

**Title:** *Missing in Action*

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**Synopsis:** It is a fact that, in the U.S., only 35% of church attendees are male. This article discusses ways we can successfully structure our sermons and conduct our ministry to attract more men to our congregations.

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### **Missing in action (MIA)**

On June 11, 1982, five Israeli soldiers went missing in a battle with Syrian and Palestinian forces near the Lebanese village of Sultan Yaqub. Several years later, two of the captured soldiers were returned to Israel in prisoner exchanges with Syria and Achmed Jibril's PFLP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command). Three soldiers -- Zachary Baumel, Yehuda Katz, and Tzvi Feldman -- are still missing. Zachary Baumel is an American citizen.

Over the years, Palestinian and Syrian officials have made many references to information in their possession regarding the MIAs, but have been unwilling to cooperate in efforts to return the missing soldiers to their families. So, despite Israel's best efforts, Yehuda Katz and Tzvi Feldman, and Zachary Baumel, remain unaccounted for despite ongoing reports (including the 1988 Amnesty International Report and the 1993 Amnesty International December Update) indicating that some of the missing soldiers are still alive. (The International Coalition for missing Israeli Soldiers. The Soldiers' Stories; The Battle of Sultan Yakouli, p. 1.)

Regardless of your nationality, to be missing in action as the result of a battle is a terrible thing. Those who love you are frantic with worry. Your fate is uncertain. You live as a prisoner of the forces that hold you within their grasp.

Many governments spend an enormous amount of resources searching for their MIAs. For example, the United States government has created entire governmental agencies

to continually search for the 88,000 Americans missing in action—78,000 from World War II and 10,000 from all other conflicts. (Department of Defense Web Site) Indeed, the United States has created a special Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command as well as an Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory especially for the purpose of identifying MIAs' remains.

### **Missing in action—from church**

But as terrible as physically missing in action is, there is another battlefield where men are missing in action. And, those who love them are frantic with worry. Their fate is uncertain. They live as a prisoner of the forces that hold them within their grasp. These are the men who are missing from our churches.

While the worst that can happen to a MIA in this world is physical death, the fate of the MIAs in the spiritual world is eternal death—and that should be a great concern for all of us pastors. As spiritual leaders, we should be just as concerned for the men who are *spiritual* MIAs from our churches as the world governments are for the men who are *physical* MIAs from their countries.

And, the research is very clear. Men are missing in record numbers from our churches. Take, for example, the research from the United States-based Barna Group. Every year, The Barna Group explores the state of Americans' faith, examining various facets of people's spiritual activity, faith identity, commitment and religious perspective and publishes the information in research documents and on the Internet. You may access this information via [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).

Barna research points out that just thirty-five percent of men in the United States attend church weekly. In Europe it is five percent. Furthermore:

- Women are more likely than men to be born again: 49% of women have accepted Christ as their savior, compared to 41% of men. (2006)
- Women are 55% of the adult born again population. (2006)

- Women are more likely than are men to believe that the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings. (55% versus 41%). (2006)
- Women are more likely than are men to believe that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator that rules the world today (78% to 64%). (2006)
- 74% of women compared to 64% of men say that their faith is very important to them. (2006)
- 68% of women describe themselves as "deeply spiritual" compared to 55% of men who say that "deeply spiritual" describes them accurately. (2006) (From Barna Website. June 7, 2007.)

Furthermore, all churches are facing the crisis of missing men in their congregations. The United Methodist Church Web Site, for example, stated statistics on attendance for the year 1999. They noted that in 1999 there were about 875,000 women in attendance at church every weekend to 248,000 men. They consider this lack of men enlisted in God's work a serious problem to the healthy existence of Methodist churches. I agree.

The absence of men from the churches of the United States, as well as other countries will have serious consequences. This absence:

- Eliminates male role models to youth
- Stifles the flow of tithes and offerings
- Creates a marked gender gap that results in an imbalance of spiritual leadership in the church
- Fosters a decidedly feminine 'feelings-oriented' in-church environment that isn't Biblical

An enormous amount of research has been done about why men, in every denomination, in every age group, and in every country, do not equal the church attendance of women. Gender debates abound! Many theories are argued. But philosophy will not fill our pews with a healthy ratio of men to women and give us the literal man-power we need to vigorously pursue God's mission in the world! So, I believe

that it is up to us, the pastors, to find ways to minister to this vast audience of missing men in all of our congregations, in every country.

Perhaps I should say right here that I am not seeking to bring men into our congregations in order to eliminate women. I have no quarrel with the role of women in the church. In some countries, where the majority of men went to war, without women, many churches would have ceased to exist. So I am not seeking to lessen the enormous and consistent contribution that women make to the work of the Lord. In fact, in the church that I pastor, I am impressed by the women who are not afraid to lead. God needs women in His church, with all their spiritual gifts and talents. However, in order for our churches to become a vital force for God in today's secular world, he also needs an equal number of men! For this reason, it is imperative that we ministers begin to study the spiritual MIA phenomenon and understand the different dynamics between men and women worshipers. Once we understand the dynamics, we can deliberately design ways to attract and keep men as an integral and active part of our congregations.

### **Women like church, men like football**

If we want to draw men into our congregations, we need to understand that men and women are socialized differently. This produces a difference in dynamics, I believe, that results in whether or not a person attends and/or participates in church.

For example, women, in general, have been taught interdependence, obedience and caring for others. They learn to be nurturers. Women, therefore, love relationships—even women who are high-powered business women, love relationships.

For many women, relationships are more important than food, drink, housing, fame or fortune. Many would 'stand by their man' as the Dolly Parton song says, regardless of deprivation, so long as they felt the relationship with 'their man' was warm and loving. So, when you and I stand in the pulpit and preach that 'every person should have a personal relationship with Jesus,' women immediately identify with that concept and are

first down the aisle to an altar call. This is not a put-down to woman. The Biblical record indicates that Jesus appreciated these traits of character in the women around Him. Even though it was culturally shocking, Jesus accepted that Mary washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. He understood the dynamics of the female heart. And, this female trait is a good one . . . for women.

Men, on the other hand, generally have been taught independence and self-reliance. When you and I preach to men about having a 'personal relationship with Jesus,' most simply do not identify with the concept. To a man, having a 'relationship' means action! This may explain why tough, earthy, working men rarely come to church. It may explain why high-achieving alpha males who are risk-takers, visionaries and fun-loving adventurers are rarely in our pews. And, as we prepare our sermons each week, we need to consider exactly what message we are sending through our microphone to the ears of our male listeners. Where, for example, did Jesus say to have a 'relationship' with Him? No, Jesus said, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men!" *Action!*

There's nothing passive about Jesus' instructions! And those big, burly fishermen on the Sea of Galilee jumped up and followed Jesus! *Action!* No wonder men would rather hunt or fish or play sports. No wonder many countries broadcast races, wrestling, boxing, football, soccer and other activities on their national television channels. *Action!* Television producers around the world understand that men will be where the action is!

To miss the fact that men need action is to miss what it means to be male. And, to forget this when we're preparing a sermon or conducting a church board meeting is to continue to promote the status quo gender gap with services that are sixty-five percent women and thirty-five percent men. For the health of our congregations, the work of the Lord and the future of our churches, we need men!

### **Ministers can change the dynamics**

I believe it is time that both women and men who have been called to the ministry to understand the spiritual needs of men and change the dynamics of how we minister as

well as how we write and preach our sermons. It is time to become bold and passionate in seeking to draw men to the Lord with a vision for God that is breath-taking. We need to preach sermons that will challenge men to action for the gospel of Jesus Christ! This is impossible unless we, ourselves, are burning with a desire to advance the cause of Jesus Christ throughout the world. And, whether we are male or female, we must set the example as ministers of action if we wish to change the dynamics of our congregations.

I've heard, and preached, many sermons admonishing my congregation to be more loving, dependent, supportive, kind, patient and feelings-oriented. I no longer preach those types of sermons. Once I caught a glimpse of the real Jesus, Jesus the man, a man of action, I began to intentionally represent him more accurately in the pulpit as well as in our church activities that involve men. As a result, I have seen a rewarding increase in male attendance.

Here are some of the dynamics that have worked for me.

**Sermons:**

- I purposefully stress Jesus as the Bronzed Man of Galilee as a powerful leader of men. I stress Jesus' care and love for women and children but challenge the men of my congregation like this: "Jesus said, 'No one having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God.'" (Luke 9:57-62) In other words, "Do you have what it takes? Are you fit to follow Jesus?" Challenge the men to action! Jesus was not passive. He daily confronted the religious order, the status quo, and the hypocrisy of the Jewish rulers. He walked on water, cast out demons, healed the sick and raised the dead. Jesus is powerful, bold, courageous, and dangerous to complacency, confident and, above all, balanced in all aspects of life. In no way was Jesus a wimp. Help the men of your congregation to get to know Jesus as a role model for *real men!*

- Whenever I preach the 'Lamb,' I always preach the 'Lion' from the tribe of Judah who rides a white horse with a bow in his hand. Men want to follow a King, not a lamb. And, following a lamb is no longer an understandable societal metaphor as it was in Biblical times. Some languages in the world do not even have a word for 'lamb' or 'sheep.' The Inuit language is one example.
- I search for and use stories of honor, respect and integrity to stir the male heart. Men are challenged by illustrations of sacrifice both in times of war and for the faith. I try to build a passion for action in the cause of God. Some books that have been helpful in the United States include Foxes *Book of Martyrs*, *Jesus Freaks* and *Stories for a Man's Heart*.
- I use current local, national or international sports events in my sermons that appeal to men, especially if it is a sport's star or coach who has declared his love for God. Ministers who have no 'worldly knowledge' of sports, who play no sport, who are isolated from the world of men in their city, state or country, who have no knowledge of the names of local heroes, who have no idea how the local men entertain themselves, will have little connection with the men in their congregations. Here's a word of advice to both women and men pastors: take time to learn who won the local, regional and national sports events of your country! Take time to learn about your current national 'stars.' In the United States, I make sure I know who won the national golf, tennis, and racing events. I use these events as sermon illustrations.
- Male directed words are intentionally used during sermons. Words like competence, power, proving oneself, results, success, competition, and so forth.
- I employ technology such as videos and on-screen graphics to illustrate sermons. Men learn best by the use of visual aids and by observation. Sitting idle and passive in a pew while a minister 'lectures'

is terribly boring to a man of action. To bring back our spiritual MIAs into our congregations, our sermons must be alive and dynamic!

### Activities

- When activities are planned for men, never include exercises that make the male spirit uncomfortable. Don't ask men to sit in a circle, hold hands, share their feelings or read publicly. These activities embarrass most men.
- Outdoor meetings are super effective. Weekend outings such as camping, white water rafting, skiing, baseball and football games, tennis and golf are how men bond. Never think you are wasting your ministerial time by spending it in one of these activities with the men of your congregation. It may be the best witnessing you ever do!
- Play hard with the men . . .and pray even harder with them---in that order. Let the men of your congregation know that you are a *praying* as well as a *playing* pastor.
- Take every opportunity to arrange excursions to soccer, baseball, football, hockey and basketball games. Rodeos and bull-riding competition, the races and rock-climbing are just a few of the activities that the men of your congregation will enjoy. Then use these opportunities to praise God for health and fellowship and for each man present.
- Men do better with projects that have an 'end' date. Stay away from never-ending programs. This is why weekly meetings such as 'prayer meeting' generally dwindle and die---they are never ending. Instead, run a series of programs that have a start and stop date. Allow men to challenge the purpose and efficiency of your projects and programs. Men like to tinker to make things better and faster. Don't be threatened by their questions or suggestions.
- Always publicly recognize a man's accomplishments and contributions. Brag on them!

- Communicate your vision, purpose and goals regularly as you fellowship with men. Men like to know where they are going and why they are going there!
- Model what a godly man looks like and acts like. Men and boys learn by observation and men follow a leader, not a program. Be the godly leader they can follow.
- Live what you believe in front of the men—without ever being course or rough in word or deed. Ride your motor cycle to church, take that convertible out of the garage and drive it to church. Put those old baseball trophies on your desk at the church. Take that mountain bike to a men's outing where other men can join you in a ride.

### **Conclusion**

An enthusiastic effort to reach the men in our congregations will facilitate congregational growth. In fact, research shows that men have a greater impact than children and women on a families church attendance. One study shows that when a child comes to church about seventeen percent of the time the family will follow. When the mother comes to church about thirty percent of the time the family follows. But when the father comes to church about ninety-three percent of the time the family follows. (Promise Keepers at Work [Colorado Spring. Focus on the Family, 1996. 111])

It is time that we pastors make an all-out effort to bring our men who have been spiritual MIAs back to church. Our challenge is to preach and administer our churches so that men will understand that 'real men' go to church. We want them to learn to know the only 'real man' who ever lived. Then, as sons of the Most High God, men will find a brotherhood within the church from which they may draw their identity and where their church experience will have eternal significance. When that happens, we will fill our pews with both women and men and the cause of God will be greatly strengthened.

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