

## BECOMING AN INFORMATION AGE CHURCH

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NOTE: This is not a promotion for buying a computer, VCR, and a satellite dish for your church. Rather, it is a call for our churches to seriously consider how to position themselves for very significant social changes which are now in process. These changes are typically labelled "The Information Age." Basically, it means that as we move into the 21st century most working Americans will be providing a service rather than producing a product or growing food and fiber.

The previous shift from agricultural-based to an industrial-based life brought gigantic changes in where people lived, the rhythm of their lives, the structure of their families, how they obtained and consumed goods--almost every aspect of life. Even church life was impacted. The coming of the Information Age promises another tidal wave of change. If church leaders will respond creatively to the coming set of changes, the 21st century can be the greatest age of the church. But if it is business as usual, watch out.

In order to get things in perspective, let's review what happened as the United States passed from being an agricultural to an industrial nation. In the 19th century the vision of Thomas Jefferson formed much of our federal policy. He thought the nation should be comprised of yeoman farms and shopkeepers. The nation was surveyed out in sections, one square mile or 640 acres. These sections were in turn grouped into townships, usually 36 square miles or six-mile square. Somewhere near the center of each township a village would be laid out or a settlement spring up. Here would live the storekeepers, craftspersons, millers, physicians, teachers and ministers. The town would contain 50 to 300 persons and the rest of the township might contain about 1000 members of farm families.

With this agrarian model in place most Americans would generally live in a six-mile world. That is, most of their needs would be addressed within three miles, one hour's walk, from where they lived.

The Home Missions movement in the 19th century responded by seeking to plant churches at the heart of each of these settlements. The church names reflected the basic organizing principles (stackpole) for these churches. The Raytown Baptist Church--place and theology. This was a church that saw as its "field of work" the township served by the village of Raytown. It sought to evangelize and disciple all of the people who lived within three miles of its doors. And it affirmed the Baptist theology as contrasted with the Methodists, Disciples or others.

Many of the churches shared a pastor with neighboring congregations. They met for worship only once or twice a month. Some began as a Sunday School. Others added Sunday Schools.

Ironically, even as the Agrarian Age wave of settlement was spreading across the continent and the checkerboard of six by six square mile communities centered in villages that Jefferson envisioned was being filled out, the economy was turning to industry. Factories were replacing village craftsmen. First, the port cities became centers not only of transportation but also of manufacturing. This seems to have spurred the development of railroading as a means of carrying the products of the factories to the inland villages for sale to farm families and for bringing the products of the soil to the cities to feed their ever expanding population of factory workers.

Urban life, early on, tried to recreate rural village life as a compacted form. Cities were initially a collection of villages, usually clustered around factories. Many 19th century city churches were simply transplanted village churches. The initial change was to have worship every Sunday and to have a pastor who was fully supported by the congregation.

But village life could not be maintained in urban places long. Life rhythm was different. The six

day work week of 10 to 12 hours per day replaced the rhythm of seed-time, cultivation, harvest and slack time of the farm. The seasonal freedom of the farm was replaced by the ever-present watchful eye of the supervisor. Work was routinized. Production was standardized. Promotion, planning, training, plant and product became a part of the everyday language of farmers become factory hands. Mobility--social and geographic became common.

Coming out of World War I, a number of Southern Baptist leaders recognized that to be effective in the Industrial Age our churches must change. For example, Arthur Flake took the methods of urban salesmanship and applied them to Sunday School and Church growth. The Sunday School incorporated the organizational form of a factory. Leaders were superintendents. They followed a Standard of Excellence. Church programs were designed to produce a product in a church "plant." By the 1950's one could attend a Southern Baptist Church in almost any community and find the same set of programs, using the same resources, meeting at the same times, doing the same stuff. We had become Industrial Age churches.

It is my judgment that this was wise. Our tremendous growth in the 1950's and 1960's must, in part, be attributed to the fact that we responded to a new era with a way of doing church that "fit" the everyday world of the people. Denominational leaders identified how Industrial Age people congregated, related and learned. Then they designed programs that reflected these learnings in order to get the work of the churches done.

Back in the Agrarian Age almost all churches were small. In the Industrial Age, however, the idea that "big is better" became an axiom of American culture. Consequently, a goal for many of our churches was to become a big church. For many, the engine was pulsating programs. For others, it was a powerful pulpit. For many it was both. Perhaps the mega-church with more than 1,000 in worship on any given Sunday, is best seen as an end product of the Industrial Age. Not only has it grown because it "did it better," but its growth was made possible by the diminished role of the village in the life of Industrial Age people. The automobile and freeways came to carry a person across a major city or a rural county as quickly as a horse and wagon carried a farmer from the edge of his six-mile world to its center. The urban regional church draws from 15 miles around or more. And their rural cousin, the mini-mega churches, in the Wal-Mart towns are doing the same.

The Industrial Age spawned new church forms appropriate for its way of life. It seems that in the Industrial Age programs and pulpit replaced place and theology as the primary organizing center of church life for many of us. It didn't kill off the agrarian churches. They continue. And so will the Industrial Age churches as we move into the Information Age. However, the most pressing task of the Church as we move into the 21st century is to discuss the emerging shapes and foci for the Information Age Church. In order to accomplish this we will need to listen to the futurists--Toffler, Naisbett, Theobald, Drucker, Barker, Barnas and others. What are the emerging characteristics of how the work place will be organized? Networking. Choices. Project Groups. Global Focus. Cocooning. The logics and syntax of the computer and of television. Shifting configurations. Needs Driven Services. Niches. Boutiques. Shrinking Middle. These are some of the concepts that leap out from the pages. Rather than define all of these let me suggest how these developments in the larger culture may be played out in our Church life.

#### 1. Choices

In mega-churches this will take the form of myriads of study groups, support groups, mission project groups, prayer groups and self-improvement groups. Many will last for years. Others will exist for only a few weeks or months. Persons will spend only a brief time in some groups, years in others.

Elsewhere, churches may emerge that will have a single focus on ministry. People will choose to be a part of such a church either because it meets a need they feel or it provides an opportunity for them to perform a ministry. Many persons will come to the church as a consumer, grow and become a provider of ministry.

Particularly in rural areas an emerging role of the Association may be to direct persons to a church which is doing something in which they want to participate and in helping churches find their niche. Even in a typical Old South rural county the 27 churches may have 50 groups each doing needed things--providing choices for people. Already I am finding small rural churches that focus on and cater to the needs of cowboys, home schoolers, over the road truck drivers, recovering alcoholics, drama nuts, senior citizens, and adult educatibly handicapped. Mission is replacing standardized programs and place as the organizing principle for some.

## 2. Networks

Many people are finding their "community" not so much in where they live, but among the people with whom they work--in their profession. Unfortunately, too often they come together around the things of Satan rather than around the things of God. The WMU and Brotherhood are addressing this development with the national fellowships for professionals in fields such as medicine, entertainment, agriculture, veterinary medicine, and education. In many parts of the United States congregations can and may emerge that use profession as their organizing principle. And many of the national fellowships could be formed at the county or associational level. Foci would include fellowship, Bible study that applies biblical principles to issues related to their profession and ways their knowledge and skill to ministry projects. It appears likely that "ministry" will be the stackpole of the uniquely new congregations for the Information Age. Some may focus on evangelism within their profession. Others will focus on using the knowledge and skills of their profession as a "point of contact" for ministry and witness to the poor, the hurting, the needy and the dysfunctional. Others will focus on intense Bible study which will reinforce their everyday work life. Many will belong to two or more "churches." One will be a place/programs church. The other will be a network kind of church. Still others will have a "church" comprised of people in the same life condition (recovery groups/age cohort groups). Still others will have a church-type expression in the work place.

It is crucial that we realize that few 21st century people will experience church as it was conceived in the 19th--four generations in the graveyard outback, three generations in the church house, and another 10 generations or more anticipated by the church leader. Christians in the 21st century may more typically pass through a score or more churches, often in several simultaneously, in their life course. My point is that we must break out of thinking church strategy from the perspective of how we did church in 19th century villages. This will not work even in many 20th century villages.

## 3. Needs Driven

This is the central concept. Information Age living will be formed around needs. People will seek out churches that either offer to meet a consumption need and/or offer opportunity to give expression to a need to serve others. Actually, this isn't so very new. It is, rather, that it will become more prominent. One might call these "designer" churches. Using the "life-style" information from the market, 21st century churches will begin to design worship experiences, learning opportunities, ministry projects and fellowship activities for a specific life-style group. The appeal will not be--you ought to come here because this is the church for your place, or this church has a nice smorgasbord of programs. No. This is the church designed for whom you are and what you need. A primary goal of these churches will be to grow those who come as consumers into providers of ministry--reaching the unchurched from this life-style group.

In sum, I suspect that most of us believe that the Church has not done very well in responding to the urbanization, bureaucratization and secularization that accompanied the Industrial Age. I believe that God is giving the churches another chance as the Information Age comes upon us. Let's seize the opportunity. New churches. New kinds of churches. Refocusing old churches.