

Becoming
a
Future
Church

Everything has changed

Part 1 of a 4 part series looking at the Church and how we can face the future.

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An initiative of the Missional
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A red ribbon graphic with a white border, containing the text 'Becoming a Future Church' in white. The ribbon is folded at the top and bottom, with a pointed bottom edge.

Becoming a Future Church

Everything has changed

It is not difficult to see that the Church in the West is in crisis. Across Europe, in western-influenced Africa, and even in the USA, analysts are reporting a sharp decline in membership (and in regular attendance) of the Christian Church.

The mainline Protestant Churches are most affected but the Roman Catholics and Pentecostals are also experiencing this. Even the 'Mega-churches', supported by multimillion Rand marketing budgets and excellent music ministries, are feeling the challenge.

Christendom is dead

Why are western Churches in decline? It is because Christendom is dead. Very early in the fourth Century AD, the Christian Church became 'mainstream'. Before this, Christians were a bunch of renegades, living on the edge of society, custodians of such a powerful contagious message that the Church grew from 20 000 to 20 million in less than 300 years.

In 313AD, Constantine made Christianity acceptable, 'mainstream'. Every civil servant, if he (then, there were only male civil servants) wanted to keep his job, had to convert – had to become a "card carrying" Christian. Being a member of the Holy Church became socially acceptable and the Church as an institution began to grow and complexity. For the first time, buildings began to be constructed – a place of worship for every village and, eventually, the great cathedrals to symbolize the awesome power of God (and perhaps of the king). For more than 1 000 years, Christendom reigned without challenge. The newly formed and arranged professional clergy became the guardians of the faith – what Christians believed and how they lived out their belief. This "control" eventually became so intense that it resulted in the Protestant Reformation, a popular uprising against the Roman Church's control of our faith.

But the Reformers replaced one "Christendom Church" with another. And why wouldn't they? This model of Church is the only one any of them (probably us) had ever experienced.

The times were 'a changing' and the hold of the Christendom was loosening as the world moved into modernity. The ascent of science caused people to question their faith, often they asked questions the Church could not answer and often the only way the Church responded was in making outrageous statements or radically excommunicating anyone who threatened the faith. The invention of the printing press and subsequent proliferation of literature (including the Bible) was another nail in Christendom's coffin. When people started to read the Bible for themselves, personal faith emerged as a phenomenon. The control of the priests and ministers was lessening. The demise of the feudal system and the emergence of the State as the steward of safety and security also took its toll on Christendom. The Church's grip on people was slowly lessening.

And so, in the twenty-first century, the Church is in crisis. "They" (the world) are no longer coming to us. Weddings are often held outside the Church, funerals (or memorial services) are often held in gardens or on beaches. Baptisms are fewer – they are considered more and more irrelevant.

Our protector, Christendom, is dead and the Church, as an institution, is declining. Our sanctuaries are emptying out; We live among a smorgasbord of religions; Christians, immersed as we all are in consumerist culture, shop around from church to church to see which one will entertain them best; and even our Sundays are not sacrosanct anymore.

In 1995, David Bosch's family published a small book he had written called, "Believing in the Future" (Bosch had been killed in a motor accident in April 1992). In this book, Bosch analyses the incredible changes of worldview that the world has experienced as it moved from modernity to post-modernity. Christendom and the Church were at home in modernity. The Church conceived of itself as Eurocentric, solid, institutional and normative. The postmodern worldview with its opposition to Grand narratives is not a place in which the modernist Church can thrive.

Without the sway of the Christendom Church, Sundays have changed. No longer does the Sunday Service dominate the day's events. The work week has been extended and as shopping hours increase and access to entertainment is extended, people are expected to work on Sundays. In an attempt to extend their sport and cultural offerings, schools are expecting children to participate in activities on Sundays and family time as well as Church time is often sacrificed to accomplish these. Services are often made earlier, to "free up more of the day" on Sundays.

In the prevailing culture, the nature of relationships has also changed. The neighbourhood has become more anonymous. In former years, neighbours knew each other, took time to greet and to get to know one another and shared their life stories. Extended families lived close to one another and shared birthdays and provided support. Today, many don't know their neighbours, live far away from their families, and travel a great deal more. People

have networks of friends who communicate electronically, stay in touch via Facebook and chat groups and perhaps even have very deep and intimate friendships with people who live many thousands of kilometres away, on the other side of the world. People in a street have WhatsApp groups, as do parents of School children. Friendships are formed there.

We live in a multi-cultural world and neighbourhood. Different races, religions and cultures interact. This is different from fifty years ago when Churches and neighbourhoods were pretty much monocultures. Of course, today there are also many sub cultures displaying different interests and hobbies (motorbikes, Science fiction readers/movie watchers, gardening, goths, to name but a few).

Finally, Children are not introduced to faith in schools as was once the case. Bible knowledge is at an all-time low. The great hymns and stories of our faith are not communicated anywhere except Church. Despite this, there is a deep hunger for spiritual things and a trip to any bookstore will show the extent to which people are seeking spiritual input. Many courses are offered in various spiritual practices and traditions.

An adaptive challenge

In his book, *The Forgotten ways*, Alan Hirsch suggests that the Christian Church is faced with an adaptive challenge. He defines an adaptive challenge as a “situation where a living system faces the challenge to find a new reality.. Adaptive challenges set the context for innovation and adaption”. He believes that our present “crisis” presents us with “an extraordinary opportunity to discover ourselves in a way that orients us to complex challenge in ways that are resonant with an ancient energy”.

What seems clear, as one looks to the future, is that Church as we know it is not likely to survive. As baby boomers and generations older than them make way for newer generations, so congregations will dwindle. Some, who have mastered the attractional model of Church may survive but in a smaller fashion. We need to seek out new ways of being Church that are not built around attraction with its appeal to consumer needs of members and the lengths to which this model goes to entertain.

The challenge is to discern what this kind of a Church will look like. At this stage, I suggest that the start is to formulate the questions and not spend too much time (yet) on answers, lest they be simply quick fix solutions. At age 16, it is believed, Albert Einstein asked a question: “If I could sit on a beam of light, what would the universe look like?” It was from this question that the Theory of Special Relativity emerged.

Questions:

What was your experience of Church as a child? How does that compare to the state of the Church now.

How do you see the Church needing to change in the future? Why should it make these changes?

What are some ways your congregation will need to change?

Further reading:

David Bosch, *Believing in the Future. Christian Mission and Modern Culture*. Trinity Press, Valley Forge, 1995.

Church of England (UK), *Mission-Shaped Church. Church planting and fresh expressions of Church in a changing context*. Church Publishing House, London, 2004. (Chapter 1)

Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten ways. Reactivating the missional church*. Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2006. (Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2)

Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity. What it is, where it is going, and why it matters*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2012. (Part 1).

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1. The situation in the East, particularly in China, is a totally different matter. The Chinese Church is the fastest growing Church in the world today (Some estimates are 80 million Christians (See Philip Yancey, "Discreet and Dynamic: Why, with No apparent resources, Chinese Churches thrive," *Christianity Today*, July 2004, 72). Despite the efforts of the cultural revolution (or perhaps because of them), there are more Christians in China today than in Europe. Even in formerly Communist countries (that used to be part of the USSR, there is a resurgence of the Church.
 2. Christendom is the form and expression of Church as it developed in the post-Constantine period (312AD until around 1960). The period is characterised by the Church's growth in influence over the State and the people, the growth of the Church as institution, the proliferation of Church buildings, the development of a professional clergy and the attractional model of engagement with the World (Hirsch 2006: 276).
 3. Hirsch quotes Rodney Starke in 2006: 18.
 4. See Fresh Expressions, *Mission Shaped Introduction Course*, Session 1, page 12.
 5. Hirsch and Altclass, 2009, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 202.
 6. Hirsch 2006: 17.
 7. In the United States, a significant number of large attraction model Churches are going "multi campus". In this arrangement, the sermon of the teaching minister is broadcast to multiple venues which have independent worship but share this "input". In effect, this becomes a network of congregations who share resources and assure the "big guns" of a "decent" Stipend. This is a shrewd way of prolonging the life of the Attractional model Church.

Missional Congregations Project

In July 2015, the Executive Commission created *The Missional Congregations Project*, which seeks to further the UPCSA's mission priority of building missional congregations.

Dr George Marchinkowski is available to address Presbyteries and Congregations on the subjects of

- How the Church is changing and why.
- Does the answer lie within? Skills for being a missional church.
- Rediscovering "apostolic" leadership.
- How to become a missional congregation.

Interested Presbyteries and Congregations can contact George on george@stmungo.co.za or 011 706 6108.





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