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## Resurrecting the Celtic Model of Evangelism for the 21st Century: George G. Hunter, III

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James R. Farrer

### **abstract**

Dr. George G. Hunter III has been the premier author in alerting Christians in our current era to the ancient Celtic Christian style of evangelism and mission. This model, pioneered by St. Patrick, became the “greatest sustained Christian mission in Christianity’s history.”<sup>1</sup> The contagious power of these Christians and their communities ushered in almost 1,000 years of Christian culture to Europe. Hunter identifies the Celtic Christians’ main strategies which can be fruitful in reaching today’s prodigals, “nones,” and modern “barbarians.” This model is urgently needed today since the United States has become the third largest mission field of non-Christians in the world.

### **precarious position for the church**

As one of the premier specialists in church growth and vitality, George Hunter calls attention to the precarious position in which the church of Jesus Christ finds itself. In 2010, 51 percent of those in Great Britain reported having “no religion at

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<sup>1</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 73.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 5 all.”<sup>2</sup> Even more distressing is the 1994 report of the Church of England General Synod’s Board of Mission which related that 86 percent of British children had no connection with any Christian church during their childhood.<sup>3</sup> In addition, according to a 2007 report of the German Bible Society, while 60 percent of Germans officially belong to a congregation, church attendance is not above 4 percent. This percentage dropped to 1.5 percent in some larger cities.<sup>4</sup>

The United States is moving toward a similar low level of church connection that is found in Great Britain and Europe. Almost every denomination wants to increase its numbers. Sadly, for several decades, many Protestant leaders have warned their own denominations of what the Rev. Adam Hamilton told the 2012 United Methodist General Conference: “At the current rate of decline from the last five years, we have less than 50 years of the United Methodist Church in the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

Even with such pessimistic predictions, most leaders do not realize just how few congregations are adding members. Hunter reports that “less than one percent of all the churches in the United States grows significantly from conversion growth in a given year.”<sup>6</sup> What urgency exists for complacent American Christians since the United States has become the third largest mission field of non-Christians in the world!<sup>7</sup>

However, there is hope and good news. Hunter concludes that after more than seventy years of research on the foreign mission field and now in North America, “More is now known about how the [Christian] faith spreads and how churches grow than we have ever known” since the apostles roamed the earth.<sup>8</sup>

### **passion for the lost**

Hunter has long held a passion for those who do not go near a church. Hunter himself grew up in a family that attended church about once a year. Before his senior year of high school, the presence of the living God enveloped Hunter. When “the light went on,” he visited five congregations in his hometown before one showed interest in him and invited him to join its membership.

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<sup>2</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for Our Future* (Suffolk, England: Kevin Mayhew Ltd., 2004), 217.

<sup>4</sup> German Bible Society (lecture at Wertheim, Germany, August 8, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Heather Hahn, “UM Membership Still Sliding,” *Good News*, vol. 46 no. 2 (Sept/Oct 2012), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Hunter, *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> George G. Hunter III, *Should We Change Our Game Plan? From Traditional or Contemporary to Missional and Strategic* (Nashville: TN: Abingdon Pres, 2013), 125.

## Farrer: Resurrecting the Celtic Model of Evangelism for the 21st Century:

As a seminary student, Hunter was assigned to a summer immersion experience on Muscle Beach, California. Gathering there was an odd mix of weightlifters, beatniks, surfers, sunbathers, addicts, and criminals. Hunter discovered that many had no Christian background or memory. Their image of the church was boring and irrelevant. The few who attended a church service with Hunter sensed that the church members either did not care about them or were suspicious of their new faces. Hunter's companions were too different from "good church people."

### successful methods

Throughout his career, Hunter has compiled case studies of successful outreach methods. For him a very early example in the Bible is the story of Ruth's gradual conversion from paganism into Naomi's family and faith.

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A second example is Jesus' connection with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Learning from Jesus' encounter with this pagan woman, Hunter compiles five important questions for those who wish to deal with those outside the faith.

1. Do we want to know secular, pre-Christian people?
2. Do we want unrefined and out-of-control people in our church?
3. Are we willing to go where these non-Christians are?
4. Are we willing to really spend time on their turf?
5. Are we willing to let our church become their church, too? (their style, music, favored time of worship, etc.)<sup>9</sup>

As Hunter reviewed church history, he discovered that when the Rome-based church in western Europe believed it could not reach the barbarians on the boundaries of the world, St. Patrick developed a model that proved successful. Hunter calls it ". . . the greatest sustained Christian mission in Christianity's history."<sup>10</sup>

### over the course of three decades "all things Celtic" has gained popularity

Bookstores devote sections to literature on Celtic studies. With the popularity of Michael Flatley's *Riverdance* comes an interest in Celtic music and dance. Celtic-style weddings abound, and there is a renewed nostalgia for the romance of King Arthur and Renaissance fairs. Some teens find a niche in dressing in funereal attire,

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<sup>9</sup> George G. Hunter III, "Reaching Secular People: Celtic Traditions and Winning the West Again" (lecture at Newlonsburg Presbyterian Church, Murrysville, PA, October 14, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 73.

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 a style known as “Goth.” Celtic spirituality can be viewed as a form of the New  
 Age quest. New Age spirituality is informal, experimental, subjective, self-focused,  
 and seeks oneness and peace. It claims to be non-judgmental. New Age  
 conferences invite all types of religions, but the Christians and Jews with a belief in  
 one LORD are never on the program. Many types of Celtic spirituality can be  
 earth-centered and seek spirit guides which many Christians view as skilled  
 demons.

### perceived differences in beliefs/style

Celtic Christianity flourished in the British Isles from about 400 to 1,000 A.D. Most  
 current literature on Celtic spirituality outlines many differences between the Celtic  
 model and the Roman model of church practices. Often Celtic Christianity is  
 explained as the opposite of the worst features of Dark Ages Roman Catholicism.

| <b>Roman</b>               | <b>Celtic</b>               |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Hierarchical               | Collegial                   |
| Centralized                | Individualistic             |
| Inflexible                 | Tolerant                    |
| Demands Uniformity         | Fiercely Independent        |
| Complex                    | Simple                      |
| Transcendent God (far off) | Immanent God (close)        |
| Original Sin               | Original Goodness Continues |
| Males over Females         | Equality of Genders         |
| Body Denigrated            | Body/Sexuality promoted     |
| Worship Indoors            | Worship out in Nature       |
| Control the Land           | Free the Land               |

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One can see why many have become so enamored with this presumed Celtic  
 style. Professor Ian Bradley of St. Andrews University gave this same impression  
 in his book *The Celtic Way*. However, with more research, Bradley discovered that  
 this dichotomy was a nostalgic artificial construct and that the Celtic movement  
 was quite close to Rome in theology.<sup>11</sup> Hunter notes these same similarities in  
 theology, but he also finds that the Celtic model relinquishes some control and  
 conformity. Thus Celtic Christianity was less an institution and more of a  
 movement.<sup>12</sup> This was an important shift if the gospel was to be taken across the  
 fierce landscapes on some of the loneliest places on earth.

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<sup>11</sup> Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd., 2000), ix.

<sup>12</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 30.

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Also of note is J.R.R. Tolkien's remark that the term "Celtic" was "a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come . . . Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason."<sup>13</sup>

### **celtic evangelism emphasis lost and regained**

44 Mention should be made that in the past three decades, many writers have helped to promote Celtic Christianity and Celtic spirituality. Today's Christian church members and clergy are drawn to ancient Celtic places, practices, and Celtic-style prayers to help cultivate their own souls. However, early Celtic Christians designed their monasteries and worship to save the souls of others.<sup>14</sup> Only a few today have continued this evangelism thrust of Patrick and Columba. The Rev. George Macleod, founder of the Iona Community, had a multi-faceted emphasis. His goal was to spread the gospel by a number of ways following Columba's model. In 1938, he received government funding to give jobs to unemployed dock workers by rebuilding the twelfth century abbey on the Holy Island of Iona, where fifty Scottish kings have been buried. In recent years, the Iona Community has focused on peace and justice issues and developing worship resources, while dropping the evangelism component.

Another author of Celtic literature who has made use of Patrick's evangelism model is Ray Simpson, founding guardian of the internationally dispersed Community of Aidan and Hilda. Hunter spent time at Simpson's center on the Holy Isle of Lindesfarne while preparing and writing his Celtic evangelism book. In Simpson's recent book, *The Cowshed Revolution*, he gives examples of ways small groups of Christians continue to turn the world upside down.

Following in Macleod's and Simpson's footsteps, Hunter is now the leading interpreter of and spokesperson for Celtic-style evangelism.

### **strategies**

Hunter has compiled dozens of helpful ideas in his many books about secular and unchurched people. Following are several of the components of what Celtic Christians used to evangelize for Christ. Centuries later, these same strategies can be employed by today's Christians.

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<sup>13</sup> Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 226.

<sup>14</sup> Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 16.

Patrick (Patricius) was reared in Northern England in the early fifth century. As a teenager, he rebelled against his family's deep Christian faith. Pirates captured this strong youth and took him to Ireland where they sold him as a slave. Six years later in a dream, Patrick heard "Your ship is waiting," and he walked perhaps two hundred miles to the coast. A ship's captain took Patrick to England or Europe. Around 432, following many years in Christian study and church service, Patrick had a dream in which the Irish people cried out to the effect, "Holy servant boy, come and walk among us."

Today, the Holy Spirit is touching church members through their left brain reading or hearing of the Great Commission verses in the Bible. The Holy Spirit also continues to use right brain styles of communication . . . voices in the head, intuition, art, music, and visions. One should note that according to Notre Dame University researcher Morton Kelsey, 49 percent of New Testament verses refer to some form of what we might call spiritual experiences.<sup>15</sup> Missionaries report that God increasingly uses dreams to show Muslims that one of their highest prophets, Jesus, has important things to say to them personally.<sup>16</sup>

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### **hospitality and love**

Today many worshipping communities draw people in through their hospitality. The early Celtic model was to ask permission from the local authority to enter that tribal leader's territory. They gained the people's favor first through providing entertainment such as storytelling, music, and simple plays sometimes depicting a Bible narrative. Later, Celtic monastery outposts fulfilled the roles of drop-in center, retreat-house, art workshop, and hospital. They modeled Christ being in the midst of His people.

It is clear that many churches today desire to follow Jesus' command to love. The congregations that succeed in welcoming people with little church background do so by extending their gifts of hospitality. This makes it easier for the unchurched to come into Christian community. Inviting people to enjoy food is an effective strategy. Eating is a spiritual endeavor, one in which Jesus is not only an unseen guest, but He is also the host at every table.

Following are a few examples of congregations extending hospitality in non-traditional ways. For many years, First Presbyterian Church, Irwin, Pennsylvania,

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<sup>15</sup> Morton Kelsey, *Encounter with God* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1972), 242.

<sup>16</sup> A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Close Encounters of the Vulnerable Kind: Christian Diabolical Proclamation Among Muslims," *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 49 No. 1 (Spring 1994), 72.

Farrer: Resurrecting the Celtic Model of Evangelism for the 21st Century: advertised the cheapest meal in town. The Hot Metal Bridge Church, a storefront congregation in a section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where a large percentage of young single adults live, provides several meals each week for its neighborhood. Other long-established congregations in the region encourage their members to sign up on a rotating basis to help cook meals.

Church property may itself be a difficult barrier for the non-churched. In another Pittsburgh neighborhood, the Open Door Church has cooperated with city officials to turn vacant lots into an inner-city vegetable garden. They encourage children to learn gardening and share produce with citizens nearby. Another congregation holds a Bible study in a tattoo parlor.

46 Grace Presbyterian Church is located in Martins Ferry, Ohio, the first town founded in that state. Years ago, so many newcomers were being welcomed that the church built a hotel to give hospitality. As the patterns of pioneer travel changed, the hotel was sold. In recent years, this rust-belt church has again bought this building, turning it into a youth center and coffee house with guest musicians. Pastor, author, and church consultant Bill Webster notes that four taverns are within a ninety-second walk of the church. Unemployed steel workers can be found in the taverns almost all day and night. A Grace member said, “If Jesus ministered to outcast lepers, shouldn’t we even let these bar people know that we exist?” The church began handing out small glasses to the tavern owners. The printed slogan on the glass: “Grace Church, Give Us a Shot.” Over the course of time, this congregation has ministered to many people at the “end of their rope.”<sup>17</sup>

Denver, Colorado, has a church with a very unique name, “Scum of the Earth.” The founding members chose the name because they felt they had been treated like “scum,” even by other churches. They meet Sunday evenings so they can stay out late Saturday nights playing in bands or just meeting friends. The church allows lip rings and tattoos. Their gathering starts with a meal which may even include lobster bisque! Grizzled street people drift in to eat. Some may stay; some may go. The music is screaming loud with punk-rock hymns and may include a flinging mosh pit when the praising of the Lord really gets everyone excited.

On the West coast, Tribe of Los Angeles jumpstarted when the preacher’s husband, a drummer, began inviting those who had drums or wanted to pound on a box, to participate in a drum circle each week. Tribe connects with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

In Sheffield, England, there is a remarkable demonstration of hospitality. Church Doctor Ministries offers pilgrimages to this British town where members of St. Thomas, an Anglican-Baptist Church, invest their lives with students, the

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<sup>17</sup> William O. Webster, *A Place of Grace: A Resurrected Church’s Journey to Vitality* (www.xulonpress.com, 2013), 43.



Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 5 marginalized, and addicts, having marvelous success in building community and making disciples. As liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop writes, “Christians often forget that when we join Christ’s community, one joins a gathering of beggars. Everything is a gift.”<sup>18</sup>

## empowerment

Patrick, the rebel from Christianity, had been surrounded by paganism during his years as a slave under a Druid tribal chief. Young Patrick learned of barbarism as he walked among the skulls of opponents stuck on poles around the chief’s homestead. Ireland was full of earth-centered paganism, where spirits claimed each property, stream, and hill. These spirits, including those of dead ancestors, could trouble the sleep, and otherwise affect and hassle Ireland’s inhabitants. Each of these spirits needed to be appeased, sometimes by the spells of witches and sometimes by child sacrifice. With his unique experiences, Patrick had learned a simpler way. Instead of navigating through these nagging pagan gods, he stood under the authority of the Most High God, literally the strongest of the strong ones (Genesis 14:17–22). Patrick may have known that in Isaiah 2:8 these pagan spirits were called “nothings” and in Ezekiel “gods of dung.”<sup>19</sup>

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Earlier, about the year 286, the ancient Egyptian desert monk St. Antony pioneered going into the wild places not just to pray for stress reduction, but to pray and to do battle with the spiritual forces of wickedness.<sup>20</sup> Patrick also grew in apostolic boldness. According to ancient histories, which undoubtedly mix legend and fact, Patrick stood on the Hill of Slane opposite the unprecedented grandeur of the pagan power place of Tara and overcame the Druid confrontation. Whether or not this event from the mists of time took place as described, there still would have been many occasions when Patrick could recite the prayer/hymn he had composed.

I bind unto myself this day the strong name of the Trinity . . .  
I gather this power against every cruel and merciless force  
to attack my body and soul,  
against the charms of false prophets,  
the black laws of paganism,  
the false laws of heretics  
the deceptions of idolatry,

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<sup>18</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 59.

<sup>19</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. I* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 225.

<sup>20</sup> Diana Severance, “Exorcising the Desert,” *Christian History*, Vol. XVIII No. 4 (November 1999), 18.

Farrer: Resurrecting the Celtic Model of Evangelism for the 21st Century:  
against spells cast by women, smiths and Druids,  
and all unlawful knowledge  
that harms the body and soul.

Although Druids studied for twenty years to learn their secret witchcraft spells, Patrick easily taught common folk how to pray for protection and how to pray in Christ's authority against evil spirits. One need not get the impression that every Christian in the Celtic era was an exorcist who would counter Druid shamans. However, scholarship indicates that the tactic for this mostly lay movement was to grow members from babes in Christ toward being representative ambassadors standing behind the authority of the risen ruling Christ advancing his cause. The Bible consistently warns about following or returning to the elemental spirits, (Galatians 4:8–9). Psalm 35:10 rejoices: "O LORD, who is like you?"

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### evangelizing the culture

In 563, Columba, another Celtic leader, left Ireland for the Isle of Iona off western Scotland. His mission was serious. Columba desired not only to convert individuals but all segments of society. Perhaps influenced by Romans 12:2, Columba sought not to be conformed to this world nor to let society "squeeze you into its mold," as the J.B. Phillips translation expresses it. In fact, the first clearly recorded Christian anointing of a secular king in Britain or Europe was at the hands of Columba!<sup>21</sup> This may have happened on the Holy Isle of Iona in 574. Later, coronation blessings likely occurred at the dramatic summit of the hill fort/artist colony of Dunadd near Scotland's richest prehistoric archeological landscape, the Kilmartin Valley. Dunadd's rocky crag protrudes from the valley peat bog like a single biscuit on a baking sheet. At this site of pre-Christian rites, Columba would anoint the king as he stood with his boot in a footprint carved into the rock. This symbolized his marriage to the land and to the people assembled on the hill and in the valley below. Indeed, a carved bowl in the rock for anointing oil remains close by the footprint today.

This site is near some of the most sparsely populated areas of Europe. Surprisingly, this backwater of the "Celtic Fringe" was actually part of a sophisticated trading network which linked through France, Turkey, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and beyond. Minerals from those regions were used to produce the unique yellow and blue colors in the illustrated Gospels *Book of Kells*. University of Glasgow archeologists believe that the *Book of Kells* had its beginnings at Iona

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<sup>21</sup> Ian Bradley, *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Heart of the Monarchy* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 94.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 5 and Dunadd before being taken to Ireland for safe keeping from Viking pirate raids.<sup>22</sup> Columba was interested not only in evangelizing individuals, but also in placing the arts and politics under the lordship of Jesus.

Another Celtic evangelist to follow Patrick and Columba was Columbanus. His journeys after the year 600 left a lasting influence in France, Switzerland, and Italy. During the early seventh century, his followers founded more than sixty monastic communities, helping to bring Europe out of the Dark Ages.<sup>23</sup>

## teams

Even though Celtic Christians had outstanding evangelistic leaders, their model of evangelism tossed out the “Lone Ranger” style. The Celts went out as small groups.

Across several recent decades, church consultant Lyle Schaller has shared the advantage of sending bi-vocational lay teams of three or more leaders into weaker congregations that have agreed to attempt a turnaround in membership and who have agreed that a different style is necessary to reach a new constituency. Schaller and the ancient Celtic Christians agree that the continuity is in the team, not in one individual.<sup>24</sup> Hunter writes that “The Celtic strategy of sending teams into ‘enemy territory’ is almost never done today, but it is the greatest apostolic adventure available to most Christians.”<sup>25</sup>

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## koinonia and soul friend

Patrick modeled discipleship through mentoring. Unlike the Roman style, Patrick emphasized that individuals could belong before fully believing and being fully trained. The Irish term for a mentor is *anam cara*. This soul friend is a combination of companion, coach, mentor, and feedback person. This person would support, listen, encourage, pray, discern, truth-tell, and provide a measure of accountability.

## conclusion

The Western world is in the midst of what Jesus determines are fields ripe for harvesting (John 4:35). In our current landscape, business as usual will not work. Many are “immunized” against the church because of substandard Christianity.

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<sup>22</sup> Ewan Campbell, *Saint and Sea-kings: The First Kingdom of the Scots* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 1999), 33.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 28–29.

<sup>24</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *Innovations in Ministry: Models for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>25</sup> Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 30.

Farrer: *Resurrecting the Celtic Model of Evangelism for the 21st Century*: Hunter calls them “ignostics” who simply do not know much about real biblical facts and faith. For many of our Maker’s precious people, life is out of control because of burnout, financial overload, chemical imbalances, poor decisions, or spirits who sap their strength and seek their destruction.

The Celtic model of evangelism has proven itself when Christians are willing to go to the sight, sound, and sensation generation and to hug the prodigals and those who have tried the smorgasbord of religions.

Today off the coast of Ireland, Britain, and Scotland there is hardly a remote rock jutting out of the sea that does not have at least the remains of a Celtic church or monastery on it. With Hunter’s guidance, many present-day churches evangelize close to home and across the globe to fulfill the same mission of Christ as did Patrick and his Celtic followers.

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