd built a (more or less) "Christian Society." In that society, virtually everyone was baptized, and every baptized person was considered a member of the "parish;" so it made some sense to make the parish church the center of everyone's community life "from the cradle to the grave."<sup>4</sup>

We, however, are clear that due to centuries of secularization, churches in North America and Europe find themselves, once again, in an extensive "mission field." We observe, in all of our communities, an increasing number of people with no "Christian memory," who have no idea what Christianity basically claims and offers, who cannot even tell you the name of the church their parents, or grandparents, stayed away from. A smaller percentage of the people in every county in the USA are regularly involved in a church than a decade ago; a much smaller percentage than a generation ago.

More "secular people" are open, or receptive, or even seeking than any other time within anyone's memory. Ironically, in the time of an emerging "harvest," more and more churches have retreated into the church, and have not been offering what the Christian Faith has to offer. Consequently, millions of people have turned to other religions, philosophies, or ideologies—from Astrology to Zen, from Communism to Objectivism, to make Ultimate Sense of their lives; these ways have their own driving values, which shape their people in different ways than Christianity's driving values of "faith, hope, and love" shape Christians.

The burden of my book is to demonstrate that, in this new

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secular mission field, local churches are called to be “missionary congregations.” The local church’s Main Business has shifted from “chaplaincy” to “apostolicity.” So the main business of Old East Side Church, and Liberty Baptist Church, is NOT taking care of “our people,” but outreach to people who have not experienced the Gospel’s power for New Life. A hundred and fifty million people, in the USA alone, are candidates for forgiveness, justification, second birth, and a purposeful Kingdom life. Furthermore, as Paul instructed the Corinthian churches, Old East Side and Liberty Baptist are both mandated to reach the most “unlikely” people in the community—not only because they matter to God, but also because their changed life is the greatest of the “Signs and Wonders” that draw “regular” people toward The Faith.

The problem, from a missionary perspective in any century, is that building a cradle-to-grave community that Christians “will never have to leave” removes them from the “real world” that matters to God, for which Christ died. At one level, Mr. Falwell acknowledges the potential tradeoff: “We have no intentions of building a ‘compound’—no wall is going to go up. . . . If a non-Christian family applied, they would be accepted.”<sup>5</sup> But what are the odds of that happening? How often would it ever happen? Is that approach to doing church going to win this world? The difference is enormous between building a community essentially for Christians and building a community essentially for outreach.

In any mission field, including ours, the People of God are “called” and “sent” to be “in” the world—as salt and light, in ministry and witness—but not to be “of” the world. (The current trend in some mega-churches looks like being “of” the world somewhat more, while being “in” the world a whole lot less!) Most traditional congregations, however, are oblivious to the secularization of the western world and why a secular society requires a missionary agenda for churches in the twenty-first century. (In many ways, a majority of churches have not yet adapted to the *twentieth* century!) Short of a massive paradigm shift, the people of Old East Side Church are not much more likely to move from tradition to mission than they are likely to move *en masse* to Calcutta. WHY is Old East Side stuck? WHY is Liberty Baptist planning to become like Old East Side, only more so? WHY are both churches apparently oblivious, or indifferent, to the apostolic opportunity all around? We will reach an expla-

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nation by a circuitous route, by way of "globalization." The essay that follows attempts to explain how many traditional churches got into this pattern, and how to shift from tradition to mission.

"Globalization" is upon us; it is impacting societies everywhere, including the USA. We observe one expression of increasing "globalization" as record numbers of American citizens now work "overseas"—serving, say, their company, or a university, or the Peace Corp, in another land, another culture, often in another language.<sup>6</sup> Tragically, however, only about one in seven of these cross-cultural "sojourns" is satisfying and effective.<sup>7</sup> The other six in seven experience one of two outcomes. 1) Many are so unable to adjust to their new situation that they return "home" early, without fulfilling their assignment, at significant cost to their organization, and at great personal cost. 2) Many others remain technically within the host country, while "retreating" into the "expatriate subculture" where, say, they play tennis and bridge, and share news from home, and complain about the nationals and the way they live.

Craig Storti, a popular guru in the field of Intercultural Communication, tells us that both of these patterns—returning home, or retreating into an expatriate enclave—are rooted in the experience of many "cultural incidents" over time.<sup>8</sup> Americans typically expect people of other lands and cultures to be "like us, and therefore to behave "like us."<sup>9</sup> Sometimes, when they are not like us, we find their behavior interesting, even charming. Sometimes, however, when nationals greet an American differently than expected, or show up "late" for a meeting, or say "yes" when they mean "no," or run a red light, or stand too close in conversation, or avoid eye contact in conversation, or withhold their opinion from the class, or eat dog meat, or sip curdled camels milk, or belch after meals, or hire a less-competent cousin, (or innumerable other possibilities) this creates a "cultural incident;" the American experiences frustration, or rage, or disorientation.

When the American experiences enough of these cultural incidents (without getting in touch with his or her feelings, and processing the feelings, and learning from the cultural incidents, AND without discovering the different culture-based assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and values behind the confusing behavior of the nationals), he or she has collected enough "brown stamps"

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to cash them in for an early flight home, or a prime-time membership at the Nairobi Hilton Racquet Club. In short, six of seven cross-cultural ventures are unsuccessful because the sojourner never learns to process the cultural incidents, fails to develop an understanding of the host culture, and thus fails to learn to adapt, communicate, and relate with the nationals.

Donald McGavran exposed the fact, a half century ago, that Western missionaries are often as cross-culturally dysfunctional as other sojourners, though they “spiritualize” the decision to leave early, and they develop their own institutional way to leave without leaving. That institution is called the “Mission Station,” or the “Mission Compound”—an approach to mission that prevailed in Christian mission’s “Great Century” (1800 to 1914), and is still the dominant paradigm for doing “foreign mission” today.

McGavran observed the following pattern. Typically, after an exploratory period in which the pioneering missionaries learn the language, gain rapport with the nationals, and perhaps win a handful of converts, the missionaries take steps to organize their activities within a “mission station,” or “compound”. They acquire land in a major transportation center, and then they build a chapel, and residences for mission personnel and their families, and other living quarters for their national helpers, and perhaps a school, an orphanage, an agricultural center, a leprosy home, a clinic or hospital, or a printing shop.

The church that arises at the compound is a “gathered colony” church, reflecting the missionaries’ home culture, composed of the mission personnel and their families, and the first converts—who may also live and work at the mission compound, often become socially isolated from their people, and become more like the missionaries. Most activity takes place within the compound. Mission personnel may engage in forays into the hinterland within manageable travel distance from the compound, establishing casual and cordial contacts with the nationals—but not “living contacts”—and perhaps raising up a few small congregations. The mission station, itself, may or may not have had walls around it but, typically, most of the nationals experienced themselves estranged from the mission station and what went on there. When mission leaders discovered how the nationals experienced the mission—they were surprised and shocked; the people had not experienced the mission at all consistent with the mission’s good intentions!

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McGavran conceded that, typically, mission stations were built as a first stage, with the hope of a later "great ingathering." But, wherever great in-gatherings did not occur, the means became the ends and mission experienced a "diversion to secondary aims". Mission was redefined as education, medicine, relief work, etc.—for which the missionaries could see results, which involved the activities the missionaries were now used to, which the next generation of missionaries were then recruited to perpetuate. In such an arrangement, the activities of the mission station dominated the mission's agenda; the churches were peripheral, and nationals outside the compound and the churches were incidental—unless they came for an immunization, or a literacy class.

So in many lands today, most missionaries who serve the mission's institutions (or, now, the National Church's institutions) are teaching Greek, or filling teeth, or checking blood pressure much as they would have back home. In such settings, most missionaries bond with only a few nationals—most of whom have adapted enough to meet the missionaries more than half way, and many missionaries bond with virtually no nationals who are not Christians. Furthermore, as Ralph Winter has observed, your average missionary today is not much more likely to be substantially engaged with an Unreached People than are the missionary's supporters back home!

The work in the institutions, and life in the compound, have consumed the time and energies of the missionary, while isolating the missionary enough from the nationals that the "cultural incidents" are spaced out enough to avoid extensive culture shock and disorientation; consequently, the missionary never gets around to learning, and adapting to, the host culture. Christianity's apostolic mission to the surrounding mission field is now forgotten, or will come "later." When new missionaries join the mission, they are expected to become creatures of the compound also; anyone who bonds, or even fraternizes "too much," with the nationals is suspect. When such missionaries gather to sip tea in the evenings, and report news from home, and complain about the nationals, many of them sound much like their fellow citizens at the Nairobi Hilton.

We are now positioned to view Old East Side Church's struggle for a future through a cross-cultural lens.

One of the effects of the secularization of the West is the secularization of the cultures of the West. Once upon a time,

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from the Constantinian era to the Renaissance, the Church's beliefs and values pervasively influenced the European cultures from Denmark to Spain but, today, with some variation from one country to another, and even within the cultural regions of some countries, these cultures now present church people with a constellation of assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors, aesthetics, and lifestyles that are "alien" to those of the church. While some Christians may experience some "temptation" in exposure to non-Christian ways, most Christians essentially find those ways to be confusing or offensive, and they withdraw.

So, for decades now, Old East Side's people have experienced an endless chain of "cultural incidents." In each generation, Old East Side's people have expected non-Christians to believe and live like Christians; when they discovered that the "natives" were different, after all, they were confused or offended. A hundred and fifty years ago, they experienced the frontier town's saloons, painted women, and gunslingers as confusing or offensive; later they experienced the sights, the new peoples, and the choices pervading their cities as confusing or offensive. In the 1950's, they felt assaulted by the sudden emergence of rock music, and by Elvis' gyrating hips, and by the presence and propaganda of other religions, philosophies, and ideologies. Today, they are put off by what they have heard about unchurched people's clothing and cussing and cohabiting, their divorce and their drugs, their tattoos and their taste in music. Many of Old East Side's people have withdrawn from the wider community—lest they be exposed to an immodest woman, or a homeless person, or a thief, or an atheist, or a Muslim, or a drug transaction, or a New Age book shop.

Historically, church leaders experienced one cultural incident after another and, not knowing how to own and process their feelings, or how to "exegete" the changing culture around them, they launched a strategy of "retreat." Churches developed more and more ways to "circle the wagons" by developing "Christian" expatriate subcultures in a fallen society. In the nineteenth century, for instance, we founded most of our colleges in towns far away from the glitter and alternatives of the secular cities.

This tendency to withdraw into enclaves we think we can control has continued since the nineteenth century, and has accelerated. We started more "Christian colleges" to educate our young people, and then "Christian schools" to educate our kids.

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We located to "Christian neighborhoods," near our church of choice. Our churches organized basketball and softball teams, and competed in "church leagues." Today, regional churches are building their own activity centers, gymnasiums, and health clubs. Today, the churches and the "Christian Yellow Pages" coach Christian people to buy their shoes, their car, or their home from Christians, or get their dental work or income tax done by Christians, or to sign up for their Jamaican cruise with a Christian company and travel in the company of other Christians, only. The process expands informally; in their company life, Christians go to lunch with each other and, in their wider social life, more and more Christians fill their "dance card" with the names of Christians only. Then, in our last years, we relocate to retirement communities, and then nursing homes, for Christians. Jerry Falwell's planned "birth to antiquity" Christian village is merely one tip of an extensive iceberg.

By the cumulative effect of those, and many other, withdrawals from cultural incidents, the churches once called to be "in the world" but not "of the world," are no longer in the world that matters to God, no longer loving and befriending pagans. In many "Christian" settings, being "separate" from the world is now assumed to be normal Christianity, and complaining about the "awful" natives, and how they behave and live, is the indoor sport of choice. As a consequence of these (and many more) retreats into Christian expatriate subcultures, more and more organizations and public institutions lack a critical mass of Christians who are present as Salt and Light, and more and more pre-Christian people have fewer and fewer confessing Christians in their friendship network.

The widespread use of the Alpha course has exposed the "cultural island" that many churches have become. The Alpha course is the most widely useful programmatic approach to reaching "outsiders" that has surfaced in at least a generation. Through a ten-week process, the church offers a combination of hospitality, instruction, celebrative worship, prayer, conversation, friendship, and time that God can use to help many people discover the gift of faith. Many churches adopt the Alpha course, and many of the members take it, believe in it, and are enthused to invite pre-Christian people to the next Alpha course. Then, they "discover" that most of the church's loyal members do not know enough pre-Christian people, well enough, to implement the strategy!

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That is why Old East Side's problem is more serious, and more complex, than its leaders have known. A new motto or logo, or a new program, or a new website, or a change of pastors, is not likely to fix this problem. Nothing less than a serious "paradigm shift"—through which they discover their identity as a "missionary congregation"—will do it, and I think we have learned that Old East Side's people will never experience the paradigm shift inside the walls of the church; but they may well experience it outside the walls—in one (or more) of three ways:

1) They can discover it out in their community. If a cadre of Old East Side's people will expend the sweat equity to get to know lost people, and understand them and their culture, and identify with them, ideas for "outreach ministries" will be entrusted to them. In time, say, the church would be reaching people through a range of classes for literacy, or parenting, or money management, or English-as-a-Second-Language. The church would reach other people through, say, support groups, and recovery groups, and fellowships for Spanish, Tagalog, Haitian, and Samoan speaking people, and an alternative "people's" worship service that uses language and music they understand—with signing for deaf people.

2) They can discover it from another church that is already practicing the mission paradigm. As a van load of people spend time at the teaching event of a church, like Willow Creek, that is achieving what Old East Side could achieve, as they study what this church did, and as they meet its converts and celebrate with its people—they typically catch the vision for what could happen "back home."

3) They can discover it cross-culturally, through a "liminal" experience in another part of the world. University Presbyterian Church in Seattle pioneered this approach in the 1980's, when Bruce Larson was the senior pastor. UPC discovered that something remarkable typically happened in people who, say, spent three weeks building a one-room schoolhouse and worshipping with the indigenous believers in a squatter community on the outskirts of La Paz, Bolivia. Larson explains: "They do no harm, they do a little good, they discover who they are, and they catch a vision for mission. They come home and see opportunity for mission in their city, and they support world mission more extravagantly than they ever imagined." University Presbyterian Church, in the 1990's, sent out 350 to 400 people per year, supported 70 missionaries and, in Seattle, engaged in extensive ur-

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ban ministry and church planting—in several different languages.

However it happens, IF the people of Old East Side Church discover who they are, and fall in love with the world again, and identify with struggling people, and believe in what lost people can become by the grace of God, then even Old East Side will become a contagious movement and the kind of Church against which the gates of hell and the powers of death cannot prevail.

Writer

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NOTES

1. This article is an adaptation of the last chapter, which is featured as a PostScript in the book, rather than the last chapter per se.

2. Readers familiar with my Church Growth writing may be asking if I have abandoned the Church Growth field's "Homogeneous Unit" principle. I am not. Contrary to the impressions of Church Growth's detractors, that principle was never intended as a principle of exclusion, but rather a strategy of inclusion. The people of the effective inclusive church do many things together, while also gathering in small groups, large groups, and congregations based on common language, culture, condition, need, interest, or affinity. The next two sentences in the main text should complete this response.

3. Chris Kahn, "A Falwell Utopia," *Lexington Herald-Leader* (July 6, 2002) E-1, E-4.

4. If one doubts that many of a medieval village's baptized people were, in fact, "Christians" in any meaningful sense, and if one believes that medieval Europe was more of a mission field than the Church's leaders perceived, that would argue against the parish church building a community center *for Christians*, then or now, OR it would argue for

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the parish church building a community center for everyone—especially for seekers!

5. "A Falwell Utopia," E-4.

6. In 1999, according to <http://overseasdigest.com>, about 3,785,000 Americans were living overseas, *not counting* military and government personnel and their dependents. This website gives the number of Americans known to be living in each country, in some countries by city. Over 35,000 Americans, for instance, live in Belgium, almost 20,000 in Costa Rica, almost 10,000 in Denmark, almost 47,000 in Ireland; 20,000 in Edinburgh, Scotland, 72,000 in Naples, Italy, over 8,000 in Pretoria, South Africa.

7. Kohls, L. Robert. *Survival Kit for Overseas Living: For Americans Planning to Live and Work Abroad*, fourth edition. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2001) 1.

8. Storti, Craig. *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, second edition (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2001) chapter two.

9. Or, I would add, Americans expect "them" to *want* to be like us and live like us! This version of the assumption, I think, is rooted in the precedent of nineteenth century European immigrants to the USA—who *did* want to "assimilate" and "make it" in their new homeland. Americans, generally, have assumed ever since that "they" want to become "like us," even though the newer immigrants from Latin America and Asia have NOT "melted" at the rate the earlier European-Americans did. Americans often assume that something is "wrong" with a people who do not want to become culturally Anglo.