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What Types of Churches Will People Stand in Line for in the 21st Century?

Russell Chandler

How many of you ever walked out of a restaurant because of poor food or service?

How about churches? How many of you have ever walked out of a church because you didn't like the service or the sermon? Too loud, boring, not your style of music, disagreed with the message, etc.?

Now, how many of you have ever stood in line for, say, 45 minutes or more to be seated at a table in one of your favorite restaurants? Why were you willing to wait that long? Think about it.

Have you ever stood in line for 45 minutes to be seated in a church? What was it about that church or service that was so compelling that you (and others) would wait that long just to get in the door?

The comparison between leadership principles of good restaurants and good churches is, of course, at the heart of my book, *Feeding the Flock: Restaurants and Churches You'd Stand in Line For*.¹ The material in the book was inspired by my study of creative, cutting-edge restaurants and churches, and how they built a following—a flock. I focused on what they feed them and how they do it.

Conclusion: If you want a good meal, go to a busy restaurant. If you want a fulfilling, satisfying church experience, visit a busy, happy congregation.

You can learn lots more, and become involved in some hands-on applications of these leadership and training princi-

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ples. All you have to do is pick up and read *Feeding the Flock*. That's the end of my commercial. I want to go beyond the how-to applications. I want to set in perspective with you some of the marks of standing-room-only churches—churches I believe people will stand in line for in the 21st century. I call them New Millennium churches and ministries.

An initial caveat: Although I've spent a good deal of my career analyzing cultural and religious trends and peering at the future, my crystal ball probably isn't much—if any—clearer than yours. And remember, the most up-to-the-minute, cutting-edge church today will be way different by the Year 2010. At least it better be! If it isn't, it will probably be dead! That's why I have always liked the name of one of the hip, African-American churches I covered as a religion writer at *The Los Angeles Times*: "The Church of What's Happenin' Now." They really stay on top of things there!

But maybe I'm not standing on too terribly dangerous ground when I describe the kind of churches people will stand in line for in the New Millennium. Hey, the Year 2000 is only 414 days away! And for those who want to be Chronologically Correct, 2001 and the 21st century will dawn in just over two years!

So what I'd like to do during our brief time together is to identify five trends in the U.S. culture that I think are going to make a major impact on the way we do church in the next several decades. And as we analyze these trends, I want us to look at 21st century church and parachurch paradigms that will cause long lines of eager people to form outside the doors of your church and mine. Well, that would be nice, wouldn't it?

Cultural Changes and Trends

The first cultural trend is Ethnicity and Diversity. It and the second cultural trend, Ages and Stages, relate to demographics.

1. Ethnicity and Diversity

Let's look at ethnicity and diversity. Ethnic diversity is here to stay. By the Year 2050 only half the nation will be Caucasian. Immigrants from Asia and Latin American countries are arriving so rapidly and in such numbers that within the lifetimes of today's teenagers *no* ethnic group will constitute a majority of the nation's population. Hispanics will outnumber African-Americans early in the coming century and will account for a quarter of the nation's population 50 years from now. America

soon will have a *minority majority*.

At the same time, the nation is moving toward disconnected communities that lack any shared sense of interest or purpose. This lack of cohesiveness stands in stark contrast to America's image as a melting pot. Complex and ingrained ethnic and racial divisions within the country pose a significant barrier to the melding of diverse peoples into a common culture.²

"Today," writes William Booth in *The Washington Post*, "emphasis is placed on preserving and promoting one's own ethnicity and cultural roots. With growing diversity, America is becoming more segregated."³

What does this mean for the churches of the 21st century? What if segregation is indeed solidifying, with television sitcoms and talk shows, movies and student associations, all appealing to ethnically diverse but segregated, precise audiences? It means that churches face an uphill struggle to carry out Paul's declaration that all are one in Christ, and that there is "neither Jew nor Greek" in the Christian faith (Gal. 3:28).

The Promise Keeper's men's movement is one bright spot, seeming to break down the reappearing walls of racial division. PK's emphasis on bringing men together across racial lines has been a giant step toward erasing such boundaries—even if it is for the limited time that the men assemble in rally and stadium events—events like PK's "Stand in the Gap" rally last year at the nation's capitol.

There is also the massive interdenominational movement that has emerged from the "Church of Modesto" in central California. The Church of Modesto has succeeded in bringing together people of color, mixing significant numbers of Latinos and blacks with white Evangelicals.⁴

Yet, on a related front, as George Barna points out in his *Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators*, "America is transitioning from a Christian nation to a syncretistic, spiritually diverse society."⁵ This phenomenon has been called "cafeteria religion," or "religion a la carte." Less dogma, more diversity. And as long as others are not coercing them to practice something that goes against their own beliefs, most Americans are content to live and let live—allowing others to pursue their own religious agendas no matter how bizarre or unconventional.⁶

The upshot of this religious pluralism is that many Americans opt for "dual citizenship," or "bilocation," becoming involved in several places of worship, even several religions, at the

same time. They accomplish this juggling act with apparent poise. They simply proclaim that truth and God are one, but that the paths to reach Her or Him are many.

The church of the 21st century, if it wants lines at its door, will have to reach beyond this *laissez faire* tolerance, meeting it with effective evangelism. We'll consider some models for doing that in a few minutes.

2. Ages and Stages

Another aspect of demographics under *Cultural Changes and Trends* is the shifting tide of the population boom. Other analysts have concentrated on the boosters, boomers, busters and the Generation X-ers. I'd just like to include a few words about Youth, Singles and the Aging under point Number 2.

Youth: Some experts in youth work and sociology have made these observations about the so-called "Next Generation"—that is, those born around 1980:⁷

- Their pulse "runs fast": Bombarded by frequent images, they are in need of constant "fixes"—strong stimulation to keep them from being bored.
- For these young people, change is constant and focus is fragmented. The remote control button symbolizes their reality.
- They have lost their innocence at a very early age.
- They live for the moment.
- They are jaded, with a "been there/done that" attitude. Few things shock them; little is considered vulgar. They live in a degraded environment that devalues everything, including personal morality.
- They take consumerism for granted.
- They are a "cyber-suckled" community. They think in a nonlinear manner, experiencing and processing several things at once.
- They comprehend information in images and narrative story telling.
- They are skeptical, constantly performing reality checks, and quick to spot phoniness.
- They tend not to trust adults.

So churches have to do youth ministry differently than they did in the days when kids were looking for Saturday-night amusement. The entertainment/rally model of youth work is out

of touch with this “Millennium Generation.”

Wayne Rice, founder of Youth Specialties, says a brand new landscape is out there. Families are no longer intact. “Today youth ministry is more like the emergency room in a hospital,” he says.⁸

While there are several promising models of youth ministry for the 21st Century, one that I believe will especially connect is referred to as “peer ministry”—i.e., teens doing ministry. An example cited last year in *Christianity Today* is Souled Out, a “youth church” in Mount Prospect, Illinois. There, kids minister to kids, demonstrating the energy and passion that this generation can bring to the life of a church. Teens reaching other teens, says businessman Ed Basler, who with his wife, Cathi, founded Souled Out, create an atmosphere of trust and affirmation that enables young people who might not otherwise hear a gospel message to hear and relate, and find release.⁹

Singles: John Vaughan of *Church Growth Today* has researched lifestyle groups where America’s largest churches are located. He notes that the Number 1 lifestyle group in the zip codes containing the 400 largest megachurches (2,000-plus members) is “Enterprising Young Singles.” Potentially, that means that long lines of up-and-coming young singles could be standing on many of our churches’ doorsteps. But within that broad singles category are subcategories encompassing a variety of individuals: the never-married, the divorced, the widowed; custodial and noncustodial parents as well as nonparents; those who date and those who don’t.

Leonard Sweet of the Theological School at Drew University says a one-size-fits-all approach to these hordes of singles won’t cut it. In fact, he says churches billed as “family life centers” will lose out as single-adult populations swell dramatically.

Sweet notes that future churches will have to choose between buying that pipe organ the older parishioners hold dear, putting their money into audio and video equipment to appeal to a younger generation, or investing in digital technology to reach yet another segment of the population.¹⁰

Aging: Speaking of fundamental changes in our society, management maven Peter Drucker believes the biggest issue for the next 25 years is the gap or relationship between people of working age and the growing number of older, retired people.¹¹

This “Third Age” is redefining the concept of aging: The “golden years” are now an extension of healthy middle age,

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stretching well into what were once called the “sunset years.” Many experts believe babies born today will likely see the dawning of the 22nd century. Their children may live even longer—120 years or more!

Demographically, the army of the elderly will grow from today’s 35 million who are past age 65 to 53 million in 2020, a jump of 51 percent. By 2030, that figure will climb to an estimated 70 million, up an astonishing 98 percent.

This Third Age is of critical importance to the church because these people have the potential for launching new careers, working part time, and doing a massive amount of volunteering. Are we ready for the line that could be forming? It means providing continuing education for these seniors so they can keep up. Otherwise, it’s been predicted that the Number 1 killer of the elderly may be boredom!

Not only will we have a bonanza of vital, healthy older people; there is another side to which churches and church-related retirement homes and ministries need to pay attention: We will have more and more frail elderly with impairments (primarily the post-80 group).¹²

3. *Spirituality and Experience*

Spirituality has become the amorphous in-word of the late 20th century. Tie this to an intense individualism and search for experience and you get a compact but I believe accurate picture of the secular culture’s idea of spirituality. Even corporations bring in consultants to address spiritual concerns in the workplace. Books like *Soul of a Business* sell well. Talk-show queen Oprah Winfrey is doing a series on “Remembering Your Spirit.” The Sunday evening TV program, “Touched by an Angel,” dispenses a God-is-love and wants-you-to-be-all-you-can-be theology. Now I’m not complaining about either show. Far from it! But none of this is associated with organized religion. These “signs” tell me what the church of the 21st century is facing.

Pastors note that people come to them with views of truth and God that they hold in private ways and that they have no desire to commit to anything specific. Only about half of Americans, for example, now die in the denomination they were born in. More than three-fourths claim a religious identity but have little to do with that religion.

What’s “in” is custom blending, like Starbucks coffee. Wade Clark Roof, religion professor at the University of California at

Santa Barbara, calls these spiritual explorers the "Quest Generation." This group looks for experience rather than dogma, connection above learning.¹³

The trendy type of prayer service called Taize, for example, draws in the kids with soft music and simple, oft-repeated phrases and prayers. *The Wall Street Journal* analyzed the market-research take on Taize and concluded that its elements of chanting and contemplation made it a quintessential 90's mix of spirituality and individualism. Taize enables participants to customize their religious identities and to draw from a pantry of sundry sources.¹⁴

Roof says the direction is away from history and doctrine, toward a generic form of religion. What attracts people to the new spirituality is the hope of experiencing transcendence while shucking off the traditional restraints associated with old-time religion. Anything that demands absolute standards or mentions sin is perceived as being intolerant.

Eugene Kennedy, professor emeritus of psychology at Loyola University in Chicago, calls the trend "soft spirituality." This, he says, "tacks the foam rubber onto the Cross."¹⁵ Soft spirituality does indeed mesh with the 21st century cultural comfort zone.

To Kennedy, soft spirituality is a mirage, not an oasis. "The springs," he writes, "may run with Evian water, but there is no real nourishment here, just the illusion of refreshment. That such a movement has co-opted the name of spirituality in our pop culture," he continues, "tells us just how hungry we are for the real thing and how unfed we remain."¹⁶

The point for churches and ministries in the decade ahead is that people *still seek after spirituality* and religious experience. Churches that endure into the next millennium will capitalize on that yearning, at the same time finding ways to counteract the cultural belief that spirituality has little or nothing to do with church.

I believe cutting-edge churches are finding ways to turn spiritual hunger toward authentic faith. Ron Martonia, senior pastor of West Winds Community Church in Jackson, Michigan, has shifted the church's entire membership assimilation procedure to a more "hands-on" process of self-discovery. The lay people have a higher sense of ownership, he reports.¹⁷

New Millennium churches will also reshape their cultural perspective, resonating with the culture's easy familiarity with

the “network society.” Individuals with spiritual hunger soon discover that the network is grander than the individual, and that technology, after all, is an empty, heartless god. Hearts yearn for value and experience of the holy and sacred, whether or not they can articulate that or theologize about it. And they need to be shown that they can find it best in community.

William A. Beckham speaks about the importance of the small-group community in his book, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century*.¹⁸ “Some churches,” he says, “after researching what the contemporary generation wants, are trying to give them the experience they demand. The strategy is to package the church in a new way so that members get more experience and less knowledge.” The greatest value to the exploding thousands who throng the megachurches—both weekdays and Sundays—is a spiritual experience rather than a ritual.

But this will only go so far, Beckham warns. There needs to be a cell-church experience of New Testament design as well as the large-group celebration. Without this small group of “transparent fellowship, the church will be no more successful on the experience side than it was on the knowledge side.”¹⁹

4. Communication and Collaboration

The fourth cultural trend is Communication and Collaboration. Todd Gitlin wrote an article called “Pop Goes the Culture,” published in *U.S. News & World Report*.²⁰ He makes the case that culture has become the vehicle of communication for U.S. collective life. For example, when *Seinfeld* airs its final episode or celebrity Frank Sinatra dies, the whole nation knows about it together. The same top films are released to theaters—in metropolises as well as small towns—on the same weekend. So everyone is seeing and talking about *Titanic* or *Beloved* in the same time frame. Gitlin uses five “S” words to describe the future of this popular culture, the vehicle driving us to the 21st century:

Saturation: The “imagescape” created by popular culture is ubiquitous and inescapable. In a wired, techno-society, the Internet disseminates culture worldwide, instantaneously. And whatever new technologies may emerge next century, chances are they also will be the medium to transmit collective ideas.

Segmentation: It is becoming more and more difficult for a single brand or icon to grab a monopoly or galvanize a national audience. The “Big 3” networks are already challenged. De-

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nominations, which formerly had a lock on churchgoing market share, find it harder and harder to sustain. "Niche marketing" will mean more specialized magazines, more TV channels, more religious groups, and, in sum, more seductive and entertaining approaches to reach the fragmented society that we talked about under Cultural Trend Number 1: Ethnicity and Diversity.

Sensation and Scandal: A summary of Gitlin's point: All forms of media, in a never-ending quest to increase profits, will place the emphasis on kinetic style, creating one "microintensity" after another, and "spectacles that move." Celebrity lives will continue to be a commonality that links diverse people and provides what Gitlin calls "membership cards" for ordinary people.

Synergy: Video games, TV programs, toys and amusement parks will be linked to amass market share through the "maximum reuse of materials." We already have the spinoffs from the movies to the McDonald's toy giveaways, to the T-shirts to the CDs, and to the greeting cards, etc. etc. Meanwhile, on the Christian front, "Painter of Light" Thomas Kinkade is now launching a home furnishings line to match his super-popular paintings, books, jigsaw puzzles, wall plates, calendars, greeting cards, etc. etc.

Speed: This means getting the message to the viewer before she can switch attention somewhere else. The challenge to producers (and preachers) is to "make it wiggle" when it comes to news, commercials, websites, and worship services. Split-screen viewing, already popular on CNN, will increase in sophistication and use.

While all this is going on, tele-communities are evolving. Joined by modern telecommunications and bound by common interests, these tele-communities are transcending the limitations of time and geography. Their impact on trade, politics, culture—and the church—will only increase in the future. Community is now defined by the marketplace instead of location.

"A church," writes Len Sweet in *Next*, a publication of Leadership Network,²¹ "that does not come to grips with technology is living in the death-grip of the past. God has a history of speaking through new media forms, beginning with the Christian church itself. Jesus came on the scene during a major technological shift: the transition from an oral to a written culture..."

"Today we are being asked to do what our ancestors did before us: bring the church into a new technological world" with-

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out letting the technology “ensnare or enslave us.”

As Sweet and others identify it, the issue is the communications revolution that revolves around the culture of the screen instead of the culture of the book.

Bad news for us book authors: In 1996 the average American spent 1,600 hours watching television and 300 hours listening to music. The average amount of time spent reading books during the entire year? 100 hours. (Actually I’m surprised it was that much!)

So what’s the church to do that wants people to stand in line for its services? Are we adapting our methods of communication to effectively reach the Next Generation raised on MTV and sound bites? George Barna notes that the average teen now has an attention span of six to eight minutes.²² How do you impart biblical truth in this nano-moment? Answer: Very quickly!

The method and mode of communication is as important as the speed, especially to younger folks, who link method to credibility. To them, information presented electronically often rates a higher believability quotient than do words uttered directly from a speaker’s mouth. (I’m not sure about from a horse’s mouth!)

What about the “Cyberchurch”? Can there be a *real* Internet Church? asks Steve Hewitt, editor of *Christian Computing* magazine. Personally, I think it will only be a pale substitute for the real thing: face-to-face person-to-person fellowship. But for perhaps 10-15 percent of the Christian population, Cyberchurch may be a practical reality. It may be the only option for the distance-challenged. And for all of us it will be a vital adjunct to the gathered, assembled Body of Christ.

What is Hewitt’s take? “The Internet is unlike anything else we have ever dealt with,” he wrote in the September 1998 magazine cover story. “It will have a greater effect on the church than the telephone, the car and even the printing press. We have to be open to the possibilities and be willing to combine our futures with this growing technology.”²³

In any case, the church that people will stand in line for in the 21st century will be collaborative in style and communication. Such churches will abandon pastor-centered models in favor of collaborative styles that include larger teams and task-enabled lay persons. The role of the pastor/leader today is to create an environment in which lay persons’ potential can be set loose for ministry. This means teams of staff and laity working together in

a collaboration that keeps grace and accountability in creative tension. The churches that will grow in the future will be those that know how to heal the soul and nurture people's inner need for peace and meaning.

This, as I said, happens best in the context of community. In fact, collaboration will be the only way to stay connected to the church and its constituency, and to the larger community. No one congregation or denomination or movement can do it all. Nor can effective action occur independently in one's own circumscribed world. The future church will collaborate with other churches in the community, with other denominations, and with non-profit and service agencies—even with government and business sectors.

The issue for the future according to religion-watcher Martin Marty is whether believers will find communities and build loyalties and use them to make a difference in the world.²⁴

David Cannistraci in *The Gift of Apostle* says that when we view the kingdom of God as a giant net with God's people joined together like the interconnecting cords, increase occurs.²⁵ As we link in interconnecting relationships and share resources, our effectiveness is multiplied. And when multiple networks move in the same direction, he adds, this becomes an even greater force, paving the way for such things as famine relief, ministry mobilization and resource pooling.²⁶ It's the Gestalt effect; the loaves and fishes!

Growth in American Christianity, then, will be in churches that take seriously the call to present the Gospel in a medium that connects culturally with their potential audience.²⁷

Branding and Benefits

These days there is a frenzy over "brands." On the seminar and lecture circuit and in the business press the buzzword is "creative branding." The talk is all about "brand extension" and "leveraging the brand." In *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, Jeff Bezos, founder-CEO of Amazon.com, touted as "Earth's Biggest Bookstore," converses on unique brand challenges and getting people to keep visiting a place that doesn't exist. (By the way, how many of you have ever ordered a book online from Amazon.com?)

Branding as a cultural trend may at first seem unrelated to churches you'd stand in line for. But wait a moment: Hear out Jeff Bezos. Here are a few kernels cut from his *Wall Street Journal*

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cob:

1. Without a clear sense of the brand, you might never log on [visit].
2. Brands mean all kinds of things to people, but underlying them all is the idea of saving time (the fast-paced New Millennium's most precious commodity). "Not only does a strong brand save you the time of going out and researching other lesser known products or services; it eliminates the risk of a bad experience, which could cost you a colossal amount of time."
3. "A brand has to make a promise and then deliver it." For books that means the promise of an authoritative selection. But get this! "There's also the emotional promise of inspiration and discovery, of finding the next great book that is going to change your life." [I hope you're making some church connections here!]
4. Next, Mr. Bezos points out that a brand is a relationship between you and your customer. Ultimately, what's important "is not what you send out to them in advertising ... but what they reflect back and how you respond to that." The entire experience is shaped by the customers, and what they value, and how they benefit.
5. "Word of mouth has been incredibly important to us," Bezos says, "and ultimately that's what a brand is, the things people say about you when you're not there."²⁸

Amazon.com is thus very serious about targeting its audience and convincing it that the company offers something of significant value.

I want to make a radical suggestion: The churches of the 21st century people will stand in line for will have well-established brands. I don't mean denominational tags. In fact, I believe that denominational religion as we know it will decline in importance in the coming century. What I mean is that growing, vital churches will have the leadership, the authority, the consistency and the biblical qualities that are synonymous with excellence and value. Those churches that abandon their commitment to excellence will lose members and followers no matter what they are called. A brand can be empty, riding on a reputation that has long passed its zenith and slid into mediocrity or irrelevance.

The "brand" doesn't make the church; the church makes the brand.

I agree with George Barna that attracting and keeping the

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unchurched revolves around *relationships, relevance, and benefits*. These three are keys to establishing your brand for the 21st century. Barna defines *relationships* as friends and relatives inviting others to services; *relevance* as music and message the audience can relate to; and *benefits* as new friendships, good experiences for their children, practical help, and an encounter with God. "There are literally millions of unchurched and nominally churched adults who are actively searching for a meaningful religious experience." They are looking for relationships, relevance and benefits.²⁹

Keeping the "brand" in mind, the 21st century church leader will need to be highly relational—leading from the middle of the people, in the middle of the culture—rather than from the front. Sam Williams, senior pastor of Bay Marin Community Church and an adjunct professor here at Golden Gate Seminary, has re-defined evangelism as helping people discover where God is already at work in their lives.

"So we ask a question [that] they can answer," he says. "'Tell me about your spiritual journey.' 'What's happening in your life spiritually?' They know the answer to these questions. It's Mars Hill instead of Pentecost ... It's starting where they are."

This is recognizing each person's individuality in a post-modern cultural setting. "We ask," says Williams, "'How can I help you? What do you need to know?'" That, he says, "is basically our new model of developing disciples."³⁰

Cultural relevance of New Millennium churches will include their contemporary style of worship and evangelism, and the strength of their members' conversion experiences. As Donald Miller, author of *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*, observes, the focus of these churches "is on internal transformation as opposed to change in external appearance."³¹

Even the New Millennium churches' architectural style reflects the cultural brand needed to attract and hold visitors. Relational, accessible, informal, friendly, with outside spaces that beckon with the message that people will feel comfortable and can bring friends if they want to. Inside: natural light, high-quality electronics with "live" acoustics—a place for communication and to worship God and meet His people.³²

What are the benefits to churches that pay attention to the cultural trends and the communications revolution ushering in

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the New Millennium? Connection in time of isolation and insulation; community in the midst of mobility, eternal values in a sea of relativism.

That's more than a benefit. It's a blessing. And for that, I predict people will stand in line!

Conclusion:

My message has tended to emphasize trends and the "receptivity factor"—a phrase I guess Dan Reeves came up with. So perhaps you're thinking, "Can the culture connection be overdone? What about the biblical imperatives? Is Eugene Kennedy right after all: the seeker-sensitive church is nothing but a comfortable cross wrapped in foam padding?"

The right question, however, is *not* "How do we stop the collapse of the church culture?" As leadership development consultant Reggie McNeal phrases it, "The *right* question is 'How do we re-conceptualize a Christianity that is *not* tied to the church culture?'"³³ To set our course in this direction is to seek the leadership style of the Apostolic Church! Its goal is to produce disciples who live out their faith in a culture increasingly alien to the Gospel," says MacNeal.³⁴

As we round the Millennial curve into the 21st century, our culture is basically reinventing itself every five years. George Barna notes that during this time period the core attributes of our society including language, customs, dress styles, leisure pursuits, relational emphases, values, and entertainment preferences—all of these are reshaped and reconfigured. If change is this pervasive and coming this rapidly, how can the church afford to ignore it and cling to outmoded styles or out-of-date ways of communicating?³⁵

There is a danger, of course, that we will be co-opted by the culture. But the corrective is to keep Romans 12 firmly in mind: "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out."³⁶

While "reinventing" themselves and adapting, churches that people will stand in line for need to have a well-rounded and balanced diet of spiritual messages.³⁷ These will emphasize both the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of the faith. The horizontal convinces seekers of all ages that Christianity is relational and relevant. And through vertical messages the character of God, the teachings of the Scriptures, the nature of repentance

and the Cross, and the new life in Christ are portrayed and metabolized.

Though I had hoped to devote more time to the Christian leader of the 21st century, I'll summarize briefly: Because of the ethnicity, diversity, different ages and stages, and the disparate states of religious experience that people bring to their Quest for Spirituality, the Christian leader will need to be what Kevin Graham Ford calls "a facilitator of mass-customized experiences."³⁸

Before his wording puts you off, think about how Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases Paul in First Corinthians 9:19-22:

I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life.

One final question: If churches following this pattern are so culturally bound, will they compute with the *next* generation? Won't they be dinosaurs by 2015? David S. Luecke, writing in the *Christian Century*, wonders whether the typical Willow Creek audience 15 years from now will have the same preponderance of gray hairs that one sees today in Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral.

Churches that people stand in line for today can tomorrow become victims of their own success. And what works for one doesn't necessarily work for another. As organizations adapt to their environment they establish an equilibrium. This may seem like a good thing. But it actually decreases their ability to change in response to *new* conditions. Take this down: "The more an organization adapts, the less adaptable it becomes."³⁹

Ah, there's where the constant need to reinvent comes in. The Red Lobster and the Olive Garden restaurants do a complete makeover every seven years. With Luecke we can celebrate those churches where everything comes together. But, as he says, "imitating their approaches offers no assurance of a second success, because the mix of people and circumstances will be different.

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Churches grow where a lot of people are excited about what they are doing and are doing it well.⁴⁰

So, sow. Sow three or four or more seeds. In God's plan and perfect timing for the 21st century, some seeds will grow. Even apparent randomness can be explained as the movement of the Holy Spirit, who calls and gathers the church.⁴¹

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit," Jesus said (John 3:8, NIV).

That was true at the beginning of the First Millennium. It is true at the beginning of the Third. And it will be until Jesus comes.

Writer

Chandler, Russell. Dr. Chandler received a B.S. from UCLA in Business Administration (1955) and a M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary (1958). A noted journalist, author, and speaker, he has received several journalism awards and the Wilbur Award for book of the year in 1989 for *Understanding the New Age*. Since 1992, Russell has devoted himself to being a freelance journalist, author, and speaker.

NOTES

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