



Mission Drift: The Silent Killer

Mission Drift - Part 1

Contents

Article 1: Mission Drift - The Silent Killer	2
Mission Drift – Should we be concerned?	2
Illustrating Mission Drift	2
Should we be concerned? – The Bible says ‘YES’	3
Are we concerned? – The evidence says ‘NOT REALLY’	4
Mission Drift – Demonstrating our concern about mission drift	5
Bibliography	6

This is the 1st article in a series of 3 articles on Mission Drift. The articles describe the problem of mission drift for Christian organisations and measures that leaders can implement to prevent mission drift.

Mission Drift - The Silent Killer

My friends and I go surfing most Saturday mornings. Before we enter the surf, we take note of strong currents and we make plans to counter their effect. Slow but steady drifts are not visible so we often don't take them into account, that is, until we notice that we have drifted a long way from our point of entry!

This is how it is with many Christian organisations. Strong currents that work against the original purpose are usually noted and acted upon, yet the slow imperceptible drift away from the original purpose is often, perhaps even generally, ignored. How harmful to the cause of the Gospel! How appropriate to refer to mission drift as 'the silent killer'!

Mission Drift – Should we be concerned?

The answer to this question is 'yes, yes, yes!'

To emphasise this point, I could give an account of many well-known Christian organisations that started with evangelical intent but experienced significant mission drift – Harvard, The Red Cross, YMCA, and Barclays Bank to name a few (1). I could then go on to consider the diminished gospel impact of each of these organisations due to mission drift, notwithstanding the secular success of the organisations.

Instead, I choose to give two current examples of lesser-known Christian organisations that are today evidencing the impact of mission drift. I do this to make the problem of mission drift more current and more relevant for the reader. The fact is that mission drift is so widespread that I probably could have used the organisation you work for (or that you support) to illustrate mission drift and its impact!

I hasten to add that I have many dear Christian friends who work tirelessly within each of the organisations I will be using to illustrate mission drift, and also that I pray for these organisations along with many other Christian organisations. The only reason I use these two examples is that they typify how easily and insidiously mission drift occurs. Furthermore, each organisation illustrates a particular type of mission drift that I want to draw attention to, thereby illustrating two distinct drift strategies deployed by the evil one. The first of these strategies is distortion, and the second is distraction.

My purpose is to promote a sense of urgency about combatting mission drift. I trust these articles will help the reader to more quickly identify mission drift and to be better positioned to intercept mission drift when it occurs.

Illustrating Mission Drift

A church affiliated aged care operator, marketed as a Christian organisation, describes the purpose of their chaplaincy program by stating, "what we seek to do within our chaplaincy is not to

proselytise, is not even to evangelise, we are there to acknowledge the spiritual depth of the person and to give expression to that” (2). The chaplaincy policies and programs are adapted to fit this stated purpose.

In stark contrast to the man-centred spirituality that is implied in this organisation’s chaplaincy program, Jesus said “I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me” (John14:6, NIV). In support of Jesus’ claim about Himself, the Basis of Union of the parent church of this organisation declares that the church is “Built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ” (3). How can it be that the chaplaincy program of this church affiliated operator does not promote the ‘one Lord Jesus Christ’ unashamedly and unambiguously? How can there be such disparity between the statement of faith of the parent organisation and the current aims of the chaplaincy program?

The answer is mission drift. Mission drift evidenced by the drift towards Christian ambiguity under the banner of human spirituality. This example illustrates mission drift through incremental ‘distortion’ of what it means to be a Christian organisation.

A different organisation, originally called to evangelise the cities of Africa, responds to ongoing social crises by adding orphanages, clinics and diverse aid and development projects to their urban evangelism programs. As a consequence of this expansion to their programs, the original call to evangelise the cities of Africa was modified to read ‘evangelise the cities of Africa in word and deed’ (4). Today, the organisation is 50 years old and the organisation’s programs are diverse and loosely connected to both each other and to the founding call, notwithstanding that a passion for evangelism remains.

Some ten years ago the founder of this organisation wrote a book about the first 40 years of the organisation’s ministry. He commented, “The ministry risked changing its nature almost totally by being side-tracked from evangelism and being an evangelistic organisation to one focusing almost primarily on social care and projects ministering to physical needs” (5 p. 496). Here we have another form of mission drift, which could rightly be described as ‘distraction’ through program drift resulting in a diminished evangelical influence on the cities of Africa.

These are two current examples of mission drift. They are occurring as I write and as you read. In each case, mission drift is detracting from the gospel impact of the organisation. In the first instance, the gospel message has been replaced by man centred spirituality, while in the second instance the evangelistic effort has been redirected to other activities. These two examples illustrate the tendency for all Christian organisations to drift away from their founding purpose, apart from intentional interception. The evil one’s strategies are almost imperceptible, but they cause great harm!

Should we be concerned? – The Bible says ‘YES’

The warnings about drift and the exhortations to fight drift are implicit throughout the scriptures. Indeed, the Bible speaks to us in many places about our tendency to drift away from God and His wise counsel. Together with these warnings are repeated exhortations to individuals, families,

organisations, and nations to fight this tendency to drift.

Moses speaks for God as he instructs the people to “be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left” (Deuteronomy 5:32, NIV).

Paul exhorts the Corinthians that “each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:10-11, NIV).

Paul expresses astonishment and concern that the Galatians are “so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6, NIV), stating that “some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:7, NIV). What a sober reminder of our need to ensure that our organisations do not promote confusion by substituting the gospel with moralism and spirituality which “is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6, NIV)!

John speaks for Jesus when he calls upon the Church at Sardis to remember and return, saying “I know your deeds; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.” (Revelation 3:1b-3a, NIV).

These are but a few of the numerous warnings and exhortations that remind us of our tendency to drift away from Christ, the one foundation. We are urged to be alert, to be on our guard, to build with great care, to remember, and to ensure we build on Christ alone.

Perhaps you work for or support a professing Christian organisation. Has the organisation experienced mission drift? Is the organisation intercepting this mission drift? What does the Lord see as He looks at the organisation? Does the Lord see careful construction on Christ alone, or does He see loose governance with a diminished gospel impact? Clearly these are important questions, and it is regrettable that they are not often asked!

Should we be concerned about mission drift? The Bible says an emphatic ‘yes’!

Are we concerned? – The evidence says ‘NOT REALLY’

Larry Reed, in his comparison of organisations that have lost their Christian purpose with others that have retained their Christian intent, cites Barclays Bank, the Young Men’s Christian Association, the Red Cross, Harvard University, and Rush Presbyterian St Luke’s Medical Centre as sizeable organisations that have lost their original Christian purpose (1).

In commenting on how these and other organisations lose their founding purpose, he writes “it rarely comes with one large decision that turns the organisation in a new direction, but with a series of small decisions that change direction in imperceptible ways. It is only over time that you notice that the organisation has reversed course” (1).

I suggest that the evidence tells us that most of us are not sufficiently concerned about preventing the many small decisions that cause mission drift.

Look at the conference flyers for Christian conferences and you will find a great many sessions on leadership, transformation, and change. The sessions that warn about mission drift and call on leaders to intercept our tendency to drift are limited. Visit a Christian bookshop and look for writings on mission drift. At best, you will be directed to a remote bookshelf. Review the agendas of board meetings of Christian organisations and you will find little evidence that preventing mission drift receives boardroom attention. Sit in on an executive management meeting and you will rarely find a focus on intercepting mission drift. The matters that receive the greatest attention are growth, transformation, new initiatives, and the search for the 'silver bullet'.

Is it any wonder that mission drift is alive and well? No! Are we even aware that mission drift is occurring this very day in the Christian organisations we may work in or support? Probably not! Are we deeply concerned about combating mission drift? Generally not!

Preventing the many small deviations that lead to mission drift is hard work. It involves careful construction, it requires strong foundations and it demands intentional interception. It is work that takes place in the trenches rather than the limelight. It is work that requires a preventative mindset together with a passion for furthering the cause of the gospel. It is work that is not often done well. To be frank, it is essential work that that is most often neglected!

Mission Drift – Demonstrating our concern about mission drift

From what I have written so far, it is unsurprising that this series of articles calls for leaders of Christian organisations to give far more attention to preventing mission drift. To achieve this purpose, it is essential that we understand the strategies of the evil one and that we commit to building organisations where mission drift is continuously intercepted.

This series of articles purposes to help business leaders fight mission drift. Article 2 focuses on understanding the causes of mission drift, while Article 3 focuses on intercepting mission drift where drift has occurred over a protracted period and has been acknowledged by the leaders.

I close this article with a penetrating comment by Wes Stafford, the retiring CEO of Compassion International. In reply to a question during a recent interview, Wes said "I can think of many Christian organisations that have lost their spiritual commitment. I can't think of one secular organisation that found its way to a Christian commitment' (6 p. 7).

For the sake of the gospel we do well to intercept mission drift before it is too late!

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