

Trends & Culture



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Trends & Culture" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training*. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of *Leadership Resources* and *Christianity Today International*, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS is not another program. You don't have to build a program from scratch or take another night to be out. *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* works when you want it to, where you want it to, the way you want it to. It's completely flexible and designed to be easy to use.

You probably already have regularly scheduled meetings with board members or with other committees or groups of leaders. *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* fits easily into what you're already doing. Here's how to use *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* at the beginning of a board meeting or committee meeting:

1. Select a learning tool. In this theme of "Trends & Culture," you'll find multiple types of handouts from which to choose:

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| ◆ Bible study | ◆ case study | ◆ activities |
| ◆ interview | ◆ devotionals | ◆ resources |
| ◆ assessment tools | ◆ how-to articles | ◆ sample retreat |

2. Select a handout. Suppose, for example, you want your board or church to assess the church's readiness to reach your changing community. You could select one of three assessments in this theme: "Entering the World outside the Church" (p. 6), "Hay Where the Goats Can Get It," (p. 7), and "4 Trends Affecting Churches" (p. 8). From these options, select the one that best fits what you want to accomplish.

3. Photocopy the handout. Let's say you selected "4 Trends Affecting Churches." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).

4. Prepare for the discussion. We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific decisions your church is making?

5. Lead the discussion. Most handouts can be read within 5 minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion to specific issues your church is facing.

Most *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* handouts can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes (except the Bible study, which may take longer). Your board, committee, or team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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Understanding the Times

Knowing what is changing and what cannot.

1 Chronicles 10, 12

The Bible was written not only in languages different from ours but in totally different cultures and centuries. Translating it into English may be the easiest part; translating it into twenty-first century American culture is far more difficult. Amidst changing times and shifting values, how can we make sound, scriptural decisions? The model of a few Israelite defectors gives us insight.

Read 1 Chronicles 10:1–7

- ◆ What was the political climate like for David? What was it like to be a Hebrew during and between the reigns of Saul and David? King Saul was on his way out and King David on his way in. The changeover was painful. On the home front, civil war raged between those loyal to David and those loyal to Saul. On an international scale, Israel was fighting the nation of Philistia.

Read 1 Chronicles 12:16–18, 22–38. Note especially verse 32.

- ◆ On what basis had the soldiers made the decision to follow David and leave Saul?
- ◆ Why did the chiefs of Issachar choose to follow David?

First Chronicles 12 lists those who deserted Saul and joined David. This includes the “men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (12:32). There were only 200 of them out of a population of millions, but at least they were attempting to understand what was happening and make a difference.

Apply

- ◆ Name some trends in our society. Name some changes in our community.
- ◆ When we consider our times, what tools can help us make wise decisions?
- ◆ How can we know how to apply Scripture to our situation?

God’s truth is transcendent. The Bible gives God’s truth in a cultural container. The truth is absolute; the container is relative. We must pour the truth out of the container of first-century Hebrew-Greek culture into the container of twenty-first century American culture. When done properly, not a drop of truth is lost. A simple example is 1 Corinthians 16:20, which says “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” The truth here is that Christians should give warm, kind greetings to each other as an expression of their spiritual solidarity. In Corinth they kissed each other. In Minneapolis we shake hands or hug each other.

Knowing the Bible is not enough. Evangelical Christianity has done well on revelation (the Bible) but poorly on relevance (the culture). This phenomenon may be partially explained by the static nature of Scripture and the dynamic nature of society—that is, the Bible doesn’t change but the culture does. This has been markedly evident over the past 50 years.

Today, modern men and women of Issachar try to understand what is happening in order to decide what should be done.

—LEITH ANDERSON. Adapted from *Dying for Change* (Bethany House, 1990). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. Describe ways our church is changing to accommodate these cultural shifts. Give an example of when it might be inappropriate for us to do so.
2. What can we do to better “understand the times”?



How People Think Today

Insights into the new world views.

Matthew 18:1–9

The gospel is relevant in any age. But what does it take to effectively communicate it to people today? To answer that question, BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS talked with Michael Sack, president and CEO of Quali-Quant Research, Inc., a marketing firm that serves Fortune 500 companies and Christian organizations.

How is communicating to people today different from what it was in the past?

Today's young people see almost 1,000 percent more images than 55-year-olds saw in their youth. Surprisingly, though, young people don't have a corresponding understanding of the images they see. For Generation X-ers, the images have no symbolism, no moral value. Young adults choose images for color or movement or entertainment. Inanimate messages—anything other than person-to-person speech—lose value as you get younger in this culture.

What does this mean for classes or Bible study groups?

When church leaders hand out study materials or ask people to watch a video, they need to know it will be less effective for those who are young. The impact of anything that hasn't been personally delivered will go down by about 25 percent for each 10 years that an audience is below 50.

Also, the younger the audience, the more important it is to tell people in concrete terms what to do. They need examples. For example, when a young Christian walks down an urban street and sees a homeless person panhandling, he's often afraid of being used by someone who will buy drugs or alcohol with his gift.

Church leaders can give concrete behavioral help. "If you work in a city where this confronts you regularly, buy McDonald's coupons," a leader might say. "When somebody asks you for money, give something that can be redeemed only for food." That would have great meaning, especially to younger listeners, because the message—"help the poor"—is conveyed in specific, understandable behaviors.

"Behavior precedes attitude."

MICHAEL SACK

So should today's church leaders try to change behavior rather than understanding?

They should aim for both. The marketing world has learned that behavior precedes attitudes. The most effective way to sell a product is to affect the behavior at the point of sale, when the buyer is making decisions.

When I sit in church hearing a great message, I sometimes wonder when the lesson will address actual behavior. What specific call to action has the leader made to each individual? What church structures have been put in place to support those decisions? Unless there's a behavioral component to the message, the odds of its having a long-term effect are pretty low.

This isn't a new idea. Three of my favorite Christian authors—C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and Oswald Chambers—have written that if faith doesn't exhibit itself in behavior, if you are not called to do something that is an act of faith, then faith won't grow.

How do people today view sin?

I've been researching the American sense of what is evil and found that in large part we have lost a concrete definition for it. Generation X, for example, has almost no concept of evil. Political correctness requires that people equally consider all ideas. In doing so, we lose our sense of right and wrong. The group under age 25 has refined this process to an art. ➤



How People Think Today *continued*

What do people believe in?

I give people thousands of pictures and ask them to create a collage that shows the god they believe in and the god they don't. For Boomers, the god they don't believe in revolves around discomfort rather than truth and evil. Their idea of evil is irritation.

What aspects of today's culture should give hope to church leaders?

The North American mindset isn't healthy, yet because of our problems this is an incredibly opportune time for the body of Christ to expand and move forward. There is a vacuum that will be filled. Christians should step up and fill it before something else does.

When you look across the congregation, there are at least four adult audiences. Each has a different way of seeing the world. Here's who they are and how the gospel might be presented to them.

1. **Older adults.** People ages 55 and up. This need-me, show-me generation possesses skills and money. Since they may live to age 80 or 90, they've got almost half their lives in front of them. In our culture, being old means being worthless, so people in the over-55 group need to do something worthwhile. They're looking for positive examples of older adults. They are searching for the sense of importance that only Christ can give. Church leaders can challenge the cultural notion that those over 55 are half-dead. Older adults don't feel they're half-dead; they feel they have much to offer, but nobody wants it. They need to feel appreciated.
2. **Boomers.** Ages 40-55. This entertain-me, earn-me generation tends to be faddish and intellectually lazy. Boomers are looking for spiritual definition. They want talk about meaning, self-definition, and self-worth. They relate best to new church models and media presentations. They greatly desire a stabilizing influence, which can come only through faith in Christ.
3. **Busters.** Ages 30 to 40. This why-me generation doesn't like crowds or mingling with other generations. Busters are skeptical of guarantees. They crave relationships and want to talk things over with peers. They want to create a better world. They are stable and work well together. They have a firm foundation and could make up a strong leadership pool for the body of Christ in the future.
4. **Generation X.** Ages 20 to 30 years old. This feed-me generation suffers from low self-esteem. Gen X-ers prefer to retreat from the world into small groups. They crave unconditional acceptance but have a very short list of what's really important. They're looking for written reinforcement of key concepts, such as what you might explain in a spiritual notebook. I've never seen a group of people anywhere in the world, including people in absolute poverty in the Philippines, who have a greater urgency to hear good news than this generation in this country. They long to hear that there is hope.

Discuss

1. What kinds of gospel presentations have been most effective to you personally—movies or videos, a book, handout, first-person testimonial, or an interpersonal relationship?
2. Using Michael Sacks's profile, suggest how Matthew 18:1-9 might be taught to relate to Boomers, Busters, Gen-X-ers, and Older Adults.
3. What programs does our church provide that address the specific needs of these groups? Can one ministry appeal to multiple groups, or is it best to target only one?



Entering the World Outside the Church

2 ways you can relate to others.

Acts 17:16–34

If you are going to invite folks from outside the religious establishment to cross the threshold into the community of faith, you need to know the world they are coming from. There are many ways to enter the world outside the church, but they boil down to two. How are you doing in each?

1. Enter their world vicariously.

- ◆ Read non-religious newspapers, magazines, and books. They will keep you current on the concerns, interests, fads, habits, and trends that affect the lives of those you are seeking to draw into the circle of God's love.

In the past week, what books, newspapers, and/or magazines did you read?

List a few things you learned about cultural trends from one of these publications.

- ◆ Watch TV. Go to the movies. Listen to music. The values that shape this generation, the fears that threaten this generation, the hopes that move this generation, and the myriad of problems that unsettle this generation are all there, reflected on the tube, the screen, in the lyrics.

Name a TV show or movie that you saw recently.

List at least three things that the show or movie reveals about today's culture.

2. Enter their world personally.

- ◆ Go to shopping malls, coffee shops, restaurants, parks, the beach—wherever people gather—and strike up conversations. Ask questions that prompt folks to talk about their experiences. Then just listen.

What can a stroll through a mall teach you about today's culture?

What can you learn about people from observing their behavior at a restaurant?

- ◆ Make appointments with community leaders such as government officials, union leaders, teachers, police officers, social workers, and local artists. As an overseas missionary knows, the first thing you need when you enter a new culture is “cultural informants” who can teach you what you need to know.

What people could best inform us about people in our area?

What questions would we ask them?

- ◆ Make friends with people who are not Christian. Enter their world, earn their trust, and enjoy them.

Describe a person you encountered recently who is not a believer. What does he or she care about? How could you get to know him/her better?

- ◆ Join non-Christian organizations. Serve on the school board, work in a soup kitchen, join a non-church-related social group.

Name one non-Christian organization that you belong to. Why did you join it?

What have people in this group taught you about the beliefs and values of non-Christians?

—WALT KALLESTAD. Adapted from *Entering the World Outside the Church* (Augsburg Fortress, 2001). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. According to Acts 17:16–34, what were some ways Paul used to understand the world of Athenians? What did he learn?
2. How did that knowledge affect the way he addressed Athenians? How did that approach vary for different types of listeners?
3. How can our church better speak to people in today's world?



Hay Where the Goats Can Get It

4 ways churches can respond to a changing community.

Luke 14:12–14

In Garrison Keillor’s tales of Lake Wobegon, Val Tollefson complains that Pastor Ingqvist of the Lutheran church mumbles and murmurs a lot. “He never comes straight out,” Tollefson says. “He never puts the hay down where the goats can get it.”

Putting the hay down where the goats can get it is a challenge for the church in every era. But the goats seem to be moving more rapidly these days. They are more mobile, more consumer-oriented, and busier than they once were. They have more options for amusement, more claims on their allegiance, less loyalty to a denomination, and higher expectations for fulfillment.

Thinkers as various as David Wells and Martin Marty wonder if, in our preoccupation with reaching the goats, we have not forgotten the hay. Meanwhile, church-growth consultants insist that those who reckon themselves guardians of the hay do not understand the goats. In *Congregation and Community*, sociologist Nancy Ammerman focuses on the interaction between congregations and their surrounding communities. Like any ecology, as the environment changes, new life forms emerge and old ones fade. Although such change involves pain, Ammerman sees it as a good thing. The ability to adapt to the environment becomes key to survival.

For most of the 2,000-year existence of the church, the ecological system has changed relatively slowly. But today, all bets are off. Musical tastes, ethnic composition, economic conditions, geographic mobility, and educational background shift like plates along the San Andreas fault, and churches

that fail to respond to these changes are likely to fall through the cracks.

Here are four ways churches can respond to changes in the surrounding community:

- | | Most like us | Somewhat like us | Not at all like us |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Don’t change. Some churches may be aware that the ecology in which they were born no longer exists, but they continue doing what they know to do. After a period of slow decline, these congregations usually disappear from the scene, making way for utterly different congregations to sprout up in their stead. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Relocate. Instead of trying to adapt to a changing neighborhood, some churches relocate to a neighborhood that better fits their congregational profile. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Become a niche congregation. As opposed to traditional parish or neighborhood churches, niche congregations establish a distinctive identity (perhaps involving worship or social programs or generational targets) that enables them to reach people beyond their local neighborhood. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Change. These churches do what’s necessary so the makeup of the congregation comes to reflect the population of the surrounding neighborhood. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

—JOHN C. ORTBERG, JR. Adapted from “Dinosaurs and Denominations” in *BOOKS & CULTURE* (July/August 1998). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. List some ways people in the community around our church are changing. How might we adjust ministries to meet some of those needs?
2. How can a congregation adapt to its changing neighborhood yet minister to long-term members?
3. What does Luke 14:12–14 suggest about how a church should respond to the needs of people?



4 Trends Affecting Churches

Finding direction in times of change.

1 Corinthians 9:19–23

In the 1950s, people had learned from the Great Depression and World War II to trust institutions and respect men in positions of authority. They were satisfied when they achieved survival goals, and they felt comfortable when offered the choice of “take it or leave it.” They believed in loyalty to one’s country, church, family, and employer.

Nearly every observer of America’s religious scene agrees that the past three or four decades have brought radical changes in such beliefs. The increasing demand for excellence from today’s churchgoers and the increasing competition among churches presents challenges to congregational leaders. But these changes also offer benefits.

The number-one benefit of these trends is that they are forcing church leaders to think more intentionally about how they “do church.” Increasingly, they are asking, “What should our parish uniquely be doing?” and “Why are we doing ministry in the way we’re doing it?”

The second benefit is a qualitative one: congregations are increasingly willing to accept that they are not called to do everything. If today’s competition forces people to say, “No, our church doesn’t do that,” that’s okay.

Compare the following trends with the experience of your church.

Churchgoers who are satisfied with an average level of quality and a limited range of choices in congregational life are beginning to disappear. Successive generations demand excellence. They expect to be offered attractive choices in worship, learning, personal and spiritual growth, fellowship, and involvement in ministry.

Has happened
Is happening now
May happen soon
Does not apply

Competition among congregations to attract and retain new members is increasing because of the erosion of inherited institutional loyalties, greater geographical separation of the place of residence from the place of worship, and a rapid increase in the number of very large congregations with an abundance of discretionary resources.

The ecumenical movement of the 1960s, which stressed what we have in common rather than what separates us, is making it relatively easy for those on a personal spiritual journey to switch from one church to another.

The combination of competing agendas and limited resources is making it difficult for many churches to respond creatively and effectively to pleas for help from congregational leaders.

—LYLE E. SCHALLER

Discuss:

1. How are people’s changing attitudes toward authority, choices, and ecumenism affecting your family, the place you work, your church?
2. Given these changing attitudes, name some things we should change and some things we shouldn’t.
3. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul tells us how to identify with those around us so we might win them to Christ. List some ways can we do this in our community.



Jesus in a World of Crystals

When ordinary words fail to convince.

John 3:1–21; 4:4–26; 6:60–69

The Case “I don’t believe in God,” the man tells you straight out. “But tell me why you believe.” So you start in, not realizing you are about to learn a hard lesson in what evangelism means for a new millennium.

Your description about how you came to belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ is cut short. “I’ve heard all that before,” your friend says. Then he begins telling you about someone he knew whose life has been turned around by New Age spirituality. “Crystals, channeling—it worked for her,” the friend says. “Just like your Jesus.”

Astonished by the comparison, you begin explaining the difference. But you get nowhere with your argument that Jesus is a historical person.

“My friend’s guru is a real person, too,” your friend says, shrugging it off.

You argue for the historical validity of the Bible, but your friend says he doesn’t believe in heaven or hell. He doesn’t believe in the Bible or any other spiritual authority, either. And he’s not particularly bothered by the prospect of dying.

What Would You Do?

- ♦ Is an apologetic defense-of-Christianity type of approach futile with this kind of person? Why?
- ♦ How do you begin to relate to this guy? Is there a movie, TV show, or song that you might discuss that could lead into a deeper conversation about spiritual matters?

What Happened

Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship Ministries, who reported this story, was fumbling with his fork when an idea popped into his mind. “Have you seen Woody Allen’s movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors*?” he asked.

His young friend became thoughtful. Yes, he had seen it, he said, and he had loved it. The movie shows a successful doctor who is haunted by guilt after hiring a killer to murder his mistress. His Jewish father had taught him that an all-seeing God always brings justice. But in the end the doctor suppresses his guilt, convincing himself that life is nothing more than the survival of the fittest.

“Is that our only choice—to be tormented by guilt or else to kill our conscience?”

Colson asked. He followed that question with examples from Leo Tolstoy and C.S. Lewis regarding the reality of moral law. His friend listened intently.

Finally Colson cited the Book of Romans, which teaches that, try as we may, we cannot run from the voice of conscience. His friend wasn’t ready to make a decision, but he did listen carefully to the message of what Jesus Christ did on the cross to reconcile God and humanity.

—ELMER TOWNS AND WARREN BIRD. Adapted from *Into the Future* (Revell, 2000). Used by permission of Fleming H. Revell, a division of Baker Book House Company. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company. <http://www.bakerbooks.com>

Discuss

1. Why was Colson’s appeal to a movie successful?
2. What do John 3:1–21; 4:4–26; and 6:60–69 teach us about customizing our approach to people in our time? Describe how our approach might differ for a teen, a senior, a college student, a young married woman.
3. Colson used a movie as a conversational link with his friend. What TV show or movie today could serve as a discussion opener?



Ministry to the Disinclined

Nothing's new about resistance and indifference to the Gospel of Christ.

Acts 24:24–26; 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6

Read Acts 24:24-26

Comprehend It would be fun, I think, to ask the writer of Acts, “What do you think about the modern disinterest in the gospel?” Luke probably would say, “Has anybody physically beat you for preaching the gospel? That’s the response we got.”

Luke, of course, has amazing confidence in the power of the Word. Despite hardships, he tells a story of the Word leaping over boundaries. Some, in fact, have accused Luke of homiletical triumphalism, saying, “Preaching makes things happen! Look at Peter—he preached, and a couple thousand people showed up for baptism.”

But triumphalism? A few verses later, Stephen preaches and people beat the stuffing out of him. Christian leaders can hope for baptisms, but we have to recognize that “beatings” may also come our way. Our modern dilemma is not new; leaders throughout Christian history have struggled with delivering the Good News to an indifferent and sometimes hostile world.

It’s been a long time, though, since I’ve had the tar beaten out of me for presenting the gospel (or since I’ve had 2,000 seek baptism!). More typically I’ve gotten the Gentile response in Acts: scoffing or patronizing disinterest. It’s like Agrippa and Felix, who say things like, “My, we haven’t heard anything this interesting in a long time. We ought to get together and talk about this again. Of course, everything is relative, and we don’t believe one way or the other...”

I think Luke might say to us, “What you’re reading as modern disinterest is just the good old pagan response to the gospel. Resistance is nothing new.” The response we get isn’t the issue. The issue is to bear apostolic witness, regardless of how hard it is.

My friend Stanley Hauerwas and I were speaking at a gathering of Methodist ministers. During the question-and-answer time, one stood up and said, “I preached on racial justice in my church, and things went from bad to worse. My children were mocked at school. And the congregation called the bishop and complained about my sermons. Then my wife was fired from her job. As a result, I was assigned to a church in another city.”

My heart went out to this poor brother. But Hauerwas’s heart didn’t. “He’s a big God, not a fake. That’s what it’s like to work for a real God. Does anybody else have anything to say?” No one whined after that.

When we sign on to work for God, we sign on for the baptisms as well as the beatings. We should expect nothing less than the reaction the apostles got: opposition or just plain befuddlement.

—WILLIAM WILLIMON. Adapted from *A Voice in the Wilderness* (Multnomah, 1993).

Discuss

1. When was the last time you got a reaction to your Christianity? What happened?
2. How do you keep hope when you don't get a positive response?

Pray Pray for God’s Spirit to move among the present generation, and ask him to give you hope and courage as you share his message with lost people.



Our “Western” Religion in an Eastern World

We authenticate our faith through community.

1 Peter 2:4–12

Read 1 Peter 2:8b–10

Comprehend In a bookstore near my home, I inquired about books in the religion section. The clerk, 20-something with a butterfly tattoo on her arm, explained, “We sell a lot of books on Eastern thought and spirituality, not as many on Western religion.” Then, as if correcting herself, she said, “Not as many on Christianity. I guess that is the only religion based on Western ideals.”

I realized again how we, the church, have painted ourselves into a corner.

Record numbers want to know God, yet Christianity is seen as the religion of the West in a postmodern world that is re-embracing Eastern thought. Yet Christianity is rooted in the East. We worship a savior who spoke an Eastern language, whose birth was signified by a star seen by magi of the East, and whose lineage is a Who’s Who of the ancient Near East. Yet our faith seems to be inseparably intertwined with Western ideals.

If you have any doubt that Christianity has swallowed Western thought, visit the counseling section of your local Christian bookstore. As you browse the racks, you will find yourself climbing Maslow’s pyramid of self-actualization. Most of us are so accustomed to interpreting Scripture through the lens of our needs. The fatal flaw of the Western world is unbridled individualism. The autonomous individual reigns. He chooses theologies and frameworks that suit his taste, stirring together an eclectic, personalized spiritual potpourri.

The Christian community is the hermeneutic and the apologetic of our faith. The Bible calls us out of individualism to be a chosen people, a family that functions together as a body. The church must pray for eyes to see itself as the whole body and escape the self-centered, needs-based Christianity that asks questions such as “Am I being fed?” or “Are my spiritual needs being met?” Let us ask instead, “Are we loving God and our neighbor?”

God has not called us to a Western worldview or an Eastern worldview, but to one that is Christian. This is intrinsically a missionary worldview. We must become immersed in the culture without caving in to it.

—CHRIS SEAY

- Discuss**
1. In what ways have we integrated Western ideals in our worship? Where have we observed the negative effects of individualism in our church?
 2. What does Scripture teach us about our identity as a community (1 Pet. 2:4–12)? How can our community connect with non-believers in our midst?
 3. How can we immerse ourselves in our culture without caving into it?

Pray Pray for the non-believers among our community. Ask for God's wisdom as we create a community that authenticates the message of Christ.



Ministering to the Postmodern Generation

A new twist on the old way of doing church.

1 Corinthians 12

Postmodern ministry is no longer about age groups. The questions for congregations are (1) How do we welcome younger people into leadership? and (2) How will they change our church? Ministers to postmoderns should recognize and strive to affirm the values postmoderns espouse, such as:

- 1. A quest for authenticity.** The hallmark of faith in this generation is authenticity. Everyone uses the word, but most struggle to define it. Authenticity is when your inside matches your outside, one person said. It is two parts integrity and one part self-disclosure. It is not soul-letting without a tourniquet, but it does require a willingness to share from your experience for the benefit of others.
- 2. The end of the age of anonymity.** Authenticity is practiced in community. A generation that esteems community will expect it of the church. New structures for encouraging community will spring up, and postmoderns won't ask permission. Existing organizations will take on new relational aspects. All this talk of story and resonance is born from the need to share who we are. In this age, people must get to know the people of God before they get to know God.
- 3. The journey is the thing.** This is an outcrop of authenticity and community. It also results from the appreciation of ambiguity and paradox. Without a pot of answers at the end of the rainbow (so few believe in answers anymore), the joy must be found in the journey.
Expect a renewed interest in the ancient. Generations without roots need connections to something older than they are. Ancient texts, prayers, and liturgies will be embraced as our Christian family history and reinterpreted by new adherents.
- 4. A roll-up-your-sleeves faith.** This generation is mission-minded, passionate, intense, youthful, and energetic. The result is a hands-on kind of faith. This generation expects the church's giving and sending to be matched by going and doing. Postmoderns want to make a difference, and they want to know the person for whom they make a difference. *Incarnation* is a key word.
- 5. Participation gets a new face.** Participation in worship once meant lusty singing and hearty amens. Not any longer. For a generation that spent 23,000 hours watching TV before turning 18, the old kind of participation looks passive. Church has no remote; worship no joystick. Some postmoderns are adding new forms of artistic expression to worship. Corporate readings are making a comeback. Expect to develop new ways to participate.

—ERIC REED

Discuss

1. Which of the values listed above are already important to us? How do we show that?
2. Do you know people who care about the values above? What are they like?
3. What can we do to better connect with younger people? How can we include them as we structure ministry?



How to Discern Our Times

Reading our culture with an eye toward its reformation.

1 Chronicles 12:32; Colossians 1:10–14; 2:8

In the midst of the turmoil of the Cromwellian revolution, a tribute was written to the local pastor of the Harold Church in Staunton, England. It remains on the church wall and says, “In the year 1653, when all things sacred were throughout the nation destroyed or profaned, this church was built to the glory of God by Sir Robert Shirley, whose singular praise it was to have done the best of things in the worst of times.”

As bad as our times may seem, they are not the worst of times. Nonetheless, these are challenging days for those committed to engaging this culture with the claims of Christ. If we want to do the “best of things” in our times, we must understand the nature of these times and what to do.

What can we do to understand our times and propel our ministries toward the best of things?

- 1. Develop a Christ-centered worldview.** Read those gifted in discerning cultural trends in the light of biblical truth, such as Gene Veith on postmodernism, Ravi Zacharias, D.A. Carson, and, from the last generation, Francis Schaeffer.
- 2. Let Scripture instruct.** The most effective tool in discerning our times is to understand what Scripture teaches us about the fallenness of our world and the clear standards of scriptural righteousness by which we then measure all we observe, experience, and do.
- 3. Watch the world with healthy skepticism.** Our environment is severely damaged by sin. What John calls the cosmos is being managed by Satan, the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31, 16:11). As students of fallen times, we become aware that much of what we hear trumpeted as good and right may very well be wrong, regardless of how wonderful the spin may be.
- 4. Temper skepticism with hope.** If all we have is applied suspicion, we are likely to spend our lives looking for opportunities to curse the darkness. But we are called to do more—to understand the darkness in a way that invites the light of Christ to shine through us into the deepest darkness (Matt. 5:14-16).
- 5. See the values under the deeds.** Understanding the darkness means recognizing that our fallen world is fundamentally driven not by sinful activity but by non-truth values that produce wayward behavior. The Colossian church, which had been “delivered from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son,” was warned by Paul not to be taken captive by “the traditions of men according to the elementary principles of this world” (Col. 1:13, 2:8).

Discerning our times grows not as much from the study of our culture, as important as that is, as from a deepening understanding of God. Getting a grip on him—the values that emanate from his character, his teaching about what is true, and his warnings about the schemes of our adversary—will make us insightful students of our times.

—JOE STOWELL

Discuss

1. Describe some ways that we can observe culture to improve our understanding of people around us.
2. How can we be sure our efforts to connect with culture are compassionate and God-honoring?
3. How can we reject sinful values yet love sinful people? On what basis do we accept our ministry to a lost culture (Col. 1:13–14)?



Bringing Truth to Bear on Our World

3 steps to making Scripture relevant.

Ephesians 5:1–2, 8; 2 Timothy 3:16

When we refer to the Bible in a conversation, our goal is to gain a hearing. We can't make people believe the Word, but we can encourage them to listen to it, to take it seriously, and to weigh its claims and promises.

Look how God did it. He knew the world inside and out: its triumphs and its tragedies, its needs, the hollow in its heart. But he didn't remain aloof. He rolled up his sleeves and waded in. He brought truth and wisdom from outside the world to bear on human hearts. He said what the world needed to hear, not what it wanted to hear. Using that incarnational model, here is a strategy for biblical communication.

- 1. Understand your world.** As leaders who want to effectively communicate God's Word, we need to be students of our world. Some ways to do that:

 - ◆ *Read everything you can get your hands on.* Look for clues about what's in the hearts of people in your world. Read newspapers, news magazines, comics, bestsellers, airline magazines.
 - ◆ *Watch television and go to the movies.* The screen, whether in the privacy of our homes or at the local 24-screen theater, has more influence on our generation than any other voice.
 - ◆ *See what makes your friends and neighbors tick.* Leith Anderson takes advantage of the times he is invited into others' homes as an opportunity to learn about their world. Which room is the center of the home? What books are on the shelves? What magazines are stacked for browsing in the bathroom? What videotapes are piled up by the entertainment system?
 - ◆ *Make the most of every conversation.* Parties can be gold mines. Just ask questions: Where do you work? What drew you into the field? How would you separate the winners from the losers in your profession? What do you like to do when you have some free time? Who are your heroes? Why?
- 2. Enter your world.** It is not enough for us to understand our world from afar. When we enter the world of the men and women around us who don't know Christ, we lay the groundwork for real communication to take place.

Jesus didn't keep his office away from the masses. He walked the earth. His feet got splattered with the same muck as everyone else. He hung out, so to speak, at the beer halls and bowling alleys and betting tracks of his day. Jesus spent so much time with unchurched people that he was accused of wining and dining too much with the wrong crowd (Matt. 11:19).
- 3. Bring home the truth.** The transforming power of Jesus Christ is released only when we point people where God would have them be, then point to Jesus Christ as the only way to get there.

God's Word is for today. It is a bolt of lightning sizzling with the promise of new life. And when we faithfully bring Word and world together, the Word courses through us with power and hits home. And the world stops in its tracks, more than ready to listen.

—DAVID W. HENDERSON. From *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Baker, 1998). Used by permission of Baker Book House Company. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company. <http://www.bakerbooks.com>

Discuss

1. How do we Christians become separated from the world around us? How can we practically enter our world as Jesus did?
2. Which of these three steps do you need to do? What is one specific action you could do for that step?



Spying on Our Culture

Learning to see what is invisible.

Romans 1:20; 12:1–2

We live in a culture with particular norms, traditions, habits, language, and personality. What makes culture unique is often invisible to those within it, however, because people have been immersed in it since birth.

In this activity, your group will observe, reflect upon, and evaluate some of the elements of our culture. Its purpose is to help us understand what drives our culture—our values, motives, how we esteem others, and the biases we share—and to ultimately understand how the gospel intersects our culture.

Much of American culture is rooted in consumerism. Many of our habits and traditions are formed around things that can be bought and owned, such as music, books, clothing, and even “experiences.” This activity will focus on this aspect of our culture.

Research

A week or two before the meeting, have each participant research certain components of pop culture. For example, have some individuals peruse the bestseller section at a local bookstore. Encourage the researchers to ask employees what have been the most recent popular purchases. Have each person go to a different type of store (record stores, toy stores, etc.), challenging them to proceed as if they’re seeing things for the first time. Assign some people to watch several prime-time TV shows, noting their purpose, appeal, and probable target audience.

Tell everyone to merely observe and try to understand. They will be called upon to evaluate what they have seen later, when the group comes together. Here are some questions to consider as they do their research:

- ◆ What is the product or program?
- ◆ Who is the target audience for this product?
- ◆ What is its purpose? Why would someone buy or watch it?
- ◆ What message (if any) is this product or program trying to get across?
- ◆ What attempts are being made to get people to buy this product?
- ◆ What promises does this product directly or indirectly offer?

Evaluate

Have individuals do a “show and tell” of their experiences to the group. Pass around any objects or listen to music that was purchased. You may want to record people’s comments on a white board or overhead. After you have heard the reports, discuss what you learned. Look for positive and negative aspects of culture expressed in these items. Ask these questions:

- ◆ What does this product say about what we value and what we don’t?
- ◆ Is there a subtle message besides the overt one? What is it?
- ◆ What is true about these messages? What is false?
- ◆ Does the product deliver what it promises? If not, what does it fail to deliver?

Discuss

1. How does our culture affect how we present and live out the gospel?
2. What parts of our culture can be embraced to encourage a deeper understanding of the gospel, and how can we address that in our ministry?
3. How can we apply the principles we’ve learned to our lives and our church?

—LINDA M. GEHRS



Further Exploration

10 helpful guides to understanding today's world.

PERIODICALS

Books & Culture. This bimonthly journal is one of the leading thought publications for Christians today. Includes reviews of books, commentary on contemporary art, and “The Science Pages,” a department that relates science to matters of faith. www.booksandculture.com

Regeneration Quarterly. Written by and for today's younger generation, each issue, topically driven, presents contemporary social and faith issues from a personal perspective. Contains reviews on current books, music, and film. www.regenerator.com

Mars Hill Audio. On this bimonthly tape series, Ken Myers, formerly of National Public Radio, interviews current authors and makes applications to the life of faith. www.marshillaudio.org

BOOKS

Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future by *Lyle Schaller*. In his conversational style, Schaller leads readers through today's shifts from small entities to large, from neighborhoods to regions, from superstars to teams and others (Abingdon, 1999; ISBN 068708539X).

The Experience Economy by *Joseph Pine and James Gilmore*. The authors argue that high-profit business will move from arranging sales to staging experiences that will engage customers on many levels. For example, Disney World is not merely a theme park; it's a weeklong excursion to zoos, golf clubs, and nightspots (Harvard Business School Press, 1999; ISBN 0875848192).

New Rules for the New Economy: 10 Radical Strategies for a Connected World by *Kevin Kelly*. The editor of *Wired* talks about the relationship of communication to economics. Kelly's insights reach beyond the Web (Viking, 1998; ISBN 0670881112).

The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty by *David G. Myers*. Myers, a psychology professor at Hope College, analyzes post-war trends in marriage and divorce, crime, media, and morality, and draws implications for society and for people of faith (Yale, 2000; ISBN 0300081111).

Mustard Seed Versus McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future by *Tom Sine*. Sine approaches data on trends from a Christian perspective and brings to his findings an agenda for a simpler, faith-driven lifestyle. Sine's engaging anecdotes from around the world are joined with recommendations for local churches (Baker, 1999; ISBN 0801090881).

Evangelism Outside the Box by *Rick Richardson*. Gives great insight into today's generation—what makes it tick and how to bring God's good news to this unique group. Includes chapters on community, asking and answering the right questions, and the nature of spiritual awakening in a postmodern society (InterVarsity, 2000; ISBN 0830822763).

Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns edited by *D.A. Carson*. Essays by leading Christian thinkers, including Ravi Zacharias, Robert Coleman, and Ajith Fernando, give readers guidance for ministry to postmodern thinkers (Zondervan, 2000; ISBN 0310234328).



Retreat Plan

How to use "Trends & Culture" at a weekend retreat.

BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS expands easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the "Trends & Culture" theme. The purpose of this retreat is to learn how to understand the thoughts, traditions, influences, and needs of people around us so we can reach them with the gospel.

Friday Evening

- ◆ 8-8:45 P.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of "How People Think Today" the interview with Michael Sack on pages 4-5, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the bottom of the page. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments and consider what that may mean for our church.
- ◆ 9-9:45 P.M. **Bible Study:** End the evening with "Understanding the Times," the Bible study on page 3. Photocopy and pass out the study, or use the handout as your notes.

Saturday Morning

- ◆ 9-9:45 A.M. **Devotional:** Set the tone for the day by handing out (or presenting) the devotional "Ministry to the Disinclined" (p. 10). Discuss the questions at the bottom of the page, and consider why we can be hopeful of reaching people who do not think like us.
- ◆ 10-11:00 A.M. **Activity:** Use the activity "Spying on Our Culture" on page 15 to help members better understand the culture.
- ◆ 11:15–NOON. **Assessment:** Hand out "Hay Where the Goats Can Get It," the assessment on page 7, to each participant. After everyone has read and completed the assessment, discuss how to interact with people so they may one day come to Christ.
- ◆ NOON. **Lunch.**

Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1-2 P.M. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the how-to article "Bringing Truth to Bear on Our World," on page 14. Have each person spend some time alone to quietly read and respond to the questions on the handout. Have the group come together to share what God has taught them about meeting individuals where they are. Then pray together, asking God for guidance and wisdom as you reach people outside your comfort zone.

You can create similar retreat plans for this BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS theme. Simply determine what you want to accomplish and select the handouts that support your objectives.