

shifting

The Western Canadian District



The Future: Shifting, Sifting and Trusting

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Predicting the future is a fool's game, one should be very careful about believing they understand the future clearly. Especially if you are young enough to, hopefully, be around for a couple of more decades when you may be held accountable for your predictions. This is even more true in a time such as the one that we are living in when the only thing we really know for sure is that change is the only constant we can count on. However, as we gaze into the future, we can say with some certainty that there are many cultural, societal, and technological developments that have taken root in the world today that will continue to germinate and grow into trends that will shape our lives and the practice of Christian ministry for the next 20-30 years (if not longer). What is offered here is not so much predictions but reflections on some major societal realities that are impacting life in this world in general and the work of the church in particular. The four trends I identify and reflect on here represent cultural realities that we ignore to our own peril as we think about ministry in the future. To help us think about the implications for Christian ministry I identify these trends within an area of theology or ministry practice.

Ethics: Artificial intelligence and Technology will challenge Christian ethics

The development of Artificial intelligence and medical technology are the leading factors in the way that our world will change in the years ahead. Unless you are a hard core technology geek or have an inside track to the ideas that are already being developed and tested, whatever you know about these developments is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of what is coming and how it will effect life on planet earth. Algorithms are increasingly employed to help predict your behaviour and even influence choices that you make. Soon those who create and accrue the data from multiple algorithm sources will have tremendous power to market, suggest, manipulate and command human behavior in virtually every area of life.¹ Resisting the influence of the algorithm, should we even choose to try, will take significant effort from us in the decades ahead. Many of us are aware that ongoing developments in medical technology are promising that life spans will range much longer than currently expected.² Robotic

¹ Harari, *21 Lessons*, 47.

² Harari, *Homo Deus*, 49-56.



technology is already capable of producing robots that can do most of the work that human beings have normally been responsible for. Further, a new documentary entitled *A. rtificial I. mmortality* engages with a fast approaching reality; machines that don't just mimic human behavior but are actually able to become repositories of their ideas and spiritual essence in a way that allows for the ongoing development of the human personality even after the physical death of the human from whom the robot received their personality.³ Current, and developing technology offer the possibility of people having their own robots for sex partners.⁴ Thus, in the near future robots will be able to do human work, offer human empathy, engage in human behaviors and even develop their own ideas about faith. They will have the whole internet as their intellectual capacity and the best of human communication and efficiency will be programmed into them. If this sounds like fantasy to you, just do a bit of searching on google, you will find out these concepts are well on their way.

The implications for ministry relate directly to Christian and pastoral ethics. How does a world where algorithms consistently engage with everything you do and then seek to influence everything you will do in the future relate to the idea of a sovereign God and human free will? Is it legitimate for churches to engage in using the data that algorithms produce to shape their ministries and even influence its members choices? What if a number of "people" who show up to your Sunday service, small group or weekly ministry to the homeless are robots? Do you engage them in discipleship? What if your congregation has an option to "hire" a robot as its next pastor? Or a seminary can hire their next church history professor from a robotic firm? Is it okay to have sex with a robot? Let's be honest, the bible does not address any of these questions directly. Our work in developing a robust and sound ethical approach to these, and many other related things is a brand new challenge to Christian ethics, and it will be a great challenge for church leaders to address in the decades ahead.

Mission: Changing religious commitments will challenge how the church does mission and evangelism

We have heard about the decline of the church and Christianity for a long time when I began vocational ministry in the late 1980's we knew that mainline denominations were in sharp decline but we evangelicals were doing fine. Me and my freshly minted pastoral colleagues coming out of Bible College expected our churches to grow. If you did ministry the right way, ran some good programs, preached well, prayed adequately you could expect to see numerical growth. That was how we were trained, that was what we "knew." What we did not know was that the world had already changed and we were just not aware of it. Decline in church

³ <https://www.artificialimmortality.ca/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57o380nALxY>



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attendance and the shifting views on religion and Christianity are nothing new anymore. The trends toward decreased attendance and fewer people identifying as Christian have been ongoing for over fifty years now and are well known.⁵ The contemporary “missional movement” is a direct result of these changes and wise church leaders have adapted new outreach styles and theological perspectives accordingly. However, this trend has not yet fully entrenched itself in Western society in the way that it will in the years ahead.

We have not yet come to terms with the realities of large swaths of the population identifying as religious “nones.”⁶ The reality of huge portions of the population having no understanding of the biblical story line or the basic tenants of the Christian gospel. We have not come to terms with the changes that are taking place and will continue to take place in a society where Christian ethics play a smaller and smaller role. Our current experience is only a taste of what is unfolding in front of us.

The challenge to ministry is not a new one but it is one of radical contextualization. Current approaches to visioning the church missionally and the implications of that to neighbourhood ministry, etc. are a positive start but they do not even begin to address the depth of change that we are on the precipice of. As younger generations increasingly self-identify as religious nones and society as a whole continues to marginalize the church as a key player in communal discourse the church will be moved into a position of being a missionary to the culture that we in North America have not experienced before.

The concept of seeing ourselves as missionaries to the culture is intrinsic to a missional theology. However, we have never really had to come to terms with that in the way that missionaries who launched themselves to China in the 1900’s did or even those from a couple of generations ago who went behind the iron curtain to minister in communist lands where the church and the memory of the Christian gospel had been all but eradicated. For them, contextualization meant learning to tell the story of God’s saving work in places where there was not much cultural memory and the church had already been dismissed as archaic and useless in a modern world. A context similar to that is what we are moving into. We are only now beginning to taste the initial flavors of this experience. Ministry in the future will have to learn to live in and address a cultural context where any sense of Christian privilege no longer remains and evangelism and mission are starting from the ground up. In fact, the uniqueness of the current and future context we find ourselves in is just as tough as the one of the first century church. In their case Christianity was a new idea that has never been tried, in our case Christianity is an old idea that has been tried, for a long time actually, and has been found

⁵ See Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*, for a thorough overview of these trends.

⁶ Thiessen and Wilkens-LaFlamme, *None of the Above*, 8.



wanting. This is a brand-new reality to address and the vast challenge that it presents will demand creative and thoughtful responses, beyond what is already being attempted.

Theology: Changing societal values will challenge the churches understanding of the gospel

Building on the previous section, the missional movement has provoked the church to re-think its identity as well as its mission. It has brought back an understanding of God as the God of mission and the church as an expression of the missional character of God. Along with this has come a rediscovery (especially in evangelical circles) of the meaning of the idea of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God can no longer be understood primarily as “heaven,” some alternative realm that we will inhabit someday. Rather Kingdom language is the language of mission. We are called to work with God in helping facilitate the coming of his kingdom in the here and now. The kingdom is present in the world today. This does not deny that there is a future aspect to the kingdom coming in its fullness that we have not yet experienced but there is also the “now” of the kingdom, a tangible inbreaking that occurs when the church does the work of proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel. Thus, along with a reorientated identity and understanding of Kingdom the missional movement has also provoked fresh considerations of the idea of gospel (the good news of the Kingdom). What is the gospel and what is the work of proclaiming the gospel?

Some would say we are at a turning point in our culture on a number of issues. Race relations, gender relations, indigenous and settler relations and immigrant relations to name just a few. A challenge for the church in the coming years can be framed by the question, “where will the church be in this turning point?” Will we be leaders? Will we get involved? Will we leave it to others to do that work with cursory support? Will we denounce it all as politically correct liberalism and turn our backs?

What does that have to do with theology and the gospel? If the sea changes that are happening in our culture today continue to move in current directions the challenge before the church is to reflect deeply on how Christian theology connects with these issues, where these connections can be applied to society and whether we can see this as legitimate gospel proclamation? If our theology of the gospel only allows for the work of Christ on the cross as an act of personal salvation, or even that proclaiming that aspect of the gospel is what is most important and everything else the church does is somehow secondary, the church will run the risk of furthering its own obsolescence. If our gospel can include a wider vision, based on and driven by a genuine biblical theology, that embraces the idea of working to bring reconciliation, justice and equality to more people as truly the work of gospel proclamation then the church will have a role to play in helping our society address the issues that are increasingly on the minds of many.



Spirituality: Changing religious tastes will challenge the way we invite people to engage with God

Despite the aforementioned reality that more and more people are disassociating from organized religion a parallel trend seems to be on the rise; those who would identify as “spiritual but not religious.” That is, they still have and want to explore a spiritual side of their lives but without participation in a traditional religious format. If the trend toward disassociation from formal religion and its institutions is a troubling trend then perhaps the trend toward the desire to experience the divine, or some kind of transcendence is the silver lining in that dark cloud.

In the previous three sections I focused on the reality of the challenge that we face in responding to the various trends, here I want to focus on the opportunity. Christian spirituality is a rich, diverse, inclusive feast that offers numerous paths for people to connect with God. From the practices of ancient monastics, ascetics and mystics, to the contributions of Eastern Orthodox and Catholic traditions and to the important spiritual practices of pioneer missionaries in the nineteenth century, Christian spirituality is suited for a culture that wants to connect with God in diverse ways.⁷ In many ways traditional evangelical spirituality is not that diverse. Read your Bible, pray, attend Sunday worship, give a tithe. This has been changing in recent decades as many of us have found new ways to respond to God through ancient practices or practices often associated with traditions outside of evangelicalism. This trend must grow and as it does we will find that we have something to offer to a population of people who are open to spiritual experience as long as it is outside the traditional trappings of organized religion. Of course the uniqueness of Christian spirituality, its focus on Jesus, is not something that can be compromised, but the vast tradition of Christian Spirituality is replete with practices that invite honest spiritual seekers to enter in and find God.

The challenge is for us to learn how to engage these practices ourselves and how to invite others in. In the years ahead our outreach strategies may include inviting non-Christian friends to a mid-week *Lectio Divina* group or to a silent retreat. Perhaps our services will become more liturgical and our buildings will include unique expressions of iconic art. The possibilities are endless because the great tradition of Christian spirituality is so deep, diverse, and rich. If people remain interested in spirituality, Christianity has a large menu to offer them.

Theological Reflection: The key practice for leading the church

⁷ For a full overview see Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries*. Also, for a clear call to learning from other Christian traditions see Gordon Smith’s chapter “Ecumenism in a Secular Age: A Theological Conviction, A Practical Necessity.” In *Wisdom from Babylon: Leadership for the Church in a Secular Age*.”



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The question that can legitimately be asked in response to the challenges in front of us and the kind of contextualization that will be required is, “how do we engage with these challenges and yet remain faithful to Christ and his gospel?” This is a question all of us should be concerned about. The key response to this question is the need to develop the ability to do robust theological reflection on the issues that we are faced with and seek the Spirit of God to speak to us in a way that takes seriously Jesus’ promise to give us his Spirit for this very purpose (John 16:12-14) and then trusting that he will truly guide and lead his church. This is a communal discipline that churches must learn to practice. It will be the primary part of the talk that I will offer to district conference when we gather.



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Recommended Resources

Beach, Lee. *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2015.

Harrari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2016.

_____. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2018.

Smith, Gordon T. *Wisdom From Babylon: Leadership for the Church in a Secular Age*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2020.

Thiessen, Joel and Laflamme-Wilkens, Sarah. *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the U.S. and Canada*. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020.

Zahl, David. *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting Technology, Food, Politics and Romance Became our New Religion and What to do About it*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019.