**Twenty-First Century Trends**

**Opportunities & Threats Facing Churches**

**By Rev. Don Eastman – October 2022**

**Emerging New Paradigms of Christianity**

For more than a half-century dramatic change has been taking place in the religious landscape of North America. Scholars of the social sciences, religious academics, polling experts, and various church leaders have written extensively about forces and trends bringing this change.

Theologian Hans Kung, in *Theology for the Third Millennium* (1988), used the paradigm theory of scientist Thomas Kuhn to define major historical periods (or epochs) of change in Christian church history and theological development. Kuhn defines a paradigm as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.” In science the new paradigm usually replaces the old. **In theology the old paradigms live on, coexisting with the new paradigm.**

Kung says that **during Christian history there have been six successive major (or macro) paradigms:** Primitive Christian Apocalyptic; Ancient Church Hellenistic; Medieval-Roman Catholic; Reformation-Protestant; Modern-Enlightenment; and the emerging Contemporary-Ecumenical paradigm, which has been tentatively called “postmodern.” Within each macro paradigm there may be evolving smaller meso/micro paradigms. Another way to think of paradigms is as “models of interpretation.” Paradigms can also be synonymous with worldviews (Huston Smith in *Why Religion Matters*, 2001).

*Postmodern* paradigms emerged in the mid-20th century then grew visibly in the following decades. The term “postmodern” may simply mean a period following the modern era. Another meaning rejects some ideals/outcomes of the Modern-Enlightenment era. In popular use, however, it became a catch-all word for a wide range of trends in a rapidly changing world. A more colorful meaning of the word was given in 1995 by historian/futurist Leonard Sweet’s son who described postmodernism as “a conceptual bucket with a hole into which any number of definitions could be poured.” (Sweet, *Faithquakes*, 1995)

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox in *The Future of Faith* (2009) gives helpful insights for this evolving era. Cox says the span of Christian history can be divided into three periods: The Age of Faith, when faith *in* Jesus advanced the movement he started; The Age of Belief, when tenets *about* Jesus were codified into creeds and controlled by hierarchies (for about 1500 years); and **the emerging Age of the Spirit that draws large numbers of people “more to the experiential than the doctrinal elements of religion.”**

A key feature of the new paradigm is liberation theology. Cox notes that “liberation theology is a whole new way of engaging in theology. It begins by rethinking the Christian message from the point of view of the poor and the outcast.” Kung observes that theology has been changed by “modern liberation movements…against sexism, unjust social structures, against racism, imperialism, and colonialism.” He concludes that “the postmodern paradigm is rooted in concern for the comprehensive liberation of humanity.” This holds promise for what Cox calls “Jesus’ message of God’s reign of *shalom*.”

As this new era of liberation continues to evolve, new models of interpretation will emerge. We will have opportunities to be adaptive, creative, and innovative. If we are courageous, faithful, and persistent we can indeed share in the transformation of our world. Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity After Religion* (2010) calls these new models “awakenings” as in the previous Great Awakenings. I think that idea powerfully portrays the possibilities of experiential spirituality in the Age of the Spirit.

**Appreciating Religious Diversity**

Appreciation begins with information. Today, many people are familiar with only their own religion and even then most have a limited perspective of their own tradition. But information can inspire transformation. One of today’s most troubling trends in our society is religious polarization. Engaging, understanding, respecting, and appreciating (even when disagreeing with) a religious “other” is one of the greatest challenges and opportunities of our times.

Harvey Cox. In the *Future of Faith* (2009). devotes a full chapter to dialogue with religious “others” While *interfaith* dialogue with those in other world religions became common in the late 20st century, Cox suggests that we in 21st century Christian churches also engage in *intrafaith* dialogue with those of other Christian paradigms. Cox concludes, “We need to face in three directions: toward other faiths, toward the ‘other wing’ in our own tradition, and toward the complex political context of our fractured world.”

Having participated in such dialogues, I know that it can feel risky but it also can be rewarding. Some conversations might yield immediate progress. But sometimes seeds are planted that may come to fruition in another season. The common ground we find can be a holy place.

Diversity is the design of God’s creation. **Throughout the history of world religions in general and Christianity in particular there has always been great diversity between religions and significant diversity within religions.** New Testament scholar Gregory Riley discusses Christian diversity in *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (2001). He uses the metaphor of a major river as a model to inform the historical development and current diversity of Christianity. For example, the Mississippi River is formed by many tributaries in the north and flows into may streams in the southern delta.

**Spiritually, people are in different places and spaces.** This is confirmed especially in sociologist Nancy Ammerman’s *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* (2014), a major study on religion in everyday life. We see a rich tapestry of spiritual practices across a wide range of engagement levels and theological paradigms.

Additionally there are other dimensions of spiritual diversity:

* The features of congregational culture discussed by Nancy Ammerman (1998) are highly influential in the formation of diverse paradigms. For example:
  + “A culture includes the congregation’s history and the stories of its heroes.”
  + A culture includes a congregation’s “symbols, rituals, and worldview.”
  + The culture of a congregation is “shaped by the cultures in which its members live.”
* Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby (2004) affirms that spiritually can be highly individualized and diverse, even within specific religious traditions. Bibby’s construct of two broad categories of responses to the question, “What do you mean by spirituality?” is helpful. These findings are similar to those of the 2014 Ammerman study where people talked about their spirituality in *theistic* or *extra-theistic* discourse. Bibby found that 53% of respondents used Conventional and 47% used Less Conventional language to describe their spirituality.
  + Conventional: Overall, they use the theological and biblical language of Christian traditions. Conservative Protestants tend to have the most conventional views of spirituality (88% to 12%).
  + Less Conventional: Overall, they use a more secular language to describe spiritual meanings. People of other faiths are more likely to have Less Conventional views of spirituality (74% to 26%).
* Psychiatrist Scott Peck (1987), builds upon theologian James Fowler’s six stages of faith (1981) to suggest a progression of four stages of spiritual growth:
  + Stage 1 – Chaotic, antisocial: (Undeveloped spirituality); Peck estimates that most young children and about 20% of adults are in this stage. They are basically unprincipled, nothing governs them but their own will. But some can be very disciplined by their own ambition, gaining prestige and power and even become preachers or presidents.
  + Stage 2 – Formal, institutional: (Conventional spirituality); This is the stage of most churchgoers, believers, and healthy children. They are strongly attached to the *forms* and less so to the *essence* of their religion. Their view of God is more external, transcendent than immanent, loving yet punitive like a benevolent cop in the sky. Two adults in this stage tend to raise children with dignity in a home with the principles of their religion and a love that is legalistic. Children often internalize these principles but may begin to question, especially in late adolescence and move toward the third stage.
  + Stage 3 – Skeptic, individual: (Questioning spirituality); Often “nonbelievers,” people in this stage are generally more spiritually developed than many who remain in the second stage. Some may become atheists or agnostics. Although skeptics, they are active truth seekers very committed to principle. They often are deeply involved in social causes.
  + Stage 4 – Mystic, communal: (Integrated spirituality); Peck recognizes that *mysticism* is not an easy word to define. It takes many forms. Peck says that in this stage of spiritual growth mysticism obviously has to do with mystery. The more people in this stage understand, the greater the mystery will become. (In my words, it’s living with the questions.) It speaks of unity, an underlying connectedness between things; people, other creatures, and even inanimate matter. It also extols the virtues of emptiness; emptying oneself of preconceived notions and prejudices to perceive the invisible underlying fabric that connects everything. It is communal in the realization that the whole world is a community and what divides us is precisely the lack of this awareness.

**Spiritual but Not Religious**

Two things can be true at the same time. Religion and spirituality can be considered synonymous *and* people can make a distinction between the two. Definitions determine the distinctions. Some who make such a distinction associate “religion” with institutions and “spirituality” with individuals. But for most the two terms simply overlap.

**One thing seems obvious. The phrase “spiritual but not religious” has continued to gain currency in recent years.** The Pew Research Center polls between 2012 and 2017 asked two questions, “Do you consider yourself to be a religious person?” and “Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?” In 2012, 19% of respondents identified themselves as spiritual but not religious; 59% were religious and spiritual (plus 6% religious but not spiritual). By 2017, the spiritual but not religious respondents increased to 27% with 48% saying they were religious and spiritual (plus 6% religious but not spiritual).

In 2019, I asked a similar question of a local congregation in a survey on beliefs, values, and spiritual practices. 31% of the respondents said they were spiritual but not religious; 51% were both spiritual and religious (plus 7% religious but not spiritual).

In the 2017 Pew Research study, almost half of those who said they are spiritual but not religious attended worship services (17% weekly or more, 32% monthly/yearly). Most of them say religion is important (27% very important, 27% somewhat important). Another 37% said they were unaffiliated; the diversity within this group is significant.

One of the most helpful discussions of this topic that I have read is in Reginald Bibby’s 2011 book, *Beyond the Gods & Back*. In the chapter on Polarization & Spirituality, Bibby makes the following assessment: “To the extent that spirituality finds expression both within existing religions and apart from religion, there is no doubt that it will persist on a global basis. One would expect that its expressions will only become more diverse as it moves outside the parameters of formal religion in an increasing number of cultural settings around the world.”

**Nones, Dones, and In-Between**

Much attention, especially in the news media, has been given in recent years to those who are unaffiliated with specific religious traditions. It revives the old notion that the demise of religion will be replaced by secularism. Also known as the “nones,” the unaffiliated are persons in the Pew Research surveys of 2018/2019 who describe their religious identity as “atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular.” ***To say that one’s religion is nothing in particular is a self-described identity, stated at a point in time for various possible reasons, and may be temporary.***

The rise of the nones has been dramatic since the 1990’s. In 1988-1989, 10% of American adults identified as “none” in terms of religious preference (Gallup surveys). By 2008, that number had risen to 16%; and by the end of 2021, 29% were unaffiliated (Pew Research). On its face this dramatic change supports the idea of secularism’s defeat of religion. But within the numbers the picture is more nuanced.

In *American Grace* (2010), political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell note that “aggregate stability can conceal individual instability.” For example, the aggregate percentage of nones was virtually identical in both the 2006 and 2007 waves of their study. Yet 30% of the 2006 nones claimed affiliation with a religion in 2007, while 30% of those who were affiliated in 2006 became new nones in 2007. But few in either group had any other significant change in religious belief or practice. In this study they are called “liminals” from the Latin word for threshold or in-between.

The nones are notably diverse. Other examples can be seen by looking inside the aggregate numbers.

* In 2021, the Pew Research Center reported that that number of unaffiliated had risen to 29% (4% atheist, 5% agnostic, and 20% nothing in particular).
* The percentage of nones differs by generation: Silent Generation 10%; Baby Boomers 17%: Generation X 25%; and Millennials 40% (Pew Research 2018/2019).
* As noted in the 2014 Ammerman study, the feelings of the nones about past religious/spiritual experiences may differ as expressed in terms of apathy, anger, antipathy, or ambivalence.
* Some nones have no past religious/spiritual experiences.

Another group among the unaffiliated is described by sociologists Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope as the “Dones.” Also called *Church Refugees*, the title of their book (2015, Group Publishing) on “why people are DONE with church but not with their faith,” These were people who were active and deeply committed to their religion yet felt estranged in their congregation. Almost 90% of them would consider involvement in another church in the future. Tension points for most of them were:

* They wanted community and got judgment.
* They wanted to affect the life of the church and got bureaucracy.
* They wanted conversation and got doctrine.
* They wanted meaningful engagement with the world and got moral prescription.

**The Dark Side of Religion**

It is sad news in 2022 that confidence in America’s major institutions are at an all time low, according to a Gallup poll that has been conducted for nearly a half-century. It is especially disturbing to learn that only 31% of respondents have “a great deal or quite a lot” of confidence in churches or organized religion. This coheres with trends we have been observing such as the decline in religious affiliation and participation, as well as the increase in polarization, and a revival of white supremacy and nationalism.

**For all the good that has been done by religions over the centuries there has often been a dark side to our story when religion fails.** It is vital to our future that we learn from the past and not repeat these failures nor ignore their legacy. The troubled history of the very concept of “mission” should inform us how colonialism was a vector for the unholy trinity of racism, sexism, and classism and alert us to its remnants and risks in today’s world.

South African missiologist David Bosch discusses this dark history in his influential book, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (1991). Foundational was the fusion of church and state during the Middle Ages (600 to 1500 CE). It became customary to use various forms of coercion, including violence, to induce or compel people to embrace the Christian faith. Non-Christians were denied the same rights as Christians. Mission was the “self-realization” of the church. The defense and extension of Christendom became the foremost duties of rulers as well as clerics.

By 1300, the “structure of human society was finally and permanently ordered. Within the divinely constituted and sanctioned order of reality, different social classes were to keep their places. God willed serfs to be serfs and lords to be lords. An immutable, God-given ‘natural law’ ruled over the world of people and things.”

New discoveries near the close of the 15th century inaugurated a new period in world history: Europe’s colonialization of Africa, Asia and the Americas. “European Christians met people who were not only physically, but culturally and linguistically different from them. One of the most appalling consequences of this was the imposition of slavery on non-western peoples. And all along the (assumed) superiority of Westerners over all others became more and more firmly entrenched and regarded as axiomatic.” Subjugation and oppression of indigenous peoples in the name of Jesus went global.

Spain and Portugal introduced slavery and were soon followed by emerging colonial powers. Bosch says that In the early 16th century the pope authorized the opening of a slave market in Lisbon where 12,000 Africans were sold annually. By the 18th century Britain had the lion’s share of the slave market, sending 300,000 African slaves to America between 1783 and 1793. He says, “It has been estimated that the number of slaves sold to European colonies amounted to between twenty and forty million.”

The human capacity for evil and its presence in religious people is the focus of the book *When Religion Becomes Evil (2002)* by professor of religion Charles Kimball. He says there are five warning signs of the corruption of religion:

1. *Absolute Truth Claims*: In every religion, truth claims constitute the foundation on which the entire foundation rests. However, when particular interpretations of the claims become propositions requiring uniform assent and are treated as rigid doctrines, the likelihood of corruption in that tradition rises exponentially.
2. *Blind Obedience*: Beware of any religious movement that seeks to limit the intellectual freedom and individual integrity of its adherents. When individual believers abdicate personal responsibility and yield to the authority of a charismatic leader or become enslaved to particular ideas or teachings, religion can easily become the framework for violence and destruction.
3. *Establishing the “Ideal” Time*: There are many variations on the notion of an ideal time. Some have the goal of an other-worldly hope, some place emphasis on this-worldly hope. When the hoped-for ideal is tied to a particular religious worldview and those who wish to implement their vision become convinced that they know what God wants for them and everyone else, you have a prescription for disaster.
4. *The End Justifies Any Means*: Religion becomes a force for evil – with potential global consequences – when the end justifies any means. In authentic, healthy religion the end and means to that end are always connected. A common warning sign is a goal or end that ignores the Golden Rule; treat others with love and respect, just as you would like others to treat you.
5. *Declaring Holy War*: Holy war is not holy. Some extreme circumstances may call for military force, but we must be wary when political leaders seek to justify policies on religious grounds. Grave dangers facing the world community demand focused, intentional, and persistent “striving” together for peace and justice.

Sadly, this historical legacy continues when religion fails today. There are other examples of the dark side of religion; some may be less egregious but nonetheless harmful and hurtful. This presents a challenge to be engaged by every paradigm of Christianity, including the emerging Age of the Spirit.

**The Triple Revolution**

In the book *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (2012) internet expert Lee Rainie and sociologist Barry Wellman introduce us to new frontiers of friendship and constructs of community brought about by a triple revolution that has been well-underway in recent decades. They introduce the new concept of a *social* operating system (an operating system is the software that supports a computer’s basic functions) that supports social networks with information/communication technologies (ICTs).

Their central theme is that is that **a new system, networked individualism, is replacing “the long-standing operating system formed around hierarchical bureaucracies and small densely-knit groups such as households, communities and work groups.** In generations past, people usually had small, tight social networks – in rural areas or urban villages – where a few important family members, close friends, neighbors, leaders, and community groups (churches and the like) constituted the safety net and support system for individuals.” That safety net produced support/resources called “social capital.”

This new world of networked individualism is oriented around looser, more fragmented networks that provide support. “Such networks had already formed before the internet. Still, the revolutionary change from small groups to broader personal networks has been powerfully advanced by the widespread use of the internet and mobile phones.” Rainie and Wellman note that “some analysts fear lower social cohesion, widespread loneliness, and less capacity to help one another,” in short, a loss of community. But the authors say that a different social order has emerged in which “ICTs actually aid community.”

**The significance of this trend for churches is huge because churches have always been social networks**.

**The Social Network Revolution**

A social network is a set of relations among network members be they people, organizations, or nations. Social network analysis focuses on the characteristics of these relationships. In an earlier book, Wellman (*Networks in the Global Village*, 1999) says there two ways to look at social networks, “as *whole networks* or personal *communities*, which he also calls *personal networks*. Whole networks are “defined, bounded units such as organizations, nation-states, or neighborhoods.” Personal (or ego-centric) networks are made up mostly of an individual’s strong ties to kin, friends, neighbors, and/or workmates.

A personal network can be pictured in three concentric circles with the individual in the center circle. In the second circle are other people (usually about six or less) with whom the person has active, intimate strong ties. Then in the outer circle more people (typically about six) who are active, non-intimate, yet strong ties. And outside of these circles are about 1,000 people (with increasingly weak ties) known to this individual. Importantly, these weak ties also have strength; they can be good sources of social capital.

For example, think of a congregation as a whole social network made up of individuals with mostly weak ties to many others. Some congregants may participate in groups or activities which also are whole networks within the larger one. A key difference between whole networks is whether or not a group is densely-knit and strongly-bounded (closed social networks). Wellman (1999) calls these groups “tight little knots of similar people who deal mostly with themselves.” They are insular, isolated, exclusive, and homogenous. From my perspective, think of cliques in churches (or churches as cliques).

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In his book, *The Rise of Christianity* (1993), sociologist Rodney Stark uses contemporary social science to help explain the dramatic growth of the early Jesus movement over its first 350 years. Stark attributes its success to open social networks “through a structure of direct and intimate inter-personal attachments.” He also notes that “most new religious movements fail because they become closed or semi-closed networks.”

From the band of disciples following Jesus, to the *koinonia* (fellowship) of converts at Pentecost, to the household cells established by Paul and his followers, to the Catholic monasteries and convents of medieval Europe, to the 18th century Anglican Methodist clubs of John Wesley, to the 20th century small groups of North American churches, social networks have always been the beating heart of the church as the Body of Christ in this world.

**What’s different in today’s world is that most people “live in fluid and changing networks that go well beyond groups.”** (Rainie/Wellman, 2012) Globally, widespread connectivity, weaker group boundaries, and increased personal autonomy are driving the shift to networked individualism. Nine key changes are facilitating this change.

1. Automobile and airplane trips have made travel wider-ranging and broadly affordable, helping spread social networks worldwide.
2. The rapid growth of telecommunications and computing has made communicating and gaining information more powerful and more personal.
3. The general outbreak of peace and the spread of trade have driven commercial and social interconnectedness.
4. Family composition, roles, and responsibilities have transformed households from groups to networks.
5. Structured and bounded voluntary organizations are becoming supplanted by more ad hoc, open, and informal networks of civic involvement and religious practice.
6. Common culture passed along through a small number of mass media firms has shifted to fragmented culture dispersed through more channels to more hardware.
7. Work has become flexible in the developed world, especially the shift from pushing atoms in manufacturing to pushing bits in white-collar “creative” work.
8. American society has become less bounded by ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.
9. The decline of defined benefit pensions and the rise of independent retirement accounts.

**“Many Americans have moved to a more flexible and individualized way of engaging with religion.”** (Rainie/Wellman, 2009)

**The Internet Revolution**

Evolution of the internet is a revolution in which most of us have participated. From its obscure beginnings in the 1960s, it slowly developed over three decades. Consistent with a theory called the “diffusion of innovation,” those early pioneers, the “Innovators,” made gradual discoveries and developments. The late 1980s/early 90s saw the rise of the “Early Adopters” using personal computers mostly for email and computer bulletin boards. The worldwide web, Mosaic web pages, and broadband in the 1990s/mid-2000s brought in the “Early” and “Late Majority” of internet users.

Rainie and Wellman (2012) note that from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, “the internet changed from a dazzling novelty to being commonplace.” We spent more time online; an array of things done online grew dramatically; we could self-manage our web pages; and higher speed broadband was available. “By mid-2011, 71% of internet users regularly watched videos online.” Since those earlier days use of the internet by American adults has steadily grown from 52% in 2000 to 93% in 2021 (Pew Research Center, April 2021).

One of the most significant trends amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the live streaming of church worship services. An increasing number of churches had been doing this prior to the pandemic. A Pew Research poll in March 2021 found that of all adult Americans who attended church monthly or more, 72% watched religious services on TV or online in July 2020, and 57% did so in March 2022. Within these numbers some individuals attended both in person and online at times. **Looking forward a key question is “how many congregants will continue to attend worship services online and/or in person? “**

**The Mobile Revolution**

The explosive growth of mobile devices – phone and wireless laptops – reflects their widespread use. The number of mobile users picked up in the 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s as prices fell. By 2010 there were more than 300 million mobile subscriber connections in America (Rainie/Wellman, 2012). By 2021, Pew Research reported that 93% of adult Americans owned a mobile phone; 85% were smart phones.

Text messages (SMS for “short message service”) became a mainstream activity between 2006 and 2011. Mobile (cell) phones kept getting smarter. Added features included internet access, email, taking photos, video recording, listening to music, playing games, and other applications. Cloud computing became popular in the 2000s but it wasn’t until social media took off that people started living on the cloud – often without realizing it. The small size of mobile phones gives users a sense that their social networks are easily accessible wherever they are (Rainie/Wellman, 2012).

Rainey and Wellman say that **“the emerging need is for people to learn how to cultivate their networks—and to get out of the cocoon of their bounded groups.”**

I think one of the most important questions for us to engage is, **“How do we build online or digital community?” Perhaps our social networks need “new wineskins.” We need to focus on building connections, conversations, and community. It’s all about relationships.**

**Leadership in an Uncertain World**

What follows is simply a basic outline of the book *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World* (2012) by Bob Johansen. He was the keynote speaker at the 2013 General Conference of the Metropolitan Community Churches. A highly regarded futurist for more than forty years, he has also written two additional books, *The New Leadership Literacies* (2017) and *Full-Spectrum Thinking* (2020). In these books, Johansen offers very helpful and wise insights as we focus on the future.

**The VUCA World**

1. Volatility
2. Uncertainty
3. Complexity
4. Ambiguity

**Four Messages for the Future**

1. The VUCA world will get worse.
2. The VUCA world will have both danger and opportunity.
3. Leaders must learn new skills to make a better future
4. More is needed than traditional approaches to leadership development and executive training.

**Ten Leadership Skills**

1. Maker Instinct
2. Clarity
3. Dilemma Flipping
4. Immersive Learning Ability
5. Bio-Empathy
6. Constructive Depolarizing
7. Quiet Transparency
8. Rapid Prototyping
9. Smart-Mob Organizing
10. Commons Creating

**Thinking about Tomorrow**

***The Picture Today***

* Impact of the COVID-19 epidemic
* New economic realities
* Acceleration and amplification of existing trends
* Overall decline in church attendance and membership
* Accelerated increase of unaffiliated (especially younger generations)
* Polarities and Culture Wars

***Threats or Opportunities***

* Value of niches
* Youth and young adult generations
* Importance of social networks
* The digital revolution

***Key Questions***

* Who are we as a church?
  + Questions of culture/identity/purpose/core values
  + What kind of church is this?
  + What is our message; what’s good about our news?
  + What is our niche; what are we known for?
* Where are we as a church?
  + What is our current situation?
  + How do things work here and how can they be improved?
  + Internally, what are our strengths and weaknesses?
  + Externally, what are the force and trends that present opportunities or threats?
* Where do we intend to go as a church?
  + Who do we intend to reach and serve?
  + What do we have to offer?
  + What is our vision for the future?