



What Kind of Day Is Today?

The church must forever be asking, “What kind of day is it today?” for no two days are alike in her history.

David Smith, *Mission After Christendom*¹

JESUS DIDN'T ASK, “Would you like to walk?” He asked the invalid at the pool of Bethesda, “Do you want to get well?” (John 5). Rick admits that when he first read that story in the Bible, he thought, “It didn't happen like that! What a rude question. Why did Jesus ask that? Of course the man wants to walk!”

Again, Jesus didn't ask if he wanted to walk. He asked, “Do you want to get well?” Maybe Jesus was alluding to something more than just walking. When he asks, “Do you want to get well?” Jesus is asking the man if he is ready for the change that is coming. The man's friends will most likely change. He won't be begging anymore; he won't be by the pool anymore. If he gets well, a lot of things would likely change.

“Do you want to get well?” That's the question Jesus asked the man at the pool, and it's the question we asked at the end of our first book, *The Externally Focused Church*. We thought that would be a good place to start this journey, asking some more tough questions about change—change that affects our churches and our communities.

We've come to discover that “Do you want to get well?” is one of many great questions Jesus asks. After thirty years in the “people” business—most of it with congregations and their leaders—we have found that we don't always want to get well. We want the pain or angst to stop, or we want good things to come, but the bottom line is that most of us don't really want change.

Have you ever noticed that the guy at the pool doesn't really answer this great question from Jesus? His response was something like, "Sir, every time I try to get in the water, someone always gets in ahead of me." In other words, he says, "I would if I could but I can't, so I am not. It's not my fault."

What is true for us as individuals is almost always magnified when we get in a group. We have been with thousands of church leaders, and we often talk about how we want to get better as people, as leaders, as congregations. We want to be more effective, reach more people, help people grow in their faith, serve more effectively. We want to get well! While a whole lot of us talk about what we ought to do, could do, might do, or should do, most of us end up sitting around the pool explaining to one another what's holding us back from change.

Change is hard but necessary. In *The Externally Focused Church*, we asked leaders to change their conversations by changing their questions. Instead of asking, "How big is your church?" ask, "What's your church's impact in the community?" We also asked, "If your church disappeared, would your community notice?" Asking those questions has sparked change—a lot of change—in our own churches and others.

That's what we want to do with this book. We want to see continued transformation in our churches and in our communities by asking better questions. Sometimes the questions are tough, but we have a responsibility to take the gospel that never changes to a world that will never be the same. In other words, Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, but the world we are living in is changing every day. Are you ready to ask some more tough questions about your church and the community? Are you ready to change the conversation once again? Do you want to get well?

Waking Up to a New Day

A few years ago, Eric met a young pastor named Jeff Waldo from University Baptist Church, outside of Houston. Jeff had just finished a master's program in future studies from the University of Houston. After the disappointing discovery that he knew nothing of horoscopes, crystal balls, tarot cards, or fortune cookies, Jeff told Eric what future studies was about. Future studies is not about prediction but about imagining plausible and possible scenarios for the future so that we can plan accordingly. "If things continue along this trajectory, this is what we can expect." Of course, the future rarely has the decency to conform to our expectations, and prognosticators are notoriously bad at predicting

future outcomes. Consider this prediction regarding the automobile from the *Literary Digest* in 1899: “The ordinary ‘horseless carriage’ is at present a luxury for the wealthy; and although its price will probably fall in the future, it will never, of course, come into as common use as the bicycle.”²

Just how accurately can anyone predict the future? If anyone should know, it would be Phillip Tetlock. For twenty years, this psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, worked with 284 people who made their living as “experts” in prognostication about politics and economics. By the end of the study, the experts had made 82,361 forecasts, placing most of the forecasting questions into a three possible future outcomes: things would stay the same (status quo), get better (political freedom, economic growth), or get worse (repression, recession). What was the outcome? Statistically untrained chimps, with a dartboard, would have come up with more accurate predictions!³

Predicting the future is not our goal here, but discovering today’s trends and patterns is. Why? Those discoveries do help shape tomorrow and enlighten us. We must wake up and ask ourselves, “What kind of day is today?”

STEEPR: A Leadership Skill to Master

To understand the times and to be in step with what God is doing, all leaders need the ability to answer the question “What kind of day is today?” You probably remember the men of Issachar from 1 Chronicles 12:32 “who understood the times and [therefore] knew what Israel should do.” In Luke 12:54–56, Jesus poses this question to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you *don’t know how to interpret this present time?*”

So how do futurists think about the future? Jeff identified the constructs he and other futurists use. The broad bellwether categories futurists pay attention to are society, technology, economics, environment, and politics. To these five categories Jeff insightfully adds religion—now forming the acronym STEEPR. Using these six categories helps us think about what kind of day it is. It helps us become men and women who interpret the present and know what new questions to ask and what changes to make. Let’s take a brief snapshot, from a 30,000-foot altitude, of what kind of day it is today using the STEEPR approach.

Society

What has happened in society in the past twenty years? How about the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Soviet communism, and end of the Cold War, just to name a few. For the past two decades, the United States, with a mere 4 to 5 percent of the world's population, has been the unilateral power in the world, producing a quarter of the world's economic output and militarily controlling land, air, space, and sea. People are on the move. Displaced by war, famine, or economic factors, the numbers of people migrating are greater than ever before. A friend recently told us that there were over 120 ethnicities in his Washington, D.C., ZIP code.

Society has its share of global problems. AIDS is a killer disease. Twenty years ago, HIV was barely making the radar screen. But this morning, we wake up to a different day. Thousands of children are orphaned every day by this deadly disease. And even curable diseases are taking their toll on the most vulnerable of our population: one child dies of malaria every twenty-nine seconds in Africa, and three people die every minute of tuberculosis.⁴ "According to the World Water Council, 1.1 billion people live without clean drinking water, 2.6 billion lack adequate sanitation, 1.8 million die every year from diarrheal diseases, and 3,900 children die every day from waterborne diseases."⁵ But could tragedy and opportunity for the church be two sides of the same coin?

As populations grow, we are becoming more familiar with how people around the world are living. Societies are no longer defined solely as nation-states but also can be defined by generations. Thanks to the Internet and the proliferation of American TV programming abroad, teens in New York City feel more akin to teens in Mexico City, São Paulo, or Tokyo than they do with an older generation in Des Moines.

Add to these global challenges our local challenges of divorce, fatherless children, broken-down family structures, the aging boomer population, and urban gang activity, and we have tremendous new potential growth opportunities for the church—if we see them as new avenues of ministry rather than hindrances to ministry. How will the church respond to the influx of migrants and immigrants? How will the church respond to the pervasiveness of AIDS and the need for clean water? How will the church respond to rapid social change? Do we know what day today is?

Technology

In *Bold New World*, the futurist William Knoke describes how he wrestled with describing what kind of day we live in today. Knoke puts

forth the idea that human society was first organized as “dots”—small communities living in isolation from one another. Small bands of people living in isolation proved to be more efficient in terms of access to supplies of food and fuel. But isolation also meant that knowledge and ideas had little opportunity to spread and cross-pollinate. So if one tribe figured out a better way to attach the head of a spear to its shaft, that breakthrough never spread beyond that tribe, and progress as a whole was stunted.

In time, trade routes were established, carrying goods and ideas along the connections of overland paths and rivers. These dots were eventually connected by lines. These “first-dimension” people operated from point to point along the Amber Route of northern Europe, the Silk Road of Asia, the Roman Road of the Mediterranean, and the Inca Road of South America. As trade routes crisscrossed, the “second dimension” of the plane was formed, allowing people to explore the length and width of their world.

By the sixteenth century, thanks to technological maritime advancements, humans—especially Europeans—could circumnavigate the globe. By the end of the nineteenth century, 85 percent of the world’s landmass was controlled by just a handful of European nations.⁶ As odious as some aspects of colonization were, it was not without future beneficial ramifications. Niall Ferguson, a history professor at Harvard University, “argued that the British Empire is responsible for the worldwide spread of the English language, banking, the common law, Protestantism, team sports, the limited state, representative government, and the idea of liberty.”⁷

The mid-twentieth century ushered in the “third dimension” with the advent and perfection of commercial air travel, satellites, and space travel. This third dimension—the “cube”—was controlled not by nation-states but by multinational corporations and airlines.

So what kind of day do we live in today? Knoke says that we live in the fourth dimension—a “placeless” society where “everything and everybody is at once everywhere.”⁸ Far and near are the same. The primacy of place is quickly being supplanted by the placeless society, where global communication is instantaneous and corporations run a “just in time” global assembly line.

Technology has played a tremendous role in this placeless society. Think about how it changes our habits and the way we live. For example, Eric carries one device, an iPhone, that serves as a phone, e-mail server, Web browser, camera, and video and music storage system—but then, you probably do also. This combination that allows him to stay

connected to people all over the world. He talks to his brother in Australia and his grandchildren in Asia via a computer with a built-in camera through Skype. He keeps friends and family abreast of his activities (sometimes to the chagrin of his wife) via his blog (<http://www.ericjswanson.com>), Twitter, and Facebook pages and stores family pictures online with Shutterfly.

Consider how we access information. The Google search engine has become a verb—"to Google something" is understood to mean to track it down on the Internet. Google has the ambition "to organize all the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."⁹ But there is more. In 2000, Jimmy Wales launched a free online encyclopedia called Nupedia. There were seven arduous steps to get something published in Nupedia, from assignment to final approval. Ph.D.'s and other experts were recruited. Wales's editor in chief proposed a different solution: let the site users create and continually edit the content themselves! "Within five years, Wikipedia (*wiki* is a Hawaiian word meaning "quick") was available in two hundred languages and had . . . more than one million [articles] in the English-language section alone. . . . As for Nupedia, it managed to squeeze out twenty-four finalized articles and seventy-four articles still in progress before it shut down."¹⁰ Wales's vision for sharing knowledge is compelling: "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing."¹¹

Companies like Procter & Gamble, which alone has 7,500 researches, are using technology to solve their toughest problems. Rather than hiring more researchers, P&G is posting problems and challenges on the InnoCentive network, "where ninety thousand other scientists around the world can help solve tough R&D problems for a cash reward."¹²

Technology is changing how we access and customize our entertainment. Whereas the baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) of America grew up watching the same network television shows (*Bonanza*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *M*A*S*H*, *Star Trek*), today's generation has literally hundreds of entertainment options through cable and satellite TV, XM and Sirius Radio, and the Internet. Audiences have the ever-increasing ability to piece together their own customized versions of digital music and video and access them through a variety of digital and screen-equipped devices. Singer Colbie Caillat's song "Bubbly" was downloaded 14 million times through her MySpace site before she even signed with a record label.¹³ Singers and underground bands are taking a similar path by gaining a Web following and commanding a higher price before signing with a record company.

News stories, once the privy of reporters and telejournalists, are increasingly broken by common folk with a camera or cell phone. In May 2008, the earthquake that devastated Sichuan, China, was reported as it happened via camera cell phone and social media sites. The BBC reportedly heard of the quake via Twitter. The communication was powerful and instant. By contrast, in previous times, the government would have taken months to even disclose that an earthquake had occurred. In the summer of 2009, hundreds of Iranians used cell phone video cameras to capture the dissent of thousands of Iranians expressing their reaction to a flawed election. If you find yourself saying, “This is old news!”—and by the time you read this, it will be—you only help drive home the point of how quickly our world is changing.

On July 23, 2007, the first presidential debate was held in which questions from voters were asked via YouTube, bringing voters a little closer to the politicians.¹⁴ The first question, from a voter named Zach, who introduced himself with “Wassup?” was a foretaste of things to come. Democratic candidates were asked questions about global warming by a snowman and about Second Amendment rights by a redneck brandishing an automatic weapon. Some questions came through guitar-wielding singers. What was clear was that Internet technology and politics would never be the same. This format has since become commonplace. The same can be true in reverse. Speakers and singers can instantly poll their audiences using an iPhone application. The Refuge Church in Concord, North Carolina, has been known to poll its audience of young adults in the middle of the message. Attentive twenty-somethings can text a response to the pastor’s question, and his iPhone “app” instantly gives him the results of the poll. Nowadays, if you can imagine it, there’s probably an app for it!

Churches and believers that understand the times are using digital communications beyond church walls to further kingdom causes. Walt Wilson, the founder and chairman of Global Media Outreach, reports that “each day, more than 5 million searches are done on the Internet for spiritual terms.” On his own Web site, they “see a decision for Jesus Christ every 35 seconds.”¹⁵ Many churches use technology to start video congregations as part of their multisite expansion. They understand that once people are comfortable interacting with digital sound and digital images, it matters little if the speaker is on the stage, in the next room, five miles away, or home in bed, having delivered the message last night. Tech-savvy mission leaders are shrinking the world with technology.

There are now Internet churches with thousands of members who have never met in real life. To understand the times is to understand what is happening today with technology. Pastor Tom Mullins of Christ Fellowship Church in West Palm Beach, Florida, explains that his church has an online congregation of ten thousand people, each of whom stays online an average of forty-six minutes of a seventy-minute service. Because Christ Fellowship broadcasts church services in real time, it is not unusual to have people from other parts of the world respond to the message in real time. “Our objective is to connect people to a community and connect people to Christ,” Internet church pastor Dave Helbig told Eric in early 2009. “The ‘Is this real community?’ question is asked only by those over thirty-five years of age. It’s a beautiful thing. We had a quadriplegic baptized who was living locally but came to Christ online. Now he is doing follow-up for new believers all over the world as part of our Internet church. ‘No one knows I’m a quadriplegic online,’ he says.” LifeChurch.tv, based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, has experienced more decisions for Christ at its Internet campus than it has at its eleven brick-and-mortar sites.¹⁶

Economics

There is no doubt that we in the United States, even in spite of our current economic crisis, are consumers, and many of us possess an abundance of stuff. We have “more cars than licensed drivers” and “spend more on trash bags than ninety other countries spend on everything.”¹⁷ To understand what is happening economically today, one has to consider what is happening with globalization. Globalization is the interconnectedness of people, goods, and services in the world. That your cell phone may have been designed in the United States and manufactured in China using components from Malaysia, Brazil, and Taiwan is symptomatic of globalization.

You’ve heard the word *outsourcing*. It refers to products and services that were once produced domestically by U.S. companies and workers that are now produced by the same companies in countries where labor is cheaper, environmental laws are looser, and people are desperate to better their lives. And no job seems to be safe from export. Call the service department of almost any company, and it is very likely that you will be connected to Bangalore, India, or another of the call centers scattered around India. Any job that can be outsourced either has already been outsourced or soon will be. Thomas Friedman, in a 2005 *New York Times* interview, noted, “When

I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, 'Tom, finish your dinner. People in China and India are starving.' Today I tell my girls, 'Finish your homework. People in China and India are starving for your jobs.'"¹⁸ We are now competing with workers on a global scale. Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International*, writes, "No worker from a rich country will ever be able to equal the energy and ambition of people making \$5 a day and trying desperately to move out of poverty."¹⁹

To understand the economic forces of our world today, we need to understand what is happening with globalization and with China. China is booming—sustaining a torrid 9.5 percent annual economic growth rate for the past generation with no slowdown in sight.²⁰ "In two decades, China has experienced the same degree of industrialization, urbanization and social transformation as Europe did in two centuries."²¹ Even amid the global recession of 2008–2009, China maintained a positive economic growth rate. The constant influx of rural migrant workers into the cities of China creates a stable and growing labor force that is paid, on average, around \$70 a month to produce electronic parts, toys, socks, furniture, computers—you name it. Ted Fishman, author of *China, Inc.*, writes, "China is an ever increasing presence and influence in our lives, connected to us by the world's shipping lanes, financial markets, telecommunications, and above all, by the globalization of appetites. China sews more clothes and stitches more shoes and assembles more toys than any other nation."²² Although China's gross domestic product is only seventh-largest economy in the world and only one-seventh the size of that of the United States, "in China one dollar buys about what \$4.70 does in Indianapolis" making China's economy "closer to four-fifths the size of the U.S. economy than it is to one-sixth."²³ The Institute for International Economics in Washington calculates that "the average American household enjoys . . . savings that start at around \$500"²⁴ because of China's low prices. If you have bought a color TV for under \$90 or a DVD player for under \$40, you have China to thank.

China is not alone as an economic juggernaut. "Over the past 15 years, India has been the second-fastest-growing country in the world—after China—averaging above 6% growth per year."²⁵ In a 2003 study by Goldman Sachs, researchers predicted that by 2040, India "will boast the world's third largest economy. By 2050, it will be five times the size of Japan's and its per capita income will have risen to 35 times its current level."²⁶ Daniel Pink notes that "each year, India's colleges and universities produce about 350,000 engineering graduates. That's one reason that more than half of *Fortune* 500 companies now outsource software work to India."²⁷

The economic role of the United States is certainly impressive. “With 5 percent of the world’s population, the United States has generated between 20 and 30 percent of world output for 125 years.” After World War II, America’s gross domestic product “made up almost 50 percent of the global economy.” Today, thanks to the demise of economic communism (which left emerging nations with only one true economic alternative), the investment of Western capital around the world, and the free flow of goods and services, “between 1990 and 2007, the global economy grew from \$22.8 trillion to \$53.3 trillion,” with emerging markets accounting for “over 40 percent of the world economy.”²⁸

While it can be mind-boggling to try to grasp economic trends, it is critical to gain an understanding of global economics. It often serves as the “X factor” for the future. Everything changes when the economy changes. We saw how true that is in 2008 when oil prices rocketed to nearly \$150 a barrel in the summer before plummeting to under \$40 a barrel in December. Gas prices surpassed \$4.00 a gallon in July before returning to under \$1.60 a gallon by the end of the year.

We could only wish that the other sectors of the economy—housing, industry, the credit and business markets—might rebound so well. Once mainstays of the American economy, these markets have now had to be bailed out by the government. The years 2008 and 2009 saw the financial markets plummet, with the best and brightest minds befuddled at finding ways to fix the ailing economy. And when the United States coughs, the whole world catches a cold. How does the church respond to people in need during a time of major recession? Do we know what kind of day it is?

Environment

The year 2005 was a wake-up call for Americans. The tsunami that washed over the coastlines of South Asia and East Africa in late December 2004, killing tens of thousands and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless, was just the beginning. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit our own shores with a fury, leaving in their wake devastation and loss on a scale largely unknown to this generation of Americans. Our sophistication and technology were no match against the unleashed forces of nature. Devastating droughts, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes get nearly everyone’s attention around the world. Environmental issues don’t just affect the quality of life but threaten life itself. “Of China’s 560 million urban residents, only one percent breathe air considered safe by European Union standards.”²⁹ Over one billion people do not have daily access to clean drinking water.³⁰

The environment is becoming more and more of an issue to politicians and public alike. Former vice president Al Gore garnered not only an Emmy Award for his documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* but also shared in receiving the acme of all awards, the Nobel Peace Prize, for his lifelong environmental efforts. There are new economic opportunities associated with environmental issues. As energy prices climb, the quest for cleaner alternative energy sources is escalating, along with business opportunities and wealth awaiting the clever people who come up with solutions. Entrepreneurs like Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Group, committed \$3 billion over the next ten years to combat global warming. It is a cause people are passionate about.

And now many Christians are getting on board. In early 2006, the *New York Times* published an article about eighty-six evangelical leaders who signed a document backing a major initiative to fight global warming, citing that “millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbors.”³¹ Signers of the statement included presidents of thirty-nine evangelical colleges; parachurch leaders; and megachurch pastors, including Saddleback Pastor Rick Warren, Bishop Charles E. Blake Sr. of the West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles, and the Rev. Floyd Flake of the Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral in New York City; as well as Hispanic leaders like the Rev. Jesse Miranda, president of AMEN in Costa Mesa, California.

In part, the statement read, “For most of us, until recently this has not been treated as a pressing issue or major priority. Indeed, many of us have required considerable convincing before becoming persuaded that climate change is a real problem and that it ought to matter to us as Christians. But now we have seen and heard enough.”³² In a television advertisement, Joel Hunter, pastor of a megachurch outside Orlando, Florida, stated, “As Christians, our faith in Jesus Christ compels us to love our neighbors and to be stewards of God’s creation. The good news is that with God’s help, we can stop global warming, for our kids, [for] our world and for the Lord.”³³

What is indisputable is that glaciers are melting and global temperatures are rising. Eleven of the twelve years from 1995 and 2006 were the hottest ever recorded.”³⁴ In February 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), composed of more than two thousand scientists from 154 countries, released its summary report on global warming. By comparing different future scenario models, the consensus was that the world will warm 0.4 degrees Celsius (0.7 degrees Fahrenheit) in the next twenty years.

It seems that in spite of a growing scientific consensus that human activity and fossil fuels are at least partly responsible for disappearing ice caps and rising sea levels, many Christians take a stand *against* such findings simply because the findings are supported by scientists (or movie stars or Democrats or some other group). Whereas in the past, Christians were often at the forefront of science, believing they were discovering, through their research, the very manner, mind, and methods of God, scientific evidence, for some believers, is rejected simply because it comes from the field of science. Are we alienating the scientific community and the younger generation by clinging to stubborn provincial views? Are these people thinking, “How can I believe what this guy says about God and the unseen world when he rejects the evidence of the seen world?”

Maybe we need to get ahead of the culture on things God cares about—including stewardship of our planet. Peachtree Baptist Church in Atlanta has given legs to the stewardship of creation through its Faith and Environment Ministry. “We believe that we are called as Christians to care for and sustain God’s creation,” reads the church’s environmental ministry mission statement.³⁵ The Faith and Environment ministry focuses on congregational and community activities that create awareness of earth stewardship. This is accomplished through educational programs, community events, and adopting green practices as a congregation. The ministry focuses on several Scriptures, including these:

The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land [Leviticus 25:23–24].

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? [Ezekiel 34:17–18].

Would it be so radical for a church to have its own recycling center or administer a neighborhood car pool to get to church? Would it be that out of the ordinary? On a day like today, what should we be doing?

Politics

What are the political forces that are shaping our world today? Communism, as a political and social reality, no longer poses the political and military threat of yesterday. The largest country that still lives under the political banner of communism, China, has abandoned the economic principles of Marx and embraced a quasi-free-market economy.

And since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has changed its tactics and position in world politics, not only going after terrorists but also engaging the countries that support them. In past generations, our battle was to stop the spread of communism. Today, American policy is to spread freedom and democracy around the globe. Nations that have declared themselves enemies of the United States and its policies are actively or covertly seeking the capacity to build nuclear weapons. Currently only seven countries have nuclear weapons, but that number is likely to change.

Closer to home, in some areas, the lines between the secular and the spiritual are becoming more clearly defined. Court battles are waged over the posting of the Ten Commandments in public places or the inclusion of “one nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. The familiar commercial greeting “Merry Christmas” is slowly being replaced by “Happy Holidays.” In Starbuck’s in December, Eric picked up two different bags of coffee—a silver package labeled “Holiday Blend” and a red package labeled “Christmas Blend.” When he asked about the difference between the two types of coffee, he was told that they were in fact identical! Apparently, Starbuck’s felt caught in the middle this transition and learned to cater to both sides of the issue.

In the United States, politics and faith make unlikely bedfellows. The perception that evangelicals embrace a particular political party is not entirely inaccurate. “According to the National Election Pool exit poll, in 2004 Bush received 78% of the vote among white evangelicals, up 10% from 2000, according to Pew’s final pre-election poll that year.”³⁶ The potential danger of the link between faith and politics is alienation by affiliation. The 2008 election exit polls were not much different, with 74 percent of evangelicals casting votes for McCain and 25 percent voting for Obama.³⁷ Recently, a friend of Eric’s was engaged in a conversation with a young Jewish woman who was investigating Christianity. Her main hesitation was expressed in her sincere question: “If I become a Christian, do I have to become a Republican?” How are we doing? The moral high ground is not a political platform. *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallace writes, “Endorsing political candidates is a fine thing, but ordaining them is not—the way that some leaders of the religious Right named George W. Bush as ‘God’s candidate’ . . . and proclaimed that real Christians could vote only for him. . . . What do such tactics say about Republicans’ respect for the black churches, when the African American vote was again almost 90 percent for the Democrats? Is something wrong with their faith?”³⁸ To reach a multicultural generation with the gospel is going to take some serious rethinking. The danger of affiliating too closely with any political party is that we can no longer judge that

party's actions by the values of the kingdom—by which all political systems must be judged. Let's not forget that in Roman times, "to the populace all religions were equally true; to the philosophers all were equally false; and to the magistrates all were equally useful."³⁹

No matter what your definition of the "right" candidate may be for a particular political position, we believe that we are never going to be able to legislate morality. Even we, the authors, don't agree 100 percent on matters of politics (which probably comes as no surprise!). We do agree that each of us as individuals and citizens has a responsibility to participate in the political process and that the church needs to rise above politics and look to engage our communities at the point of need. The political landscape is changing. Are you willing to understand what kind of day it is?

Religion

For a long time in the history of the world, the only channel you could get was the God channel. It did not matter where you set the tuner, you received the God channel. He was the reason the sun came up, the rain fell, and the harvest would come. Then in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, through the influence of men like René Descartes and Francis Bacon, we began to understand more about how the world functions. We grew in our understanding of the mechanics of life on earth and the earth itself, and the more we understood, the less God was needed.⁴⁰ Of course, there were still plenty of places for God; theologians called this "God in the gaps." We needed God when we couldn't explain things. However, once we understood the science of how things functioned, we had less need for some imaginative way to explain it.

This led naturally to the science or modern channel, and for a long time, it was the dominant channel. You could still get the God channel, but you had to lean out the window and put aluminum foil around your ears. For those of you over the age of forty, the Modern channel was the primary channel for the culture we grew up in; that is why books like *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* were so important to Christians.⁴¹ There was evidence we could get our hands around and help others do the same so they could know God.

We are living during a seismic shift in culture. With all of our scientific and technological advances, we have become a channel-surfing culture. Today, there are fifteen hundred channels vying for reality, each claiming it has the truth. Today, only three out of ten adults believe that there is any absolute moral truth; under the age of thirty, that number drops to less than two out of ten.

For the church today, there is good news and bad news in this. The good news is that the God channel is again up and running; the bad news is that there is a lot of noise out there. The result is that we live in a world where evidence isn't the key but experience is.

Spirituality is up and church is down (a deeper look at that is just a few pages away). According to the Gallup Organization, 66 percent of Americans would make or agree with this statement: "The church has little or no value in helping me find meaning or purpose in life." We keep playing the game as it has been played for years, and many of us aren't even aware that someone has changed the rules. We don't want to get well. We don't want to know what day it is. Spiritual conversations are more likely to be sought out at Starbucks than in our churches today.

So let's look at a few religious trends today to which we must pay attention:

THE DIVISION OF THE WORLD ALONG RELIGIOUS LINES

In *The Next Christendom*, Phillip Jenkins predicts that in the future, religion will be the most defining characteristic of people, taking precedence even over national identity. In a world of shifting political boundaries, people will identify with a religious faith more strongly than with the country they live in. He writes, "At the turn of the third millennium, religious loyalties are at the root of many of the world's ongoing civil wars and political violence, and in most cases, the critical division is the age-old battle between Christianity and Islam. . . . The critical political frontiers around the world are not decided by attitudes toward class or dialectical materialism but by rival concepts of God."⁴² Because the religions of both the crescent and the cross are highly evangelistic and have the world as their goal, is a collision course inevitable? Civil conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Indonesia, Bosnia, and elsewhere are basically religious wars disguised as civil wars. What kind of day is today?

THE RISE OF THE MEGACHURCH

"At latest count, there are 1,210 Protestant churches in the United States with weekly attendance over 2,000, nearly double the number that existed five years ago."⁴³ A 2002 study by the Lilly Foundation discovered that half of the people who go to church attended churches in the top 10 percent of church size.⁴⁴ Clearly, more than half of all churchgoers prefer large churches. Megachurches tend to be full-service churches with programming geared toward everyone from children to senior adults. The size of megachurches also gives them an increased capacity for service.

“Nearly half of [megachurches] say they partnered with other churches in the past five years on a local community service project (54%) or on an international missions project (46%).”⁴⁵ The influence of megachurch leaders is still taken seriously. According to *Megachurches Today, 2005*, an extensive study conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Leadership Network, found that “during 2005, four megachurch pastors were on the *New York Times* bestseller lists—one of the books, with 26 million sales to date, has become the best-selling hardcover nonfiction book in U.S. history . . . (and has been translated into 309 languages). Another megachurch pastor has sold 45 million copies of all his books. The third, a first-time author, crossed the 3 million mark in a year.”⁴⁶

But what of those who don’t attend a megachurch—or any church, for that matter?

THE SHIFT FROM INTERNAL TO EXTERNAL

Sometimes movements begin from a central location and spread like the ripples when a rock is thrown into a pond. The movement from internal to external is different. All over the world, we meet pastors and Christian leaders who almost simultaneously have come to the conclusion that unless their church is engaged in the conversation, rhythms, needs, and dreams of their communities, it’s not the church that Jesus wants them to be. We’ll tell you about some of these leaders in the course of this book. So far, we’ve found that working with leaders from Oslo, Berlin, Mumbai, Mexico City, San Salvador, Kuala Lumpur, Beijing, Alberta, and dozens of other cities, a story is unfolding about what the church could be and should be. Church is more than just a worship center or a mini-seminary. Rather church is the visible and visceral expression of Jesus living among a people.

CHANGES IN WHAT IT MEANS TO BE “EVANGELICAL”

Young evangelical Christians are giving a new face to Christianity. They are arguably more socially aware, more connected, and more globally oriented than evangelicals of previous generations. They are more apt to rally around bringing help to hurting people, ending human trafficking, pursuing issues of justice, fighting AIDS, stopping genocide in Africa, and putting an end to global warming than they are to march against gay marriage or for prayer in school or in favor of the posting of the Ten Commandments. Michael Gerson, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, makes an interesting observation: “I’ve asked young evangelicals on campuses from Wheaton to Harvard who they view as

their model of Christian activism. Their answer is nearly unanimous: Bono.”⁴⁷ Evangelicals are no longer (if they ever were) a unified political bloc. Thirty-five percent of evangelicals now say that the religious right does not reflect their views; 40 percent oppose a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage.⁴⁸ In the fall of 2007, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “A decade ago, an overwhelming majority of non-Christians, including people between the ages 16 to 29, were ‘favorably’ disposed toward Christianity’s role in society. But today, just 16% of non-Christians in that age group had a ‘good impression’ of the religion . . . with just 3% of the 16- to 29-year-old non-Christians indicating favorable views toward [evangelicals].”⁴⁹

Rick McKinley, pastor of Imago Dei in Portland, Oregon, was interviewed in late 2007 by *USA Today* reporter Tom Krattenmaker. Krattenmaker writes, “Ask McKinley whether he and his community are evangelical Christians, and he’ll tell you yes—and no. ‘We’d say ‘yes’ in terms of what we think about the authority of Scripture and those things,’ says McKinley, who is finishing his theology doctorate this year. ‘What you have is evangelicalism define doctrinally, which we’d agree with, and defined culturally, where we would disagree. Culturally, it has been hijacked by a right wing political movement.’”⁵⁰

RISING INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY BUT MOVEMENT AWAY FROM THE ORGANIZED CHURCH

In the summer of 2007, Eric and his wife went to Ireland and Scotland with several other couples to learn more about Celtic Christianity. The most thought-provoking lesson was given by Peter Neilson—a missional church planter from the Church of Scotland. He said, “When Moses met God on the mountain—that was spirituality. When he came down and told the people what God said—that was the beginning of religion.” Have we lost spirituality in our construction of religion?

Let’s take a look at spiritual interest. In a 2005 *Newsweek* poll, 79 percent of people described themselves as “spiritual” (while only 64 percent describe themselves as “religious”). Fully 84 percent indicated that spirituality is “very important” or “somewhat important” in their daily lives.⁵¹ Interest in spiritual things is acceptable and on the rise. The decline of a purely rationalistic approach to life has given people permission to express their spiritual side. The singer Bonnie Raitt summed up the attraction of spirituality at a recent concert in New York City this way: “Religion is for people who are afraid to go to hell. And spirituality is for those of us who have been there and back.”⁵² People have plenty of room in their lives and space in their minds for the ethereal and nonmaterial

aspects that spirituality provides. Jesus is as popular as ever. It's not unusual to have pictures of Jesus on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* at least once or twice a year.

Although spiritual interest is high, people are looking for new places to find spiritual vitality and authenticity. According to a recent study that actually tracked the attendance of two hundred thousand orthodox (Catholic, mainline, and evangelical) churches in the United States revealed that "in 2004, 17.7% of the population attended a Christian church on any given weekend."⁵³ Reggie McNeal writes, "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith. They contend that the church no longer contributes to their spiritual development."⁵⁴ George Barna calls these folks "revolutionaries—confidently returning to a first-century lifestyle based on faith, goodness, love, generosity, kindness, simplicity and other values deemed quaint by today's frenetic and morally untethered standards."⁵⁵ Barna estimates there are twenty million such revolutionaries in the United States today.

The missiologist and researcher Ed Stetzer reports in a recent study on alternative faith communities "that a growing number of people are finding Christian discipleship and community in places other than their local churches. The study found that 24.5% of Americans now say their primary form of spiritual nourishment is meeting with a small group of 20 or less people every week."⁵⁶ Stetzer continues, "About 6 million people meet weekly with a small group and never or rarely go to church. . . . There is a significant movement happening." Is today a day of postcongregational Christianity?

Neil Cole, author of *Organic Church*, defines church as "the presence of Jesus among his people, called out as a spiritual family to pursue his mission on this planet." Cole goes on to say, "The church could meet in a traditional building, a living room, under the trees, or in a parking lot. What's important is Christ among us and being a family on a mission. If those elements are present, it doesn't matter how many you have or where you meet."⁵⁷ As one Boulder County resident pointed out to us, "The [institutional] church is like a set of training wheels. Training wheels help you learn to ride a bike, but after you learn to ride, you don't need them anymore."

The missiologist Darrel Guder writes, "We ring our bells, conduct our services, . . . and wait for this very different world to come to us. Pastors continue to preach sermons and carry on internal polemics over doctrines as though nothing outside has changed, but the reality is that everything

has changed and the people are not coming back to the churches”⁵⁸ David Smith observes that the real problem of Christian mission in the modern West is not the absence of spiritual hunger in the postmodern generation but rather the church’s failure to recognize the existence and significance of this quest on the part of thousands of people beyond its doors. Even where such recognition does occur, there is often a refusal to respond on the terms set by the searchers rather than on those dictated by existing ecclesiastical traditions and structures.⁵⁹

In former times, if one wanted to be part of a spiritual community and wanted biblical content, one had to show up at a central location at a given time. Such a world no longer exists. Through technology, people have figured out new ways to stay connected to people they care about. The world’s best content can be downloaded from the Internet at any time, day or night. The largest university in the world, Phoenix University, figured out long ago the value of rented buildings and digital content. A collapse in the church culture certainly does not mean the collapse of the church. Church is also taking new expressions in the form of “simple church” or “organic church” whose goal, much like Starbuck’s and McDonald’s, is not size but ubiquity—the church in every space and every place. This idea is expressed in a large ad by Embassy Suites Hotels in *USA Today*. It was headlined, “Because One Giant Hotel in One Location Would Have Been a Dumb Idea,” followed by a listing of all the hotel properties around the world.⁶⁰ Part of our task is to help shape what church needs to be for the twenty-first century and how to reach and grow people that may never be part of what we currently call “church.” It’s that kind of day.

Liminality

A couple of years ago, Eric read *Mission After Christendom* by David Smith. (A quote from this book opened this chapter.) In this book, Smith suggests that we are currently in a time of transition, limbo, or “liminality,” which he defines as a state between two cultural paradigms, on the cusp between the modern era and the postmodern era. A liminal state describes young boys in tribal societies who are pulled from their mothers and live together for a season before their initiation into manhood: no longer children but not yet men. Liminality describes the people of Israel when they were carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. Everything they trusted in that had worked in the past no longer worked. In a liminal state, what used to seem true is true no longer, and what will be true in the future has not

yet been fully revealed. This is liminality. Because major cultural shifts, such as from modernity to postmodernity, occur over decades rather than months (Smith suggests that the modern era ended with World War I), we might want to learn to be comfortable with liminality. In liminal times, there is confusion because the path is unclear. As Eric has the opportunity to speak to groups of Christian leaders and pastors, he often asks, “If you know, with confidence, what you are doing in ministry, please raise your hand.” There is much more laughter than hand-raising. We live in a liminal time.

What If We Don't Understand the Times?

Just think of all the major changes in society, economics, environment, politics, and religion that we have experienced since the turn of this century. The world we live and work in is radically different than the world we lived in just a decade ago. And it is safe to say that the world will be very different ten years from now than it is today. The implications are staggering. Programs and tactics that worked in the past won't necessarily be the ones that will be effective in the future.

If the church is God's enterprise in the world, then we who are stewards, managers, and entrepreneurs in the enterprise need to be as discerning and as savvy as in any other organization; indeed, given the stakes, we would argue even more so than in any other enterprise. The future will not be shaped by doing more or better or harder what we have done in the past. The key is not skating where the world was but where the world will be.

Admittedly, when you look at the church landscape, statistics show that many of us have been content to do what we have always done. We have not always understood how to act or react to this liminal state in which we find ourselves. We have confused method with message and have often been more concerned with maintaining what we are doing than with innovating new solutions to meet current and future needs and sharing the timeless message of Christ. Are we driving on 2010 highways in vehicles that are decades old? No wonder we aren't keeping up with traffic.

If we don't take time to understand and embrace today, we are left with only looking back; which often leads to self-preservation and maintenance. Even if we happen to be a church that has a lot of people, so much of our energy can be spent on simply attracting people and keeping them coming back. We have to ask ourselves not “What kind of day was yesterday?” but “What kind of day is today?”

Here's the Good News

Smith writes, “Despite the feeling that we are in a dark tunnel, the present liminality offers the potential for a fresh missionary engagement in a radically changing social context.” And quoting Alan Roxburgh, he invites us to be part of the solution: “We too face a point at which God appears to be terminating our known world and inviting us to a new world in which the true nature of the church and its mission can be recovered.”⁶¹ This means that this is a time to experiment and discover. There is a lot of white space on the map! Can you think of anything more exciting to be a part of?

After the army of Israel faced significant defeat and was reduced to a handful of stragglers, David regrouped his assets. One of those assets was the men of Issachar mentioned at the start of this chapter. They are described quite simply as men who knew how to understand the times. These men provided David with insight, vision, and a timely understanding. Who are the men (and women) of Issachar in your life?

There is a lot of conversation, both positive and negative, about the church today. With all of its warts, wounds, and wobbles, we both love the church. We love the church because God loves the church. While there is plenty to be frustrated by and certainly much that needs to change, the church is God’s answer for the world and our communities. The church that looks to be the best church for its community looks beyond itself. Today is actually a great day for the church when we understand the times.

It's Sunday Morning!

At a Sunday evening worship service at the Mayan Theater in Los Angeles, Mosaic’s Erwin McManus told about going to the U2 concert at the Staples Center in early November 2005. Bono is not only U2’s lead singer but also, oddly enough, serves in a prophetic capacity to the secular world and the church around the world as an advocate for the poor and downtrodden. To a packed house, Bono took the stage, grabbed the microphone, and yelled, “Do you know what today is?” When the crowd responded that it was Wednesday night, Bono responded, “It’s not Wednesday night. It’s Sunday morning!” Sunday morning is the earliest part of the first day of the week. It’s a time for fresh beginnings, fresh thoughts, and new ways for God to be part of our lives and for us to be part of his wonderful kingdom mission here on earth. What kind of day is today? Today is Sunday morning!

The Leadership Challenge

We feel that this book will be of benefit to every Christ follower, but it is usually leaders who have the ability to bring about the changes needed to bring the future into the present. The Leadership Challenge presented at the end of each chapter broadens the scope of application of the chapter from the individual to the church or organization. It is our hope that this feature will bring forth insights and questions to help you lead the externally focused journey.

- What deep changes have you experienced in society, technology, economics, environment, politics, religion, and your own organization in the past five to ten years?
- What do you expect the future will be like in the next five to ten years in these same areas?
- How should these changes influence missional living?
- Where is most of your energy currently going?
- Who gives you insight and provides glimpses of future vision and timely understanding?