

The Changing Cultural Context in Which We Find Ourselves

This collection of charts grew out of the Missional Leaders Training Course sponsored by Mennonite Church Canada in 2003. They summarize some important shifts in the cultural context in which the churches of North America find themselves. Congregational leaders may use them in their own cultural and theological reflection. Or they may wish to use them in various kinds of instruction and preaching. The following is what Eric Olfert has done with these charts in his role as a missional church promoter in Saskatchewan.

Lesson Planning Ideas

The attached charts have shown themselves to be useful as overheads and/or handouts in Adult Sunday School or other adult discussion groups of up to 40 people. To go through all of them in group discussion mode requires at least two one-hour sessions, and depending on the willingness of the group to enter into discussion, can easily fill three one-hour sessions.

The 'Crumbling Christendom' Scenario

Starting with The Crumbling Christendom Scenario works well, beginning with a bit of definition of the term 'Christendom', pointing out that it is a deliberate combination of the words 'Christianity' and 'Kingdom'. Then introduce what we are about to look at as a very simplified and selective summary of the development of the church since Jesus was on earth, based on Part 1 of a video by Loren Meade of the Alban institute entitled 'The Once and Future Church'.

Uncover (or draw people's attention to) the horizontal category entitled 'Environment or Context', and begin under the heading 'Apostolic Church'. The early church, especially under Nero in the '60s, was heavily persecuted, and this persecution continued intermittently over the next 300 years. Christianity was considered a dangerous sect, and people could be executed just for carrying the name 'Christian'. The Church/Society indicator at the bottom of the block indicates that the playing field was strongly tilted against the church. For someone to move from society into the church at that time required extreme conviction and motivation, not only because the state was hostile to the church, but because the church had to be very wary of those it allowed in, for fear they might be spies, trying to bring harm to the believers.

Moving across to the center, the Roman Emperor Constantine's mother was a Christian, and so he made it legal to be a Christian. His successor, Theodosius, eventually made it illegal to be anything other than Christian, and the Age of Christendom began. Church, Politics and even the military became largely one power, with variations over the years. It was considered normal to be Christian, and every citizen was assumed and even coerced to be Christian, so child baptism became normal. As the Church/Society indicator shows, the playing field in this era is strongly tilted in favour of the church, and one would require great conviction and motivation to be a member of society and NOT be part of the church.

Now we come to a critical point in this analysis. The theory is that Christendom is finally reaching its end in our time. The cozy, at least symbiotic (you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours), relationship between church and state is finally coming fully to an end. Our Western Society, driven by secularism and Human Rights ideals is bending over backwards to be equally fair to everyone. Being Christian is considered a free choice, as are Islam, Buddhism and even Wicca, but it is often considered a bit old-fashioned, even superstitious, to be religious. The playing field is now at best level, maybe even tilting a bit against the church.

What evidence can you cite that would support this End of Christendom scenario? What current evidence of it have you experienced or heard of?

Local Examples from Saskatchewan:

- There has been no crèche in front of Saskatoon city hall for a number of years now
- The removal of the Lord's Prayer from Saskatchewan Public Schools
- The Christmas tree in front of City Hall is now called the 'Holiday Tree'.
- The Canadian government's regulations governing charitable donations and the use of receipted money keep tightening.
- City planners no longer automatically set aside planned plots for churches.
- The government is taking over the right to define marriage.

-

If we can at least provisionally agree that something important is changing in the church-state relationship, the next question is 'What should we be thinking about this? Is this good or bad? Well it obviously isn't easy or comfortable! I just became eligible for the Clergy Residence Deduction, and the idea that it will likely disappear fairly soon, is certainly not a welcome one.

By this point someone will probably have pointed to our Anabaptist roots and the fact that our forefathers' main distinctives from the church of their time were all strong calls for an end to Christendom:

- Adult Baptism – a direct challenge to the 'automatic' church membership of Christendom
- Pacifism – a clear separation of the church from the state's military agenda
- Discipleship of all believers – a challenge to the Christendom Church's hierarchy
- Community – a call for commitment & dedication to the community of Christ
- Separation of Church & State – clearly anti-Christendom

In order to understand the implications of this Crumbling of Christendom, let's look at a few more categories. Here uncover the 'Nature of Christian Community' layer on the overhead.

The early church was hard to enter, not only because society made it hard, but because the church needed to protect itself. Alan Kreider tells us that the early role of the deacon was largely that of gate-keeper. The deacon's job was to screen those who came to the door, letting in those who 'belonged', and turning away those who didn't. Doesn't sound very 'Seeker-Friendly' does it? Serious seekers were not allowed in, but they were paired up with 'mentor' believers who taught them what it meant to be believers. This Catechism process focused on learning to 'behave' like Christians, and it could easily take several years of mentoring before a seeker was deemed ready to be baptized as a believer.

The Christendom and Emerging/Missional columns in this layer are hopefully self-explanatory, and what is interesting is the fact that that as Christendom ends, we find the experience of the early church again becoming relevant to our search for faithfulness.

The next 'layer' is 'Mission'. The early church practiced what I like to call 'behaviour evangelism'. They consciously sought to behave like Christians. This meant behaving in ways that were deliberately and consciously out-of-step with their society. An example cited by Alan Kreider is in relation to the plague, which periodically swept through the societies of this time. Those with resources fled from the plague in the cities to the rural countryside, where less crowding and better sanitation made the plague less of a threat. Christians became known as those who stayed in the city and nursed the sick, not afraid of the death which claimed many of them. Observers were intrigued, wondering where this power to overcome the fear of death came from, and out of this, conversations began which brought more seekers to the door.

Again, the Christendom and Emerging/Missional columns are fairly self-explanatory.

The bottom 'layer' is that of 'Clergy/Laity'. The first bishops did not appear in the early church for several centuries, and only when the church had grown to a point where some form of

centralizing function was a necessity. Even then, there is a sense that the bishop was not seen as the highest authority, but as the one who had the function of holding the larger church together.

And again, the other two columns are hopefully self-explanatory.

The Changing Understanding of Our Call to Missions

Again adapted from Loren Meade's Video (Part 2 of 'The once and Future Church'), this overhead/handout attempts to outline in more detail the impact of the ending of Christendom on our understanding of Missions.

Readers tend to find this overhead fairly self-explanatory, with the possible exception of the 'Guiding Biblical Text' layer. The traditional or Christendom understanding of the Great Commission would, as stated, see this text primarily as a missionary job description. John Howard Yoder's work in "As you go..." suggested that the intent of the passage, taken in the context of the rest of Matthew 28, would be more accurately transmitted if it was understood something like; "As you go through life, go in such a way that disciples are made everywhere and called to baptism; go in such a way that people learn everything I have taught you". In this, more missional understanding, the Great Commission is less about -What to do- and more about -How to live-.

The Modern/Post-modern Shift

This overhead/handout is informed by lectures given by Chris Arney as part of the MC Canada Missional Leadership Course. It is an attempt at demystifying the Modern/Post-modern 'jargon' a bit, and simplifying (perhaps over-simplifying) that concept in order to make it more accessible to the average Adult Sunday School participant. It should be made clear that the 4 'layers' chosen are not the only ways in which the Modern-Postmodern shift can be understood

If, indeed, the significant change of philosophical world-view suggested by this concept is real, then the 'inter-generational stress' that is currently moving through our churches has the potential to impact us much more profoundly than in previous generations. It behooves us to think about it and its implications at every level.

It seems to me to be important to study these ideas, and to discuss them inter-generationally. If we do not work hard at inter-generational communication, this shift can, and will be, very destructive.

An important point is that there is nothing less Christian or less Biblical about the Post-modern outlook on life, and that in some ways it could be argued that it is more in tune with Christ's message than the Modern understanding.

Again, in order to keep discussion participants focused, working through the overhead 'layer by layer', leaving time for questions, responses, examples etc. as you move along seems to work well. Having handouts prepared is useful, but don't give them out until after you have worked through the overhead. This overhead seems to be quite self-explanatory.

Some Implications of the Modern-Postmodern Shift for how we do church

Print this on the back of the previous sheet for hand-out purposes. Again, it has usually been fairly self-explanatory, but has generated good discussion.

Eric Olfert
April 8/04