

# The **FINISH** COMMITMENT

The background of the entire page is an abstract geometric composition. It features a large, glowing cross in the center, rendered in bright yellow and orange hues. The cross is composed of several overlapping, semi-transparent rectangular planes that create a sense of depth and movement. The background is filled with various shades of purple, red, and orange, with numerous thin, intersecting lines and rays of light that radiate from the center of the cross. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and spiritual illumination.

THE ESSENTIAL ALIGNMENT OF  
**PRIORITIES, PARADIGMS & PURPOSE**

A MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH OF GOD  
FROM TIMOTHY M. HILL  
GENERAL OVERSEER

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The FINISH Commitment is a global church focus on the Great Commission FINISH. Our vision is predicated on the acronym FINISH (Find, Intercede, Network, Invest, Send, and Harvest), including qualitative declarations constructed on Scripture and quantitative goals contextualizing how we are engaging the Great Commission.

## **FIND**

To FINISH the Great Commission, we must FIND the lost and disenfranchised, including the unreached people groups around the world, engaging them in love and winning them to Christ.

## **INTERCEDE**

To FINISH the Great Commission, we must INTERCEDE, making prayer and worship the highest privilege and greatest responsibility of every believer.

## **NETWORK**

To FINISH the Great Commission, we must NETWORK servant leaders of all generations, including pastors, ministers, and laity for shared ministry engagement.

## **INVEST**

To FINISH the Great Commission, we must INVEST our resources by strengthening the Church through strategic partnerships for care, church planting, education, leadership development, and discipleship.

## **SEND**

To FINISH the Great Commission, we must SEND disciples to all nations, actively sharing the gospel through Holy Spirit empowerment.

## **HARVEST**

As a vibrant movement, the CHURCH OF GOD must commit NOW to reap a world HARVEST with a global church focus on the Great Commission Finish.



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And, I must not fail to acknowledge the inward influence of the Holy Spirit, who daily prompts me to lead the church toward the supreme task of finishing the Great Commission.





## Chapter 1

# The FINISH Commitment . . . It's Time!

I remember hearing the word “paradigm” for the first time as an eager young pastor trying to get my bearings with a new congregation I had been assigned to in Texas. While attending a church growth seminar, I attentively listened as the instructor taught about “paradigm shifts.” I’m embarrassed to admit my naivety, but while taking notes, I couldn’t even spell the word, much less define its meaning. Another pastor sitting near me sensed my “greenness,” and quipped about “pair-of-dimes” being equal to “twenty cents” and “pair-of-dime shifts” happen when two dimes are rubbed together. I returned his “class clown” humor with a slight grin, then again turned my attention to the speaker. In an hour, that instructor did more to help me understand my congregation and our mutual frustrations than I had been able to gain in the few months I had been their pastor. On that day, I discovered at least some of the “whys” behind the acceptance or the rejection most people have toward new methods and concepts. We are conditioned by the paradigms that help form us, and as a result, function accordingly.

A paradigm is a set of generally accepted assumptions or the vision of reality through which we perceive the world. It is a standard accepted by an individual or a society as a clear example, model, or pattern of how things should work. The term was brought to renewed prominence by science-fiction writer and historian, Thomas Khun, in a book published in 1962, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Khun defined paradigms as “the theoretical framework within which scientific thinking and practices operate.” Since then, the term has been frequently associated with the understanding of

world economies and politics, as well as social and religious practices. A “paradigm shift” describes the fundamental change of the usual and accepted way of thinking and performance in these and other areas of science, technology, and culture. In other words, it is a change in how one views the world.

Throughout history, various change agents have provoked and driven some paradigm shifts to happen so quickly that the world seemed to awaken one morning to find little was the same as the day before. For example, within a few hours of the horrific terrorist attack on America on September 11, 2001, new paradigms affecting everything from national security to global travel began to take form. Other examples include the effects of the ever-advancing breakthroughs in medicine, technology, and a myriad of scientific disciplines. For instance, try to imagine navigating through your day without Internet or cell phone capability. Everything from friendly email to top-level business transactions would be interrupted, if not jeopardized. Multiply that scenario exponentially as it relates to global governments and economies. Bottom line: Paradigms are both “effective” and “affective.” They cause and create, and at the same time they influence and alter. One thing for sure—good or bad—they can last a long time.

## **Effective and Ineffective Paradigms**

The Bible offers many examples of effective and ineffective paradigms. You can read about societies rising or falling as a direct result of its embraced paradigm. Here are a few examples.

David’s leadership of the united kingdoms of Judah and Israel became the standard by which others would be judged in the future. He prioritized worship and made the ark of the covenant and its return to Jerusalem his focused priority. The result was an unprecedented era of remarkable favor and blessings from the Lord.

Another example is Josiah. Beginning at eight years of age, Josiah initiated a paradigm of righteous reform. He dismantled pagan altars and groves dedicated to idols. He renovated the Temple and rediscovered the Word of the Lord. Josiah led the kingdom of Judah through 31 years of revival, prompted by his emphasis on the Word of God.

*A “paradigm shift” describes the fundamental change of the usual and accepted way of thinking and performance .... it is a change in how one views the world.*

By contrast, Jeroboam led from a paradigm of evil, idolatry, and self-preservation. It was said he had “done more evil than any other king before him” (see 1 Kings 14:9). For 22 years, the nation of Israel suffered greatly and entered an unusually long state of economic, social, and religious depression.

Forty-two different individuals led Israel and Judah, and history hasn't been kind to most of them. One of the strongest indictments made against any of Israel's leaders was about Saul. He had all the potential in the world, and could have brought Israel to its greatest days as its first-named king. Within days of his coronation, however, Saul began to function from a paradigm of uncertainty that became marked by his own suspicion, distrust, and jealousy of others.

It is discouraging to realize the failures of mortal men, the disappointing models of leadership, and the government some of them brought forth. Yet, the leaders who sought to know the Lord and follow righteousness were able to inaugurate new paradigms of promise that prefigured the eternal reign of Christ and its blessed abundance.

Joel prophesied about a paradigm of restoration accompanied by the outpouring of God's Spirit (Joel 2:28-32).

Micah signaled the coming paradigm of the Messiah, pinpointing the town of the Lord's birth and likening His kingdom to a great mountain where people would find security and salvation (Micah 4:1-8).

Haggai foretold a “glory” paradigm that would come with the building of the new temple (Haggai 2:9).

Zechariah proclaimed a paradigm of protection and intercession, when the office of priest and king would be brought together

as one, and a person uniquely qualified would occupy both offices simultaneously (Zechariah 6:13).

Malachi heralded a paradigm of repentance and preparation for Israel in anticipation of a coming Messiah. (Malachi 3:1).

These and other leaders served their generation and spoke specifically to it. Often these leaders would be used of God to prophesy beyond the boundaries of their generation into the lives of the nation's future sons and daughters. Some of them never lived to see their prophecies come to pass, but they died with great comfort and confidence that the Word of God spoken through them would not return void, but would accomplish all God had designed.

In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5, Jesus laid the foundation of a new paradigm of Kingdom-living and Kingdom-loving, unlike anything the world had known. Who among that mountainside audience would have dreamed that in the chaotic environment of a Roman-suppressed civilization, anything like Jesus was proposing in His sermon could be possible?

Think about it:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

With the Beatitudes, Jesus presented what a worldly system would define as a "paradigm of paradox" that doesn't resemble happiness. However, Jesus knew that hollow lives would never be filled by hollow things.

The kingdom of heaven models a different standard that defies worldly comprehension. In heaven's kingdom, the most exalted are those whom the world considers the least important. In heaven's kingdom, believers set their affections on things above rather than on things of earth. In heaven's kingdom, its citizens understand the first shall be last and the last shall be first. In the kingdom of heaven, the way up is down. In heaven's kingdom, those who lead understand they must lead like Jesus and be the servant of all (see Luke 22:26).

## The FINISH Paradigm

I am writing these words on the first anniversary of my election as General Overseer of the Church of God. Reflecting on the first year of casting the vision that became known as The FINISH Commitment, I am still overwhelmed at the largeness and even the seeming audacity of such a challenge. To think that a movement like the Church of God could play a significant role in completing the Great Commission boggles my mind, yet it inspires my soul.

*There must be no allowance for institutional inertia . . . We must, however, be willing to face facts, address issues, and quit judging ourselves by ourselves.*

For one year now, the church has newly embraced the paradigm of global evangelization in a most meaningful way, and we are dedicated to **Find** the unreached, **Intercede** in prayer, **Network** with others, **Invest** in church planting, **Send** laborers into the Lord's work, and **Harvest** unlimited fields before Jesus comes.

With such a task before us, there must be no allowance for institutional inertia, and there is certainly no time for attempting to answer questions no one is asking. We must, however, be willing to face facts, address issues, and quit judging ourselves by ourselves.

What does it mean to be Church of God?

When we answer that question, will the answer honor our fathers and mothers of heritage? Hopefully, it will.

Will that answer speak to the passion and callings of our sons and daughters who want to identify and engage with a movement that is making a meaningful difference in this world? We must work to make it so.

Ultimately, will the answer to that question please Jesus Christ? It must or else we tragically disqualify our existence.

Recently, I called the Executive Council of the Church of God to

undertake a monumental task. In the context of the Great Commission, I asked them to focus on the following:

- Doctrinal Affirmation
- Structural Acclimation
- Generational Assimilation
- Ministerial Activation
- Visional Actualization
- Spiritual Acceleration

It's a task that focuses on 25 distinct issues that I feel must be addressed in our movement. These issues are not based on my opinion, but rather prayerful observation. These items certainly do not represent an exhaustive list, but I'm convinced for many reasons they are more than representative of common passion, dedication, and in many cases, great concern. These items will be revealed later in this book.

I invite you into the Executive Boardroom where the Council of Eighteen joins the Executive Committee to carry out the business of the Church of God between International General Assemblies. In the next chapter, I will share with you my address to the Executive Council that resulted in a unanimous adoption and the formulation of working focus groups to help facilitate further progress.

Know that I love you and need you and, most of all, I value your prayers.

God bless you, Church of God.

Tim Hill

General Overseer

## Chapter 2

# The Place Where Two Roads Meet

### **Executive Council Address**

Earlier this week my mind went to the passage of Scripture in Matthew 21 where Jesus faced His passion and rode into His destiny.

The final week prior to the Lord's death began with His triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. Jesus instructed two of His disciples to go to a place called Bethphage to secure transportation that would be used for going into the city. They were told that they would find a donkey and its young colt tied at a place where two roads came together. When they were found, they were then instructed to loose them and bring them back to the Master.

Jesus just as easily could have walked into Jerusalem. After all, He had walked everywhere else. Why did He choose this mode of travel? There were two primary reasons. First, He was fulfilling the prophetic scripture of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah that said, "Behold, your King is coming to you . . . lowly and riding . . . on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9 NKJV).

The second reason was also very important. By his actions, Jesus was sending a strong message to everyone that all the prophecies, promises, types, and shadows of the old law were now fulfilled in Him. Most of His critics had said that He had come to tear down the old law and worked in opposition to all that Moses and their forefathers had written and taught them to believe. It seems that Jesus very carefully made the choice to ride upon the back of the new and unriden colt which is representative of a new day that ushered in New Testament grace, not built-upon laws written

in stone, but based upon the law of covenant relationship established in men's hearts by Jesus Christ. However, He also allowed the colt's mother to closely tag along behind because this sent the message that Jesus had not come to destroy the old covenant, He had simply "ridden it out." Everything the old covenant pointed to would be completed in all He did and in who He was. His birth fulfilled the words of Isaiah. His death fulfilled the words of David, and His resurrection was foretold by Abraham.

Every promise concerning the Messiah was lived out by the man riding the donkey, and His journey into Jerusalem made it all so very clear. How significant that these animals had been found tied up in Bethphage at the place where two roads came together. It was the place where the past merged with the future, and the thing that would carry the gospel forward was bound right in the middle.

## **The Two Roads: The Past and The Future**

This speaks of one of the dilemmas of the church today. We are called to be the carrier of the gospel, but we find ourselves bound where the road of the past and the road of the future meet. Granted, stationed somewhere between can be a very comfortable place to be, because being positioned in the middle of where two roads meet allows you to be critical of those who haven't come as far as you have, and at the same time, you can be suspicious of those who may have passed you by. What a pathetic picture of too many churches today. They are just tied up in the middle. They are not totally dwelling in the past, and they're proud of it. It took them a while, but they finally caught up with what God was doing. The only problem is, they caught up with Him just about the time He started moving again.

## **Jehovah Is a Proceeding God**

Never forget that Jehovah is a progressive and "proceeding" God, and His Word is constantly "proceeding" out of His mouth. His fundamental and unalterable laws will not change, but He will update His methods from time to time, and so must we. God desires to release the church from that "in-between" place and move us into our destiny as a spiritual force in this world. We must not resist the "untying" that He brings our way. The name *Bethphage*



means the “house of the unripe fig.” This was the place where Jesus cursed the fig tree because of its barrenness. How significant it was for the Master to liberate the donkeys from a place of immature fruit and barrenness. This point must not be overlooked. The church must move away from its place of barrenness and immaturity to have lasting results.

***I believe we have come to this time in the history of the Church of God for an appointed purpose. We are experiencing a prophetic alignment for an end-time assignment.***

With all of this in mind, I wonder if the Church of God finds itself at a place where two roads come together? I’m praying, that God will untie us from the place of the in-between and His mantle of anointing, bravery, compassion, courage, and all that we need to climb upon the back of unriden opportunities will move this church into its destined place. I believe we have come to this time in the history of the Church of God for an appointed purpose. We are experiencing a prophetic alignment for an end-time assignment.

When I think about the Church of God, I think about foundations and a history that confirms purpose. More than 131 years ago at a place nestled in the Unicoi Mountains, a little stream of water called Barney Creek represented an early trickling of spiritual desire that would become a global flood of Pentecost. A small group of people came together, unsettled and stirred, yet moved to seek the Lord. There was purpose in that meeting. Their own recorded *Minutes* documented that “strong men wept” as they considered the great fields of harvest. When I look back upon that history, I become keenly aware that God has stepped in with the definite and divine leading of His Holy Spirit, confirming to this movement that we are a people of purpose and harvest priority. We are not here by accident. I believe that we are a people

that God has ordained before the foundations of this world to be here now. Our best days are not behind us.

Next, I contemplate some known facts and a harvest that challenges paradigms. Today, you and I are part of a world population that numbers almost 7.5 billion people. Two-thirds of that number are not saved, and 2.9 billion people have never heard the name of Jesus. Among all the people groups in this world today, there are approximately 7,000 of them classified as unreached. To be classified as an Unreached People Group means that two percent or less of that culture have a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout the world, the growing Muslim influence is enormous. In the United States alone, the population of Muslim influence has now reached almost 3.5 million people.

Today, 92 million people known as Millennials think and approach life and religion differently than anyone previous to them. Many of them gave up on attending church long ago.

Attempting to list all the facts and statistics is an impossibility for the time afforded me, but they all prove that we find ourselves in the middle of a harvest that challenges paradigms. I'm of the persuasion that when the paradigm does not permit you to reach the harvest, then there is a need to evaluate the paradigm. We must become willing to stretch our known paradigms: the way things have been, the way things are, the way we intend to be. We must be willing to stretch, to change, to adopt, to amend, because anything that doesn't lend itself to discipleship and reaching the lost for Jesus Christ is a paradigm that needs to be questioned and amended.

As to our future, it all depends on our willingness to evaluate our past, examine our present, and be intentionally focused as we move ahead. There will be times in the process when we will affirm or amend, but whatever we do, we must secure a future where hope conveys our priorities.

How do we see our future in the context of the Great Commission and the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:14 when He declared, "The gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world . . . and then shall the end come" (NKJV)?

How will we posture ourselves in the light of Psalm 2:8, that says, “Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance” (NKJV)? God is waiting on us to petition Him in prayer that we might reap a global harvest.

We’ve been looking at current trends and realities and where we are fiscally and spiritually. Even as it comes to budgets, we must ask ourselves: “What kind of budget can we go away from here with?” I think there are two kinds to choose from.

Sometimes and sadly, we’ve had to accept that the best that could be hoped for was a “bridge” budget—one that spans the gap of where we’ve been to where we want to go. It is a bridge. But ultimately, I think we must have a budget that helps to build a generation more than bridge a gap.

***We must be willing to . . . change . . .  
because anything that doesn’t lend itself  
to discipleship and reaching the lost . . .  
needs to be questioned and amended.***

I once heard a well-known financial advisor say, “Show me your credit history, and I’ll describe your past. Show me your check-book, and I’ll describe your present. Show me your budget, and I’ll describe your future. Show me all three and I’ll describe your priorities.”

When serving as a pastor, I always knew that every year at budget time we were speaking to what we wanted to feed, and in some cases, what we wanted to starve. But in all cases, it spoke of what our priorities were going to be.

A little more than two years ago, at the 2014 International Council Meeting, while serving as the director of World Missions, I shared what I called “A Forecast for the Future Revealed in Current Trends and Realities.” Based upon study, experience, conversations, and my own field observations, I presented to that Council several items that I believe had impacted and even changed the delivery of the gospel around the world, including,

but not limited to, the global economy, terrorism, new political suppression, refugee migration, and more. I also listed more positive observations, including the fact the mission field has become a mission force, an increase of student engagement in missions, and most certainly an unprecedented move of the Holy Spirit in the world.

Coming into this role as general overseer, I'm very thankful for the perspective I was afforded while in World Missions. That opportunity to observe ministry from a more global setting has formed and fashioned my ministry passions for the future. Now in this new leadership role, I have continued to note observations, challenges, and realities inclusive of the North American church. I have participated in conversations and dialogued with ministers and laity which represent a balance of several demographic considerations.

As I survey the landscape of Church of God ministry and operation, I'm most aware of the amazing gift we have in God's favor and Holy Spirit anointing residing upon and within us as part of the body of Christ. Then when I consider the unlimited resources we have in the people that attend and work in our churches, from the youngest child and student to the most senior saint, we are blessed with incredibly prayerful, dedicated, and gifted people. With that said and affirmed, I must highlight for you that I believe in the future, for the sake of Kingdom acceleration and Harvest effectiveness, there are some vital matters to which we, the Church of God, must give attention. Our commitment is to be engaged as part of Christ's body and FINISH the Great Commission. However, to spiritually, missionally, and even administratively accelerate our harvest goals as a movement, occasionally the movement must retune, retool, and recalibrate. In consideration of that fact, there are key and critical matters in my opinion which should be identified, clarified, and spoken to with immediacy and even a sense of Kingdom urgency.

There are 25 items we must address with prayerful diligence.

## **Doctrinal Affirmation**

- Affirmation of Pentecostal Distinctive of the Spirit- Empowered Life

- Affirmation of Scriptural Position Regarding Social Issues

### **Visional Actualization**

- Enhancing the “Value Add” Dynamic to All Churches
- Great Commission Budget Funding that better supports the Core Values of Church of God
- Revisioning Methods, Structures, and Delivery Systems in Light of a Multinational and Multigenerational Culture
- Church Planting, Multisite Campuses, Expansion of Church Revitalization
- Strategic Development for Urban Impact, Mission Regions, and Western USA
- Actualization of a Global Context of Ministry focused on Great Commission functionality
- Affiliation and Amalgamation Procedures

### **Ministerial Activation**

- Women in Ministry
- Enhancement of Ministerial Well-Being, Rehabilitation, and Reinstatement Procedures
- Harmonization of Standards Relative to Applicants for Ministry
- Pastoral and Congregational Vision Advancement
- Enhanced Credentialing Process
- Enhancement of Ministerial Development Procedures
- Enhancing the Right and Role of Ordained-Level Ministry with Clarity to the Use of the Title of “Ordained Bishop”

### **Generational Assimilation**

- The Aging of Ministry
- Opportunities for Upward Mobility to New Generations of Potential Leaders at all Levels of Ministry and Administration

### **Structural Acclimation**

- Distinctives and Proclivities of Structure
- Tithing and Reporting Consistency
- Elections and Appointments Reflecting Multicultural Diversity
- Enhanced Preparation of State/Regional Leaders for More Effective Ministry/Administrative Success
- Focused Appointment Considerations for Greater Missional Impact
- State Director’s Level of Preparedness and Effectiveness

## **Spiritual Acceleration**

- Renewed Dedication and Commitment to the Core Values of the Church of God

I reiterate that while I don't consider this list to be exhaustive, I do believe these items to be among the most crucial of potential considerations that will demand the attention of this and future deliberative bodies.

Some of these items will simply require renewed affirmation, while others will require strategic amendment prior to significant adoption. But all of them will require prayer, study, and intentional focus from a harvest perspective. My commitment to you as general overseer is to join with you, shoulder to shoulder, as we embark upon this journey together. The Executive Committee will host "Connect" tours where we will invite open dialogue. We will visit states and local congregations, inviting participation in the process. We will gather at the next International General Assembly and utilize our time in meaningful discussion that leads to a more mobilized church. I'm sure that in the process we won't always see eye to eye, but we will walk hand in hand.

*Editor's note: Following Dr. Hill's address, the Executive Council engaged in lengthy prayer. Following this time of intercession, Dr. Hill's report was adopted, and focus groups utilizing each individual council member, were commissioned to begin immediate processing of assignments for Agenda preparation for the 2018 International General Assembly.*

## Chapter 3

# Facts — A Harvest That Challenges Paradigms

**W**e live in an ever-changing world. Things and beliefs we held to be sacrosanct just a decade ago seem to no longer be true. Our world is exploding with growth, both numerically and informationally. Rapidly expanding technology, changing demographics, the growth of new religions, the growth of those who claim no religion, new family trends, escalating property values, and the emergence of a different thought-process by young people as they explode into adulthood are just a few of the trends that are challenging the paradigms and assumptions of the past. Those trends and changes are also creating new challenges for a church that is trying to reach the harvest in the end-time. The statistics about the contemporary trends are mind-boggling. However, we serve a God who loves to respond when it seems impossible.

For just a moment, consider the logistical Biblical nightmare of getting 2 – 3 million people out of Egyptian bondage and into the Promised Land. A few years ago, an army officer in charge of logistical support was asked to estimate the efforts needed to move that many people across a desert. While these numbers are just best estimates, he suggested that . . .

- To feed that multitude, it would take 1,500 tons of food per day.
- To cook for that many people, it would take 4,000 tons of wood per day.
- That many people would consume and use as much as 11 million gallons of water a day.
- They would need a campground to stop at every day as large as two-thirds the size of the state of Rhode Island.

- To cross the Red Sea in just one night, they would have to walk 5,000 abreast, requiring a space three miles wide.

All those numbers and statistics are staggering. However, they give us just a glimpse into the mind-set of God. We should never be stifled in our work for God, even when the task looks overwhelming, because He works in an environment of “more than enough.”

## **Expanding World**

The Scriptures clearly tell us that “the harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38 NKJV). Currently, there are more than 7.4 billion people living on this place we call earth. More than 325 million of them live in the United States, the third most populous country in the world. Only China at 1.4 billion and India at 1.3 billion have more population than the United States. So, the world is a massive mission field. And, as I have often said, our mission field must become our mission force if we are to reach the billions of people who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Indonesia is an excellent example. Of the 17 million or so Protestants in that Islam-dominated country, over 3 million belong to or attend Church of God congregations. While this number is great, Indonesia is still the most populous Muslim nation in the world. But some unofficial sources say this could be changing and suggest that as many as 2 million Muslim a year are converting to Christianity, or one convert every 15 seconds. The mission field is truly becoming a mission force - but much remains to be accomplished.

According to the United States Census Bureau, there is one birth every eight seconds in the USA, there is one death every 12 seconds, there is one international migrant (net) coming into this country every 33 seconds, netting a gain of one person every 12 seconds. The impact of those numbers means that the United States is gaining 7,200 people per day for a total of 2,628,000 a year.<sup>1</sup>



It has been suggested that the average church in America averages 70 or so in worship attendance—and our statistics in the Church of God bear this out for our denomination. Collectively, we would need to start more than 100 churches A DAY just to keep up with the population growth in our country. The harvest truly is plentiful and growing daily.

### Demographic Trends

Contrary to what some may think, the United States is not a homogenous society. You only need look to recent election trends and discussions coming out of Washington to understand that we are very dissimilar in our thoughts, beliefs, and foundational principles. We are a divided—and often divisive—society. Why? There are a multitude of reasons we could explore, but most of them relate to demographical changes in our society.

While we serve a God who is never changing, such cannot be said about our society, particularly over the past few decades. It appears the wind blows in a new change almost daily. For the church to be able to address those who are impacted by these changes, we must be ever mindful of the crossroads where we find ourselves, standing where the road of the past and the road of the future meet.

***We would need to start more than 100 churches A DAY just to keep up with the population growth in our country. The harvest truly is plentiful and growing daily.***

According to the Pew Research Center, by 2055 the United States will not have a single racial or ethnic majority. This change will primarily be brought about through immigration. Over the past 50 years, the United States has accepted more than 1 million immigrants per year, with most of them coming from Latin America and Asia. Since 2009, more Mexicans have gone back to their country than have arrived in the United States, but Asian and African immigrants continue to come

to the United States in large numbers. While much discussion is going on in Washington about immigration policies, the church must work to meet the spiritual needs of these immigrants in our country.<sup>2</sup>

During the massive migration of people out of the Middle East and Northern Africa into Europe in 2014–2016, I commented that God is bringing people out of countries where we cannot send missionaries into; instead, He is bringing them to countries where there are vibrant, life-giving churches. As an act of assuring everyone hears the gospel, God has brought people to us and our churches when we could not go to them. Now, literally thousands of people who have never heard the gospel in their own land have been exposed to God's grace in their new homeland.

Demographic shifts cause the old saying of “my four and no more” to be thrown out the window. If our churches are not reaching the ethnic and racial minorities in their communities, they are a dying church and may not even realize it. We must never forget that the Great Commission requires us to make disciples of “all the nations”—and “all” includes your community, your city, your state, and the United States—and everyone who lives there.

Although my children have been reminding me of this for a while, the statistics now clearly point out that our nation is aging and the younger generation is not as willing to accept religion as those who have come before them. But more on that later. It is interesting to note that from 1950 to 2010, the global population tripled and the population of the United States more than doubled.<sup>3</sup> However, the growth rate is slowing down considerably, meaning that the population is aging among traditional church attenders. Because of high birth rates among Muslims and Hindus, those religions are not experiencing the same settling of growth.

## **Growing Muslim Influence**

In the next 30 years, the world's religious makeup is projected to look much different than it does today. Islam will grow faster than any other major world religion, increasing from 1.6 billion followers in 2010 to more than 2.76 billion followers in 2050. By 2050, it is projected that Christians and Muslims will make up nearly equal shares of the world's population, with Christians at 31.4 percent

and Muslims at 29.7 percent. At that rate of growth, Muslims will be the world's largest religion well before the end of this century.

In the United States alone, there were 3.3 million Muslims as of 2015—and that number is growing exponentially each year with the expectation of better than doubling by 2050. Muslims currently represent only 1 percent of the U.S. population, but more than 23 percent of the world's population. However, the number of Muslims in the United States could be much higher, simply because the U.S. Census Bureau does not ask questions about religion, meaning that there is no official count of the U.S. Muslim population.<sup>4</sup>

*Unless we **FINISH** the Great Commission during our lifetime, we could see Christianity become a secondary world religion to Islam in the next 50 years or less.*

Why is the Muslim population growing so fast? While about 20 percent of current Muslims were raised in a different faith or in no faith at all, a similar percentage of those raised in Islam no longer identify with the faith. So “conversion” is a net zero gain. Simply put, about as many Americans become Muslims as leave Islam.<sup>5</sup> The growth of the faith is coming biologically. Muslim women on average have 3.1 children compared to 2.3 for all other religious groups combined.<sup>6</sup> Because of such, Islam is the world's fastest growing religion.

Unless we **FINISH** the Great Commission during our lifetime, we could see Christianity become a secondary world religion to Islam in the next 50 years or less. The harvest truly is plentiful—and is ready now.

## Millennials and Generation Z

For years, the church has been focused on the harvest of reaching “baby boomers.” Prior to the emergence of the millennial generation, baby boomers were the largest generation to ever live. Millennials, defined generally as those born between 1980 and

2000, have now surpassed the largeness of the baby boomer generation and by most counts, there are some 92 million Millennials living in the United States today.

Although with each new generation we tend to say that they are not like any generation before them, Millennials have truly stuck to the mantra that they are different and are going to stay different. Instead of buying homes as previous generations, Millennials have returned home with as many as 30 percent living with their parents. Further, while previous generations moved into marriage and child-bearing in their early 20s, Millennials are waiting later—the median age for marriage among Millennials is now 30 years of age. Millennials have also developed what is being called a “sharing economy”—putting off making large purchases such as cars and luxury goods and instead using Uber and other products without the burden of ownership.<sup>7</sup>

In comparing baby boomers to Millennials, baby boomers would be seen as “owners” and Millennials would be seen as “renters.” As you can imagine, this renter-mentality among Millennials makes them much more mobile, both in their lifestyle and their dedication to a local church. While most Millennials have never written a check and very few carry cash, they are becoming the most charitable generation ever in the giving of their time and in the giving of their financial resources. A recent survey reported that 70 percent of Millennials volunteer for charitable efforts while 84 percent make charitable donations annually.<sup>8</sup> But because of their mobility, churches must respond to Millennials differently, offering online giving, text-to-give opportunities, and dedicated “apps.” Paying for buildings and for “overhead” costs of large church facilities is not a reason for Millennials to give. As a matter of fact, due to their “sharing” mentality, most Millennials are directing their charitable giving to places where they can see direct results. Simply put, Millennials seem to be “cause” oriented, rather than systems and structure oriented.

But if the Millennials represent a challenge for churches continuing to try to reach the harvest like they did in previous generations, the emergence of “Generation Z” makes Millennials look

tame by comparison. Representing some 23 million Americans, “Generation Z” covers those born at the end of the Millennials generation, some say as early as 1994, and going through 2010.

Think about this: Generation Z has never lived in a world without Internet. Gen Z-ers think that FaceTime, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat are how people have always communicated. They are a generation that can carry on a whole conversation in 140 characters or less. Many do not even know what cursive handwriting is and most are more familiar with reading their Bible from a screen than off paper.

When it comes to charitable giving, Gen Z-ers seem to be less charitable than the Millennials they are following. Since Generation Z was coming of age just as the financial collapse of 2008 was in full swing, they may be more cautious givers as they move fully into the work force. Gen Z-ers saw the median net worth of their parents fall by nearly 45 percent during the Great Recession and they may be overly cautious about giving until they feel they have stockpiled enough funds to carry them through another recession like 2008.<sup>9</sup> Seventy-seven percent of Generation Z expect that they will have to work harder than previous generations just to have the same lifestyle.

From a volunteer standpoint—and if you can get them locked in, Gen Z may be a huge blessing to a local church. They certainly seem willing to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty. But on the other hand, unless there is a drastic change in their philosophy as they age, Generation Z is going to be less willing to offer financial support to the church than their older “cousins” from the Millennial generation.

Because of the massive amount of information that is available to Generation Z, these young people have grown up faster and much more educated than those they are following. Because they have only known the instant gratification of text messaging and Google look-ups, Gen Z-ers tend to be an impatient group. They want answers immediately. From the church, Gen Z-ers are looking for authenticity, honesty, and not a lot of hype. You can expect that a Gen Z-er will fact-check every statistic and every definitive

statement that the pastor may use from the pulpit. These young people are looking for wi-fi in the church sanctuary and specialty coffee in the lobby. Social media is where they get their news, and they are always tethered to their mobile device. Most Gen Z-ers would not know how to use a landline telephone.<sup>10</sup>

If Millennials are “cause-oriented,” Generation Z is poised to take that to a second level. As a group, they have grown up hearing about global warming and “carbon footprint.” Therefore, building a majestic church facility with all the necessary parking and infrastructure needed is seen as wrongfully and wastefully using resources. Because of their impatience, a short direct sermon in a coffee shop is more appealing than a liturgical church service in a temple.

Many scholars have pointed out that the baby boomers started out with the same cause-oriented goals as both the Millennials and Generation Z-ers. The hippie and beatnik revolution of the 1960s and 1970s were a result. However, soon the baby boomers settled in and decided to be more conformist than they had been projected to be. Will the Millennials and Generation Z-ers experience the same maturing? Such remains to be seen, but so far, both generational groups have refused to conform. How we do church, how church properties are built and paid for, and some of the church service traditions of the past will certainly have to change to maintain Millennials and Gen Z-ers as regular church attenders. Barna research points out that only two in 10 Millennials believe that church is important and 59 percent of Millennials who grew up in church have now dropped out.<sup>11</sup> It remains to be seen, as mentioned earlier, if they will return to church and the foundational beliefs of their youth as they get older. There is no doubt the paradigms of change are certainly in the air.

## **Changing Tides**

If you think all these demographical changes are impacting our society, think for a moment of how the church must adapt to be relevant as society changes so rapidly. It has been said that America is “accumulating a deep psychological national deficit” for future generations.<sup>12</sup> Where the television became the babysitter

for children born in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, cell-phones, iPads, and electronic tablets are now serving as babysitters for the children in the early part of this century. While both may seem equally bad, at least the television showed interaction among people—something that the electronic devices of today make sterile. Children of today can go for hours and not have to communicate verbally with another live human being.

***How we do church, how church properties are built and paid for . . . will certainly have to change to maintain Millennials and Gen Z-ers as regular church attenders.***

When I was growing up in Texas, youth activities in the church determined whether the church was alive and vibrant. Today, fewer young people, including young adults, are attending church. One survey found that only 28 percent of younger Americans between the ages of 23 and 37 attend church at all.<sup>13</sup> Citing the church's irrelevance, hypocrisy in the church, and the moral failure of prominent church leaders, more and more young people are calling it quits on church attendance. Because of the failure to reach—or to maintain—these younger attenders, a shocking 85 percent of U.S. churches are either declining or plateauing.<sup>14</sup>

Even more challenging is the growing number of people who are “religiously unaffiliated,” often called the “nones.” In the past decade, “nones” have grown from 16 percent of the U.S. population in 2007 to 23 percent of the population today. In the United States, the “nones” trend has been fueled by Millennials, 35 percent of whom claim to be religiously unaffiliated. But while the percentage of “nones” in the United States is greater than those who identify as mainline Protestants or as Catholics, “nones” on a global scale occupy an even larger segment of the population. Pew Research estimates that “nones” are now the second-largest religious group in 48 percent of the world’s nations.<sup>15</sup>

If we as the church are going to shake off these shifting paradigms and maintain relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how are we

going to be able to do it? Church planting! What? You ask. A recent study done by a mainline denomination shows that after planting a new church, attendance grew by 21.5 percent for at least five years following the start of the church.<sup>16</sup> It appears unchurched people and those dissatisfied with their current church see a new church plant as a chance for change—both in changing old methods and structures of the church and in modernizing how they worship.

In an age when Bible literacy is at an all-time low—remember that 82 percent of Americans believe that “God helps those who help themselves” is a Bible verse—the church is faced with the challenges of a massive paradigm shift that all the statistics cited above point out.<sup>17</sup> But we cannot give up. The HARVEST is ripe. Laborers are needed. We must pray that God will send laborers into HIS harvest.

It is easy for us to look at the “facts” and be discouraged about the harvest. The paradigms of old seem to weigh against us. We must realize that our attitude of self-sufficiency is not going to help us FINISH the Great Commission. It IS HIS HARVEST, and His “strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NKJV). When we are weak, He is strong.



## Chapter 4

# Foundations — A History That Confirms Purpose

**I**t has been said that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. When it comes to a history that is bathed in Pentecostal blessings, repeating some of that history may not be such a bad idea. There are certainly episodes in our church history that we would like to forget, but overall, we have a heritage of seeking to FINISH the Great Commission—and we cannot give up now. The FINISH line is too close.

As we look back over the history of our church and this great denomination that we call the Church of God, there is no doubt that we can see God's purpose leading and directing our steps. Clearly, if purpose doesn't precede action, all you have is recreation. If purpose isn't built into invention, nothing is built except a meaningless testimony of wasted time. Thomas Edison purposed to illuminate our world, and created a light bulb. Alexander Graham Bell purposed to enhance communication, and created a telephone. Louis Pasteur purposed to prevent the spread of diseases, and created what became known as pasteurization.

As we purpose today to FINISH the Great Commission, we are compelled to look back and examine the purpose of our foundation as a church. Did a FINISH commitment exist in the hearts of our forefathers? Was it manifested from the beginning of a fledgling movement? Is purpose in our movement's DNA? If not, then the best we can hope for is a brief mention in the religious history books as a bright star that flamed out, cooled off, and fell from the skies of 21<sup>st</sup>-century evangelism. I have often said that we are not filled with the Holy Spirit for our enjoyment; we are Spirit-filled for our employment. Our expressed purpose is to manifest Christ's words: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on

you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NIV).

That’s it. Bottom line. Nothing more and nothing less. If our history doesn’t confirm the Lord’s calling upon us as a movement to go into ALL the world and spread the gospel, our future as a people and as a church is dismal and bleak. However, I am proud to proclaim that our history proves otherwise. We have a purpose! We have a future! We have a calling! And we have a destiny!

For a moment, consider with me the foundation of the “movement” we now call the Church of God. The first 35 years of the Church of God, now more than 131 years old, reveals pivotal events which set in motion our establishment as a worldwide leader in the Pentecostal Movement. While outsiders at the time might have viewed such as seemingly inconspicuous gatherings or innocuous events, the early believers who came “together as the Church of God” propelled our movement toward its ordained purpose.

Those early years also revealed a number of founding fathers—and mothers—who took on the burden of establishing a church amidst a background of persecution and hardship. The courageous men and women of the early Church of God live on in the annals of our history as pioneers of the faith, preparing the way for future generations to reap the harvest.

Several key occurrences that took place in the first quarter of our church’s history (1886–1920) served as foundational milestones and today anchor our purpose in ministry and outreach. Each event has had a lasting impact even through today, affirming our church as a vital component in FINISHing the Great Commission. To highlight a few of those early historical events that confirmed the purpose of our church, consider the following:

- 1886 – Barney Creek: Nine men and women joined together at a meeting house in upper east Tennessee, burdened to become a New Testament church.

*If our history doesn't confirm the Lord's calling upon us as a movement to go into ALL the world and spread the gospel, our future as a people and as a church is dismal and bleak.*

- 1896 – Shearer Schoolhouse: Believers who sought holiness during a ten-day revival not far from Barney Creek prepared the way for the first encounter with a move of the Holy Spirit.
- 1904 – Tomlinson in Cleveland: A.J. Tomlinson sought a location to evangelize beyond the mountains, ultimately establishing a foundation in Cleveland, Tennessee.
- 1906 – First General Assembly: Twenty-one delegates from five churches in three states recognized the need for evangelism and establishing of guidelines and doctrines for Kingdom work.
- 1908 – Cashwell in Cleveland: After reading of the great Azusa Street Revival, Tomlinson invited G.B. Cashwell to Cleveland, Tennessee where Tomlinson was filled with the Holy Spirit.
- 1909 – Barrs Sailed for Bahamas: Edmond and Rebecca Barr set sail for the Bahamas, becoming the first Church of God missionaries.
- 1910 – ***Evening Light and Church of God Evangel*** published: The first publication of the young movement came off the press, spawning generations of informative and inspiring published pieces.
- 1918 – Bible Training School: On January 1, 1918, the first class met in the upper room of the Evangel Publishing Co.
- 1920 – Home for Children: The Church of God orphanage was established in Cleveland, Tennessee.

But just to list these events in the timeline of the emergence of the Church of God does a disservice to the purpose of our “movement.” We must go deeper to understand that the hand of God has been on our efforts from the beginning to FINISH the Great Commission.

## **A Firm Foundation**

The birth of our movement in a grist mill at Barney Creek exemplifies the hunger the Church of God carries today to reach the lost through the FINISH Commitment. From that tiny stream that powered the grist mill at Barney Creek, came a mighty river which

today flows around the globe. On August 19, 1886, the Spurling, Plemons, and Loftis families responded to an invitation from Richard Green (R.G.) Spurling, a licensed Baptist minister struggling with the limitations of the Landmark Baptist Movement. Landmarkism taught that only certain Baptists were part of God's church. Burdened to be a New Testament church, Spurling gathered a group of like-minded believers at Barney Creek and preached a sermon, calling for the restoration of God's church. At the conclusion, he invited those gathered to sit "together as the church of God." Those nine courageous pioneers established a congregation that day, which they named "Christian Union," a church they could not have dreamed would one day flourish to reach into 183 nations and territories of the world. Spurling's sermon called for a return to the New Testament. Looking back to Barney Creek 131 years ago, God birthed a church to help accelerate and complete an end-time harvest.

## **Holy Ghost Encounters**

In the years following the establishment of the Christian Union, R.G. Spurling planted congregations in nearby Monroe and Polk counties in rural east Tennessee. The family eventually settled in Turtletown, four miles from the Camp Creek community in Cherokee County, North Carolina. Camp Creek became the setting for a momentous outpouring, further solidifying the foundation set in place at Barney Creek. The Camp Creek revival would become the young movement's first step in the sometimes treacherous journey toward a Spirit-filled effort at worldwide evangelism. The encounter was another stone in the pathway toward prophetic alignment.

During that 1896 ten-day revival, four evangelists shared the preaching duties at the Shearer Schoolhouse in Camp Creek. William Martin, Billy Hamby, Joe Tipton, and Milton McNabb proclaimed the necessity of holiness and challenged listeners to seek the experience of sanctification. Former General Overseer Charles W. Conn, author of *Like a Mighty Army*, said the four were "given to much prayer and fasting," preached earnestly, and throngs of people responded. "Almost from the start of the

meeting, the altars were filled with repentant sinners and seekers for the experience of sanctification. Many skeptics of holiness were convinced, and many more rough-living sinners were converted” (Conn, 24).

It was after the revival, in services led by Rev. W.F. Bryant, that those early congregants continued to seek God with passion until, as future General Overseer A.J. Tomlinson would write, “unexpectedly, like a cloud from a clear sky, the Holy Ghost began to fall on the honest, humble, sincere seekers after God. . . . One after another fell under the power of God, and soon, quite a number were speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Persecution, violence, and excommunications from local Baptist churches followed many of those who experienced the Holy Ghost outpouring. Confusion and miscommunication among the congregants threatened to crumble the foundations of Barney Creek, but the church would ultimately prevail. A dozen years later, A.J. Tomlinson, who was the de facto leader of the Church of God at the time, was burdened for this Holy Spirit phenomenon taking place in Los Angeles on a street named Azusa. Earnestly seeking for this infilling, Tomlinson invited one of the Azusa Street evangelists, G.B. Cashwell, to preach at what would be the third General Assembly in Cleveland, Tennessee. Cashwell’s dynamic message and Holy Spirit anointing swept through the Church of God, including Tomlinson, who was gloriously filled with the Holy Spirit, falling, nearly incapacitated, and speaking in other tongues. In the months to follow, Tomlinson would be named the first general overseer of the newly named Church of God movement, and he would lead the young church into becoming one of the first denominations proclaiming Holy Spirit baptism and Pentecostalism as one of its primary tenets.

### **Strengthening the Foundation**

Recognizing the urgency for organization and evangelism, 21 delegates gathered on January 26 - 27, 1906, in the home of J.C. and Melissa Murphy in Camp Creek, North Carolina, for the first General Assembly. The delegation included representatives of congregations from North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee.

A number of issues faced the young church, including forming a set of guidelines and practices that would govern the existing congregations and those who were to follow. While in 1906 finishing the Great Commission might not have been conceivable to the new Spirit-filled believers in the hills of Tennessee and North Carolina, the believers were challenged to advance the message of the Gospel beyond their own mountain communities. As was noted earlier, it was here where Tomlinson noted that “strong men wept,” signifying their heavy burden for evangelism. Jesus had commissioned His 12 disciples to make disciples as they were going into all the world. Why couldn’t this small band be commissioned with the same mandate? The Minutes of that first Assembly reveal that those “strong men” were not only willing to go, but anxious to go, “in consideration of the ripened fields and open doors for evangelism . . . to press into every open door . . . and work with greater zeal and energy for the spread of the glorious gospel of the Son of God than ever before.”

In subsequent General Assemblies from those early years, church leaders would seek Spirit-led instruction in establishing guidelines for training ministers, overseers, missionaries, and department leaders to equip them for Kingdom service in church planting and evangelistic endeavors. Today, the roots of those early decisions have firmly established an army in the Church of God of nearly 43,500 credentialed ministers and 38,200 churches around the globe (statistics from May 2017).

## **Global Foundations**

The ripened fields and open doors referred to in that first General Assembly would become manifested for the Church of God with the launching of the first missionaries to the Bahama Islands. Native Bahamian Edmond Barr, working with R.M. Evans, planned for that first evangelistic excursion off U.S. soil to take place in Barr’s home country. Leaving in November 1909, Edmond and his wife, Rebecca, arrived in the Bahamas. Rebecca Barr, a U.S. citizen, not only became the first Church of God missionary, but also the first woman and first African American of our movement to take the gospel to a foreign land.

Since the Barrs landed in the Bahamas, Church of God World Missions has continued to send Spirit-filled missionaries around the world, now having some 580 missionaries carrying the gospel into more than 183 nations. With nearly 7.4 million members in those nations and over 38,000 churches, the dispersion of the Spirit-filled message gets us closer to the FINISH Commitment mandate (statistics from May 2017).

### **Educational Solid Ground**

Based upon the setting and sparse availability of schools in the mountain regions at the time, it is safe to assume that most of the early pioneer church leaders did not have access to varied educational offerings. Even so, delegates at the 1911 General Assembly were eager to explore ways of broadening educational opportunities and would begin a dialogue that would lead to the launch of Bible Training School (BTS) on January 1, 1918. Of course, BTS would later become what is now Lee University.

Our founders prioritized education and recognized its vitality toward training future generations to FINISH the Great Commission. From these humble, yet bold beginnings a century ago, the Church of God has sent thousands to engage in global ministry. Our movement now operates 116 Bible schools and colleges around the world with close to 40,000 students. The “flagship” of the church’s theological training institutions is the Pentecostal Theological Seminary, located in Cleveland, Tennessee. In addition, there are thousands more enrolled in certificate courses, such as Calling And Ministry Studies (CAMS) and the Ministerial Internship Program (MIP). CAMS and MIP have become the cornerstones of ministry preparation. The majority of our ministers with the Church of God go through the MIP, laying a firm foundation and confirming their ministry calling before moving to the credentialing process. To date, nearly 17,000 ministers have completed MIP, along with 6,000 who have tested their calling through the CAMS program.

### **Caring for More Than a Century**

The founding pioneers recognized we cannot proclaim success with the FINISH Commitment without fulfilling the fundamen-

tal call of James 1:27 to “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (NIV). Historian Charles W. Conn stated in *Like a Mighty Army* that after several short-lived orphanage programs, the General Assembly of 1919 took “determined action toward beginning an orphanage and children’s home . . . at that meeting the Spirit of God moved upon the people in a wonderful way . . . a spirit of weeping swept the congregation . . . (and) delegates arose to give or pledge various sums toward the immediate care of homeless children.” On December 17, 1920, a home opened and “the care of orphans and needy children would become a permanent facet of the Church of God and its mission upon the earth.” Today, we see that early foundation expanded to 88 orphanages or children’s homes operating around the globe and other forms of contemporary benevolence through entities associated with the Church, such as Operation Compassion, Ministry to Israel, People for Care and Learning, and God’s Pit Crew.

Without doubt, the early pivotal events of Church of God history were Spirit-led to establish foundations and advance our movement toward its God-given and God-called purpose. The evolution of those events has confirmed that the anointing present at the time was sincere and genuine, as all have stood the test of time for more than a century.

It has been said that the secret of one’s future is hidden in their daily routine and in their past. Personally, I’ve found that to be so. However, I can also see that it is true when I look over the history of the Church of God. Our early days of existence and common routine reveal that every undertaking had Great Commission purpose. Nothing just “filled” the calendar or merely occupied space.

Purpose was the prerequisite for launching dreams and actualizing vision. Great Commission purpose was the qualifying reason for every church plant, school launch, and mission endeavor in the early days of the Church of God—and such remains true today. I like to say the Church of God had a “Soul Purpose” for existing.

We still do.



## Chapter 5

# Future — A Hope That Conveys Our Priorities

**H**ope! A simple word but a word that literally controls our destiny. Without hope, lives are lost. Without hope, nations crumble. Without hope, futures are destroyed. Hope is essential.

As we look to FINISH the Great Commission and focus the Church of God on that great task, the idea quickly fades away without hope that such truly can be accomplished. But as we come together in agreement, our hope truly begins to convey our priorities.

You can find Jeremiah 29:11 printed on just about anything—from coffee mugs and T-shirts to bracelets and photo frames. Countless Bibles given to graduates have had this scripture written on the first page: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (NKJV).

It’s a beautiful sentiment, but we need to stop and remember that this promise of “a future and a hope” was not made to a person, but to a nation. Also, the message of hope was not given at a time of celebration, but in a dark time. It was communicated by the prophet Jeremiah “to all who were carried away captive . . . from Jerusalem to Babylon” (v. 4 NKJV), where they would remain in bondage for seventy years (v. 10). Preaching about hope to a group of folks who are held in slavery for seventy years is a difficult task, to say the least.

The Israelites had brought this crisis upon themselves by forsaking the greatest commandment—“Love the Lord thy God with all

thine heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:5 KJV)—and the other statutes and laws that derived from it. However, the Lord promised His people that when they finally returned to Him with all their heart, they would find Him, and He would bring them back from captivity (Jeremiah 29:13-14). Tragically, this would take seven decades because they lost hope.

Today, the American church finds itself in a society that is becoming more and more Babylon-like. According to the Barna Group, “More than four in 10 (44 percent) of the nation’s adult population qualifies as post-Christian” (*Barna Trends 2017*). I could make a list of our society’s slide towards secularism and hopelessness. However, the question is, does the church have a future and a hope? And more specifically, are the priorities of our movement, the Church of God, such that we have a future and a hope?

Our hope is found in our obedience to Deuteronomy 11:22. We must “love the Lord . . . walk in all His ways, and . . . hold fast to Him” (NKJV). This is true for the entire body of Christ; but here, we are focusing on our movement. I believe the Church of God has a divinely ordained present and future role to play in the kingdom of God, but we must love God, walk in His ways, and hold fast to Him if we are to achieve it.

## **Our Core Values**

At the 1948 General Assembly, the Church of God developed and adopted our Declaration of Faith, which has never been altered. It is imperative that we continuously remind ourselves of those core values—our priorities—as we seek to FINISH the Great Commission. Not only are they Biblically imperative, the core values found in the Declaration of Faith give us hope.

*The Bible.* Our first and foundational declaration is “we believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible.”

According to a Pew Research article published in April 2017, only 39 percent of Americans who call themselves Christians say the Bible’s text is the Word of God and should be taken literally, while 36 percent say it should not be interpreted literally. A separate 18 percent of Christians view the Bible as a book written by

men, not God. If the Church of God is to have a future and a hope, we must hold fast to our belief that the Bible is what it says it is: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16 NKJV). The Bible is the foundation of the Church, and Jesus Christ is both the “chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20) and the builder of the Church (Matthew 16:18).

*The Church of God has a divinely ordained present and future role to play in the kingdom of God, but we must love God, walk in His ways, and hold fast to Him if we are to achieve it.*

The remaining thirteen statements in our Declaration of Faith are products of our commitment to the verbal inspiration of the Bible.

*The Trinity.* The second and third declarations concern God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, about which there is much misunderstanding even among Evangelical Christians. In a 2014 LifeWay Research survey, “nearly a quarter of respondents (22 percent) said God the Father is more divine than Jesus, and 9 percent were not sure. Further, 16 percent said Jesus was the first creature created by God, while 11 percent were unsure. . . .

“More than half (51 percent) said the Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being. Seven percent weren’t sure, while only 42 percent affirmed that the Spirit is a person. And 9 percent said the Holy Spirit is less divine than God the Father and Jesus.”

Twisted ideas about God helped to send ancient Israel into captivity; and, unless we intentionally indoctrinate our members regarding God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, ignorance will undermine who we are.

*Sin and Holiness.* Our next four beliefs concern sin, repentance, the new birth, sanctification, and holy living. In a society where most people believe failing to recycle is more immoral than viewing pornography (Barna Group, 2016), and where tolerance of divergent lifestyles is viewed as a supreme virtue, those four

statements of faith seem archaic. However, now more than ever, genuine holy living, which begins with a sanctified heart and is exhibited by our well-chosen words, loving deeds, and godly choices, will stand out. John Tyson, pastor of Trinity Grace Church in New York City, wrote:

*In the 1950s, we lived in a culture of belief, and people were tempted to doubt; but in a secular culture [like we have today], it's a culture of doubt, and people are tempted to believe, Charles Taylor said. So, when people see the church as a compelling counterculture, they're tempted to move out of secularism and embrace something that's true, and beautiful, and hopeful, and resonates with the things that they're wrestling with. We can't give up on the Church because Jesus won't give up on the Church (Barna Trends 2017).*

**Baptism in the Spirit.** Statements 8 and 9 of our Declaration of Faith regard Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues. The Church of God was founded upon the belief in a Spirit-filled existence and we must hold tightly to these beliefs, even while our churches sound and look differently from place to place. We have laid-back pastors who dress casually and speak softly; energetic pastors who sweat profusely and preach loudly; and many others who fall somewhere in-between. No matter the style, unless we have Spirit-filled pastors who teach and preach about the baptism in the Spirit, encourage members to receive this baptism, and allow spiritual gifts to flow, the Church of God will not have a hope and a future. We must live by our Statement of Mission, adopted by the 2006 General Assembly: "The mission of the Church of God is to communicate the full gospel of Jesus Christ in the Spirit and power of Pentecost." This is why we exist, and why the world needs us. A priority with a hope!

**Church ordinances.** Water baptism, the Lord's Supper, and washing of the saints' feet (statements 10 and 12) identify us as Christians, create deep fellowship among us, and bring us into a closer relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Divine healing.** Our broken world needs to know there is One who can heal them spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. We must continue to practice James 5:14-15, anointing and praying for the hurting people in our churches and communities.

If we will lift up the hope for healing found in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, it will help propel us to a hope-filled future.

*Future events.* Our last two faith statements point to the future described in God's Word: the Second Coming, the Resurrection, the Millennial Kingdom, eternal life for the righteous, and eternal punishment for unbelievers. If our church is to have a future and a hope, we must continually remind ourselves that life on earth is temporary. We do this by singing, preaching, and teaching about the Second Coming and eternal life in heaven. We must always declare our belief in "the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13 NKJV) through everything we say and do.

*The mission of the Church of God is to communicate the full gospel of Jesus Christ in the Spirit and power of Pentecost. This is why we exist, and why the world needs us.*

### The FINISH Commitment

It matters that the Church of God has a hope and a future because *we have a role to play in finishing the Great Commission*. Therefore, we have adopted the FINISH Commitment not as a short-term emphasis, but instead as an ongoing focus. This commitment flows out of our core values—out of who God has always called us to be, and who we must continue to be.

We must **Find** the lost, **Intercede** on their behalf, **Network** with other believers, **Invest** our resources, **Send** laborers into "the field," and reap a world **Harvest**.

**Find.** The primary reason God baptizes believers in the Holy Spirit is not so we will experience the joy of speaking in tongues, but so we will "receive power" to be Christ's "witnesses . . . even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NASB). Just as the point of a football team's huddle is to strategize for their next play, so believers gather in "holy huddles" on Sundays and at other times throughout the week in preparation to be Christ's witnesses

everywhere they go. We must find lost people!

Thankfully, numerous Unreached People Groups (UPGs) are being evangelized around the world, particularly in Asia and South America, through Spirit-empowered Church of God witnesses. During a recent 12-month period, a national leader in southern India established relationships with 65 missionaries who are touching 23 UPGs in his area, according to Ken Anderson, coordinator of UPGs for the Church of God. For example, in Nepal one small orphanage has a representation of eight unreached peoples. These children are being raised in a dynamic ministry setting and hopefully will become effective missionaries in touching their own people groups. Meanwhile, in small towns and cities across the United States and the rest of the world, countless individuals and families who once were lost have been found through anointed Church of God evangelists and outreach workers.

**Intercede.** Statement 3 in our Declaration of Faith says we believe Jesus “ascended to heaven and is today at the right hand of the Father as the Intercessor.” While Jesus is interceding to the Father in heaven for us as believers, we are to be engaged in “intercession . . . for all people” (1 Timothy 2:1 NIV). When we do not know how to pray, the indwelling “Spirit Himself makes intercession for us” (Romans 8:26 NKJV).

Through the years, God has raised up multiplied thousands of prayer warriors in Church of God congregations everywhere who have helped advance the kingdom of God through their intercession. For instance, for the past seven years, a church in Georgia has been holding Tuesday-morning prayer meetings. The pastor notes that they have seen numerous people saved, delivered, and healed - and many prodigals come home. They have even had addicts walk away from their addictions.

On the international level, Church of God Prayer Ministries is inspiring and equipping individuals and churches to unite in prayer for a last-days revival. Every week, hundreds join Saturday Night Fire in a “phone-in” prayer meeting.

**Network.** At the beginning of the 20th century, the modern Pentecostal Movement sprouted in diverse places: Azusa Street in

Los Angeles, California; the flatlands of Topeka, Kansas; and the mountains of western North Carolina. Now more than ever, the various denominations that were birthed through these outpourings must network to fulfill the Great Commission.

However, effective networking does not begin with our cooperating with other denominations. Instead, it must begin within the Church of God. Our churches must work together to help complete one another, rather than compete, so together we can grow the kingdom of Christ. Male ministers should minister in partnership with female ministers; established churches should help church plants; and churches serving various ethnic groups must serve together to build the Kingdom.

Within congregations, networking happens when senior members mentor young adults . . . teens and children engage in church-wide ministries . . . and laity and clergy work together. Nothing will draw us together like the fellowship which occurs when eating the Lord's Supper as one body, observing footwashing, praying together, and then reaching out together in ministry. The simple principle is that we can accomplish a lot more together than we can separately. Networking is vital.

***As a part of the FINISH Commitment, the Church of God has committed to invest in planting 1,000 churches in the United States and 10,000 globally, all by 2020.***

**Invest.** Our church's belief in "sanctification . . . through faith in the blood of Christ; through the Word, and by the Holy Spirit" is about being set apart for God's holy purpose. Christ fully invested Himself through His incomparable sacrifice, and we are to respond by fully investing ourselves in Kingdom life and ministry.

As a part of the FINISH Commitment, the Church of God has committed to invest in planting 1,000 churches in the United States and 10,000 globally, all by 2020. In addition, World Missions has a goal of building ministry centers to train church planters in eleven

strategic cities across the globe. For all this to happen, Church of God congregations must invest in this end-time vision.

**Send.** When the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries, leaders of the church at Antioch “fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, [and] sent them away” (Acts 13:3 KJV). God is still raising up pastors and missionaries who teach and preach the “full gospel” of salvation, sanctification, Spirit baptism, divine healing, and the Second Coming. In more and more places around the globe, preaching this message is dangerous. Some people will lose their freedom and even their lives because of their ministry. But we must not lose heart.

In his blog for *Christianity Today*, Karl Vaters recently wrote: “The church always thrives in persecution, the church is always best when we are counter-cultural. The church has survived bigger problems than this; whatever your ‘this’ may be.” Remember that our hope is not in this world - but in the world to come.

**Harvest.** For the Church of God to fulfill its destiny in God’s great in-gathering of souls, we must recognize and support the ministry of God-called evangelism. Churches and evangelists must work together to win people to the Lord and bring about spiritual renewal.

Another critical part of the end-time harvest is to continually raise up the next generation of leaders. Recently, we launched a new initiative called the Jeremiah Project, which is posed to equip, empower and highlight the next generation of Church of God leaders. God told Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5 NKJV).

The question isn’t “am I called to missions?” The questions are “where does God want me in His plan to reach the world? What does He want me to do and where?” Without doubt, I think everyone is called to the Harvest field. The question is just what role are we are supposed to play.



## Faith for the Future

The Scripture talks about a great revival in the last days. God promises to “pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17 NKJV). I see the Church of God playing a great role in that outpouring. For the Church of God to be in 183 nations of the world and represented in the United States by 6,500 congregations with 1.3 million members, we are poised for a nationwide and global revival.

I am confident that this is the day of overflow in the Kingdom—and in the church. God is surely accelerating His work among His people. This accelerated work is in keeping with this advancing age, and it is by no accident that we are part of the generation permitted to be alive now. We were chosen to be the transitional generation to bring the church from one time of success into what we believe to be the final era of the church. The church of today was conceived at a timely moment and called to deliver a transforming message. It is a message of—

***Accelerated Harvest***—The prophet Amos foretold a time when the reapers would be overtaken by those ready to plow and sow the fields again. This powerful word from the Lord completely describes the current in-gathering that is occurring around the world today. An unprecedented wave of mission and evangelism is spanning the globe. Just as one generation completes its labor, a new and younger generation with greater energy, resolve, and boldness is on the heels of the previous one with another reaping already underway.

***Accelerated Opportunity***—This is a remarkable season of opportunity unlike any the church has ever known. The complexities of national and world events combined with the unusual spiritual climate rarely seen in our lifetime all lend themselves to unprecedented open doors for Christ to be proclaimed. An increased wave of immigration has brought the world to the doorsteps of America, and now the United States is literally a “nation of nations.” This creates exponential Kingdom possibilities. Many new immigrant believers become effective missionary evangelists to their own people living in the United States, as well as in their homeland.

Christian youth are stepping forth with amazing boldness and energy. Their attitude does not speak of self-preservation, but of self-sacrifice. The revival among this Jeremiah Generation is God's response to their intense desire, hunger, and passion.

***Accelerated Restoration***—We have entered a day of divine recovery and restoration. Just as God promised Israel through the prophet Joel, He will restore all that has been devoured by the Enemy. The promise to Israel was a complete restoration of the years that had been taken away. God's promise is a restoration of lost time—not merely days and months, but even the years of lost health and peace stolen by our adversary.

***Accelerated Power***—God has promised unusual power for unusual tasks. A link between task and anointing is obvious. Throughout Scripture, a compelling case is made to support the fact that God provides power commensurate with the task. The Holy Spirit has enabled the church for these times. Why then should we shrink from the call and challenge to take a life-changing gospel to the entire world and FINISH the Great Commission?

A river of abundant blessing awaits the Church of God. The world will only be changed when the church has been immersed in the revival river.

Will we find the river of revival and FINISH the Great Commission?

We must!

We will!

## Chapter 6

# Finishing a Corrected Course

I stand on the shoulders of those who have preceded me in the Office of the General Overseer. From my youth, I can remember the strong themes and the emphases most of them brought to the church. The intentional ministry focus that each of them brought to the attention of the church were prophetically aligned for God-ordained seasons.

In this new millennium alone, the Church of God has been and continues to be inspired by these incredibly impactful themes:

- “Go” and “One” emphasized by Dr. Mark L. Williams
- “Engaging the Missional Mandate” and “Forward Together in Changing Times” emphasized by Dr. Raymond F. Culpepper
- “Reaping the Harvest in the Spirit and Power of Pentecost” by Dr. G. Dennis McGuire
- “Charting the Course” and “Staying the Course” by Dr. R. Lamar Vest.

In considering the “FINISH Commitment—A Global Church Focus on Completing the Great Commission,” I find it compelling that these preceding themes remarkably served as intentional pathways of access to the opportunities and goals now before us. With that said, however, I must now highlight a thought that captures my spirit as I write these closing words.

In considering Dr. Vest’s groundbreaking emphasis on mission and vision which were encapsulated in his books, *Charting the Course* and *Staying the Course*, I’m stirred with the question, “Is it now time for a “course correction?”

I've been on airplanes when the pilot had to do it. I've sailed on ships when the captain thought it necessary. I've ridden on trains when the engineer had to decide to switch tracks. More than once, I've exited off the interstate to refuel my car then returned to the road to eventually discover that I was traveling back to the place from where I had just come. In my preoccupied state of mind, I failed to realize I was going in the opposite direction. Soon, I was looking for another exit ramp in order to correct my course.

Navigating a course correction is necessary at times. Forward movement isn't helpful if what is needed is a change of direction.

Sometimes, we just find ourselves going the wrong way and, at first, it's not even detectable or noticed. It comes in the form of a casual drift that over time can take you out into the swift currents and dangerous depths of treacherous waters. While we never intentionally or determinedly go in wrong directions as a church, we can become victims of "drift."

For most of this millennium, the Church of God has been in a mode of structural and financial realignment. We've learned how to do more with less and attempted to "upgrade" and "downsize" at the same time. While we were at it, society continued to reel and rock with the tremors of moral disintegration and cultural devolution. Emerging generations finally emerged and once Z was taken, the alphabet ran out of letters to identify the next generation after them that's yet to come. Now, we as the Church of God must ask ourselves, "Can our kind of church reach and minister to this kind of world?"

Among all that the FINISH Commitment is about, with its established priorities and goals, it is also about us being certain that we are on course as a movement. We must not allow ourselves to drift into meaningless irrelevancy, but we must affix our gaze upon the shorelines of Great Commission accomplishments.

Pastors must become engaged in prayer and personal soulwinning in a greater way than ever before. State leaders must again become drenched with apostolic anointing and become agents of revival rather than directors of ecclesiastical traffic. Laity must be

valued again as our greatest resource, and the harvest must be our most precious time and financial investment. Church planting and revitalization must be a priority. Now!

***Navigating a course correction is necessary at times. Forward movement isn't helpful if what is needed is a change of direction.***

We need a Spirit-led revival emphasis in every church and in every Church of God entity and institution around the world until heart integrity is renewed, mission is embraced, and spiritual compromise is eliminated.

Spiritual lethargy must become our enemy and we must refuse denominational mediocrity. Everything that we do must count and make a difference for the sake of the Kingdom. There is no time for “wasted time.” Every sermon preached must have a Great Commission purpose, and every meeting, conference and seminar conducted must do more than affirm our egos and seek to alleviate our guilt for not effectively reaping the harvest. We must forsake our excuses for missing the mark in soul-winning and seize the opportunity to touch the world with the Gospel.

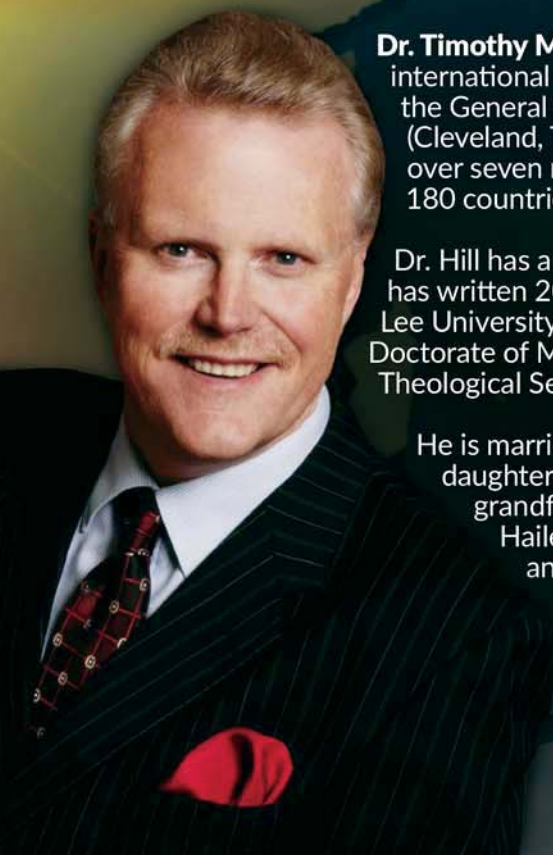
I am determined to do my part to help FINISH the Great Commission in the Spirit and Power of Pentecost. May we all do so to the glory of God for the sake of souls around the world!

## Endnotes

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# CHURCH OF GOD FINISH COMMITMENT



**Dr. Timothy M. Hill** has served in national and international Christian leadership for many years. As the General Overseer of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), he serves as Presiding Bishop for over seven million members of the church in over 180 countries around the world.

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