

Trends Affecting Mobilization of the North American Church

by Bill Waldrop

Trends seem to be “a trendy thing” these days. And no wonder. Trends, we think, give us an indication of what the future will be like. (John Naisbitt’s book, *Megatrends*, was actually an effort to picture the future by means of trends analysis.)¹ Certainly the future is of keen interest to those of us concerned for the role of the North American Church in world mission. We believe that if we understand the present trends with some accuracy, we may be able to do a better job of mobilizing the Church during the coming years and into the next century. On the other hand, ignorance of important trends could result in serious mistakes, even failure.

The Church in North America is the best endowed Church for world mission in Christian history—the richest ever in monetary wealth, technology, and mission experience, if not also still the richest in available personnel. For the Church on this continent not to be a major player in bringing world evangelization to completion is unthinkable. However, some present trends indicate that this is a dark prospect.

The Trends’ Environment

Before describing the main trends as I perceive them, we should consider the environment or context in which the trends have become evident. It is the environment of change in which we are now living that has caused the trends to emerge and in some cases to grow strong.

In the first place, there is still a tendency on the part of many in the Church and mission community to resist change, hoping that the present stormy climate some how will return

to “normal.” This simply isn’t going to happen. Alvin Toffler’s canny prediction in 1970 that the future would come forward like a massive juggernaut to meet us rather than our moving toward it, has proven prophetic.² In his 1989 book, *The New Realities*, Peter Drucker wrote, “The ‘next century’ is already here, indeed we are well advanced into it.” In his 1992 book, *Managing The Future*, Drucker titled the first chapter, “The Future Already Around Us.”³

The “sea change” from an industrial society to an information society, which began some years ago, continues to accelerate and promises to accelerate well into the 21st century. For those of us who are middle-aged or older, pervasive and rapid change will characterize the rest of our lives; it will likely continue throughout the lives of our children and a good part of the lives of our grandchildren. This massive shift from the industrial age to the age of high technology already has affected everything, including the Church, and will continue to do so. Not to flex and respond to change in the world, in global mission, and in the Church, will result in being marginalized, if not run over by it. We do well to heed the words of Jeff Hallett:

After a decade of trying to force fit an explanation and remedy to the current ‘chaos’ of our world into the old... framework, it is now time to accept unpredictability and constant change as a proper reflection of reality. Whatever the problem being addressed, successful approaches will now evolve to reflect a new perspective on change and chaos as a ‘given’ rather than an aberration that we should fear or try to control.⁴

In the second place the babyboom generation, upon which the future of world mission increasingly rests, is mark-

edly different from all that have preceded it. Although much written about, many in the Church have failed to grasp the fact that this generation actually comprises a different culture. Unless this is understood, those who seek to work with it will experience one frustration after another. One nationally known Christian leader was heard to remark that he was ready to give up on the boomer generation and hope for better things from the one coming behind it. While this may have been said tongue in cheek, it nevertheless revealed a frustration which is shared by many. Too many older people insist that boomers need to conform to traditional ways, ignoring the fact that they represent a culture markedly different from anything America has seen before, and therefore must be dealt with contextually!

In the third place, the rise of the non-Western Church is the most significant development since modern missions began 200 years ago, and probably since the triumph of Christianity over the Roman Empire in the early fourth century. Its impact on world evangelization, already being felt, is just beginning. Unfortunately it has had a negative effect upon the Western Church, causing many believers to see it as a panacea for completing world evangelization with little further need for Western resources. Of course, this is not so. It is true that the Church in Latin America, Asia and Africa is much more vigorously involved in the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement than the Church in North America. The Western Church indeed is declining while the non-Western Church is rising. But this does not mean that North America’s role is no longer important. Rather, what we

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have now is a new climate for world mission, one which will be characterized increasingly by partnership on equal footing, with neither Western nor non-Western partners having a superior or inferior role.

The three foregoing characteristics of the world scene in which we live today have largely generated the trends we in the North American Church must deal with. As the staff of APMC has worked with local churches from coast to coast, we have come to affirm the analysis of Leith Anderson—that 85 percent of all Protestant churches in America are either stagnating or dying.⁵ This leaves 15 percent that are reasonably healthy. In a national church of some 350,000 to 375,000 congregations, this means there are at most about 55,000 in the healthy category. Many of these are growing, younger churches, usually less than 20 years old. Among the healthy ones a substantial number are charismatic type churches. Among the stagnating or dying ones are churches that once were strong in missions but are no longer. Others among the unhealthy ones are still trying to be mission-active even as they decline.

Two-thirds of the healthy category are denominational, one-third are independent. However, usually the denominational churches are as independent in attitude as the nondenominational ones. Not all the 55,000 robust churches are missions-active; many have not even begun to do missions. However, it is these 55,000 upon which our mobilizing efforts should primarily be focused in this decade and beyond. They will comprise most of the mission potential within the North American Church for years to come.

The Key Trends

Although undoubtedly there are several other trends which will affect our efforts to mobilize the Church, over the years eight major ones have become

obvious to me and our staff.

Trend #1: A move in the church away from a biblical theology of mission to no theology of mission at all.

Cross-cultural missions has never tended to be a felt need in most North American churches. The Christian Church, wherever it has existed in every era, has always had a tendency to become institutionalized—to turn inward. That inherent tendency unfortunately is now being strengthened by a subtle erosion of the biblical conviction that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and eternal life.⁶ While American believers still consider Christ important for what He means to them individually in their unique American context, there is growing doubt that people in distant cultures will be cut off from God and heaven because they never heard of Him. In this situation mission loses all its urgency.

Trend #2: Fewer dollars for global outreach. This is being caused by at least five factors, along with the first trend:

—Local needs are looming larger and larger, pressing in upon all churches, even those that have tended to ignore them in the past.

—Boomers, now a majority in most evangelical churches, are more concerned about local needs because they can see them and be directly involved in doing something about them.

—Church people in a less robust economy are nonetheless intent upon maintaining the lifestyle they've become accustomed to (if older) or the lifestyle they desire (if younger), in spite of shrinking personal resources.

—People generally have a growing isolationist attitude toward the world outside the United States.

—The generations of older people that have constituted the funding base for world mission heretofore are gradually exiting the scene. They are not being replaced in sufficient numbers to sustain the mission effort of the past. Of

course, these generations, the wealthiest in American history, will pass much of their wealth on to their children and grandchildren. However, this will have little effect on the downward trend of mission dollars if there is not a commitment to global outreach among those inheriting this wealth.

Trend #3: Decline in the number of career missionaries from North America. It was recently noted that in a brief four year period (1988 to 1992) the number of career missionaries from North America dropped 16 percent, from about 38,600 to 32,600 missionaries.⁷ With mission dollars decreasing and boomer concern increasing for both missionary and mission agency effectiveness, we can expect to have fewer career missionaries in the future. In the next 10 years, we should not be surprised if the total number drops well below 30,000 and perhaps to as few as 25,000. Hopefully, these will be highly selected and well qualified for what they will be doing in other cultures, primarily working with the existing national church to enhance its cross-cultural global outreach. This trend obviously will impact the mission industry as a whole.

Trend #4: A growing loss of confidence in mission agencies, both denominational and independent. There is increasing skepticism about the real motives and effectiveness of mission agencies even among older people now as well as younger ones. While older people used to place unquestioning trust in mission agencies, this base of confidence seems to be eroding.⁸ Among seminary students there is a perception that mission agencies are not keeping up with the times, that they are more intent upon maintaining their structures than on seeking to be effective.⁹ People cite being turned off by agency representatives who can't seem to relate to young people, evidence of poor administration, an apparent lack of concern to relate effectively with the local church, and unwillingness to partner with

other agencies to more economically and efficiently accomplish world mission. The mission agency scene is increasingly thought of as “Missionary, Inc.”: Given over to individualistic entrepreneurialism, elaborate and expensive organizational structures, and fierce competition for dollars and people.¹⁰

Trend #5: A conviction among healthy churches that the local church has primary biblical responsibility for world evangelization. The importance of this trend cannot be overemphasized. It is the cause of many younger churches’ strong move into world mission. It is generating unprecedented resources of people, prayer and money not seen before from individual Churches in the American mission experience. Understandably it is causing great concern among mission agencies, especially the more traditional ones. Agencies that can partner with these churches to facilitate fulfilling the churches’ visions and strategies will find great usefulness in the coming years. Key words here for agencies are partnership, facilitate, and enable.

Trend #6: Disappearance of the dichotomy between local outreach and global mission. This applies only to those churches that are determined to do cross-cultural missions as well as mission in their own locale. This is a healthy attitude because it applies the principle of Acts 1:8—that of *simultaneous* concentric circle outreach. Unfortunately, most churches focus primarily upon needs within their own congregations, then move into the local community as remaining resources will permit. In most Churches cross-cultural mission outside the local area comes third or not at all. However, among Churches that

generate sufficient energy for all three, the continuum of mission from the Church in its community to distant places will result in greater effectiveness “over there.”

Trend #7: Networks as a growing influence in world mission. As John Naisbitt predicted in 1982, substantial net-

so as time goes on. This is fast becoming a key indicator of which churches will become effective in world evangelization and which ones will recede into ineffectiveness and oblivion.¹² The information revolution has come to the churches. It has already created two classes of churches, those that continually acquire and use the latest and best information they can get, and those that do not. Consequently, what we see are churches that are either on the cutting edge in the way they view missions and the way they approach doing it, or churches that are doing missions much as it was done in the 1950s or 1960s. Many older churches and agencies are in the latter category, seemingly content to function in missions as they have for decades, mistakenly believing that they are leading the way.

Healthy Churches

It is well to ask: What will characterize most of the North American churches that will be vigorous in global outreach during the next few years,—those that will be intentional about mobilizing their resources for world

mission? I see five main characteristics:

1. Financial wealth—enough money not only to meet the internal needs of the congregation and do significant local ministry, but also enough to engage in cross-cultural ministry beyond the geographical area of the church itself.
2. Energy for mission, both locally and globally. This probably means that a majority of the people in the congregation must have reasonably good emotional health. Some churches must expend practically all their energies taking care of dysfunctional peo-

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works have developed in our society.¹¹ Some have had a major influence, e.g., the feminist and gay movements. The same is true in the Church. A.C.M.C. for example, is actually a network of mission active Churches concerned not only to do missions well but also to encourage other Churches to become involved. While denominations are becoming less influential as networks, trans-denominational networks are gaining energy (the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement is a cogent example on a global scale).

Trend #8: Churches that are rich or poor in information becoming more

ple within their congregations. This is true, for example, in some inner city churches. Such congregations are doing well just to meet the needs of their own people. Thus, in a society that seems to become more dysfunctional day by day, mission active churches may tend to be larger rather than smaller, able to meet directly the needs of hurting people while also reaching well beyond their own walls to the lost world.

3. A higher than average level of education within the congregation. Such people will insist on having current information from the best sources and will be intent on excellence in the way they do missions.
4. Leadership that is visionary and aggressive, leading the congregation to realize the resources latent within itself and marshalling the energy and resources to project itself beyond its own locale.
5. A strong biblical/theological base which motivates the people to know and live God's truth, including obedience to the Great Commission. This is the cornerstone characteristic, the engine that will generate prayer and energize the other four strengths.

It is conceivable that as few as 50,000 churches with these qualities could fully provide the mission thrust needed from North America in this decade and beyond. If each of these healthy churches generated \$60,000 annually on an average for cross-cultural mission, \$3,000,000,000 would be forthcoming, three times the combined current income of all the EFMA mission agencies. Yet this is well within the realm of possibility. Of course, many less healthy churches would contribute as they could. But when all is said and done, given the growing investment of the non-Western Church in world mis-

sion, this core of churches might be enough to provide all that is needed from the North American continent.

Conclusion

I pray that God will visit the North American Church yet again with authentic spiritual renewal like the great historic revivals of the past. I'm personally optimistic that God will do just that. If this occurs, and the non-Western Church continues toward greater maturity and increased involvement in world mission, we could see the knowledge of the glory of the Lord covering the earth as the waters cover the sea even in this century and certainly in the next. May it be by the year 2000!

References

1. John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*, Warner Books, 1982, see Introduction.
2. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, Random House/New York, 1970. Although the entire book develops this theme, see Introduction for a succinct expression of it.
3. Peter Drucker, *The New Realities*, Harper & Row, 1989, See Preface, page ix; and *Managing The Future*, Truman Talley Books/Plume, New York, 1992, page 15.
4. Jeff Hallett, *The Present Future Report*, Volume 4, Number 1, article excerpted by Leadership Network, Tyler, Texas, for its publication, "Forum Files", Volume 4, Number 2, April 1994.
5. Leith Anderson, *Dying For Change*, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minn., 1990, pages 9-10.
6. See James Davison Hunter's book, *Evangelicalism—The Coming Generation*, The University of Chicago press, Chicago and London, 1987, Chapter Two, entitled "Theology: The Shifting Meaning of Faith", pages 19-49.
7. See article by Stan Guthrie in April 23, 1993 issue of *Pulse*, Evangelical Missions Information Service, Wheaton, Illinois entitled "New Handbook Reveals Drop in Missions."
8. See article by Jim Reapsome in *Pulse* issue of May 6, 1994, published by Evangelical Missions Information Service, Wheaton, Illinois.
9. From an informal survey of students preparing for missionary service at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois. The survey was requested by a mission agency, and its results were presented at a meeting of several mission agency executives. The results were considered to be consistent with other reports on how agencies were coming to be viewed.
10. From a paper by Paul McKaughan, presented at a study group at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut on April 22, 1994, entitled "Is There a Crisis in Missionary Motivation and Support?" Used by permission.
11. Ibid, Naisbitt, chapter 8, entitled "From Hierarchies to Networking," pages 189-205.
12. Information provided by consultant J. David Schmidt of J. David Schmidt and Associates, Wheaton, Illinois, for a marketing study by ACMC, Inc., in May 1994.

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