



MINISTRY IN
2018

BY ALAN NELSON

Everyone agrees that times are changing, which means ministry today requires savvy thinking. Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky said that the secret of his success was that while other players skated to where the puck was, he skated to where the puck was going to be. Figuring out where the ministerial puck is going is no easy task, but Rev! assembled a group of individuals to give you some insights as to national culture and religious trends that

ing what the ministry horizon has in store for us, we thought we'd gather some forecasters to help us get a better feel of the trends and where they may be leading us. John Cionca, professor of leadership transformation at Bethel Seminary, Todd Rhoades, founder of ChurchStaffing.com and now with Leadership Network, and Brian Mavis, founder of SermonCentral.com and now with LifeBridge Christian Church and the Externally Focused Church Network, sat down with me over lunch. We talked shop like frat brothers. The topic: How will church be different

10 years from now? Then we collated our list of a dozen predictions and shopped them around to a few others for their input and push-back.

Delving into the future may not seem very pragmatic, but

it is important to know what's happening and where we're headed, in order to be good stewards of our resources. Investing in cassettes on the verge of going digital wouldn't be wise. Likewise, creating ministries, buildings, and staffing toward diminishing trends is not a good use of our resources. Although some may see the dark clouds in a few of these ideas, with every loss comes a potential gain. From the compost pile can grow the largest fruit, if we plant well. This is the hope and spirit of those who participated in this conversation.

There Will Be Fewer Mega-Campuses Built (But There Will Be More Mega-Ministries)

As Baby Boomers retire in droves, who will pay to build and maintain these giant campuses? Subsequent generations aren't that interested and as technology improves, multi-site churches will make more sense. Some large ministries ►►

WHAT WILL THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE BE LIKE? ■ WILL NEW TECHNOLOGIES HELP OR HINDER AUTHENTIC FAITH? ■ WHAT ABOUT ALL OF THOSE BOOMERS GOING INTO RETIREMENT? THEN WHAT? ■ SHOULD YOU BE PLANNING TO BUILD A BIGGER FACILITY ANY TIME SOON? ■ HMMM...

will undoubtedly affect your church, if you plan to be in local church ministry the next 10 years.

A few years ago I participated in a Leadership Network event, where I was asked to facilitate a discussion on church leadership development in the future. George Barna was in the group. During the conversation, various people chimed in with their thoughts, but George never made a sound. His silence was disconcerting to me. I felt a bit intimidated by the renowned research guru, thinking he was wondering who this "yahoo" was leading the group or where in the world I was going. So I asked, "George, where do you think we'll be in 10 years?"

He said, "I don't know."

I thought, "What kind of futurist is he?"

Barna explained, "The way things are changing these days, the best we can estimate is about five years out."

So although times are changing rapidly and we have no way of really know-



THE INFLUX OF IMMIGRANTS AND ETHNIC RELIGIONS WILL CONTINUE TO DILUTE AMERICA'S CHRISTIAN CULTURE, AS WILL THE INTERNET'S ACCESS TO DIVERGENT THINKING AND BELIEF PROMOTION.

have already begun reducing the sizes of their blueprints in order to capitalize on more, smaller venues. You won't find a 200-seat Starbucks, in spite of its popularity. But you will find intersections with three or four stores. While many churches will become multi-site, half a dozen networks will likely emerge as national "brands," each with dozens and perhaps hundreds of outlets. This may increase the challenge for less effective preachers, as more people experience great communicators. Mega-ministries, those over 2,000, will likely continue to increase in one way or another.

"E" and Free Publications and Resources

Just-in-time delivery systems that allow customization, made possible by the Internet and improving graphic software, will make print books and curriculum less inviting. Plus, the "open source" philosophy (such as Wikipedia, Craig's List, LifeChurch.tv), whereby people share resources freely or inexpensively, will create fierce competition with traditional resource providers. Amazon is scanning content from hundreds of thousands of books, allowing search engines to create just-in-time info. iTunes allows people to purchase individual songs, so you don't have to buy a compact disc of 15 in order to get two or three that you like, rendering the CD as old school.

Diminishing Christian Orientation

As America evolves in the direction of Western Europe, traditional church attendance will continue to decline. Some suggest that only a small percentage of the Bridger Generation (post-Millennials) will become Christians. Still, spiritual interest will remain strong, thus creating an appetite for other religions as well as nonchurch Christian venues that are more relational, experiential, informal, authentic, applicable, and process-oriented. This could catalyze a "re-Reformation," forcing us to major on the majors, doctrinally and in practice. The influx of immigrants and ethnic religions will continue to dilute America's Christian culture, as will the Internet's access to divergent thinking and belief promotion.

Simplification and Focus of Mission

The "big box" church movement afforded a buffet of need-filling ministries, pressuring lesser-sized flocks to mimic the offering or feel left behind. The organic/simple church impetus will encourage congregations to discern the one thing they're good at that fills needs in their community, creating niche and boutique churches that don't try to be all things to all people and thus embrace their unique God-print. Discovering our ministry signature will become an important impetus. This is a healthy move,

toward discovering each congregation's strengths and leveraging these instead of trying to compete with others. This in turn should create more bonding between churches as they realize they're on the same team.

Hospice Care for Denominations

While they won't disappear, the influence that denominations (and other associations of congregations) once held will be a wisp of what they once were. As finances decrease and international growth elevates non-American political power, denominational structures will pine down, consolidate, and be forced to function quite differently than in the past. While some will continue to atrophy due to theological pluralism and subsequent defection, even more cohesive doctrinal groups will downsize considerably. Churches over 1,000 in attendance function much as their own denomination already, and the lack of central support for local work will make others rethink their loyalty to denominational headquarters. This lack of strength will further diminish the ability to attract the most talented to denominational roles, which will be seen as weak and anemic destinations.

Discipleship and Outreach Through Service

The classroom approach to Bible learning will lessen as people move toward a more incarnational meth-

odology, putting feet to their faith. Mission trips, work projects, and using gifts and talents outside the walls of the church will be the growing, if not primary place, for spiritual formation. Connecting Scriptures with these experiences will increase as evangelicals discover service without losing the good news. The Externally Focused Network will expand significantly as evangelicals discover social service without feeling the need to compromise on their message. Bono and others are causing us to realize that faith without the fruit is dead. Evangelism strategies based on canned, apologetic, and intellectual processes will go the way of the 8-track and VHS unless first accompanied by authentic demonstrations of love, service, and humility.

A related but slightly different trend is a continued move toward team ministry and unleashing the church. Pastors will move toward equipping (Ephesians 4), requiring many to learn new skills and become less codependent on being the primary ministry source. They'll need to become coaches instead of "tellers" and developers instead of doers. For churches to become externally focused, pastors and staff will need to focus on individual gifting, engage people with leadership abilities, and take more of a back seat in terms of parish ministry (Exodus 18). Talent will be replaced with team-building skills as a staff hiring priority.

Morphing of House Churches

The house church movement will increase as people seek simplicity in a growingly complex society; the community, convenience, and family orientation of the house church will also appeal. But many house churches will not be sustainable without networking and interdependence. Plus, large churches seeking to take advantage of this opportunity will likely provide

support, staffing, and accountability for their own network of house churches. The "organic church" concept may be more powerful as well, since many of these groups will not be defined by residential buildings, preferring parks, coffee shops, cafes, businesses, and Internet chat rooms for their communing. The return of the front porch, neighborhood feel will continue to impact how we "do" our faith together.

Growing Ethnic Diversity

Just as ethnic groups hit the 100 million mark, with 10 percent of U.S. counties having ethnic majorities in 2007*, a growing diversity in America

* "More Than 300 Counties Now 'Majority-Minority,'" U.S. Census Bureau News, August 9, 2007, by Robert Bernstein

will mean more diverse worship styles and belief systems, and a dilution of the American version of Christianity. Anglo congregations seeking to extend their influence into different subcultures will need to learn new ways of doing this in effective ways. The ethnocentricity of many white congregations will either accentuate an "us versus them" mind-set or require new ways to share diverse cultural values and understand Christianity in a much different light. While multi-ethnic congregations will increase, they will still be a very small percentage of churches.

Decentralized Training

Our schedules are not apt to decrease in speed, making ministry training more difficult as people will have less time to gather in a single place and time. On-demand training ►►

FOUR PRACTICAL WAYS TO USE THIS INFORMATION:

- 1 Take this article on your next staff or board retreat and discuss these 12 trends, asking your church leaders what these may mean for your local church. Each congregation is different, meaning that some will be impacted more by some of these trends than others.
- 2 Take an inventory of your congregation as it exists now—budget, calendar, and staffing—and think hard about the next year or two of planning, so that you can create on-ramps to certain items that make sense for your church to pursue. What opportunities can you seize before they are gone?
- 3 One of the main reasons that certain churches grow is that they get a head start on a community's growth or a preferred worship style or ministry offering. Which of these items could your church embrace for leadership in your local area? Develop a 36-month plan to change what you're doing in order to be on the front edge of the growing trend.
- 4 In your next gathering with other pastors, discuss your own sense of local trends and how you might change what you're doing or how you're doing it. There's nothing magical about these dozen ideas, but hopefully they'll catalyze some of your own thinking about why you're doing what you're doing; you might even determine your own mini-list of local trends (such as demographics, population growth or reduction, and local economy).

will be much more the norm via the Internet and other electronic modes, allowing 24/7 availability. The good news is the technology will continue to provide faster and better means to receive training. The long-term impact on formal education has yet to be seen. Traditional Christian higher education and seminaries will likely experience a survival-of-the-fittest environment, forcing many to close their doors for lack of funding, allowing others to grow because of fewer choices. New "academies" of ministry preparation will emerge as a diminishing percent go the route of the traditional M.Div. degree.

Mergers and Release of Physical Assets

As more churches approach closure, there will be systems and protocol developed for transferring property, facilities, and assets to other churches that are vibrant and healthy, as well as to charitable organizations. Hopefully this will happen, because thousands of churches will be dying on the vine in the next decade, and if they fritter away their assets, trying to stay alive, it will be a huge stewardship fiasco. A huge number of existing-but-slowly-dying congregations will be approaching others, seeking to join or become an offshoot of their organizations.

Family Ministry Emphasis

While the '60s and '70s saw the rise of youth ministry, and '80s and '90s experienced the same with children, post-2000 trends are watching the pendulum move back. By separating age groups on Sundays and throughout the week, many fear that we've undermined the parent's responsibility for spiritual nurturing. There is a felt need to pursue family unity and intergenerational worship and spiritual formation. Family Pastor is

currently the fastest growing new ministry title and this will continue into the next decade, as churches strive to equip and empower parents to assume their responsibility. This will marginalize "old school" pastoral staff who refuse to morph, because they've assumed a ministry model that tends to function in silos and provides end-user resources.

The Spiritual Tipping Point Away From America

Although this look is at church trends in America, we cannot help but note that by 2018 there is apt to be a new way of thinking about Christianity worldwide. Because revival is happening in a number of foreign nations, the fastest growing churches will continue to be outside of North America. While economics of the church in America will continue to make it formidable, the spiritual epicenter will move away from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere. We will no longer be assumed to be the

leader in sending missionaries, modeling leadership, and knowing how to "do" church. This humbling effect will likely open us up to learning new ways of how to think about and do ministry.

While these trends are all very likely to continue in the next decade,

their impact will vary from church to church, depending on where a church is located, how its leaders see and respond to these social movements, and whatever else might interrupt our "previously scheduled programs." No doubt, the church in 2018 will look quite different than it does today, and those wired to navigate the whitewaters of change will emerge the most effective. 🌐

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Subsequent to developing this list, I immersed myself in reviewing over 500 pages of research summaries from dozens of studies from the last five years. While the bulk of these trends are subjective, none of the research seemed contradictory; in fact much of it substantiated what we are sensing. Suggested church research Web sites include: www.namb.net, www.lifewayresearch.com, www.hartsem.edu, www.theamericanchurch.org, www.barna.org, and www.leadnet.org. In the next issue of *Rev!*, David T. Olson will provide a state-of-the-church article based on data collected from nearly 200,000 churches in America. —Alan Nelson



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for an expanded version of this article, including thoughtful responses from:

- ALAN HIRSCH, author and futurist
- SALLY MORGENTHALER, author and catalytic thinker
- DAN KIMBALL, emerging church leader and pastor of Vintage Faith Church, Santa Cruz, California
- DAVID KINNAMAN, president of The Barna Group
- KEVIN FORD, chief visionary officer of T.A.G. and author
- THOM RAINER, author, consultant, and publishing CEO
- THOM SCHULTZ, entrepreneur and publishing CEO