

# TEN (UNEXPECTED) TRENDS TO SURFACE BY 2020

BY SAM S. RAINER III

**An examination of movements and ideas that may impact the church during the next decade.**

I once served under a leader who said he didn't have a vision beyond the next 12 months. His point was that everything changes rapidly, and no one knows the future. So why plan beyond what you do not know for certain? In looking far into the future, he believed leaders wasted too much time on fruitless thinking in which attainable goals are never achieved.

He had a point. Much time, brain energy, printed paper and blogosphere megabytes have been wasted on fruitless plans for an uncertain future. Despite the downsides of wasted time and premature predictions, I believe the best leaders risk being wrong for the sake of a better understanding of where we might end up; that's part of what makes a leader.

Leaders move followers toward something — goals off in the distance and in the future. Allow me to risk being doubly wrong — sharing with you not only 10 church trends for the next 10 years, but ones that may be unexpected to some. I believe these trends are critical for leaders to know as they lead their churches to advance God's kingdom in the coming decade.

## THE HETEROGENEOUS CHURCH EXPLODES

Perhaps the most important, this first trend involves not only pragmatic issues, but theological issues as well. As the younger generation ages, they will not be represented by the homogeneous unit principal that was championed in the early years of the church growth movement. Basically, this principal states that people desire to worship and serve in church with similar people, and the best way to reach people is with others who are similar.

Boomers began to change this thinking. Many sought diversity — they intentionally championed it. For many Millennials, diversity (or heterogeneity) is normal. In the future, homogenous units will still form — there's a reason why people attend Star Trek conventions (though it is

lost on me). People with common interests, characteristics, life stages and languages will still gravitate towards each other. The difference with the younger generation is that these divides will not be as distinct, specifically in ethnic terms. The United States will be minority white by 2042 — preschools much sooner, by 2021. The Millennial generation will gravitate towards heterogeneous churches because they represent what is normal in their generation.

The diverse church will explode in growth over the next 10 years. And instead of looking at this trend through the lens of pragmatic church growth practices, I believe it needs to be viewed as a picture of the Gospel. What man segregates, the Gospel unifies. Get on board with this trend not because it will grow your church, but rather because it was God's plan for his church from the beginning.

## CHURCH ATTENDANCE CONTINUES TO DECLINE

People do not wake up one Sunday and decide to leave their church. They phase out; they begin by attending less frequently. This problem is pervasive throughout the North American church. While myriad individual, spiritual reasons exist why people attend less, decreasing frequency of attendance is the single biggest macro reason for overall church declines. For example, a church has 400 people that attend four out of four weeks. This attendance frequency equates to an average attendance of 400. But if this same church has 400 people that attend two out of four weeks, average attendance is cut in half to 200.

To reduce the problem of declining attendance frequency, church leaders will begin to track not only how many attend, but also how frequently they attend as well. I am not advocating legalistic superciliousness — that every time the church doors are open people must be there. But the family that once attended almost every



week and now attends 10 times a year is gradually leaving the church.

#### **THE CONSERVATIVE DRIFT DRAWS MORE**

While the overall attendance decline will hit churches of all types and denominations, growing churches will typically be the more theologically conservative congregations. The Millennials will either go to conservative churches, or they will not go at all.

#### **DEEP TEACHING GETS MORE POPULAR**

Coupled with a theologically conservative drift, many growing churches will get deeper theologically and more popular. Many young adult dropouts left the church because they desired deeper teaching. The superficial anomalies will most likely still exist, but churches that challenge people to greater biblical depths will proliferate while others languish in their own shallowness.

#### **BOOMER MINISTRIES BOOM**

Boomers will be a different type of senior. In fact, don't call Boomers "seniors." They are not part of their parents' generation — they aren't seniors. How senior adult ministry was done with the previous generation will not be as favorable with the Boomer generation. There is just as large a generation gap between the Boomers and the Greatest Generation as there is between Boomers and their children. Boomers don't get on buses and visit places with their friends. If you're wondering why your "senior" ministry keeps getting smaller and older, and no "fresh faces" are joining, it's because Boomers don't want to be lumped in with their parents.

#### **MINISTRIES TO FAMILIES GROW**

The largest generation is no longer the Boomers. The Millennials now lay claim to that title. According to

LifeWay Research, the number one priority among the Millennial generation is family. Millennials desire to stay connected with not only their immediate family, but their extended family as well. Ministries to families have always been important but will increase as this youngest generation begins their own.

#### **STAFF POSITIONS EVOLVE**

For churches to remain healthy, staff structures will change between now and the next 10 years. As children's ministries become more diverse, children's ministers with experience in and a passion for diversity will become more important. As multi-site churches become more prevalent with more sites, administrators will need to become more skilled at managing a network of ministries. As churches refocus their programs and activities around a tight discipleship process, the old paradigm of hierarchical structures will fade as a plurality of local church leadership emerges.

#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCH BUILDING IS RENEWED**

The church is not a building, but a building is where the church meets. And buildings are the most expensive part of discipleship. In North America people go to buildings to do things — they go to the game in an arena, to the doctor at her office, to school in the classroom, and to the movie at the theater. Part of our culture is the expectation that things happen in buildings. This cultural expectation is true of the church — people go to church to be discipled.

Not all churches have buildings, nor am I advocating that they should. But church facilities are one of the most expensive and most critical tools church leaders use in shepherding God's people. In short, buildings are important pieces in God's mission of building his kingdom. Many building and design firms are >>



becoming more intentional about creating space with the purpose of making disciples. In the next ten years, this focus will continue to grow. And churches will begin to view their buildings as part of their discipleship process.

**CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP BECOMES LESS PREVALENT**

Charismatic leadership is based on the personality and charisma of a senior leader. Transformational leadership is based on the collective vision of an entire group. Both have their place, even in the church. A popular teacher should not lessen his or her charisma to detract followers. When the entire ministry structure is in place to elevate the leader, however, is when major problems arise. Charismatic teachers and leaders will always exist, but transformational leadership will become more popular in the coming decade.

Transformational leaders inspire people to reach for a common goal. They develop, train, and mentor future talent. They empower people to accomplish tasks. Creativity, transparency and authenticity are valued. Leaders and followers alike know what the goal is and how to achieve it. These leaders show everyone the big picture and why it's important. The next 10 years will bring a fresh focus on local pastors leading local churches to become focused on a local mission.

**GROWTH IN VIDEO-VENUES SLOWS DOWN**

The trend towards more transformational leadership will quell the popularity of video-venues in which a single teaching pastor is projected to multiple sites. The Internet and podcast boom brought with it a cultural wave of electronic teaching. While this trend has been positive — more sound teaching is readily available (for free) than ever before. Eventually, however, the wired generation will desire a more local, personal touch than the man-on-the-screen. By 2020, more campuses at multi-site churches will feature a campus pastor who teaches, and more people will seek out this type of local connection.

Ten years and 10 trends. Perhaps a few were more unexpected than others. I'm just one prognosticator; there is no guarantee for any of these predictions. But it is the responsibility of local church leaders to have a vision for their churches' futures. Now is the time to start planning. CE

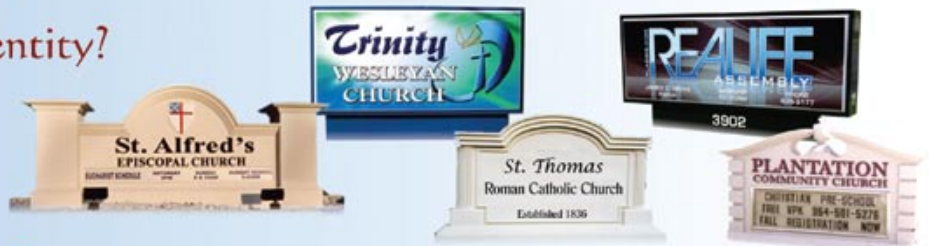
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