church morph

how megatrends are reshaping christian communities

eddie gibbs
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Allelon is a network of missional church leaders, schools, and parachurch organizations that inspires, engages, trains, educates, and provides resources to leaders working to fulfill the church’s mission in our culture. Simply put, together we are a movement of missional leaders.

We want, in particular, to serve those who are involved in new forms of missional communities (sometimes called “emerging”), those starting new congregations within denominational systems, and those in existing congregations who are working toward missional identity and engagement. Our desire is to encourage, support, coach, and offer companionship for missional leaders as they discern new models of church capable of sustaining a living and faithful witness to the gospel in our contemporary world.

The word *allelon* is a common but overlooked Greek word that is reciprocal in nature. In the New Testament it is most often translated “one another.” Christian faith is not an individual matter. Everything in the life of the church is done *allelon*, for the sake of the world. A Christian community is defined by the *allelon* sayings in Scripture: love one another, pursue one another’s good, build up one another.
The overarching mission of Allelon is to educate and encourage the church, learning from one another so that we might become a people among whom God lives, a people whose lives are a sign, symbol, and foretaste of God’s redeeming love in neighborhoods and in the whole of society. We seek to facilitate this reality among ordinary women and men who endeavor to participate in God’s mission to reclaim and restore all of creation, bearing witness to the world of a new way of being human.

To help accomplish this goal, Allelon has partnered with Baker Books and Baker Academic to produce resources that equip the church in thinking about and practicing missional life. We are excited to promote Eddie Gibbs’s book as it identifies the various trends and changes within the church in our context today. Eddie has been a wise mentor and an observer of the church for decades, and on the basis of this experience he keenly reveals some of the radical experiments that are being undertaken in the life of the church. He is a blessing to the church, and this book will help spur God’s people on into new and additional experiments as we seek to bear witness to God’s redemptive life.

Mark Priddy
CEO, Allelon International
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In the course of teaching and mentoring in the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary for the past two decades, I have been deluged with books describing and critiquing persistent trends in churches throughout the Western world. These changes are evident in churches and renewal and evangelistic movements across the theological spectrum and within many traditions.

After forty-five years of professional ministry and years of reflecting on the many movements that have embodied church renewal, I feel that the time has come to step back and review the current picture, recognizing its intriguing complexity. At the outset, I acknowledge that this is an ambitious project to attempt within the pages of a short book and with my limited resources. Nevertheless, because of the convergence of a number of factors that I will address in the course of identifying the external and internal movements for change in the first two chapters, I believe an attempt is warranted and timely.

My purpose in writing is, in the first place, to inform and encourage by providing a representative, but by no means exhaustive, survey. Second, it is to offer an interpretive commentary on the most significant developments in various streams of church life in the Western world. It is important to appreciate just how extensive and complex are the changes represented by the missional church discussions, the emerging church phenomenon, the transitions taking place within
some high-profile megachurches, various expressions of indigenous missional communities reaching out to the multifaceted urban cultural mosaic, and the resurgent Reformed network that is attracting a significant number of younger evangelicals. Many readers may be familiar with part of this picture, and as active participants may in fact be more knowledgeable than the author, but they may also be so immersed as to not have the benefit of being able to stand back and observe the overarching trends.

Recent retirement from a heavy teaching and mentoring load has provided me with the opportunity, between speaking engagements, to explore numerous Web sites and blogs, both to extend and to update my own awareness of current trends. The younger, tech-savvy generation certainly exhibits a high standard in terms of presentation and technical sophistication! I hope that readers will take time to sample some of the online sources that are cited. In addition to gathering information from numerous Web sites, I have had the opportunity to visit a few of the locations that are mentioned here, and I am privileged both to know some of the leaders personally and to consult occasionally with a number of them.

Having completed the first draft, I sought the wisdom of a range of leaders who could provide further insight and correct any errors they found there. I am especially grateful to the following people, who reviewed either the entire manuscript or sections that related to their own sphere of ministry: Brian Auten, Ryan Bolger, Peter Brierley, Wayne Gordon, Alan Hirsch, Cam Roxburgh, Bill White, and J. R. Woodward. I have benefited enormously from their insights and incorporated many of their suggestions.

This book is intended for two categories of readers. It is for people, like myself, who struggle to assess the extent and overall significance of current ecclesial trends, or who are worried about such trends, based upon the critiques of scholars and church leaders. It is also intended for leaders who are immersed in one of the streams to such an extent that they have little opportunity to view the bigger picture.

I share some of the concerns voiced by critics of emerging and missional thinking. However, we cannot be prematurely dismissive, because many of the issues being raised are deeply significant for the
ongoing mission of the church in the West. We must not lose sight of the bigger picture—the need to reenvision a church that is significantly different from the church that has been shaped and subverted by modernity and the culture of Christendom. Churches in the West need to be motivated and shaped by a missional commitment to a pluralistic world floundering in a sea of relativism.

I believe that the trends identified in chapters 3 through 8 provide signs of the kingdom, reflecting how different ecclesial communities are redefining “church” in a post-Christendom environment. Within a changing cultural milieu the church will always exist as the “becoming church.” Within the relatively limited compass of this book, I attempt to provide a survey, with samples by way of illustration. Although it does not claim to be comprehensive, I trust that the range of examples will be sufficient to provide encouragement and assurance that the Lord has by no means abandoned his church, but rather that in these days God is “up to something” significant.

In the midst of upheaval and reconfiguration, it is important to ensure that we continue to seek fresh insight from Scripture and that our search for contextualization represents a radical obedience to the gospel within specific cultural contexts, and not a sellout to culture. Time alone will tell which expressions of church will prove to be passing fads and which will establish strategic frontiers. Across the board, open, honest criticism and accountability are necessary for the health and vitality of churches as they morph, experiencing transformation through the process of engaging in mission. While the fundamental nature of the church remains as the body and bride of Christ, its forms will change and fluctuate through time and according to context.

In sending this manuscript to the publishers I am acutely aware of its limitations. It is a daunting task to attempt such a broad-based survey. Furthermore, as with any significant movement that is largely decentralized, the scenario is in constant flux. Between the time of signing off and eventual publication, further developments will have occurred. Perhaps some of the examples described will no longer exist or will have morphed out of recognition, and there will be yet new developments that will need to be identified and assessed. Such is the dynamic nature of the church in all its exhilarating and
perplexing variety, as the risen Christ continues to build his church until the day of its completion on his return.

Finally I would like to express my appreciation to Robert Hosack at Baker Academic for suggesting this project and my indebtedness to managing editor Brian Bolger and his team for their diligence and patience through the editorial process and guidance through the Web site jungle.

Eddie Gibbs
Pasadena, 2008
megatrends convulsing the western world

For the past seven years the focus of my concern for the church has broadened from a preoccupation with internal, institutional factors that contribute to the vitality of the church to embrace an interest in the changing contexts in which the church finds itself and the challenges these contexts present to leadership. The economic, technological, and social changes taking place throughout Western societies are so comprehensive and traumatic that all institutions become embroiled. Even churches are inevitably caught up in their wake. They may persist in denying that such widespread changes are actually occurring. They may attempt to minimize their significance. Or they may try to craft strategies, in an attempt to insulate themselves from the effects of such convulsions. But, sooner or later, they will not be able to escape their impact.

Indeed, inherited denominations continue to experience, almost without exception, the unrelenting decline in both membership and attendance that began in North America during the mid-1960s.¹
The fact that churches representing different ecclesial structures and theological positions are encountering the same challenges at the same time indicates that there are deep-level and widespread issues that need to be identified and addressed. The range of issues is both contextual and systemic in nature and cannot be adequately addressed simply by tweaking here and there, by adding programs, reworking the organizational structures, or attempting to improve internal communications to fix specific problems.

The organizational structures of historic churches were designed for a different cultural context, in which change was more predictable and occurred at a slower pace. Today, we live in a culture of discontinuous and often unpredictable change. When things happen suddenly and unexpectedly, the church needs organizational structures that are flexible and flat—that is, capable of adjusting to changing needs and circumstances to allow for timely and appropriate responses. This is a challenge faced by every institution, including those within business, politics, education, health care, and the military, as well as the church.

Hierarchical structures are increasingly problematic, because decision making has to go through a chain of command and levels of control. Individuals find themselves boxed into the structure, every person according to their level and within their department. Vertical relationships are emphasized at the expense of horizontal engagement. This compartmentalization contributes to an ongoing competition for resources between areas of ministry and staff persons who champion their own causes, lacking a clear picture of and strong commitment to the broader mission and agenda of the church. Hierarchies paralyze initiative and are ponderous in responding to unanticipated challenges.

The decline within traditional denominations has been, in some measure, compensated for by the proliferation of megachurches. Many of these churches are relational in ethos while controlling in governance. Some of these churches are independent, while a significant number are affiliated with a parent denomination—although it must be said that they tend to have much more in common with other evangelical or Pentecostal churches of their size and influence than they do with the churches of their own theological and ecclesial traditions.
Indeed, the current church scene in North America, and to a lesser extent in Europe and Australasia, may be more accurately described as “post-denominational.” This term does not imply the extinction of denominations as discrete entities, but rather the demise of what might be called their “tribal” insularity. They share insights and draw strength from each other, rather than depend upon denominational programs and resources.

For the past few decades a number of movements have brought churches together from different denominations, networks, and independent congregations. Such movements include the charismatic movement; youth movements such as Young Life, Youth for Christ, and more recently, Soul Survivor (an organization that began in the United Kingdom and is now also active in the United States); as well as campus-based ministries like InterVarsity Fellowship (Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship in the United Kingdom) and Campus Crusade. During the 1980s and early ’90s, the church growth movement also brought together large numbers of pastors from a wide range of traditions to address issues surrounding leadership and church management. Lastly, we must mention the impact of the Willow Creek Association and the pastors’ conferences hosted by Saddleback Community Church, along with the Alpha course, the evangelistic program created by Holy Trinity Brompton in West London. These three forums have catapulted Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and Nicky Gumbel onto a pan-denominational, international stage and sphere of influence.

Christianity’s Image Taking a Turn for the Worse

In 2007, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Research group, together with Gabe Lyons of the Fermi Project, a collaborative group that works to relate faith to the broader culture, authored a book entitled unChristian. In it, they presented some disturbing findings on “what a new generation really thinks about Christianity.” UnChristian highlights Christianity’s tarnished image and declining influence in the United States, particularly among sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds. A decade ago, an overwhelming majority of
non-Christians, including those in that age category, were “favorably” disposed toward Christianity’s role in society. But today just 16 percent of non-Christians in that age bracket have a “good impression” of Christianity. In the study, evangelical Christians come under the severest attack, with just 3 percent of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-old non-Christians indicating favorable views toward this subgroup of believers.²

Kinnaman and Lyons found that the most common perceptions held by young non-Christians about American Christianity were that it is anti-homosexual (91 percent), judgmental (87 percent), hypocritical (85 percent), old-fashioned (78 percent), too involved in politics (75 percent), boring (68 percent), not accepting of other faiths (64 percent), and insensitive to others (70 percent).³ Strikingly, half of young Christian believers surveyed for unChristian viewed their religion in the very same way: too judgmental, hypocritical, and overly politicized.⁴ One-third said it was old-fashioned and out of touch with reality. The study also found that many Christians were aware of their religion’s image problem. More than one in ten evangelicals believe that Americans are becoming more hostile and negative toward Christianity.

Theologically conservative Christians are widely perceived as being aloof and unwilling to engage in genuine dialogue, out of fear of “caving in” to the broader culture. But such openness is essential in relating to Mosaics (known also as “Generation Y”) and Busters (known also as “Generation X”), who represent the “conversation generations.” According to Kinnaman and Lyons,

Mosaics and Busters . . . want to discuss, debate, and question everything. This can be either a source of frustration or an interest we use to facilitate new and lasting levels of spiritual depth in young people. Young outsiders want to have discussion, but they perceive Christians as unwilling to engage in genuine dialogue. They think of conversations as “persuasion” sessions, in which the Christian downloads as many arguments as possible.⁵

Kinnaman and Lyons also show that although the world of young people is inundated with choices related to media, movies, television, and technology, most churchgoing teens report that they rarely recall
learning anything helpful on these topics in church. This attitude reveals a serious disconnect between the church’s agenda and young people’s preoccupations. Perhaps the biggest disconnect was the perception they had of the lack of genuineness in care and sincerity displayed by evangelicals when evangelizing non-Christians.

While the church’s agenda need not be driven by the preoccupations of young people, especially the issues involving popular culture, the church does, however, need to endeavor to understand these issues and address them in an empathetic and discerning manner, knowing when to affirm and when to confront. Contextualization, properly applied, does not imply selling out to culture but rather demonstrating the complex relationship that the gospel has to any culture, as evidenced in the New Testament itself. The followers of Christ engaged first the Jewish worldview, and then the Greco-Roman cultural contexts.

Across ecclesial and theological traditions, the current situation is in a state of flux. Not only are churchgoers shopping around from church to church, but they also demonstrate an eclectic spirituality. Many evangelicals are shifting between liturgical and contemporary expressions of worship, moving from one to the other (and sometimes back again). Among the “emerging adult” generation (ages eighteen to thirty-five), there are those who are walking away from the evangelicalism in which they were nurtured as children, perceiving it as too rationalistic or intellectually impoverished. This represents an acceleration of the “Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail” phenomenon that began at Wheaton College in the late 1980s under the influence of the late Robert Webber. At the same time, there is within the same age bracket a resurgent Reformed movement, which offers theological coherence along with a call to intellectual commitment and spiritual vitality.

While the churchgoing population in the United States is still large enough to mask the extent of the unreached and alienated segment of the population, in Europe the scene is drastically different. The vast majority of Europe’s population is disconnected from church life. The long established cultural/religious rites of passage, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals, are fading in significance. It must be admitted that, for the most part, if a church in Europe is expe-
riencing significant growth, it is doing so mainly at the expense of other local churches. And those same churches, if they are reaching out to the unchurched to any significant extent, are generally only gathering in those who have more recently ceased to be involved with a church; they are making little impact on those who, because of past hurts or general skepticism about the church’s relevance to their lives, are resistant to institutional religion.

Potential for numerical growth is not an issue of church size or new program development. Both large and small churches can trumpet their particular merits. Some people prefer a church that is large enough to offer a comprehensive range of worship experiences and programs, much like a department store offers one-stop shopping. Other churchgoers, however, prefer the “boutique” store environment, where the experience and atmosphere are tailor-made to their particular tastes and where an intimate atmosphere pervades. Unlike the experience of many who attend a big church, you cannot get lost or go unnoticed in a congregation with under one hundred worshipers in attendance—at least, that is what long-time members of smaller churches like to think. But both of these experiences, whether large or small church, are couched in consumer terms, and therein lies the problem and the challenge.

The Process of Morphing

The “morphing” of the church relates to its transitioning to a new identity as a missional presence in the West. There is a growing realization among leaders committed to mission that the challenge will not be adequately met by adding new programs to ensure the local church’s—or a denomination’s—institutional survival. Such leaders are talking about an unfettered reimagining of the church, resulting in a comprehensive change in its self-understanding and its configuration.

The term “deconstruction” is frequently used by radical voices within the emergent church. But this technical term is often misunderstood, being perceived as too threatening and confrontational. It is heard to imply demolition and destruction, which is not what
is intended. Deconstruction instead describes a particular method of literary criticism that seeks to get behind the text to reveal the embedded assumptions. Among emerging church leaders, deconstruction signifies not destruction, but a breakthrough. It means to undo or take apart in order to arrive at a deeper understanding, allowing for a creative rereading. However, in order to avoid the negative implications of the term, and its highly technical explanation, I prefer to speak of the “reimagining” of the church, and of the transformation process as the “morphing” of the church.

Wikipedia defines “morphing” as a special effect in motion pictures and animations that changes (or morphs) one image into another through a seamless transition. The term has a much more ancient usage however. It is derived from the Greek word *morphe*, which appears in the New Testament in a significant context. The apostle Paul writes to the Philippians,

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form *morphe* of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form *morphe* of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:5–8 (NRSV)

Gordon Fee explains the meaning of *morphe* in the following terms: “Since *morphe* can denote ‘form’ or ‘shape’ in terms of both the external features by which something is recognized and the characteristics and qualities that are essential to it, it was precisely the right word to characterize both the reality (his being God) and the metaphor (his taking on the role of a slave).” The mission on which Jesus embarked necessitated a radical transition from sovereign Lord to humble servant. It entailed his abandoning of heaven in order to live among sinful humankind, with all the limitations of a
bodily existence. While the morphing of the church is of a different order, it too must be prepared to undergo costly, radical, and comprehensive changes in the process of dying to itself, in submission to Christ’s will.

What does such a transition signify for the church, and why is it necessary? As we have noted, the inherited denominations are all in serious decline. Growing churches, whether denominational or independent, are bucking the trend largely as a result of transfer growth or, to a lesser extent, through the renewed participation of the lapsed. The widespread nature of decline across the ecclesial and theological spectrum and over the same time span indicates that the root causes of the slump are not primarily within the life of religious institutions. Rather, they relate to broader issues arising from their cultural context. Such changes are not restricted to local circumstances but arise from the cultural turbulence that is convulsing the entire Western world. The morphing of the church describes the process of transformation of the church as it was, or as it exists today, to the church as it needs to become in order to engage appropriately and significantly in God’s mission in the context of the twenty-first century.

Some might argue that reimagination is not the problem and that churches should instead focus on a whole-hearted application of the scriptural understanding of the church as the people of God gathered, preaching the Word, sharing the gospel, making disciples of all peoples, taking care of widows and orphans, and otherwise fulfilling its intended purpose in the world. Application is precisely the issue, but this has to be undertaken in changing contexts, which present unfamiliar challenges to most Western churches. In a post-Christendom and pluralist environment, the Christian church is no longer in a privileged position, but is one of a number of competing entities. It is operating among people who, for the most part, do not have a biblical awareness of the story of redemption, the life and mission of Jesus Christ, or the nature and scope of the good news that Christ proclaimed.

Sadly, this lack of awareness is prevalent even among the church-going population, many of whom also fail to grasp that the risen Lord commissioned his followers to share his message of good news

Eddie Gibbs,
ChurchMorph: How Megatrends are Reshaping Christian Communities,
megatrends convulsing the western world

throughout the world. Consequently, application cannot be undertaken on the basis of assumptions drawn from previous experience, but rather requires a prayerful reimagination. Only by so doing will the people with whom we seek to communicate be able to hear the timeless message of the gospel in a timely manner. They need to encounter God addressing them in the here and now, rather than in some remote time and place.

A Missional Response to Megatrends

There are five megatrends impacting the churches of the West. These are the transition from modernity to postmodernity; the transition from the industrial to the information age; the transition from Christendom to post-Christendom contexts; the transition from production initiatives to consumer awareness; and the transition from religious identity to spiritual exploration. We will now unpack each of these transitions in order to appreciate their significance for the life and witness of the church.

From Modernity to Postmodernity

Modernity represents the period of time during which traditional societal structures, in which authority was invested in hierarchies historically represented by the church and the state, or, where monarchy prevailed, by the crown, transitioned into new forms. Prior to this time, the authority of prelates and princes could be questioned only at the peril of those who begged to differ and dared to mount a challenge. Increasingly, this authority structure was challenged by modernity, which was birthed among independent scholars and artists in the universities. They were the product of the Renaissance, which arose in Italy and France in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and flourished into the seventeenth century, and were marked by their celebration of the human capacity for reasoning and artistic creativity. On the heels of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fostering an intellectual climate of free
thinking, especially in regard to philosophical and theological reasoning and political innovation.

These two movements released vast resources of human potential, which had largely remained dormant under the oppressive climate of pre-modern societies. They restored a measure of respect for the biblical story of creation, emphasizing that humans are made in the image of God and, therefore, are endowed with the creative urges of their Creator. Consequently, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries heralded unprecedented scientific and technological progress, and this age of inquiry and innovation continued to unfold as the following two centuries witnessed undreamed of progress in the areas of medicine, transportation, and communication, to name but a few. Unfortunately, humankind eventually became intoxicated by its own sense of progress. Confidence inflated into arrogance.

Then came the growing realization that we had, at the same time, unleashed destructive powers, even more potent than our creative genius. We have witnessed and been embroiled in the indiscriminate mass destruction caused by modern warfare. We are only now belatedly waking up to the environmental consequences of our reckless disregard for the finely balanced ecosystems that sustain this planet, and we are beginning to question the sustainability of our consumer-driven society. We are suffering, in increasing measure, the social consequences of our rootless and fragmented lives, in which striving for more is never enough but rather stimulates further dissatisfaction. An increased standard of living does not signify an enhanced quality of life.

Postmodernity represents a comprehensive questioning of the facile assumptions of modernity. In addition to reassessing the past, it is increasingly uncertain and fearful of the future. We live in a cultural context of heightened levels of anxiety. We despair of how to go about planning for an uncertain future, so instead we resort to hunkering down and finding contentment in living from day to day.

Postmodernity presents a missional challenge to the Protestant churches and the evangelical movements that arose in Europe and North America during the era of modernity. Some of these movements go back to the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe, while others are the product of nineteenth-century Revivalism in
North America. Each became tainted by rationalistic approaches designed to defend the inspiration and authority of Scripture and, among many evangelicals, by the self-confident assumption that strategies and plans can be devised to fulfill within this generation the missionary mandate to take the gospel to the entire world. This is not to overlook the parallel emphases of personal holiness and intercessory prayer as vital contributing factors. But such acknowledgment of our dependency on God’s initiatives and the power of the Holy Spirit was often regarded as being part of a cause-and-effect relationship: intercessory prayer was the instrument and revival the consequence. However, such a line of reasoning fails to make the logical distinction between correlation and causation. The presence of the former does not guarantee the latter outcome.

As Protestant and evangelical churches morph from modernity to postmodernity, this process will entail the reinstatement of a sense of mystery in our worship, as was evident in premodern times; yet now the mystery can be embraced without the superstition that then prevailed. It will also require that churches become more self-critical, rather than maintaining a denial-based assertiveness. Churches will need to recognize and confess how they were subverted more than they realized by the assumptions of modernity. It is our planning based on rationalistic assumptions, together with our stage-managed and celebrity-focused worship, that have driven away many in the “delayed adulthood” category. They have abandoned program-driven churches in search of a more authentic spirituality.

From the Industrial Age to the Information Age

The Renaissance and the Enlightenment contributed to the end of the monopolistic position of the Roman Catholic church in the West. The rise of modern nation-states brought about a decentralization of power. The Reformation, both in mainland Europe and in the United Kingdom, resulted in the creation of autonomous national churches. At first they struggled, when challenged by new religious movements seeking their independence on a number of theological and ecclesial issues, to maintain their exclusive position. Eventually the church within the nation fragmented into a variety of
competing denominations, which matched the competitive capitalism that generated the wealth and ingenuity that fed an expanding consumerism.

The late eighteenth century gave birth to the Industrial Revolution, which developed rapidly in the following centuries. It profoundly impacted every area of life, including agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, and living conditions. It ushered in waves of vast internal migration, as people moved from the country to the new industrial centers in order to work in the coal mines, foundries, and factories. These industrial centers served as magnets to the surrounding rural population. In the United States, the Civil War provided the catalyst for rapid industrial expansion. Then two world wars created demand for mass production on an unprecedented scale. In response, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of huge manufacturing plants and centrally organized distribution networks.

The entrepreneurship of capitalism found its most dynamic expression in North America. This dynamism was not confined to the business and industrial worlds. It also created a “can-do” climate in the church that witnessed the birth of scores of denominations and hundreds of independent religious movements. These continue to proliferate even today. Thus Protestantism in general and evangelicalism in particular were shaped and stimulated by the spirit of competitive capitalism. They were the religious equivalent of “big business,” operating with the same hierarchical structures and controlling leadership style. However, there were some significant exceptions, such as the Congregationalists and Baptists.

The great majority of churches today are led by the Builder or Boomer generations, which represent, respectively, the elitist control and delegated leadership paradigm. The difference between the two generations lies in their style rather than in their substance. Builders tend to be more aloof, whereas Boomers are more relational. These are generalizations with many exceptions, but as broad categories they helpfully describe the climate and culture of so many churches.

Churches shaped by the big-business models of the industrial age, with their centralization of power and dependent and accountable
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branch offices, struggled to interpret the different entrepreneurial climate of the information age. The most dysfunctional among them are those denominations that trace their history to the state churches of Europe. Their structures are the most hierarchical and ponderous. The challenges they face parallel those of major corporations when their markets became increasingly diversified and subject to sudden changes in customer demands. Whereas denominational executives find themselves too removed from the frontline and overwhelmed by institutional challenges, preoccupied with “firefighting” flare-ups and with downsizing strategies, it is those church leaders at ground level, grappling with the challenges of ministry and mission in their local contexts, who are most aware of the changes taking place.

The exponential spread of the Internet and development of powerful search engines ushered in the information age. The democratization of knowledge has undermined the power positions of elitist leaders who previously held the monopoly on information. They are no longer the gatekeepers, allowing only approved individuals and groups access to information. Leadership no longer consists exclusively of those individuals who are “in the know” because they had been privileged by top management, on whom they continue to be dependent. No longer is patronage a powerful instrument of control. The new generation of leaders represents those who have street-level credibility and “know-how” to mentor and empower those they recruited and those with whom they work. They also understand how to operate within an expanding network, distinguishing between and separating out influence from control.

The morphing of the church relates both to inherited denominations and to megachurches. If the latter carry a denominational label, they operate with a fair degree of independence, functioning much like a mini-denomination, and at times exercising more influence than their collective parent body. Morphing also relates to those contemporary networks of churches that have imbibed more of the control mechanism of the industrial age.

What then will morphing entail as churches transition from the industrial age to the information age? It will require a flattening of structures to ensure flexible and prompt responses to rapidly changing conditions. It will also mean recognizing that most significant
innovation and new, supportive, risk-taking networks will arise at
the local level and from the margins, rather than from the center
and from the top down.

Hierarchical leaders, for their part, must release themselves from
their organizational entrapment in order to observe firsthand what
is happening at every level of church life, and to keep in close touch
with the innovators. They must become the permission-givers, even
while insisting on accountability. Denominational leaders do not like
being surprised, so they must be kept fully informed. But this does
not necessarily entail asking for permission! Ground-level innovators
may have to work outside of their denomination’s conceptual and
organizational box. If they ask for permission, their request may be
deprecated due to organizational constraints. The key is to establish a
relationship of trust and to work with wise mentors.

As ground-level initiatives prosper, critics will arise to complain
to the leadership of the denomination. That is why two-way com-
munication channels and accountability structures are so important.
They enable leaders to hear directly from those who are taking these
missional initiatives rather than only from their critics. Those held
responsible within the denominational hierarchy need to be able to
respond to critics by saying that they are in direct contact with the
individuals concerned and are kept fully informed. Only then can
they serve as advocates of those innovators under critical review.

The morphing of the church also means that information is widely
available throughout the fellowship of believers. Each person within
every local congregation plays an active role and is taken into con-
fidence as a friend. Such widespread communication works best
in a small church, or in a large church broken down into smaller
units, each of which enjoys a measure of independence that fosters
initiative-taking.

From the Christendom Era to Post-Christendom
Contexts

For the first 250 years of its life, the church operated from the
margins of society. It was either barely tolerated or actively per-
secuted. Frequently it was misunderstood and misrepresented. A
monumental effort was required in order to shift the tide of public opinion. This came about because of the distinctive lifestyle of the early Christians, their impact on society, and their increasing influence due to their exponential growth. We see a dynamic movement that was not reliant on real estate; neither did it depend on academic training institutions to provide leadership. It was a ground-level, popular movement that turned upside down the world of its day, so much so that by early in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine came to the conclusion that if he could not beat them, he had better join them! So was born what we have come to know as Christendom, which lasted for the next sixteen hundred years in the Western world.

Under Christendom, the church was granted a privileged position as an agent of the state. It provided the moral and ideological bulwark of society. Especially in the European context, and to a lesser extent in North America, the inherited denominations represented churches one was born into, rather than churches one could elect to join. Priests and pastors served as chaplains to the majority of the community, instead of being restricted to the gathered congregation. But as Christendom gave way to a secular and religiously pluralistic society, so the ministry sphere of priests and pastors began to shrink.

The major challenge facing Christendom-era churches was the activation of their nominal and marginal members, who made up an extensive external constituency. But with the advent of post-Christendom social contexts during the twentieth century, church attendance shrank as people became increasingly socially distanced from the life of the church. In North America especially, people tend to drop out of church when they move to areas of the country where the church tradition in which they were nurtured from childhood is no longer a dominant influence.

Churches with a parochial mentality operate on a “come-to-us” philosophy of ministry. Newcomers will be welcomed, but they will be expected to take the initiative in stepping through the doorway of the church. Here in the United States, the same strategy prevails among megachurches and independent smaller churches. Provided they can demonstrate greater relevance, develop a range of need-
meeting ministries, and advertise their presence, they can attract the free-floating religious seekers who have become dissatisfied with their present brand, or local expression, of church.

For the church to morph into a post-Christendom context, it will need to adopt a different approach to ministry—from attraction to incarnational presence in the community. The Christian church is no longer in a privileged position in the culture, so it must learn to operate from the margins, much like the early church. Yet, the West presents an even greater religious challenge, for in the eyes of many people today the church has been tried and found wanting. In this new context churches will have to reestablish both their credibility, in order to demonstrate the radical nature of the gospel, and their transforming impact on society.

The process of morphing will be prolonged and painful for those churches that have a long history of enjoying Christendom privileges and prestige and that are steeped in a venerable tradition. The growing megachurches face a different but no less daunting challenge. Their recent success could prove to be their greatest downfall, should they fail to recognize the complexity of the cultural changes that are taking place. They must ignore the loud voices that proclaim, “If it’s not broke, why fix it?”

Despite the pressures to continue business as usual, a tide of change is surging through the churches of the Western world. This tidal flow has traveled further and faster in Europe, where Christendom functionally collapsed from about the time of the First World War, a war that had such a devastating impact in terms of the loss of millions of lives on the Western Front and the destruction of cities in Europe. The devastation was repeated on a much greater scale with the bombing of cities in the Second World War. Christendom may still survive as state pageantry and ecclesiastical pretensions to grandeur, but under the façade, society is increasingly anti-Christian, or at least demonstrates an ever-lower tolerance level.

In the United States, the Christendom paradigm took on a different form, due to the separation of church and state and the proliferation of both denominational and independent congregations. At the national level it appears as a vaguely defined deistic, civil religion, enhanced by a resurrected belief in “manifest destiny.” Much is made
of the country’s Judeo-Christian heritage, which is increasingly challenged by those of other faiths, as well as by increasing numbers of people declaring no religious preference, bolstered by the vocal minority of atheists.

**From Production Initiatives to Consumer Awareness**

The United States has led the world in both its technological innovations and its scale of production. Its genius for innovations in manufacturing became evident by the middle of the nineteenth century. At that time, American manufacturers moved beyond a craftsman approach, which entailed making each item separately with the result that individual parts could not be interchanged, to an assembly line concept, which meant producing standardized parts that were then assembled into the final product.

Henry Ford developed the assembly line concept for the mass production of automobiles, which brought down their price to the extent that the automobile was no longer the status symbol of the rich but was within the reach of the average American family. Factories churned out an unprecedented volume of reliable products to meet the overwhelming demand for transportation, armaments, and a wide range of goods during two world wars. Constant updates were introduced to keep pace with rapidly developing technologies and the need to meet and surpass the performance of the enemy.

Whereas Europe and Japan lay devastated and exhausted following World War II, the cities of the United States remained intact and its industrial base unharmed. Manufacturers in these cities were poised to take advantage of global needs, with the transition from war production to the task of rebuilding and resupplying devastated cities. The United States’ industrialists knew how to produce high quality goods in great quantity. The two decades from 1946 to 1966 were decades of unprecedented peacetime mass production.

By the mid-1960s a change began to take place in the developing world as mass production initiatives were replaced by the production of goods and services in response to consumer tastes. Markets became increasingly diversified, so that manufacturers had to listen more closely to their potential customers, or risk losing business to
their competitors. Advertising and marketing companies thrived, as they helped manufacturers “position” their products, gauge customer satisfaction, and solicit their suggestions for improvements and innovations. The result is that in today’s consumer societies we are overwhelmed with choices.

Consumerism is not confined to the goods and services that we utilize. It also exercises a powerful influence on our attitudes and engagement with every institution in which we become involved: our choice of neighborhoods, schools, medical plans, recreational activities—and churches. In the days when communities were static and deeply rooted, churches consisted of congregations that were both engaged and conformist. For the majority of churchgoers, the church they attended represented the church tradition into which they had been born, rather than a church they had chosen to join. Pastors and priests could rely on the support of a dependable group of volunteers to run the programs for every age group and need.

In the past five decades, however, churchgoers have shifted from being conformers to being consumers. They attend a particular church as a matter of personal choice and can just as easily decide to leave and go elsewhere—or to drop out altogether. Such instability is further exacerbated by the mobility of our society. Cities continue to expand and suburbs mushroom, with people moving every few years in response to job relocations, their desire to find a bigger home, or the need to eventually move to a retirement community.

Consumerism continues to be a major challenge faced by churches, no matter what their theological orientation or ecclesial tradition, for it is deeply rooted and endemic in our society. Megachurches, which we will consider in greater depth in chapter 4, are in my view unfairly targeted as the main promoters of a consumerist approach to Christian ministry, when in reality the vast majority of churches, regardless of size, are similarly tainted.

**From Religious Identity to Spiritual Exploration**

Most sociologists in the 1960s predicted that the emergence of secular society would bring about the demise of religion. This supposition has proven to be half right as we have witnessed the demise
of traditional religious institutions represented by what were termed the “mainline” churches. These churches, most of which trace their roots to the historic churches of Europe, are indeed suffering chronic numerical decline. But sociologists were mistaken in their biased assumption that religious interest would wane. Quite the opposite has occurred, with the majority of people still considering themselves as “spiritual.” Significant numbers of churchgoers have simply changed their allegiance from the denomination in which they were nurtured as children to independent churches or churches of other traditions. They are looking for alternatives that offer an inspiring worship environment and that provide ministries that respond to their needs, or that demonstrate social awareness and community involvement.

Perhaps the most significant development has been among those who consider themselves “spiritual” but who do not identify with any institutional expression of Christianity. They may have moved to a more privatized faith, with some organizing themselves into home-based groups. These may flourish for a while, but will they have the resources to pass on their faith to the next generation? That remains an open question.

In our increasingly pluralistic society, to be “spiritual” does not necessarily signify a commitment to orthodox Christian beliefs. It is more likely to represent an eclectic spirituality, drawing not only from the various streams of Christian theology—Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, and Pentecostal—but including elements of other religious insights—Buddhism, Jewish mysticism, Hinduism, and Islam. Individuals mix their own spiritual potpourri. Such socially affirmed, religious eclecticism is also to be found among members of traditional congregations who have imbibed the spirit of the age.

**Delayed Adulthood**

Commitment to the morphing of the church takes on special urgency when we look to the “emerging adult” generation, which according to recent sociological research and telephone surveys is far less connected to and sympathetic toward the church and Christian beliefs.
Christian Smith quotes the research of Don Miller and James Heft, who describe young adulthood as a “mysterious black hole” in the life of the American church. Smith also refers to Jeffrey Arnett’s findings arising from his interviews with one hundred young adults, which revealed “how little relationship there is between the religious training they received throughout childhood and the religious beliefs they hold at the time they reached emerging adulthood.” According to his statistical analysis “there was no relationship between exposure to religious training in childhood and any aspect of their religious beliefs as emerging adults.”

Whereas in previous decades the strength of the evangelical movement was among young people, these same people, having come to a personal faith in Christ, may not express their faith in terms of ongoing loyalty, either to their evangelical tradition or to the church that represents that ethos. They do not have a strong sense of allegiance to the “brand name” of the place where they make their spiritual home. For instance, a study by LifeWay Research that examined attendance rates at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention found that eighteen- to thirty-nine-year-olds make up a steadily decreasing proportion of the overall attendance totals at the meeting each year, ranging from almost 36 percent in 1985 to just over 13 percent in 2007. Whether these numbers are simply a stark reminder of the need, as Trevin Wax observes, to “bridge the generation gap” so that young and old alike can learn from one another more readily, or whether they point to a larger trend of waning denominational loyalty among younger people, they certainly merit further consideration.

The picture is filled in further by the presence of a countermovement to that of the emerging, missional churches. This countermovement represents a groundswell of local initiatives that explore new models and raise disturbing questions. The resurgence of a new conservatism adds another layer of complexity, as dispensationalism, fundamentalism, and Reformed streams become increasingly appealing to a segment of younger evangelicals. While these movements continue to grow, it is too soon to say to what extent they represent the evangelizing of de-churched and never-churched persons. At the present time, they appear mainly to be attracting younger Christians
who are seeking a more coherent biblical and theological position, rather than one dictated by the surrounding culture. In the following chapter we will explore some of the characteristics that many of these initiatives share.

As the Builder generation dies off and the Boomer generation heads for retirement, the Church is facing a bleak future if it fails to make a greater impact among the under-35s. As we have seen in this chapter, the issue will not be adequately addressed merely by the development of new worship styles and programs to relate to the younger generations. Churches are increasingly out of touch because they have largely failed to recognize the deep and comprehensive nature of the transitions—what we have referred to here as “megatrends”—that are impacting every area of life in the Western world. It is often only in retrospect that the realization dawns that an irreversible transition has taken place. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the churches of Europe similarly failed to recognize the extent and impact on every aspect of society of the changes accompanying the Industrial Revolution. Church leaders did too little too late, with the result that the cities that birthed the new industrial age grew at a phenomenal rate, while the migrant populations became largely lost to the church. Churches today must take care not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Summary

As we are now in the midst of the turmoil occasioned by the five transitions we have identified—from modernity to postmodernity; from the industrial to the information age; from Christendom to post-Christendom contexts; from production initiatives to consumer awareness; and from religious identity to spiritual exploration—we must learn the lesson of history: In the long term, churches will either morph or become moribund. But the process will be gradual and the picture confusing. As the Christendom mindset of traditional denominationalism fades with the passing of the Builder generation, the retiring Boomers will exert increasing influence in an endeavor to maintain their church tradition, characterized by individualism and
consumerism. But even though they represent a numerically large and affluent generation, they are likely, with increased life expectancy and the resulting escalation in retirement costs, to become progressively less generous in their financial support of the churches.

Both individually and collectively, the five megatrends we have identified in this chapter represent a formidable challenge to churches. They point to a need for congregations to locate resources—both within themselves and from outside agencies with expertise in relating the gospel to specific segments of the cultural mosaic—that can lend insight and experience to their journey along the road that lies ahead. Churches must seek out mission partners committed to assisting Christians in their witness from the margins of society within religious and culturally pluralistic contexts.