

THE CHURCH OF THE 21st CENTURY

By William M. Easum

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As this millennium nears conclusion, many church leaders are concerned about the characteristics of the Christian church in the 21st century. Although no one can describe this church with certainty, it is possible to make some educated guesses based on what we see beginning to work in the latter part of the 1990s. What follows is a brief sketch of the broad trends in the 21st century church life that will probably take us through much of the next millennium, not the fads that will change from decade to decade.

1. The church of the 21st century focuses worship primarily on what a person **experiences** about God instead of what a person **learns** about God. This trend is confirmed by the growing unchurched, biblically illiterate, ethically void population growing up outside the influence of Christianity. Their basic need is to experience the presence (Immanence) of God, not to be educated about God or the church. Emphasis is placed on stirring the heart and emotions, not educating the head.

The way a person experiences God in worship is more of a fad than a trend. Whether churches use synthesizers or organs will change from decade to decade. The current use of interviews and dramas will be replaced by other methods. However, the current movement toward the use of video and computers in worship is a trend that will stay with us for much of the next millennium and pave the way for even more elaborate visual effects in worship. Whether the movement away from bulletins and hymnals is a trend or a fad remains to be seen. The use of praise choruses, Gregorian chant, and rap are fads that will change from time to time. One thing is certain, Elizabethan music is no longer a trend.

2. The church of the 21st century is a **safe** place to develop most of one's social life, establish relationships, and hear the dangerous gospel. Christian community is a primary concern because the world is becoming more hostile toward the church. This church provides for most of a person's physical and spiritual needs from the cradle to the grave. A major trend is providing a safe nursery where parents can leave their children without worrying about them. A fad is providing parents with pagers or giving them a number and then displaying it on a scoreboard when their child needs them.

3. The church of the 21st century develops ministries for **unchurched people** rather than for people who grew up within a church culture. Conversion replaces proselytizing or transferring from other churches as the major trend in church growth. A rediscovery of and appreciation for the holy Scriptures will be a major trend. Practices that were once trends, such as infant baptism and confirmation, are becoming fads.

4. The church of the 21st century focuses on **making disciples** instead of making decisions or "running the church." Encouraging laity to develop their God-given spiritual gifts instead of holding an institutional church office is a trend. Spiritual gift inventories are a fad even though they are very important today.

5. The church of the 21st century promotes **accountability**, not control, as the dominant form of governing. Bureaucracy was a 20th century trend; today, it is a fad; tomorrow, it is extinct.

People are given permission to begin new ministries without a lot of red tape. Networking is the trend. Teams are a fad. House churches and small groups will be more of a trend than a fad.

6. In the church of the 21st century, **high commitment** is a basic value. The trends are toward more people attending worship than are on the church rolls, and people are required to be a proven servant before becoming a leader. The particulars about the form of commitment, such as giving a minimum of ten percent of one's time, talent, and income to further the body of Christ, is a fad that will change depending on the cultural climate. The amount of time affluent people invest in ministry requires higher commitment than how much money they give, whereas the amount of money given by less affluent people requires higher commitment than how much time they give.

7. The church of the 21st century **mobilizes laity** for ministry instead of relying on paid clergy. The trend is toward fewer church leaders attending seminary and more laity taking hands-on responsibility for ministry. The few clergy that do exist in the 21st century are equippers of those who equip others and administrators of the congregation's ministries.

8. The church of the 21st century is **multi-cultural** because most of the net population growth is from immigration and second generation immigrants. One of the major evangelistic ministries is teaching leaders a second or third language. Dialogue with other faiths is encouraged because they outnumber Christians in North America. The basic form of evangelism is much like that of Paul in Corinth. The trend is away from Caucasian leadership. The fad is cultural changes growing out of the leadership of the first and second generation of immigrants.

9. The church of the 21st century is part of a **quasi-denomination** that did not exist in the 1990s. The trend is toward loosely knit alliances of churches joined together around similar missions and theologies. This quasi-denomination exists to resource the local congregation, and is very lean at the center as opposed to the top. Another reason for these alliances is to ensure the personal integrity of local leadership. The leadership is more of a fad than a trend because it will change so often.

10. The church of the 21st century is **theologically conservative** and **technologically liberal**. The trend today in almost everything is conservative, except when it comes to technology. Most of the growing churches and quasi-denominations that are already emerging are theologically conservative with two basic differences from conservatism of the past. One, they are more accepting and less bigoted than most existing established churches. Two, they are eagerly incorporating many forms of technology. The actual pieces of this conservatism and technology are fads, such as abortion, homosexuality, and e-mail.

11. The church of the 21st century focuses on reaching an **area** for Christ instead of building a particular church. This makes the size and sometimes the location of a church irrelevant. Because of the changing zoning laws and the cost of location, churches have more than one location and meet in buildings once used for something else. Stained glass windows, steeples, and pews are shifting from trends to fads.

Many more possibilities could be suggested regarding the church of the 21st century. However, the odds are they are just fads that will not endure.