

Conversation #6

WHAT CULTURAL TRENDS ARE WE MISSING?

The rapid shift in culture has been a refrain throughout this book so far. That's because the shift happening in our culture is, I think, seismic. Historians still speak of the radical changes that happened to Western culture (and beyond) when, more than seventeen hundred years ago, the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion of the empire. In my view, the shift happening now in the West toward a post-Christian culture will be something equally dramatic. And naturally, as people caught in the midst of a cultural shift this size, we are unable to understand all the implications and consequences, in the same way fourth-century Christians who grew up being persecuted couldn't have understood what happened to their culture as Christianity took hold of the Roman world and beyond. Our vision is partial, and the change continues to evolve beyond our control.

That doesn't mean we can't know anything about the shifting culture. While conversations like this will always be temporary in nature and subject to change, it's imperative to have them. If you're over forty (and many church leaders are), the world into which you were born no longer exists. And if you're trying to reach people younger than you, your assumptions about what they value, what's happening in their lives, and how they see the world will often be inaccurate. Church leaders who study the trends happening around us and stay current with shifts in thinking and ideologies will always have an easier time connecting with emerging generations than those who don't.

And yet this is a conversation that's easier *not* to have than it is to have. When you lead an organization—especially when you are responsible for leading an organization like the local church—there is a temptation to ignore trends or minimize the impact they will have on how you operate. This is particularly true in successful churches. If it's “working,” why bother to think about the day when it might not work anymore? Add to that the fact that it's so difficult to gain momentum that, when you have some momentum, it becomes tempting to ignore the changes around you because they might force you to rethink your method. But the truth is that your method (your strategy, your approach, your plan) is not sacred; the mission is sacred.

Churches that will thrive over the long run will study culture, and in that process, they will become flexible, agile, and adaptive. In a business context, Andy Molinsky calls this characteristic of certain leaders and organizations “global dexterity”: the ability to adapt behaviors across cultures without losing who you are in the process.³² Leaders who are willing to reconsider the methods to preserve the mission are usually the ones who succeed long term.

To that end, new and emerging trends are all around us. You can't miss them, actually. Our lives are impacted by them every day. *Yet many church leaders are not talking about their impact.* I suspect one of the reasons we're not talking about these issues might be that few of these trends have clear-cut or obvious implications for the church; there are no easy or snappy answers. Most of the thinking around these trends leads to what I call “wet-cement conversations”: thoughts that are open to reshaping, rethinking, and reconsidering. Not every leader is comfortable with that kind of conversation. But what follows are many of the issues that we indeed need to be thinking through, observing, and praying over. Even if it results in speculative conversations for your team, to speculate is better than to ignore. And, naturally, you will add your own opinions and observations to the

dialogue as it develops. It's exciting to think of what might happen if thousands of church leaders engage the realities that continue to unfold around us in Western culture. Church leaders who see the future can seize the future.

CULTURAL TRENDS CHURCH LEADERS CAN'T IGNORE (BUT MIGHT)

While there are dozens of trends impacting the culture, the trends that follow are what I would call "organizational sleepers." These are the ones that, at least in my view, church leaders are most likely to ignore when gathered around a leadership table.

Online as the new default. Less than two decades ago, you had to go to church to hear a message or to experience church music. Or you had to ask someone to mail you a cassette or CD of the service. In other words, it was work. Now you just need a smartphone. Every attender can (and often will) listen to any communicator, band, or concert they want. And almost everyone who shows up at your door has checked out your church online before they came. *What are you doing to embrace the online world beyond a barely supported and moderately outdated website, podcast, or Facebook page?* (The conversation about online being the new default is explored in greater detail in chapter 2.)

WiFi and smartphones. On that note, WiFi is everywhere, and even if it's not publicly available in your church, people still have their phones. People who are listening to you are Googling you while you're speaking. When you make your announcements and invite them to something, they're checking out other options while you're listing yours. *Do you assume your audience is intelligent, literate, and has options?*

Dialogue. People want to talk, not just listen. While sitting around tables every Sunday may not be the answer, increasingly a church without conversation is a church without converts. Churches that elevate community across the ages, from kids to adults, will have a more effective ministry than churches that don't. *What scalable, meaningful venues do you have for people to visit online and in-house for real conversation?*

Loyalty. Brand loyalty is low. Four of the top five global companies didn't exist forty years ago.³³ Being around for a long time can be seen as a liability with the next generation.³⁴ And even if you are a church plant, loyalty is still fickle. *How are you showing the relevance of an ancient faith to the current generation?*

Lack of guilt. Guilt used to motivate people to change and even to come to faith. The next generation feels less guilt than almost any previous generation. In many church circles, loyalty is earned, in part, by making people feel guilty if they don't serve, don't give, or leave. This simply becomes less effective with every passing year. *Are you still using guilt to motivate people?*

Declining trust in authority. People will still trust authority when the authority has *earned* their confidence. But most people today, particularly unchurched people, start out with suspicion as their primary approach to the church and its leaders. More than ever, trust is earned slowly and lost instantly. Authentic, honest, transparent leadership will continue to be far more effective than closed, secretive, or powertrip-style leadership. *Is the way you exercise authority worthy of people's*

confidence?

Declining trust in institutions. The generation that had inherent trust in institutions is disappearing. Today, leaders have to show people how an organization can help them, because by default, they don't think it can or will. Most people will opt for self-directed spirituality over institutionally led spirituality (see the next point). *How are you demonstrating trustworthiness?*

Personalized, eclectic spirituality. People want to find their own unique path, and most start out that way, exploring different faiths and even making up their own versions of what they think faith should be. Eventually, some of them will embrace the path of Christ, but they don't start out there. *How do you embrace where they start but encourage them not to finish there?*

Desire for greater purpose. As noted in other chapters of this book, millennials will not stay long at work or causes that have little greater meaning or purpose. They have no desire to help any leader preserve an institution or tradition; instead they want to be part of a mission that is accomplishing something significant in the world. Younger leaders, by the way, get this, which is why you need them in your organization.³⁵ *Are your mission and vision clear, compelling, and inexhaustible?*

Personal mission. People aren't waiting for some organization or leader to change the world—they'll just do it themselves. From charity runs to starting nonprofits from home, the next generation not only believes they can have a global impact—many are having it. If your church doesn't have a burning sense of purpose and vision, you look lame compared to the average twenty-two-year-old. *How is your vision motivating people who have vision?*

Trust in user reviews. What you say about your organization matters less than what others say. People place far more trust in user reviews than in advertising copy. On sites like Amazon, the user reviews are read with much greater care than any copy produced by a publisher or manufacturer. *What are others saying about your church, and how would people find that out?*

The death of cash and checks. When was the last time you wrote a check or paid \$500 cash for something? No one does that anymore. But every Sunday most church leaders expect most of the offering to come in via cash or check. *Is most of your giving happening online? Why not?*

Those are twelve microtrends in our culture that deserve the attention of church leaders, and you can come up with many more. I'll outline a few more in this next section specifically related to technology and the way people consume content, and then I'll take a (dangerous) crack at answering the most perplexing questions of all: Where is all of this heading? What will the future church be like?

FIVE THINGS NETFLIX IS SHOWING CHURCH LEADERS ABOUT THE FUTURE

Netflix and other on-demand video providers have already changed the culture more than you think. And they've probably changed *you* more than you think. It feels like a long time ago that people gathered around a TV screen together to watch a show live when it was first broadcast. The way we

view and consume content as a culture likely has massive impact on the way the church will interact with people in the future in terms of distributing and sharing content (messages, Bible studies, kids' curriculum, and more). There are at least five ways the changes introduced by Netflix (and the like) will impact the future church.

1. Live, simultaneous viewing is dying.

About the only thing many people watch live now is sports, particularly if you monitor the viewing habits of people under forty. Even regular shows people follow are often DVR'd so people can skip through commercials. Even though I'm over forty, I rarely watch network television; but when I do, I'll record a show and start watching it fifteen to twenty minutes late so I can skip the commercials. A couple of implications for church leaders:

Will once on Sunday seem strange? People are increasingly used to listening to your content on their schedule. If your main draw on Sunday morning is the message, offering it only once live on Sunday will not resonate as much in the future as it has in the past. While this might not mean adding more services (extra services with twelve people attending are not compelling), it does force you to reconsider what you're doing and why you're doing it.

Relationships and mission will be more powerful than singing and speaking. While a message and music have always been important aspects of Christian gatherings, the gathering of the church at its best has always been about more than just a service or even a message on Sunday. The church is a community on a common mission in which relationships with insiders and outsiders are central. Churches that elevate relationship, both for new attenders and regular attenders, will see far more effectiveness in the future than churches that don't. In fact, you might even see more people drawn to your church not just for the services but also for the relationships and for a chance to make a difference working together on a common mission. If all you do is sing and speak on Sunday, it will become harder and harder to gather a crowd.

2. Watching is becoming personal, individual, and portable.

Like you, I now consume content on multiple devices. I can watch TV, movies, and Netflix on my phone, iPad, laptop, desktop, or TV. And, like you, I simply pick up where I left off. Stop a show at 33:23 on one device and pick up at 33:24 on another, whenever you want. Start at the gym and finish in the car or on the back deck.

Netflix allows subscribers to create individual users on a common account so your kids or spouse can watch what they're watching and you can watch what you're watching without messing up each other's feed. As a result, various members of a household may be watching the same series but will be at different places in the series.

The implication for church leaders is that one more shift from the communal to the individual is happening. And that tears at the fabric of what the church is about—a community. So what on earth does that mean?

It's an opportunity for people to access your content the same way they access other content. Like many churches, we created an app for Connexus that allows people to stream messages whenever and wherever they want across devices. Our content is available on our website in addition to via podcast. Accessing your messages will become more personal,

individual, and portable. Embrace it. I realize that this sometimes means people will watch online rather than attend, but it's also a great way to spread the message more quickly than otherwise. People who love what you do will share it with their friends and talk about it on social media.

People will still need to feel connected to something greater. As people's experience of content consumption on an individual level becomes more prevalent, the need for community still won't go away. We're more connected than ever as a culture, and many people are lonelier than ever. As much as people want individualized access to content, they also want to be part of something bigger than themselves. Mission-driven, mission-focused, and relationally rich churches will draw in people longing for something bigger and more significant than themselves.

3. There's a market for binge watching.

Binge watching is increasingly normal. Although it may have started back in the '80s or '90s when people lined up VCR tapes or DVDs and watched them in a marathon session, now it's just far too easy to press *play* from your couch without ever getting up. Since Netflix streams entire series commercial free, you can easily power through several seasons of your favorite show in a week or even a day. New seasons of series are now released all at once rather than episode by episode (week after week) as in the past, again resulting in binge watching for many viewers.

The implications for church leaders are actually quite good on this one. People will consume really great content in marathons, including yours. Your audio podcast could become a place where people go through an entire series while on their commute or working out. Your video podcast could become the subject of binge viewing. Ditto with your website. Some churches like North Point are even building microsites around each sermon series.³⁶ Bottom line? Make sure your content is accessible in the *easiest* forms possible for people to access.

4. Great stories are alive and valued.

It's becoming widely accepted that the best content being produced these days is not coming from Hollywood or even network TV, but from cable specialty channels and new content producers, like Netflix itself. Those shows win the ratings wars because of rich plot lines, complex characters, and willingness to take viewers seriously. Many of these cable series refuse to dumb down their content. Many critics believe TV has become what movies used to be: a forum in which great stories are told.

The gospel has always been about God's story intersecting with the human story. The church is uniquely positioned to tell the best story of all. So do it, *well*. Clearly people are looking for a better, richer, deeper story. Church leaders need to bring it to them.

5. People will pay for something they don't use, until one day, they won't.

I realize I pay almost \$100 a month for something I almost never use: network TV. I rarely watch it anymore. I hold out and pay the monthly bill because I *might* watch the World Series or the Super Bowl. I don't do illegal downloads, and watching live sports in Canada legally without subscription TV is more difficult than in the United States. But seriously—\$1,200 a year in case I *might* watch something? I could almost fly to the World Series for that.

For the first time in the United States, traditional television subscriptions are declining.³⁷ This is only going to accelerate. If your entire church model is built on people coming together at set times to

“consume” content, how long will it be until people eventually wake up and realize they are paying for something they rarely “use”? This is a bit of hyperbole, of course, when it comes to the church, because the church is *so* much more than a common gathering around content. Except that sometimes it’s not. It should be, but it’s not.

If you are simply trying to attract people to a one-hour event that people increasingly don’t attend, you will always struggle. People will support something they don’t attend until one day, they won’t.

The good news? Mission-centered, mission-focused churches will not be impacted by this. A church that has a white hot sense of mission will almost always have the resources it needs to do what the church is called to do. But churches who want to prop up what used to sort of work won’t. So focus on your mission. Focus on your purpose. Call people to something greater than themselves.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE CHURCH LOOK LIKE?

So if everything’s changing, what will the church look like in the future? That’s a great question, and the truth is, no one is 100 percent certain. While no one’s *really* sure of what’s ahead, talking about it at least allows us to position our churches for impact in a changing world. So, borne out of a love for the gathered church, here are a few thoughts. Consider it thinking in pencil, not ink.

Gatherings will be smaller and larger at the same time. While many might think the megachurch is dead, it’s not.³⁸ There are more people attending large churches than ever before, and that trend continues to accelerate. We will likely see large churches get larger. The multisite model will continue to explode as churches that are effective expand their mission. At the same time, churches will also establish smaller, more intimate gatherings, as millennials and others seek tighter connections and groups.³⁹ Paradoxically, future large churches will likely become large not because they necessarily gather thousands in one space, but because they gather thousands through dozens of smaller gatherings under some form of shared leadership. Some of those gatherings might be as simple as coffee shop and even home venues under a simple structure. We will see the emergence of bigger churches and smaller churches at the same time as the gathered church continues to change.

Churches will have a quicker, lighter footprint. Ancillary to the trend of churches becoming larger and smaller at the same time, growing churches will adapt a quicker, lighter footprint—a phrase I learned from Rich Birch.⁴⁰ Many large churches have expanded over the last decade by erecting large campuses that cost millions of dollars to build. That may continue in select cases, but for most churches, if you’re waiting for millions to build your building, you might wait forever. Churches will get innovative and start looking at portable and nontraditional ways of growing ministry.

Quicker, lighter footprints will be necessary as the economics of church change and the agility needed by churches to respond to growth continues to escalate.

They will prioritize a for-you not a from-you culture. Andy Stanley often talks about what he wants *for* people, not just what he wants *from* them. Churches in decline often think in terms of what they can get *from* people—money, time, growth, etc. Churches that will make an impact on the future will be passionate about what they want *for* people—financial balance, generosity, the joy of serving, healthier families, and of course, Christ at the center of everyone’s life.

More church staff will come from the marketplace rather than seminaries. This breaks my heart, but

the most gifted leaders are not flocking toward ministry or seminary anymore (I wish they would). They are heading into the marketplace. The best church staff moving forward will not be products of traditional seminaries. Sure, there will be exceptions, but for the most part, you will assemble your team from gifted and passionate people who already attend your church and have never thought about ministry as a vocation. (You might end up sending some of them to seminary after the fact.) I realize this trend has been happening for several decades now in growing churches. But I think in the next decade this will hit the senior pastor position harder than ever. Maybe the senior pastors who will lead the best churches of the next twenty years won't come from seminary. How we will get them educated in Scripture and theology remains a question. Rethinking theological education is critical.

Churches that love their model more than the mission will die. Many individual congregations and some entire denominations won't survive the next ten years. The difference between those who make it and those who don't will be the difference between those who cling to the mission and those who cling to the model. When you go through a cultural shift as deep as the present shift, the mission survives but the model changes.

Think about the invention of the car. When the automobile was invented, it quickly took over from the horse and buggy. Buggy manufacturers were relegated to boutique status and many went under, but human transportation actually exploded. Suddenly average people could travel at a level they never could before. The mission is travel. The model is a buggy, or car, or motorcycle, or jet.

Look at the changes in the publishing, music, and even photography industry in the last few years and you'll see the trend. The mission is reading. It's music. It's photography. The model always shifts, moving from things like eight-tracks, cassettes, and CDs to MP3s and now streaming audio and video. Companies that show innovation around the mission (Apple, Samsung) will always beat companies that remain devoted to the method (Kodak).

Churches need to stay focused on the mission (leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus) and be exceptionally innovative in their model.

The church will still gather. As radical as the shift we're seeing is, the church will continue to gather on weekends. If you read the comments on a sampling of church leadership blogs, you might think that some Christians believe the best thing to do is to give up on Christian gatherings of any kind. This line of thinking is naive. While some will leave, it does not change the fact that the church has *always* gathered because the church is inherently communal. What Christians can do together far surpasses what we can do alone. So while our gatherings might shift and look different from they do today, they will endure. They might even spread and grow.

Consumer Christianity will die and a more selfless discipleship will emerge. Consumer Christianity asks, *What can I get from God?* It asks, *What's in it for me?* That leads us to evaluate our church, our faith, our experience, and each other according to our preferences and whims. Many critics of the church have left under the pull of consumer Christianity because "nothing" meets their needs.

All of this is antithetical to the gospel, which calls us to die to ourselves—to lose ourselves for the sake of Christ. As the church reforms and repents, a more authentic, more selfless church will emerge. Sure, we will still have to make decisions about music, gathering times, and even some distinctions about what we believe, but the tone will be different. When you're no longer focused on yourself and your viewpoint, a new tone emerges.

Sundays will become more about what we give than what we get. The death of consumer Christianity will also change how we gather. Our gatherings will become less about us, our preferences, and our tastes, and more about Jesus and the world He loves. Rather than a gathering of the already convinced, churches that remain will be decidedly outsider focused. And words will be supplemented with deeds.

In the future church, being right will be less important than doing right. Sure, that involves social justice and meeting physical needs, but it also involves treating people with kindness and compassion in everyday life and attending to their spiritual well-being. This is the kind of outward focus that drove the rapid expansion of the first-century church.

Attendance will no longer drive engagement; engagement will drive attendance. Currently, many churches try to get people to attend, hoping it drives engagement. In the future that will flip. The engaged will attend, in large measure because only the engaged will remain. If you really think about this, engagement-driven attendance is exactly what has fuelled the church at its best moments throughout history. It's an exciting shift. As we saw in chapter 2, ironically, leaders who value attendance over engagement will see declining attendance.

Simplified ministries will complement people's lives, not compete with people's lives. For years, the assumption has been that the more a church grew, the more activity it would offer. The challenge, of course, is that church can easily end up burning people out. In some cases, people end up with no life except church life. Some churches offer so many programs for families that families don't even have a chance to be families. The church at its best has always equipped people to live out their faith in the world. But you have to be *in* the world to influence the world. Churches that focus their energies on the few things the *church* can uniquely do best will emerge as the most effective churches moving forward. Simplified churches will complement people's witness, not compete with people's witness.

Online church will supplement the journey but not become the journey. Online church and social media have shown up at many points within the discussions in this book. So what will happen to it years down the road? I think in certain niches, online church might become the church for some who simply have no other access to church. But there is something about human relationship that requires presence. Because the church at its fullest will always gather, online church will supplement the journey. I believe that online relationships are real relationships, but they are not the greatest relationships people can have. Think of it like meeting someone online. You can have a fantastic relationship. But if you fall in love, you ultimately want to meet and spend your life together. So it is with Jesus, people, and the church.

Online church will become more of a front door than a back door. A second truth about online church is that its audience will likely change within the next five to ten years. There's no question that today online church has become a back door for Christians who are done with attending church or only feel like attending in person on occasion. While online church is an amazing supplement for people who can't get to a service, it's still an off-ramp for Christians whose commitment to faith is perhaps less than it might have been at an earlier point.

Within a few years, the dust will settle and a new role for online church and online ministry will emerge. Online church has the potential to become a massive front door for the curious, the unconvinced, and for those who want to know what Christianity is all about.

In the same way you purchase almost nothing without reading online reviews or rarely visit a restaurant without checking it out online first, a church's online presence will be a first home for people and, for many, will lead to a personal connection with Christ and ultimately the gathered church.

Online relationships will be valued as real relationships. Churches that haven't ventured much beyond a website are going to miss the boat. Real interaction with real people online is, well, real. Sure, face-to-face is deeper, but people will tell you things online they can't muster the courage to tell you face-to-face. Whether you get them to a "real" church is increasingly debatable. I would love that. But we'll have to see. As much as you might hate it, virtual relationships are becoming real relationships.

THE FUTURE IS GOD'S ... AND YOURS

Ultimately, I have a lot of hope for the future church. I hope you do, too. The mission is too important to think otherwise. The church has withstood much over the centuries, and because it is Jesus' idea, not ours, the church will endure. That said, the church is a unique divine-human partnership; God could have chosen to act alone. Instead, he chose to partner with us to reach the world with his love. So your response as a leadership team really matters. As more and more church leaders pour their hearts, minds, and souls into the challenges and opportunities ahead—and share what they learn with other leaders—we will see the mission of the church become effective for a new generation.

Conversation #6

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk About It

1. How has the world you grew up in changed? Which changes do you like the most? Which do you like the least?
2. As you read through the twelve trends listed on pages 113–117, which surprise you the most?
3. Which of the twelve trends has your church addressed? Which trend appears to be the one you are least ready to deal with?
4. How have you seen the content consumption patterns created by companies like Netflix influence the way people interact with your church?
5. Are Sundays at your church more about what people get or more about what people give? In what ways is that distinction important?
6. Of the eleven predictions about what the church will look like in the future, which are you most ready to embrace? Which are you least ready to embrace? Why?
7. Does what's happening with online church and social media feel more like a threat to you or an opportunity to you? Why?
8. What do you think will happen to your church if you ignore these trends?

Get Practical

So much is changing in our culture, it's hard to know where to start. Re-read the chapter and select between two and five trends that you think you are best prepared to respond to. Which is most prevalent in your area? Which is most prevalent in the age group you're trying to reach?

Make It Happen

Identify the single best opportunity you have to respond to a cultural trend that's impacting your ministry. Once you've identified it, create a six-month plan to deal with it.

Then, examine the other trends you short-listed in the "Get Practical" section above and design a one- to two-year plan to address each of the obstacles.