

WHAT IS YOUR MAIN BUSINESS?

George G. Hunter III

Abstract

In chapter one of his forthcoming book, *Christianity's Main Business*, George Hunter recalls the question that Peter Drucker advised leaders of all types of organizations (including churches) to ask, repeatedly, “What is our main business?”

Hunter distinguishes between what church leaders typically say (and believe) is their main business, and their actual main business as revealed by their data—from budgets, to time expenditure, to interview data. He then unpacks the “top ten” themes he found driving most local churches.

Hunter contends that Christianity’s mission to the world was supposed to be Christianity’s main business, and, drawing from N. T. Wright, this is dramatized in the meta-narrative common to all four of the canonical Gospels.

In the 1980s, a mega-church in California raised a million dollars, apparently to invest the money. The famous pastor decided to call the White House to speak to the distinguished economist Milton Friedman, who served on President Reagan’s Council of Economic Advisers. When the pastor asked to speak to “Mr. Friedman,” the White House switchboard connected the call to a speechwriter named Friedman. Urban legend reports something like the following conversation.

The pastor asked, “Mr. Friedman, how can our church strategically invest a million dollars?” The speechwriter replied, “Why don’t you invest it in ministries for struggling people?” After a long silence, the pastor asked, “Sir,

am I speaking to the real Milton Friedman?” The speechwriter replied, “Sir, are you calling from a real church?”

It may be time to ask that question of almost every church in the land. It may be time for church leaders across the land to ask that question of their churches. Peter Drucker, the guru of the twentieth century revolution in management theory, used to say that there are two questions that the leaders of all organizations, especially organizations in the non-profit sector (including churches), need to ask, repeatedly. First, “What is our main business?” Second, “How is business?”

I discovered Drucker’s first question many years ago. I suppose I have asked, “What is your church’s main business?” to the leaders of every church that I have researched, consulted with, or led training for ever since. The question is enormously useful in studying churches. The leaders always have one or more articulate answers to the question. (Of course, when the leaders give a range of different answers, they discover that they might not be on the same page!)

I may test their answer to see the extent to which they practice what they preach. I study their budget, how they invest time, how they deploy their staff, and especially how they deploy lay volunteer time in service and ministry. For more subjective indicators, I ask leaders, “How can you tell which members are serious, and who is suspect?” There is often a discrepancy, or a chasm, between what leaders say (and believe) is their main business and their actual main business—as revealed by their data.

So, adapting Drucker, I focus enquiries around the following three questions: 1. What do the leaders and people say (and believe) is their main business? 2. What does the data say is their actual main business? 3. How is business? Typically, of course, the church is more effective in relation to the second answer than the first, since outcomes typically follow investment, time, energy, and activity. In this book, however, I am largely ignoring the third question in favor of the first and the second. The focus is upon a congregation’s main business in profession AND performance.

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My explorations around the first two questions have revealed a wide range of ways in which church leaders understand, or more usually assume, to be their church’s main business.¹ Let’s summarize the “top ten.”

1. For centuries, the main business of a great many churches has been ministry to the members and their children. Decades ago, this focused on the pastoral care and nurture of the members. In recent years, the

¹ I have published a similar, and more comprehensive, analysis of congregations (with more theological reflection) in *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), chapter two.

paradigm extended to the protection of church members from the sins and secularity in the surrounding community. Sometimes, the paradigm now includes the spiritual formation of the church's members.

2. Many churches want people to “believe like us.” The church is cognitively rooted in a constellation of truth claims. Preaching, teaching, and study are devoted to grounding and deepening the people in the tradition's ideological worldview. Depending on the church, that worldview can be conservative, liberal, or some other perspective that defies easy classification—such as the Quaker worldview.
3. Many churches want people to “behave like us.” These churches have a clear moral code—prescriptions and prohibitions—to which earnest people conform. The Sunday school, the children's sermon, the vacation Bible school, and other ministries have a moral focus for the scripting of children and other members.
4. Many churches, from Holiness, to Pentecostal, to “high church” traditions, want people to have “experiences like ours.” Christianity's essence is experiential; the experience can range, by tradition, from an emotional conversion, to a healing experience, to speaking in tongues, to a “sublime” experience of Bach's “Mass in B Minor.”
5. Some churches want people to “become like us” culturally. Christianity is assumed to be indispensably connected to some cultural forms and could not be communicated through other forms. Therefore, the church wants people to speak within the tradition's ecclesial vocabulary (or the church's more recently acquired politically correct vocabulary), to dress like the church's core members, and to share the church's values and aesthetic tastes—from food, to sports, to the arts, and to “our kind of music.”
6. Some churches expect their people to “share our politics.” For more than a century, this agenda has expected members to be (say) Democrats or Republicans, and/or to work for causes that are achieved, at least in part, politically—from abolition or temperance historically, to abortion or several gender-related causes more recently.
7. Some churches are driven to prepare as many people as possible for heaven. Christianity is mainly about going to heaven when we die. Between now and then, members attend church, have a daily devotional, and live a clean life. Much of gospel music, country music, and American folk religion regard the Christian religion as little more than a fire escape; many churches preach it.
8. Some denominations (and some of their churches) have long focused on perpetuating their denomination's traditions in such areas as creeds, liturgy, music, or polity. If the denominational tradition once crossed the Atlantic, the churches are expected to “do church” much like it was once done (say) in Germany.

9. For some denominations today, the priority agenda is the local church's support for the wider institutional church. This state of affairs represents an interesting devolution in the following three steps: 1. The tradition started out as a contagious movement—reaching pre-Christian people, planting churches, and extending a Christian presence to many new places and populations. 2. In time, the movement needed an organization to support the movement; the new organization provided a hymnal, literature, and training for pastors, and resourced the churches in other ways. 3. Eventually, the organization became an institution; in time, it was now all about the institution, and the churches became subservient to the institution.
10. In recent years, many churches and whole denominations have focused on church “health” (or “renewal,” “vitality,” or “vibrancy”). In this book, I have devoted a chapter to this trend (or obsession), with a focus on the Natural Church Development movement from Germany that has sold (by their count) over 70,000 churches in six continents on this understanding of their main business. That is undoubtedly an undercount; many denominations have bought NCD's paradigm and developed their own criteria and programs in the quest for “church health.”

I have studied many churches whose leaders navigate their church's life in reference to two, three, or four of these ten themes (or by some other theme). The researcher must often “dig” to discover the themes that drive a church, because they are usually assumed but seldom spoken. Of course, churches (like people) may live and act from assumptions that are not valid.

Woody Allen, decades ago, started his career in stand-up comedy. One story featured the following (alleged) experience in his life. One day, Woody felt some pain “in the chestly area.” He assumed that it was heartburn, though the symptom was higher than usual. His first impulse was to go see his doctor, but he guessed that he would pay twenty-five dollars for the news that he had heartburn.

Woody went to visit his friend, whose last name was Benedict and whose nickname was “Eggs.” Eggs Benedict complained of an identical discomfort in his “chestly area.” Woody persuaded Eggs to go see his doctor; Eggs paid twenty-five dollars to be told that he had heartburn. Woody was silently pleased.

Two days later, Woody heard that Eggs had died. Woody panicked, stamped to the local hospital, and requested all available tests to diagnose the pain in his chestly area. Three days, many tests, and hundreds of dollars later, he learned that he had heartburn.

When Woody left the hospital, he drove over to see Eggs' mother, to express condolences. He asked, “Did Eggs suffer long?” Mrs. Benedict

replied, “No. Car hit him. That was it!” Woody discovered he had acted on an invalid assumption.

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Okay, it is time for a “spoiler alert.” The thesis of this book is that a church’s mission, locally and globally, is its main business, or it should be. The “real church” is an “ecclesia”—the “called out” people of God whom the Lord shapes into an “apostolate”—the “sent out” people of God. The rationale for this assertion, and what that means, will conclude this chapter. That preview will help the following comments to make sense.

Analogous to Woody Allen’s experience, an assumption that a church acts on, and even lives by, might indeed simply be wrong; more often, the assumption is simply insignificant compared to the church’s main assignment from its Lord. Indeed, a church might be living by a dozen assumptions, with half of them either wrong, or what the old hymn called, “lesser things” or “majoring on the minors.” Often, a church lives by several driving values that are worthy, like the ten suggested above, but it is wrong in assuming that any or all of those constitute the church’s main business. (Of course, churches have no monopoly on pathological drift. Some universities, for instance, now seem to be more about football, social life, indoctrination, or preparing students for jobs, than the advancement of learning.)

On the other hand, a church may once have been very clear about its mission, but now, years later, it is caught in what another major management theorist, George Odiorne, once called “the activity trap.” Odiorne² brilliantly characterized the entire life history of many types of organizations (including churches). I became aware of his insights in the years that I first perceived that although most churches are beehives of programs and activities, they do not achieve very much, and their people lack the kind of fulfillment that comes only from involvement with something really important. Odiorne’s perspective was anticipated by advice widely attributed to Ernest Hemingway, “Never mistake motion for action.”

In an earlier book,³ I summarized Odiorne’s insights as follows. An organization

... typically begins with a clear mission and goals, and they devise programs and activities to achieve the goals and fulfill the mission. But over time, the ends are forgotten and the programs and activities become ends in themselves. The people now focus on “the way

² See George S. Odiorne, *Management and the Activity Trap* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

³ George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 186.

we've always done things around here." The programs and activities become impotent and less meaningful, and the organization bogs down in "the activity trap."

I once heard a joke that characterized churches, even whole denominations, that spin their wheels in some version of the activity trap.

A rich Arabian oil sheik had three sons. He loved his sons, but he had not often expressed that love. One day, he convened his sons, told them how much he loved them, and offered to dramatize his love for them in a way they would never forget. "Each of you, tell me your most heartfelt wish; I will grant, or exceed, your wish."

The oldest son quickly tested the waters. "Dad, we are oil people. I want my own oil city. Give me Houston, Texas." The father replied, "I will give you the whole state of Texas."

The middle son saw which way things were trending. "Dad, I want my own space ship." The father replied, "I will give you all of NASA."

The youngest son had not quite caught on. "Dad, it may not sound like much, but ever since I was a little boy, I have always wanted my own Mickey Mouse outfit." The father replied, "I will give you the United Methodist Church!"

Now, that punch line, while useful as comedic hyperbole, is an overstatement. I have spent time in enough churches to find much to love and affirm in each one. If some of the people in a church find friendship, a moral compass, or glue for their marriage, if they become rooted in prayer or some Scripture, or if they become more compassionate, or any of many other good experiences, there is enough worth in that church that the world would be better off if there were more of them. Furthermore, if a whole denomination is doing some good, we have some reason to celebrate. However, a church or a denomination can be stuck underachieving in the activity trap, with its members wondering if this is all there is, and its occasional visitors wondering if there is more to it than this.

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To my knowledge, there are only two ways for a church to become liberated from the activity trap and become "real churches."

First, some churches can recover and return to their original mission and to the original vision, objectives, and story that once drove the church and its people to a season of significant local achievement. Sometimes, however, the original vision was not too clear and compelling, which may be one reason it is now eclipsed. More often, perhaps, returning to "the good old days" is no longer a live option. The community and the culture have changed, and people's language, felt needs, tastes in music, attention spans, and many other things have changed. They have changed to the point that, in a line

attributed to Bonhoeffer, “The rusty swords of the old world are powerless to combat the evils of today and tomorrow.”

The second, and best, way forward for most stagnant churches is to reconstitute their understanding of their main business and become “apostolic” (or “missional”) congregations. This essentially involves the following two steps: a) It involves reaching a fresh understanding of the community context and the distinct populations that the church is in a position to reach, serve, and disciple. b) It involves a fresh, serious rediscovery of the nature of the mission to which the church is called and sent, with a strategic plan to achieve the mission. Indeed, it is arguable that we can eliminate the prefix “re” in “rediscovery.” One significant theologian, at least, argues that the churches have failed to fully understand their essential mission for at least several centuries or longer. I am referring to N. T. Wright and especially his book, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*.⁴

Wright develops an astonishingly bold thesis. For centuries, the churches have substantially ignored the driving narrative and the pervasive meaning of all four Gospels. In this period, the church’s theologians have been preoccupied with the theology of Paul, the creeds, or, more recently, new theologies. Indeed, Wright contends that this long-standing problem is even present in the creeds—which feature virtually nothing about Jesus between his birth and his crucifixion, as though the only chapters in Matthew’s gospel that matter are 1, 2, 27, and 28.

My first response was to resist Wright’s challenge. After all, we all preach and teach from texts and stories from the four Gospels much of the time. We often also feature the Great Commandment and the Great Commission—from the Gospels.

True enough, so how does N. T. Wright respond to these obvious facts? He says that we have, indeed, featured many specific texts and stories from the Gospels, while largely ignoring the big story that all four gospel writers were eager to tell. Wright proposes that we should sometimes read the Gospels rather like we read a Jane Austin novel or a Shakespeare play—not asking what a particular sentence or incident means so much as asking what overall story the author was telling.

Furthermore, the churches have, indeed, often featured (what the tradition calls) the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Wright suggests, however, that the meanings of such passages are not sufficiently discovered by (say) looking up what “agape” or “ethne” meant in first century Koine Greek. Their meaning, as in other literature, is best understood in the context of the whole story. Wright explains that after all, “the meaning

⁴ N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, Kindle Edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2012).

of a word is its use in a sentence; the meaning of a sentence is its use in a paragraph; and the meaning of a paragraph is its use in the larger document to which it contributes.”⁵

This grand rediscovery involves asking questions that were not being disputed when the creeds were written, like “Why, and how, did Jesus live?” “What did he do?” “What did he teach?” “What mandates did he give his followers?” It also involves discovering “the whole message, which is so much greater than the sum of the small parts with which we are . . . so familiar.”⁶ (Wright does NOT propose that we recover the Gospels and jettison the creeds; he wants to restore the Gospels within our normative paradigm.)

I will not presume to summarize the elaborate cases that N. T. Wright makes for his thesis from each of the four Gospels. No one should even attempt a “readers’ digest” of Wright’s important book. People who are interested and open need to read the book for themselves; two careful readings should be sufficient.

Space does not permit a serious retelling of the big story that all four Gospels tell and the mission into which they call the churches in all times and places. I can, perhaps, show one man’s view of the tip of the iceberg.

In the Incarnation, humanity’s rightful “Lord” (or “King”) became one of us as Mary’s son. In what he taught, and in such ministries as the forgiveness of sins, the healing of diseases, the casting out of evil powers, and good news to the poor, and in ministries to lame, blind, deaf, zealots, harlots, lepers, tax collectors, and other marginal populations who were all excluded from the temple, the long-promised “kingdom” (or “reign”) of Israel’s High God was now breaking into history and human experience.

Through his disciples, Jesus launched a new people, a new Israel, an alternative society that would function as a movement that would speak truth about peace, justice, and creation to all societies. At the same time, it would expand a range of outreach ministries to all sorts of people and populations and invite all responsive people in every “nation” to become new disciples, to live no longer for themselves but for God’s will, and thereby expand the movement and its kingdom work.

This mission was to be Christianity’s main business. Whenever, and wherever, the church is devoted to Christ’s mission, it is a “real church.” Real churches reject the world’s way of power and pursue their ends through love, service, prophesy, witness, and invitation. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would inspire, accompany, and empower this Messianic movement. As Wright explains, “Our ‘big story’ is not a power story. It is not designed to gain money, sex, or power for us, though those temptations will always

⁵ Ibid., 24–25.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

lie nearby. It is a love story—God’s love story, operating through Jesus and then, by the Spirit, through Jesus’ followers.”⁷

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N. T. Wright’s contribution stimulates the following four insights:

First, for the first time within memory, a globally-influential theologian sides with several generations of “mission theologians,” from Roland Allen, to Hendrik Kraemer, to David Bosch, to Christopher Wright, who have taught that Christianity’s mission to the world is the church’s main business. Their views were dismissed with a wave of the hand, because, after all, one would expect mission theologians to say such things! Wright also advances mission theology by emphasizing the meta-narrative essentially common to all four Gospels.

Secondly, I took some satisfaction in reading Wright’s suggestion that eighteenth century Methodism, as a sent-out movement of Christians who had experienced grace and were loving, serving, inviting people, and commending justice in the world, “might well be cited as evidence of a movement in which parts of the church did actually integrate several elements in the gospels.”⁸ Alas, Methodism’s subsequent history stands as proof that a movement that once got it somewhat right can, over time, morph into one of the most dysfunctional institutionalized expressions of Christianity in the solar system.

Third, if a church or denomination became convinced that Wright is right, what might be the strategic response? Alas, there is little precedent for institutions becoming movements once again! There is, however, precedent for implementing the strategy of the “ecclesiola within the ecclesia,” which refers to “parts of the church” or to movements within and from the church into the community, and to movements of people from many churches into the community, nation, and world. Such movements require advanced commitment and competence from Christians who are called (say) to teach English as a second language, minister with addicts, champion the faith’s expression in the arts, plant a new church, or work against human trafficking or for creation’s health. In this paradigm, the church invites members to discover their gifts and passion, expects their committed involvement in that mission, nurtures and prays for them, and grants the ministry’s serious autonomy. The church then features the ministries of the people in the church’s life, newsletter, and history, and reinforces the idea in a hundred ways that merely “attending church” is not normal Christianity, and following Christ in ministry IS normal Christianity.

⁷ Ibid., 241–242.

⁸ Ibid., 36–37.

Lastly, if the church's mission, at every level, is its main business, this expands our understanding of the role of evangelism. Traditionally, we have invited people to accept Jesus Christ "for his benefits," and we always hope that people will experience forgiveness, justification, second birth, and new life, and face death with assurance one day. However, the missional paradigm of the four Gospels reminds us also to hope that people become followers of Christ in his service and movements, and thereby experience the "life that matters" that comes to people who live no longer for themselves but for God's will. Evangelism then becomes the ministry that provides new personnel for the expanding movement. Moreover, the compassionate ministry movements raise Christianity's public credibility, and the movements and the churches make more disciples.

About the Author

George Hunter is Dean and Distinguished Professor, Emeritus of Asbury Theological Seminary's School of World Mission and Evangelism. Before his 28 years at Asbury, he pastored churches in Florida and England, taught evangelism at SMU, and served as United Methodism's executive for evangelism.

Hunter has published over a dozen books (with Abingdon Press), including *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (1987), *How to Reach Secular People* (1992), *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (2000, rev. ed. 2010), *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* (2009), *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* (2011), and *Should We Change Our Game Plan?* (2013)