

Identifying Problems is the First Step toward Resolving Them: An Interview with Dr. Evertt Huffard Posted by Bob Young

You have seen the problems, haven't you?

- The church in many places is struggling, not growing, not reaching the lost for Jesus.
- Mostly urban churches receive members and grow by swelling, at the expense of the rural and urban sending churches that are declining.
- Much mission work is minimally fruitful, failing to reach lost souls and reap God's generous harvest.

Dr. Jim Martin, Vice-President at Harding School of Theology, recently interviewed Dr. Evertt Huffard concerning the problems he was observing in U.S. churches. Huffard mentioned three.

- Lack of inter-congregational networking between church leaders.
- Lack of a clear unifying mission means the mission is not lived out by the members, leading to satisfaction with maintenance and survival.

*An Interview with Dr. Evertt W. Huffard
By Dr. Jim Martin*

For 32 years, Dr. Evertt W. Huffard served as professor, dean, and vice president of Harding School of Theology. He is widely known in Churches of Christ throughout the world, serving congregations and church leaders in a variety of ways. The following brief interview with Dr. Huffard will give friends and alumni an update on this new chapter of his life and ministry.

You 'retired' from Harding School of Theology in December 2019. What are you doing in this next chapter of your life?

After resigning from administration in 2016, I taught half time for three years. That first semester, Ilene and I taught and led Harding students in Zambia. Since then, I have worked part time with Mission Resource Network, preached in Millington monthly, and consulted for church leaders in 15 states and in 19 nations. I have enjoyed speaking in Bible camps, excavating in Israel, hosting two Bible land tours a year, and attending conferences. Retirement releases us to do even more — we have plans to be in nine nations this year.

You work as a consultant with a number of congregations across the U.S. and other places in the world. Are there some common problems or difficulties that you are seeing in American churches? What might the top three typical problems be?

A common challenge is that church leaders do not see themselves as "typical," when, in fact, they have a lot in common with most other churches their size. They need more networking to encourage one another and learn from each other. The lack of a clear unifying mission would be another problem. Without a mission, churches turn inward and become satisfied with maintenance and survival, when they don't have to. God has them in their neighborhood to be a blessing — lived out in their mission.

The third problem I observe nationally and globally can be the degree to which every culture manages to corrupt — or at least distort — what it means to follow and lead in the kingdom of God. For example, suburban Anglos in the U.S. struggle to understand what kind of followers God expects of disciples of Christ. Individualists and consumers don't make good followers. The reverse can be observed in the majority world where people are better followers, but leaders either over-function or fail to lead for fear of conflicts or failure.

What challenges do you sometimes see in churches of other nations that American Churches of Christ are often not aware of?

The mobility of the American society has given churches enough transfer growth that they depend on an attractional model with programs and ministries to drive growth. Not so in the rest of the world, where growth comes through intentional disciple making and the development of leaders, which can take years, even decades. Another challenge is the lack of resources or a culture of giving that we have been blessed with in the U.S. Our "collection plate" economy is uncommon in the rest of the world. The downside of this

blessing can be the dependency we create in much of the world through our generosity.

If Churches of Christ are going to thrive in the 21st century, what needs to have our attention?

I believe churches will thrive when their leaders interpret what God is doing and tell their story of how God led them to become disciples of Christ.



Dr. Evertt W. Huffard speaking at 2015 Convocation.

Dr. Jim Martin

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- Because the U.S. culture has redefined Christianity and discipleship, U.S. Christians struggle to understand what God expects of disciples. “Individualists and consumers don’t make good followers.” In other countries, “people are better followers, but leaders either over-function or fail to lead....”

Huffard also mentioned problems related to mission work.

- U.S. mobility has fed transfer growth so that churches develop and depend on attractional models with programs and ministries to drive growth.
- In contrast, mission works grow best through intentional disciple making and leader development.
- The resources and the giving culture, “collection plate economy,” of the U.S. churches does not exist in other nations, so that a dependency is created through the generosity of U.S. churches.

You can read Huffard’s responses in the above copy of the interview.

Here is a link to the HST publication, *The Bridge*, in which the interview appeared--

https://hst.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TheBridge_Q2_Spring_2020_v7.pdf