

# READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

by Paul M. and Inagrace T. Dietterich

The ability to read and interpret the signs of the times is a core competency required of clergy and other church leaders as we move into the twenty-first century. When asked to describe the signs of the times today, most church leaders point to the obvious: the thirty-year unrelenting pattern of church membership loss, financial shortfalls, deteriorating buildings, and lost influence occurring in the largest and historically most successful denominations in North America. They recognize the potential for rapid decline in even the most prosperous and strongest church organizations. Most see that the days of effortless dominance by a handful of mainline denominations is over.

It is at this point that we may go astray. Seeing only these factors, and failing to put them in a larger perspective, we are tempted to look for quick solutions to the membership, financial, and other immediate operational problems confronting us. We may try to resurrect an earlier era in the life of North American churches. We may fail to see these problems as symptoms of a much larger panorama of change. Therefore we shall miss an opportunity to help the church discover and build on their positive value.

Whether we recognize it or not, change -- destabilizing change -- is the primary fact of life for church leaders and members today, and it will continue to be the primary factor in the future. Because the Christian faith is intimately related to the "facts of life," the church is challenged reflectively and constructively to discern and interact with these changes. In order to proclaim and embody the life-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ, churches must be able to respond appropriately to the changes in today's and tomorrow's socio-historical environment. The context in which North American churches operate has changed radically since 1960, and those changes will continue to accelerate. This puts a

premium on the ability of churches to make major and profound changes in the ways they understand their calling and the ways they participate in the saving activity of God. Churches, guided by their leaders, must learn how to become more faithful and effective anticipators and managers of large-scale and profound change.

Part of the difficulty for churches is that they are currently designed to reinforce stability -- to ensure that any variations are modulated over time so that the church body can eventually return to the status quo. They are organized in ways that guarantee that the policies and practices that worked in the past continue into the future. Therefore they are resistant to change.

The danger is that as the North American context becomes more complex and competitive, the consequences for churches that either resist change or manage it badly will become more and more serious.

## Changes in the North American Context

Over the past thirty years, North American church bodies have been experiencing several destabilizing forces. These have been of sufficient scope and magnitude to create significant disequilibrium in the church.

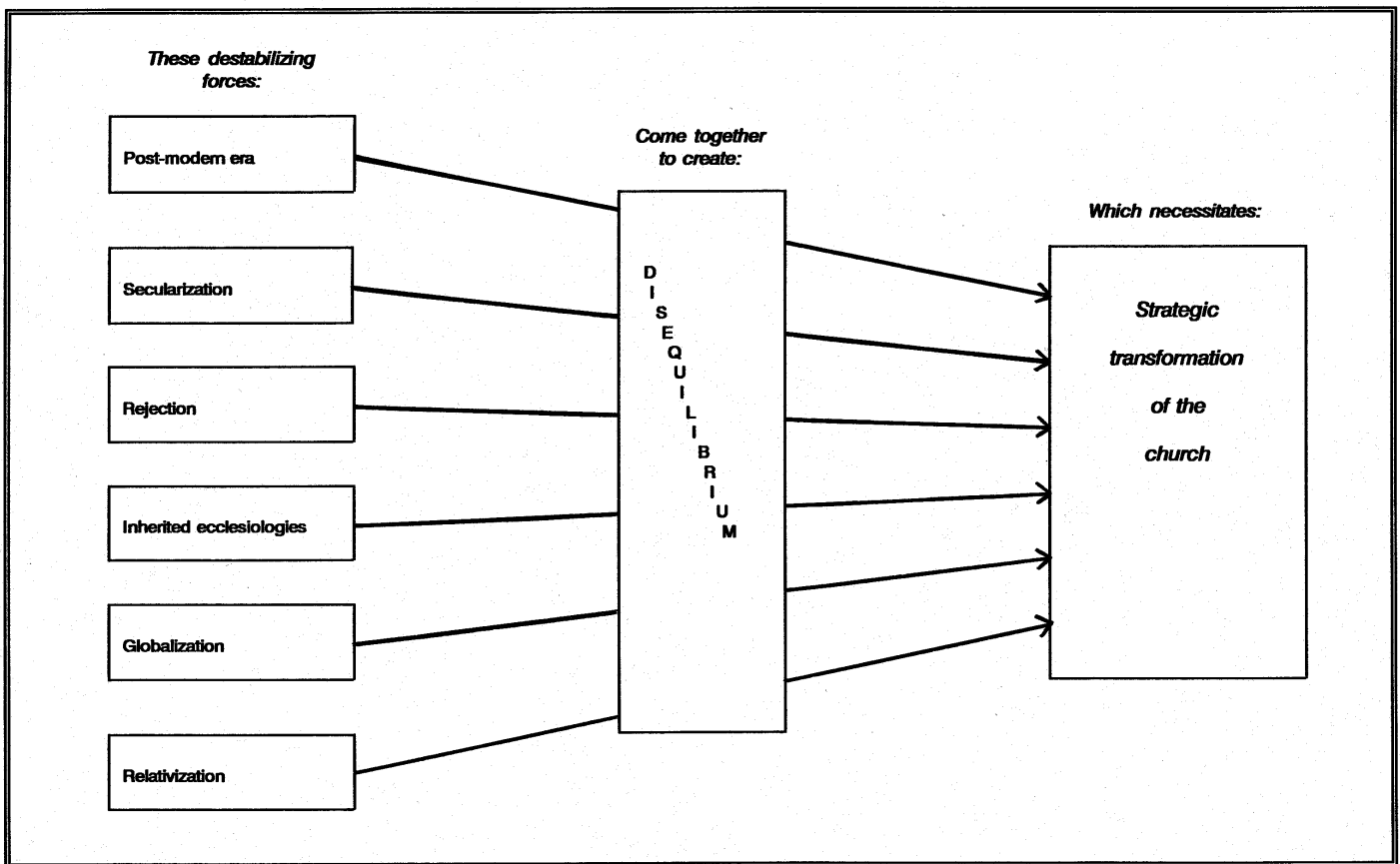
### a. The end of "modernity."

An entire worldview, called "modernity," that has characterized western thought and practice since the

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## PRECURSORS OF STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION IN THE CHURCH



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mid-1700s is being rejected today.<sup>1</sup> This worldview grew out of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Bacon, Descartes, Hume, Locke, and others, writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, built on the scientific discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton to change radically our understanding of the external world. They gave us concepts of knowledge that undermined the old assumptions of revealed truths. Knowledge came to be based on the universal premise of observation and the systematic, empirical and rational investigation of experience. No statements were to be taken for granted without evidence. The secrets of nature were to be uncovered through scientific investigation. Through rational investigation, the autonomous human mind could discover meaning. Enlightenment thinking emancipated

the western world from the arbitrary control of the irrational, of myth and superstition, and of the domination of external authority.

But the darkness is not being banished. "There is a widespread feeling that the promise of the modern era is slipping away from us. A movement of enlightenment and liberation that was to have freed us from superstition and tyranny has led in the twentieth century to a world in which ideological fanaticism and political oppression have reached extremes unknown in previous history. Science, which was to have unlocked the bounties of nature, has given us the power to destroy all life on earth. Progress, modernity's master idea, seems less compelling when it appears that it may be progress into the abyss."<sup>2</sup>

## b. Secularization

The predominant North American culture today is not Christian, but secular. This means that North American churches exist today in a missionary environment. For two hundred years mainline churches in North America served as trustees of society's values, helping to create a sense of moral community and national unity. Churches served as a kind of "cement of society," a buttress of the existing order -- usually the defender of the status quo. The culture, with its "civil religion," thought of itself as basically Christian (defined in a generic sense, in the pattern of Constantine). But since the Enlightenment the church and Christian values have been gradually marginalized. Today the church is no longer one of the "managers" of society.

People have more choices today than ever before. Many are living without any sense of the transcendent in their lives. Not long ago virtually everyone in the western world was considered to be Christian and church membership was expected of people, Sunday was set apart for church life and spiritual growth, people could vigorously debate subtly different religious beliefs, there were clear community standards of right and wrong. Today church membership is no longer viewed as essential, Sunday is thoroughly commercialized, and moral standards are confused.

## c. The rejection of the church

Christendom is over and it isn't coming back. "The church as a 'mighty army' is no more, and no manner of Christian revivalism can put Humpty Dumpty together again."<sup>3</sup> Churches today find themselves in a secular society that has, in effect, rejected Christianity. The churches are struggling to redefine their place in a culture that appears to have dismissed it as irrelevant.<sup>4</sup>

Consider these trends:

- In Canada in 1957, 53% of the population worshipped weekly; by 1990 it had dropped to 23%.

- In Australia in 1950, church attendance was 44%; today it is 24%.
- In the United Kingdom, churches are losing members at the rate of 1,000 per week and only 6% participate regularly.
- In the Netherlands, church participation is down to 5%.
- In Germany participation is at 4%.
- In Marin County, California, church participation is 5%.
- In the United States, 20% of Protestants and 28% of Catholics attend church in any given week. Only 17% of Episcopalians attend worship services regularly.
- More than 53,000 people are leaving the churches in Europe and North America each week, never to return.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that many persons in society are alienated from the church, while many others consider the church to be irrelevant, makes the challenge to the church's witness to the redemptive power and love of the God of Jesus Christ almost overwhelming.

## d. Inherited ecclesiologies no longer work

North American churches have inherited understandings of the nature and purpose of the church, technically known as *ecclesiologies*, that no longer serve them well.<sup>6</sup> This lack of clarity about the "shape" of the church contributes to confusion of leadership, conflicts about the direction the church should take for the future, waste of limited resources, and attempts to resurrect or maintain the former Establishment Church in inappropriate ways.

*The church as a place.* One inherited ecclesiology focuses upon the church as a place where people go at particular times in order for specific things to happen: worship, programs, services. "Church" becomes identified with a building, which becomes an end in itself.

***The church as a vendor.*** Another focuses upon the church as a vendor of religious goods and services to meet the self-defined needs and wants of individuals in today's competitive marketplace. Drawing upon the marketing sciences, such congregations can easily become one more voluntary organization that does good works, losing their distinctive sense of being God's called people, as they allow polls and focus groups rather than scripture and theology to define the life and practice of the church.

Churches have a new opportunity to adopt a new -- and very old -- ecclesiology, one that understands *the church as the called people of God with a mission*. This ecclesiology focuses upon the church as *ekklesia*, a people called by God, "God's own people," and sent on a mission to be a *sign*, a *foretaste*, and an *instrument* of the redemptive reign of God. Here the emphasis is upon those Christian "practices" which form a "people of God," a new community whose common life and shared ministry will manifest life inside the reign of God.

#### **e. Globalization**

North American churches function today in a global context. Technological advances in transportation and communications have brought peoples who once seemed far away next door. Population shifts are nothing new in North America. Most regions have experienced population changes over the last 100 years. The difference today is that current waves of immigration have resulted in an increasing segment of the population that belongs to other faith-groups and traditions, or to none at all. Their values are coming to have a strong influence on the patterns of belief and behavior of society. Heterogeneity is increasing at an accelerating rate. It is a situation which has led to new levels of prejudice and tension. While many local churches do their best to reach out to these new residents, others lack the theological foundations, the skills, the awareness, the strategies, and ultimately the desire to design and mount a faithful and effective missionary strategy in this globalized environment.

#### **f. Relativization**

Religious belief has been *subjectivized*: religion is excluded from public life and focused on the personal feelings and private choices. Its emphasis is on the emotional or moral life of the individual. This kind of religion intends to give existential meaning to personal and relational life and has little to do with the concrete realities with which the politician, scientist or social scientist would deal. The temptation for Christians when they enter the political arena is to focus on personal morality. Religion has been domesticated and redirected into the private sphere where inner piety and personal growth become the only criteria of religious life. This allows for relativization. Because there are no transcendent standards, one person's opinion or choices are viewed as equal to another person's opinion or choices. In such a context it is inevitable that there is pressure to relativize and trivialize Christian beliefs as a way of avoiding conflict. Yet to say that "all religious beliefs are just about equally the same," or that "we're all going to the same place," or "it doesn't really matter what you believe," is to deny the uniqueness and the power of the Christian faith.

All of these destabilizing forces call into question the church's basic strategic issues: what is God calling us to be and do, what is our role and mission, what are our key result areas and goals, with whom are we to engage in ministry and mission, how shall we orient ourselves toward this new context in which we find ourselves? As church bodies address these issues, they frequently find that they must make fundamental changes, changes that go to the roots of their self-understanding. These changes in turn necessitate major and profound changes in all of the elements of a church organization.

### **The Need for New Organizational Capabilities**

This new period of disequilibrium requires churches to find new ways of perceiving, thinking, and organizing in

order to generate and nurture new kinds of capabilities that are more relevant to this new context. Organizational capabilities are the specific skills, abilities, and competencies that are characteristics of a church as a system. They are the result of a blend of a church's heritage, history, experience, knowledge, relationships, structures, as well as individual skills and abilities, and most of all, shared learning. They form the core of a church's intellectual capital. Because they are characteristic of the entire church system rather than individuals, and because they are the result of shared learning, it is difficult for other organizations to replicate them.

In stable environments, a church's organizational capabilities have a long life. But as the environment becomes more uncertain and as the rate of change increases, a church's intellectual capital decreases. Before long, when faced with turbulence, change, and disequilibrium, the same capabilities that once were sources of success become root causes of problems.

North American churches in the late 1990s are facing a qualitatively different context for their witness to God's creating power, redeeming love, and transforming presence. The rates of change and the volatility of forces beyond their control are placing new, unique, and unabating demands upon them. Their organizational capabilities are their key to coping with this new situation. Unfortunately, however, the ecclesiologies and the organizational concepts that have driven the design and leadership of church organizations for the past century are increasingly less effective in the face of increasing rates of change. The old ecclesiologies that identified the church with the national well-being and values and that tried to dominate culture are no longer sufficient. The old machine-bureaucracy theory which has shaped the design of modern organizations, including the church, was intended to create stability, uniformity, and permanence. Today's new environment demands responsiveness, innovation, and flexibility. Therefore, a new ecclesiology with explicit implications for new organizational concepts is essential. A major challenge is for churches to develop and relate these in

ways that enable shared learning and the development of needed new capabilities.

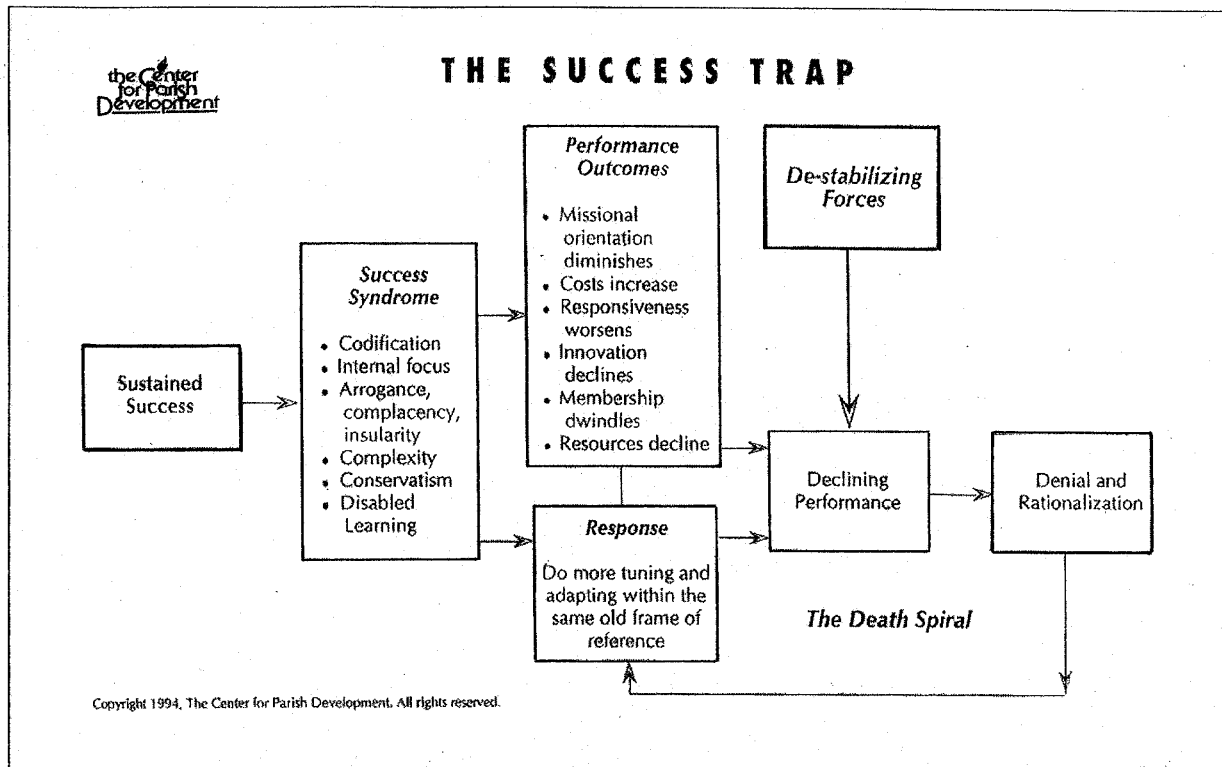
Churches designed for more stable environments tend to minimize or deny the turbulent changes occurring around them. Others mistakenly believe their organizations are better equipped than they actually are to deal with the complexities of the new competitive environment. In most cases, North American denominational bodies and local parishes are being led by people whose past has provided only limited experience in dealing with the new destabilizing realities.

### **The "Trap of Success"**

It is a paradox of organizational life that success usually sets the stage for failure. Local churches and entire denominations tend to become locked into behavior patterns as they institutionalize practices that once produced success. This kind of rigidity creates the illusion of safety and contributes to organizational arrogance. If the environment changes slowly, the danger may go unnoticed. But during times of disequilibrium, church bodies that were once successful become especially vulnerable because they are less likely to see destabilizing events.

Since by very definition, "successful" North American church organizations have tended to grow, as they grow they become more *complex* and differentiated. This causes people to focus on *internal relationships* rather than on relationships beyond themselves. Furthermore, as a church body matures it literally has more to lose, so *it avoids taking risks*. This leads to the church becoming *learning disabled*: incapable of being open and creative, or of critically reflecting on success and failure, or of accepting new ideas, or of developing new insights.

Such a church body falls into the *trap of success*.<sup>7</sup> Over time, its sustained success has led to a kind of *success syndrome*: a pattern of organizational thinking, behavior, and functioning. These practices and activities become



standard operating procedure, even though conditions have changed. Church leaders develop an *internal focus* -- the perception that all the knowledge, insight, and ideas that are needed already exist inside the organization. Rather than being open, responsive, and receptive, they become insular, parochial, and complacent, believing in their own infallibility.

The success syndrome leads to several outcomes. People uncritically assume previous definitions and strategies of "success." When faced with new challenges, the church falls back on what worked in the past. It loses sight of its calling continually to reappropriate and interpret its heritage, to be a *sign, foretaste, and instrument* of God's reconciling reign within the midst of concrete historical circumstances. With the basic theological issues considered to be settled, known, and accepted, its sense of dynamic and relevant mission diminishes. Costs of maintain-ing itself increase while it becomes less responsive and less capable of innovating effectively. As the church loses the ability to relate the redemptive event

of Jesus Christ to the real problems and demands of life within modern society, participation shrinks, members fall away, and financial resources diminish.

Performance begins to decline, leaders become defensive and deny that anything is wrong. Reflection and analysis are resisted.

The organization responds in its traditional way by doing more of the same. It makes only incremental *tuning* and *adapting* changes within the same old "Establishment Church" frame of reference.<sup>8</sup> These operational changes, mostly reactive, don't work and the cycle of repetition, problems, and denials repeats as a *death spiral*. Churches that do not repent, that do not open themselves to God's creative presence, and that do not break out of this pattern are doomed to die unnecessarily.

Those church organizations that are not yet into the death spiral still have time to build a planned process of careful, deliberate, strategic transformation. Other church

organizations, further along in the patterns of decline, need a dramatic shock to break themselves out of their denial and rationalization.

Most church leaders require support in order to administer the needed shock. They cannot bring about the needed changes by themselves. This is because the changes that are required will challenge and, in most cases, alter the very theological self-understanding of the church body. They will cut to the church's presuppositional roots and therefore evoke strong, even virulent, resistance. Extremely careful planning and extremely wise and courageous leadership are required to bring about the needed transformative changes.

Incremental changes that only tune up the old Establishment Church are akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. They are insufficient to pull churches out of the death spiral. In fact, the use of such incremental changes, rather than alleviating the problem, causes the death spiral to accelerate. System-wide changes are required that will reorient the church strategically to an entirely new frame of reference. To respond any differently is not only to risk organizational ruin, but to deny the very purpose of the church: faithfully and effectively to proclaim and embody God's love and mercy for an alienated world.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Of the several "destabilizing forces" identified in this essay, which is most pressing in your region or ministry setting?
2. What other forces or factors would you add to this list? Tell why.

3. How is the success trap a factor in the situation facing churches today?

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The Center for Parish Development, founded in 1968, specializes in helping church bodies design and make transformative changes. For additional information about the Center's resources, contact:

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