MISSION DRIFT

THE UNSPOKEN CRISIS FACING LEADERS, CHARITIES, AND CHURCHES

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FOREWORD BY ANDY CROUCH

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Dedicated to the men and women who faithfully
lead Mission True organizations

And to Laurel, Keith, Liliana & Myles and Alli & Desmond
for the abundant doses of grace, enthusiasm,
and love you share with us every day.

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Foreword

Peter Greer and Chris Horst have identified one of the deepest challenges any leader faces: how to ensure that an organization stays true to its mission, especially when that mission becomes countercultural. And they squarely face a more specific challenge of our time: how to create lasting institutions that forthrightly place the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ at the heart of their mission.

I appreciate the way Peter and Chris are careful to affirm the good things that institutions do even without a faith commitment. The "Y" is a great place to play basketball, and basketball is a great part of being human. But Peter and Chris want us to ponder the path to the "Y" from the "YMCA." The Y has gradually elided not just three-quarters of its name, but much of its original Christian mission, and most traces of its founding history, from its institutional identity. What happened to the comprehensive vision of human flourishing that once might have placed the real good of basketball in a context of greater goods and God's ultimate good? Drift happened.

To be sure, one person (or generation)'s "drift" is another's "growth." But Peter and Chris remind us that too often, institutional drift is fundamentally unintended, the result not of sober and faithful choices in response to wider changes but simply unchosen, unreflective assimilation. Peter and Chris are not asking us to create organizations that never grow or change—they are asking us to create organizations

that do not drift passively downstream when the cultural currents become swift.

They are marvelously honest about the sources of drift. Money plays a key role (as they remind us, you cannot understand the secularization of American colleges and universities without understanding the role of the Carnegie pension bequest). There is also the simple failure to pay attention at crucial moments, such as the selection of board members or the words we use to describe ourselves and our cause to diverse audiences. Most of all there is the scandal of the Gospel, which constantly calls all human beings and human institutions to repentance and transformation rather than accommodation and self-preservation.

This book addresses two dimensions of Mission Drift. The first kind is the drift that can happen on our watch, even under our very noses, when we take our mission for granted. The second is the drift that may or will happen after our watch, and direct influence, has ended.

The first kind is above all a call to personal humility and accountability. I found their reminder of why leaders fail—precisely at the moments when they seem to be succeeding—bracing and challenging. The greatest temptations, it seems, come at moments of great success or promise of success, the moments when it is easiest to forget our desperate need for God, without whom we can do nothing truly good or enduring.

The second kind of drift, meanwhile, is a call to *institutional* humility and accountability. I've had the opportunity to personally witness what happens at 11 a.m. in the offices of International Justice Mission, when meetings, email, and phone calls screech to a halt and the entire staff gathers for prayer. Peter and Chris describe the board members of the Crowell Trust taking time every single year to pray and read its founding funder's vision out loud. These are vivid examples of institutionalized humility (as strange as that phrase sounds)—practices that keep ambitious and energetic people grounded in something beyond themselves, something that came before and will endure after their momentary stewardship of the organization's mission.

The point of this book is not to denigrate or denounce the institutions that have changed, even from Christian roots, to become

something quite different. Indeed, we need institutions that cross boundaries and barriers in our pluralistic, secular world, making room for faith without requiring it. I love Peter and Chris's appreciation for the genuine flourishing, and room for faith, that is possible at secularized institutions like Harvard University. There are still plenty of young Christian men who are called to play basketball at the Y, alongside neighbors who may not share their faith. Avoiding Mission Drift does not require us to retreat into safe, sectarian subcultures.

But some of us are called to tend earthen vessels that hold an incomparable treasure: the scandalous offer of grace from the world's Creator, through the sending and self-giving of the Son, in the power of the Spirit. Staying Mission True requires first of all that each of us become, personally, more and more deeply converted by this unlikely and beautiful mission. And then we are called, no doubt with fear and trembling, to do our best to build structures that will help that mission be encountered and believed long after we are gone.

Thankfully, this is not just our mission—in fact, in the most important sense it is not our mission at all. It is the mission of the One who will remain true even if all prove false, who has never drifted from His love and creative purpose. "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

—Andy Crouch

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The Unspoken Crisis

Mission Drift is a crisis facing all faith-based organizations

Without careful attention, faith-based organizations will inevitably drift from their founding mission.

It's that simple. It will happen.

Slowly, silently, and with little fanfare, organizations routinely drift from their original purpose, and most will never return to their original intent. It has happened repeatedly throughout history and it was happening to us.

On the top floor of a Houston high-rise, I (Peter) sat across from a senior executive of a global oil and gas corporation. He led the company's charitable giving.

For over two years, we had cultivated this relationship. Late into many evenings, HOPE International staff members wrote reports to meet their deadlines. We even sent a field director to visit their London office—offering an inside glimpse of our microenterprise programs in sub-Saharan Africa. Until now, their financial support had been valuable, but relatively small scale.

But that could change. The executive articulated that he'd caught our vision. He wanted to help us provide business training, create savings accounts, and give small-business loans to many more under-resourced entrepreneurs in some of the most challenging countries in the world.

Rising from his seat, he said, "There is just one remaining issue." He paused. I held my breath.

"We are a publicly traded company and we cannot fund organizations that are so overtly faith based."

If our organization would tone down our Christian mission, his foundation would champion our cause. And we weren't talking pennies. They were ready to write a very large check. With their support, we could help many poor entrepreneurs throughout Africa and Asia pursue their dreams. Thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands—more individuals could break the cycle of poverty.

I did not give an immediate response. Instead I thanked him for the offer and headed to the airport.

I didn't know what to do.

Everything in me wanted to make this work. We were friends. The company possessed extraordinary giving potential. I respected its leaders. And we were cash strapped.

Several of our board members initially encouraged us to explore a creative way to develop this partnership. For the good of our mission, couldn't we just "tone down" our Christian identity?

This began a critical conversation within our organization about Mission Drift. How does it happen? And more important, what can we do to prevent it? These questions prompted us to look around.

And what we found concerned us. Mission Drift wasn't just threatening us.

Pastor Training School

Consider this mission statement of a well-known university: "To be plainly instructed and consider well that the main end of your life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ."

Founded in 1636, this university employed exclusively Christian professors, emphasized character formation in its students above all else, and

rooted all its policies and practices in a Christian worldview. This school served as a bastion of academic excellence and Christian distinction.[1]

This mission statement, however, is not from Dallas Theological Seminary. Neither is it from Wheaton College. It's from *Harvard University*—this statement described their founding mission. Harvard began as a school to equip ministers to share the Good News.

Today, Harvard is an incredible institution with an unmatched reputation, but it no longer resembles its founding. A few years ago, I (Peter) attended Harvard for graduate school. I loved it. Dynamic and engaging, the professors and students alike pushed each other and eagerly sought to find solutions to the world's most challenging issues. I couldn't get enough. Some of my best memories were in Cambridge with faculty and friends.

My wife, Laurel, and I lived on Massachusetts Avenue and each morning, I hopped on my secondhand Schwinn bike, my books and laptop strapped to my back. When I neared the school, I watched the synchronized rowing of the Harvard crew slice through the water on the Charles River.

Watching them, you got the sense that a lot at Harvard hasn't changed since its founding.

Harvard is distinctly New England—and colonial New England at that. On my way to Swahili class at Sever Hall, I walked by John Harvard's statue. With his colonial garb, the university's first donor fit right in. From its architecture to its tradition, much of Harvard's legacy is still intact.

But Harvard's spiritual heritage is less visible. Aside from words on my diploma that read, *Christo et Ecclesiae* around *Veritas*, meaning "Truth for Christ and the Church," little evidence suggests it was a distinctly Christian school.

Mission Drift Defined

Only 80 years after its founding, Harvard's identity was shifting. A group of New England pastors sensed Harvard had drifted too far for their liking.[2] Concerned by the secularization at Harvard, they founded a new stronghold of Christian higher education in 1701.[3]

Clergyman Cotton Mather approached a wealthy philanthropist who shared their concerns. This man, Elihu Yale, financed their efforts in 1718, and they named the college after him, the institution today known as Yale University.[4]

Yale's motto was not just *Veritas* (truth) like Harvard, but *Lux et Veritas* (light and truth). These pastors hoped to avoid the drift they saw at Harvard.

But today, neither Harvard nor Yale resembles the universities their founders envisioned. At the 350th anniversary celebration of Harvard, Steven Muller, former president of Johns Hopkins University, didn't mince words: "The bad news is the university has become godless."[5]

Larry Summers, the president of Harvard while I was there, confirmed Muller's assessment, acknowledging, "Things divine have been central neither to my professional nor to my personal life."[6]

Our contention is not with the institutions Harvard and Yale are today. It's with the institutions they are not. Their founders were unmistakably clear in their goals: academic excellence and Christian formation. Today, they do something very different from their founding purpose. What happened to Harvard and Yale is the reality of Mission Drift.

Mission Drift unfolds slowly. Like a current, it carries organizations away from their core purpose and identity.

The changes at Harvard and Yale are dramatic, but they are not isolated incidents. The more we learned about Harvard and Yale, the more concerned we were about our own organization.

The Natural Course

Our decision point came when we'd been offered a very large check. In the boardroom, the executive's challenge—*tone down your Christian distinctiveness or forfeit our funding*—awakened us to the possibility of drift.

This potential major donor forced us to reexamine ourselves, to gain perspective, to take stock of where we were headed. This conversation was a gift that shaped the course of our organization more than any financial donation ever could.

After deciding to turn down this funding because we could not in good conscience "tone down" our Christian identity, we decided to go deeper in exploring where we might find the currents of Mission Drift.

Researching this key topic became our obsession and led us to the conclusion that Mission Drift isn't just a HOPE International problem. It's pervasive and affects faith-based organizations of all varieties—nonprofits, churches, denominations, businesses, foundations, and schools.

"It's the exception that an organization stays true to its mission," said Chris Crane, president and CEO of Edify. "The natural course—the unfortunate natural evolution of many originally Christ-centered missions—is to drift," he said.[7]

Franciscan Food Banks

The backdrop for our research is our industry. We work for HOPE International, a Christ-centered microenterprise development organization. Founded by a local church in response to needs in the former Soviet Union, our mission has always been to address material and spiritual needs in places of intense poverty.

By offering training, savings services, and small business loans through over 1,200 "missionary bankers," we actively share the Good News of Jesus Christ and equip families to work their way out of poverty. Today, across the HOPE global network, we serve over 600,000 clients in seventeen countries.

It seems inconceivable we would ever lose sight of our mission. But it is sobering to look at an ancient movement resembling our own and see how easy it is for Mission Drift to occur.

In the Middle Ages, the church sponsored a charity similar to modern-day urban food banks. Created as an alternative to loan sharks, *montes pietatius* helped poor people manage meager incomes.

These charities provided low-interest loans to poor families, ensuring there was enough food on the table. Started by the Franciscans, who opened more than one hundred fifty *montes pietatius*,[8] they became widespread throughout Europe. In 1514, even Pope Julius II gave an

edict endorsing them.[9] The institutions were the lifeblood of poor European peasants.

Today, we know them as pawn shops.[10]

Pawn shops evolved from a tool designed to care for the needy to an instrument often preying on families in distress. Something intended for good drifted from its mission.

A few blocks from my (Chris's) house, a rundown pawn shop advertises its services to the low-income families who live in the neighborhood. I often drive by and see women and men at the point of desperation walking through the doors.

In the 1300s, people in poverty met caring friars when they entered the doors of pawn shops. The shops existed to help the poor get back on their feet, and these friars had their best interests in mind. Today, often the opposite is true.

Over time, pawn shop owners lost sight of their identity. Created for good, pawn shops have drifted away from their purpose.

In physics, a theory for drift exists. The second law of thermodynamics states that in the natural order of the universe, things degenerate, rather than come together. For example, when a frying pan is taken off the stove, heat diffuses in the air, leaving the pan cooler.

Unless heat is added—someone puts the frying pan back on the stove—it will cool and settle back to room temperature.[11] What we see in science (and the kitchen) we found to be the norm within organizations.[12]

Here's the reality: Mission Drift is the natural course for organizations, and it takes focused attention to safeguard against it. Once an organization ignores its source of heat, drift is only a matter of time.

Are We Adrift?

In a survey of hundreds of Christian leaders at the Q conference in Los Angeles in 2013, 95 percent said Mission Drift was a *challenging* issue to faith-based nonprofit organizations.[13]

As we began talking with Christian leaders, many recognized the pervasiveness of Mission Drift. Many lamented the drift they saw in their own organizations. Or they noted the ongoing challenges they

faced in keeping their organizations on mission. But are we willing to ask the hard questions in order to address it?

It would be easy to write off Harvard and Yale's drift from their founding identity and purpose if they were exceptions. But Mission Drift is not relegated to the halls of Ivy League universities.

Mission Drift is a very real possibility for every organization. The zeal and beliefs of the founders are insufficient safeguards. There is no immunity, no matter how concrete your mission statement is. Or how passionate your leaders are. Or how much you believe it could never happen to you.

The more layers we peeled back, the more we began to see we were vulnerable. We discovered we'd already made compromises on our very DNA.

Though we had financial metrics, we didn't measure holistic transformation.

We had no way of formally assessing whether board members joining the organization bought into the full mission.

We didn't have structures to ensure our global staff members were in a vibrant relationship with Christ.

Our programs didn't systematically disciple or encourage spiritual growth in our staff members.

We had mission and vision statements but had not fully incorporated our beliefs into our culture and operations.

The Houston oil and gas corporation opened a window into the gravitational tug of Mission Drift. The deeper we looked, the more we learned faith-based organizations face the pull of secularization every day. In all facets of their missions.

In our self-exploration, we discovered we were making small decisions that, compounded over time, would lead to Mission Drift. If unchecked, we'd inevitably follow the pattern of organizations like Harvard and Yale.

Most organizations have not willingly, consciously, changed direction. Most have not volitionally chosen to soften their Christian distinctiveness. Neither Harvard nor Yale held a "mission change day" where they mapped out their new identity. Instead, they drifted quietly, gradually, and slowly. And one day, they hardly resembled the institutions their founders intended.

As we began looking at Harvard, Yale, and ourselves, we began to feel as if drift was inevitable. Is it even possible to stay distinctively Christian as you grow and professionalize? We began looking to our peers, hoping to find a path forward.

We found reasons to be optimistic that drift is not inevitable.