

Church History: Great Commission

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[adapted from an article originally written by Tom Lindow]



The Movement's Early Formation and Structure

The Great Commission Church movement began in 1970 with a focus on planting and building churches that have a missionary zeal similar to that of many parachurch organizations (such as Campus Crusade for Christ). The movement began with a group of Christians (who were associated with a Plymouth Brethren assembly) at Southern Colorado University who had a fervent desire for evangelism and discipleship in order to fulfill the “Great Commission” commanded by Jesus to “*Go and make disciples of all nations*” (Matthew 28: 19, 20).

Three of the movement's founders were Jim McCotter, Herschel Martindale, and Dennis Clark. Jim McCotter and Herschel Martindale were a part of the Plymouth Brethren assemblies and Dennis Clark was a former staff member of Campus Crusade for Christ. The Navigators and Operation Mobilization also influenced the ministry in its early years.

These men believed, as do the Brethren, that since all believers are priests, a person need not be a clergyman to baptize or serve the Lord's supper. From the beginning, the campus fellowships considered themselves churches, baptized new believers, and observed communion. Their structure was similar to many of the Brethren “assemblies” rather than that of more traditional churches.

“The Blitz” of 1970

In 1970, approximately 30 college-age Christians embarked on a summer-long evangelistic outreach (which they called “the blitz”) to several university campuses in the Southwestern United States in which they saw many students respond to the gospel. The leaders they left behind started some of the very first churches of the Great Commission movement. In the next few years, additional mission outreaches and training conferences took place and the gospel went out to many campuses. By the end of 1973, there were about 15 “works” established.

Governing Structure of the Early Movement

As with the Brethren assemblies, the leaders emphasized that the church should be governed by a plurality of elders, also called “overseers” and “pastors” (Acts 20: 17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1). Yet, in the early days, the elders were not publicly recognized, as was also true in many Brethren assemblies. By 1974, some of the fellowships had grown rapidly. It became apparent, both scripturally and practically, that elders should be publicly recognized. Over the next few years, elders were appointed in the vast majority of churches, usually by those who had started the church. Later, new elders were appointed by existing church elders.

Initially, these fellowships were quite loosely affiliated, with a unity based mostly upon relationships rather than any formal association or doctrinal creed. They refused to take a name, as did the Brethren assemblies, to avoid being “sectarian” or causing division in the body of Christ.

By the late 1970's, as the number of fellowships grew to over 30, several of the movement's leaders recognized the need to have a more formal association of churches on a national level. Serious problems had developed in the leadership of a few of the churches resulting in a need for

more pastoral oversight of church leaders and for more standardization as to who qualified as elders.

The Formation of Great Commission International (GCI) in 1983

In 1983, 10 leaders from various fellowships around the country moved to Maryland to seek the Lord as to how He might want the movement to organize nationally. These men recognized that during New Testament times, as well as throughout all of church history, God has raised up men to minister regionally, nationally, and internationally. Throughout history, men who have started churches have felt the responsibility to provide continuing guidance and oversight to them. Over the next few years, these leaders began to give direction to the association and provide pastoral care and oversight to local churches and leaders. In 1983, Great Commission International, led by Jim McCotter and Dennis Clark, was formed to provide services such as publishing and fund raising for the developing association.

A number of subsidiary organizations were formed by individuals in GCI in an attempt to penetrate key centers of influence: American's for Biblical Government (government), Great Commission Academy (education), and Alpha Capital (media). Also, GCI started several publications, including a magazine called *The Cause*. These projects were short-lived or were discontinued in the late 1980's.

In 1983, GCI launched the first summer Leadership Training conference which attracted college students for a summer of intensive training in evangelism and discipleship. The LT program continues today under the leadership of Great Commission Ministries.

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Invasion '85

In 1985, GCI undertook a mass outreach and expansion effort called Invasion '85. During this effort, teams were sent to 50 college campuses with a goal of starting new campus ministries.

While the gospel was proclaimed and many churches were successfully established during Invasion '85, most of the churches did not continue. In many cases, team members were not properly trained nor were they given adequate support. As a result, a large number of teams returned home.

Through the Invasion '85 effort, the leaders in Great Commission learned many valuable lessons on how to effectively plant churches. As a result, from 1986 to 1999, 55 church plants were attempted in GCAC, of which 50 were established.

Jim McCotter's Departure

In 1986, Jim McCotter announced his resignation from GCI. Jim believed that God wanted him to utilize his entrepreneurial abilities in attempting to influence secular media for Christ. In 1988, Jim moved to Florida and has not attended a church affiliated with Great Commission since that time.

The Formation of Regions Within GCI

In 1987, the national leadership (Dennis Clark, John Hopler, and Rick Whitney) focused on the basic ministry of prayer and teaching the Word in churches and in regions. It was at this time that Daylights, a daily devotional, began to be published.

In 1987 and 1988, more leaders were appointed to provide oversight to the national and regional ministry. Soon after, the movement experienced another period of growth. The majority of the new churches were planted in communities of the U.S., rather than college campuses. The community churches were started mostly with college graduates in cities that were near campus locations.

Statement of Early Errors and Weaknesses

God has used the movement known as GCI to see thousands of people come to know Christ, grow in their love for Him, and go on to faithfully serve Him. But just as a young person growing up will make many mistakes, so these churches, in the process of growing up in the Lord, made mistakes, exhibited weaknesses, and allowed prideful attitudes to develop. As a result, some people were hurt and lives were adversely affected.

In the later 1980's, God revealed these errors and weaknesses to the leadership of GCI. As a result, and at the initial urging of Tom Short, the GCI leaders decided to publish a paper as part of a plan to seek reconciliation and restitution to those who had been hurt, attempting to follow the Biblical pattern for repentance and reconciliation in relationships. The paper is entitled *A Statement Recognizing Early Errors and Weaknesses in the Development of the Great Commission Association of Churches*, July, 1991. The paper has been signed by the GCAC pastors and has been widely and freely distributed. A concerted effort, called Project CARE (led by Dave Bovenmyer), has been made by the pastors of GCAC to seek out people who may have been hurt and to pursue reconciliation.

The Revival of the Campus Ministry and GCM

During the late 1980's, there was a tremendous pulling of resources from the campus ministries. In an attempt to maintain a strong campus movement, GCI did a series of "Vision" fund drives (1987-1989) in order to employ staff members full-time in campus ministry.

Then, in 1989, GCM (under the initial leading of Dave Bovenmyer) was formed primarily to mobilize people into campus ministry by training them to raise financial support and by equipping them for campus ministry. In 1990, GCM (under the leadership of Tom Schroeder, who was later joined by Jeff Kern and Greg Van Nada), took a greater role by revitalizing the entire campus ministry in Great Commission, providing overall visionary leadership, equipping, and coaching to the campus staff.

During the early 1990's, Jeff Kern and a team of skilled staff strengthened and established GCM to be a mission organization recognized for its administrative and organizational excellence. In 1993, GCM was accepted into the Evangelical Counsel for Financial Accountability (ECFA). GCM was accepted into the Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association (IFMA) in 1994, and into the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies (EFMA) in 1998.

In 1989, GCM assumed responsibility for running the summer Leadership Training (LT) program for college students. In 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997, and 2000, GCM sponsored national conventions to challenge young people to deeper commitment in their service of Jesus Christ. High School LT, a one week program designed to equip teens in evangelism and discipleship, began in 1993. In 1998, Terry Bartley, the National High School Director, began the High School Summer Intern Program, which trains workers for teen ministry. Today, GCM acts as the campus and international mission agency for the Great Commission Association of Churches. Jeff Kern is the Executive Director of GCM, while John Hopler is the Executive Director for GCAC.

The Formation of the GCAC Articles of Association

From 1980 to 1990, the attendance of churches in Great Commission grew at an annual rate of nearly 20% (from 1,920 to over 11,000 attenders). The movement spent the early 1990's defining itself and its organizational structure, and developing its Articles of Association for the Great Commission Association of Churches (GCAC). Local churches are recognized as autonomously governed entities which are united together with national and regional ministries for mission (US and international church planting), fellowship, and accountability. As of December, 2000, GCAC had over 30,000 attenders in over 150 churches and ministries in 20 countries.

International Ministry Under GCM

Presently there are Great Commission churches in Canada, Latin America, Asia, and Europe.

The church in Canada, led by John Fairchild, was begun in 1975.

The Latin American ministry, led by Nelson Guerra, began in 1976. Churches have since been planted in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Columbia, and the Dominican Republic.

The Asia ministry, presently led by Pavi Thomas, was started in 1987, primarily through sending teams of international students from US colleges back to their home countries. Today there are churches in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Nepal and the Philippines.

The European ministry, founded and led by Herschel Martindale, began in 1991 with a church plant in Germany. Churches have since been planted in the Ukraine and Italy, with other church plants planned for Berlin, Germany and Poznan, Poland.

In addition to the ministries above, GCM mobilizes hundreds of people in short-term mission trips, all with the hope of establishing new churches or strengthening existing churches.