

A DVD Curriculum for

THE  
PRESENT  
FUTURE

Six Tough Questions  
for the CHURCH

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE



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Reggie McNeal

 JOSSEY-BASS  
A Wiley Imprint  
[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-9170-8

ISBN-10: 0-7879-9170-8

Packaged with ISBN 0-7879-8673-9 and sold separately.

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

*PB Printing* 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Preparing for the Future!

As I have traveled around speaking and talking with people in conjunction with the book I wrote, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, I have run into an increasing number of people who are expressing fundamental doubts about the viability of the church. These are not critics from the outside who don't like what the church is doing. These are connected leaders who don't like what they are experiencing in church. What I say in the book and what I believe is that we can't keep "doing church" the way we've always done it and expect it to thrive. Because it won't. When you watch this series of sessions on the DVD, you are likely to find that some of your own assumptions about church are being challenged:

- If you build the perfect church (the way we think about church), they (all who aren't already there) will come.
- Growing your church will automatically make a difference in the larger community.
- Developing better church members will result in greater evangelism.
- The church needs more workers (for church work).
- Being involved in church results in discipleship.
- Better planning will get you where you want to go (in terms of missional effectiveness).

Those assumptions describe a church world that has only a limited time left. A future already exists that significantly alters the spiritual landscape in North America. Church leaders and members who want to participate in a renewal of the North American church must face this "present future" and its new realities. These realities represent tectonic shifts in the ethos of the spiritual quest of humanity. Each reality requires the church to shift its thinking

from answering the wrong question to pursuing the implications of a tough question.

The motivation behind this DVD series is the desire to help churches and church leaders deal with these realities and to be obedient to what God is asking the church to do as a consequence. It is a tall order because many, if not most, church members have never experienced missional living. They've just experienced church.

Here are some questions to get people thinking and exchanging ideas. You might want to jot your initial thoughts down in the space provided. If you do this throughout the guide, you will create a journal of what you were thinking or what God was saying to you.

*Conversation Starters*

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What would spiritual awakening in your community look like? How would it be different from church as usual?

How would spiritual awakening affect your community?

How would spiritual awakening affect your church?

What would you be doing—and doing differently—in a spiritual awakening?

What would your church be doing—and doing differently—in a spiritual awakening?

What is keeping spiritual awakening from coming?

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## **Introduction to the DVD Curriculum: What Are You Looking At?**

The John 4 account of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well in Samaria has a fascinating subplot that shows how challenging it will be to reorient North American Christians to God's mission in the world. In the Sychar experience, Jesus had a harder time getting through to the disciples than he did in achieving a radical transformation in the life of the Samaritan woman. It is possible that the disciples passed this woman on their way into town and on their way out. They apparently didn't engage her (or any other Samaritan).

When the disciples returned to Jesus at the well, he was enjoying a personal moment of missional accomplishment that they knew nothing about. He was so filled with joy that he had no room for food. When they wondered aloud if someone had slipped him some food, Jesus launched into a description of the smorgasbord of missional opportunity if the disciples could only learn to see.

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:34-35, NIV). The disciples never saw the Samaritan woman. They couldn't see the harvest.

The reason Jesus had trouble getting his disciples to see what he saw was simply this: they had grown up in church! They had been trained to be concerned with internal issues rather than to keep their eyes on the harvest. Not that they forgot the harvest, but it was in the future ("four months more"), after their own internal needs had been met.

The disciples had grown up under the influence of Pharisees. The Pharisees' approach to sharing God was "Come and get it!" What they offered was the invitation for people to convert to their

culture in order to get a shot at getting connected to God. They had contorted God's mission to a message of moralism: "You people 'out there' need to straighten up!" They had developed a very insular culture. They lived inside a Pharisee bubble (doing business only with other Pharisees, eating only with other Pharisees, worshipping only with members of their sect, and so on). In short, they operated a religious club for club members.

Jesus' evangelism strategy directly challenged the Pharisees' approach (and the behavior of disciples who had been trained in it). Instead of "Come and get it!" it was "Go get 'em!" Instead of withdrawing from people for fear of contamination, he ate with them. Instead of insisting that people clean up in order to come to God, Jesus preached that God accepts people as they are so that in the light of this love they can come to their senses (like the Prodigal Son). Instead of advancing religious institutionalism, Jesus talked about experiencing abundant life through a personal relationship with God. He gave himself away to poor people, sick people, unclean people, the disadvantaged, and those who had been disfranchised from the religion of the privileged.

In this series of DVDs, we're going to be discussing what it will take to move from a "come and get it" mentality to a "go get 'em" mind-set. It all starts with questions, in this case with pairs of questions: wrong questions (the ones we usually ask that keep us stuck in church as usual) and tough questions (the ones we need to be asking and answering if we want to move to a new present future).

Jesus had his hands full when it came to getting his disciples to "get it" in terms of his mission. In the DVD, the episode of the woman at the well is used to highlight the challenges church people face in seeing the world as God sees it.

As before, jot down some of your thoughts in preparation for discussing the following questions.

*Conversation Starters*

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Why do you think the disciples failed to engage the Samaritan woman?

In what ways is a Pharisee mentality reflected in the church culture of North America?

Who are the people “not like us” in your community?

What do you think it would take to engage them?

Is your church “looking out” or “looking in”?

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## **New Reality Number One: Generational Cultures and the Collapse of the Church Culture**

**WRONG QUESTION:** How do we do church better?

**TOUGH QUESTION:** How do we deconvert from “churchianity” to Christianity?

The collapse of the church culture as we know it will not be the death of the church. The church Jesus founded is good; it is right. It will survive until he returns. The imminent demise discussed in this series is the collapse of the unique culture in North America that has come to be called “church.” This church culture has become confused with biblical Christianity, both inside the church and out. In reality, the church culture in North America is a mere vestige of the original movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs.

Church culture collapse can be demonstrated in several ways. One is through demographics. Statistical data reveal an accelerating drop in church participation. The only reason church attendance is holding up is that people are living longer. The further down we go in the generational chain, the smaller the percentage of each succeeding generation that reports going to church. The number of Americans reporting “no religious preference” doubled in the last decade of the twentieth century. These are not atheists (only 1 percent of respondents identified themselves this way). These are Americans who simply don’t see the church as playing a vital role in their spiritual experience.

Many congregations and church leaders, faced with the collapse of the church culture, have responded by adopting a refuge mentality. This is the perspective reflected in the approach to ministry that withdraws from the culture, that builds the walls higher and thicker,

that tries to hang on to what we've got, that hunkers down to wait for the storm to blow over and for things to get back to "normal" so that the church can resume its previous place in the culture.

People who hold this perspective frequently lament the loss of cultural support for church values and adopt an "us-versus-them" view of the world. Those with a refuge mentality view the world outside the church as the enemy. Their answer is to live inside the bubble in a Christian parallel culture. Evangelism in this worldview is about churching the unchurched, not connecting people to Jesus. It focuses on cleaning people up, changing their behavior so that Christians (read church people) can be more comfortable around them. Refuge churches evidence enormous self-preoccupation. They deceive themselves into believing they are a potent force in their communities.

The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists. The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom. The church is the bride of Christ. Its union with him is designed for reproduction, the growth of the kingdom. Jesus does not teach his disciples to pray "Thy church come." The church is not the destination; the kingdom is. In its institutional preoccupation, the church has abandoned its real identity and reason for existence.

The correct response to the collapse of the church culture is not to try to become better at doing church. This only feeds the problem and hastens the church's decline through its disconnect from the larger culture. The need is not for a methodological fix. The need is for a missional fix.

## **New Reality Number One, Part One: Generational Cultures**

In this session, Reggie detailed the characteristics of each generation in American life, noting that each of these generational cohorts represents a distinct culture.

### *Conversation Starters*

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What new insights did you gain about your own generation?

What new insights did you gain about other generations?

What are the implications of this discussion for relationships in your family?

What are you going to do with these new insights?