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CONSIDERING THE GREAT COMMISSION

**EVANGELISM
AND
MISSION**

IN THE

**WESLEYAN
SPIRIT**

EDITED BY

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CONSIDERING THE GREAT COMMISSION
EVANGELISM AND MISSION IN THE WESLEYAN SPIRIT

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Megatrends That Challenge an Evangelizing Church

Achim Härter

Evangelism After September 11, 2001

The church in the twenty-first century is challenged by far-ranging changes in Western societies. The single historic event of September 11, 2001, came to stand as a symbol dreadfully indicating the vulnerability and the unpredicted risks of Western civilization. No matter if people are Christian and “churched,” if they belong to some other religion, or if they are indifferent to religious sensibilities, the shock wave of September 11 affected them all. In many parts of the Western world, we sense an amorphous uncertainty in spite of all that we hear from government officials about national strength, military power, and national security. Many individuals feel deeply a fear of worldwide terror and war, a lack of confidence toward the future. The terrorist attacks of September 11 and various actions since then have led to what I call an “emotional globalization.” The omnipresent electronic media is a key reason for the emotional interconnectedness that exists today as never before. In the U.S., medical experts like psychologist Jean Twenge of Cleveland speak of rising numbers of clients with “general phobia syndrome”;² in Germany, experts say that some 15 percent of the adult population suffer from fear-related symptoms at least periodically; and in

Greece, the population shows the highest numbers of fear-related symptoms in central Europe. The impact upon children and youths will have to be examined over time. In my view, the theme of existential fear will become increasingly important in individual counseling as well as in sociological, political, and theological discourse. I also believe that a latent spirit of fear and fright will affect an evangelizing church, which is called to witness in word and deed to the biblical truth of a loving and caring God, who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son to open up a livable, secure future for all humankind.

Ten Megatrends in Central Europe and North America

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, deep-rooted changes took place in the Western world and, indeed, worldwide. Some of these changes came to pass at a breathtaking speed: the process of disintegration of the former East and West power blocs, the ongoing globalization of economics based upon a model of maximizing profit, the uninterrupted progress of much of the world from industrial to information societies. With these global, national, and regional upheavals, the necessity for interpreting the present situation has not decreased but increased, for the individual as well as for our societies as a whole. The questions of how to interpret the present situation and what conclusions might be drawn from it for the future are questions that are important to many people. The question, however, about the role the church can play in contributing to a livable future is barely posed outside the church in many contexts. To live out the Christian mission in the world requires us to be aware of the global context. That is why evangelization and mission, in general, and local congregational development, in particular, cannot avoid working through these social realities. The successful evangelizing church must come to terms with today's changing global culture. In what follows I want to analyze the social factors that shape the minds of people in the Western world today by highlighting the commonalities that exist amid the great diversity among individuals and societies.³

In focusing on this theme, we stand in the tradition of, on the one hand, futurologists such as Hermann Kahn, David Riesman, Anthony J. Wiener, Vance Packard, and Horst W. Opaschowski, and on the other hand, trend researchers like John Naisbitt, Faith Popcorn, and Marthias Horx. Likewise, the term "megatrends" points toward general phenomena that

shape a society for a longer period of time, generally, five to fifteen years. Changes in the general social climate cannot be seen simply as the sum of individual phenomena, but need to be viewed as vastly interconnected factors that provide the frame of reference for today's social trends.⁴ There are four basic factors of societal change in the Western world:

1. The globalization of economics, science, cultural, political, and other social matters,
2. The demographic development that includes an increasing percentage of older people and migration and ethnic shifts due to economic and political factors,
3. The growing economic disparity between the "haves" and the "have nots,"
4. The development of mass communication has led to the omnipresence of electronic media, which delivers a flood of information that must be analyzed and interpreted.

With these factors in mind, we will turn to our analysis of ten megatrends or interrelated currents that shape today's societies in significant but ill-defined ways.

1. "More Is Better!"—The Differentiation and Pluralization of Life

Standing in front of the shelf at the supermarket, we may experience a strange feeling of helplessness. Which yogurt should we purchase? The one with fruit on the bottom, fruit mixed in, or a crunchy topping? In the cosmetics aisle, it seems there is not an inch of skin that lacks a customized cosmetic product. To choose or not to choose—that is the question in today's world of commerce and in almost every area of our lives. We are dependent on expert authorities to analyze the complex realities and choices confronting us. Indeed, the vast number of possibilities before us challenges not only individuals, but also persons responsible for decisions affecting the economy, politics, and culture. Historically, after World War II, a movement toward individualization has shaped the far-reaching change "from fate to choice," as described in the late 1970s by Peter L. Berger in his book *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*.⁵ Francis Fukuyama went a step further when he wrote with a sense of urgency about the "end of history."⁶ He claimed that almost all of the traditional systems of values and

meaning-making have dissolved, leading him to question the possibility of a civilized future.

However optimistic or pessimistic our view of the situation may be, one thing is clear: the days of monolithic ideals are over. There is no one set of values or foundations that is shared by all or even the majority of a society. We live among ever-increasing variety in a "Multioptional Society," as Swiss sociologist Peter Gross proposed in 1994. The motto of pluralism is "more is better!" We must learn to cope with the plurality of alternatives, even as the multitude of options gains a meaning and momentum of its own. This differentiation and variation leads to segmentation within human communities. People who share less and less in common come together only occasionally; they become part-time citizens in part-time societies. In the postmodern age, people become wanderers among different worlds, and many people understand themselves as "island-hopping" from one life-island to another.⁷ Life spheres like work, leisure, education, and family exist in a generally unconnected manner. On each of these life-islands a certain language and set of values are applicable, but may not be understood or deemed as valid in other social locations or contexts.

This sense of variety and multiple options is significant for the religious situation, in general, and the life of our churches. Christianity must deal with an external pluralism (other religions) and an internal pluralism (within the Christian faith). In the Western world, the market principles of supply and demand apply to religious life, and this leads to a situation of compromise more than it does to conflict. In a 1992 study on the religious situation in Germany, published by the weekly political magazine *Der Spiegel*, the country of the Reformation was depicted as a "heathen country with a Christian past and Christian leftovers."⁸ This description is true for other European countries, and it may someday be true in North American countries, if it isn't already. In the situation of realized pluralism, the question of truth is posed with new urgency. As Christians, we are challenged to be held accountable for "the hope that is in [us]" (1 Pet. 3:15). By all means we should renounce quick-fix answers in order to avoid running into some kind of fundamentalism, on the one hand, or into an indifferent reduction of the Christian message to a least common denominator, on the other hand.

As such, there are two major challenges to a future-oriented, evangelizing church. The first is that people should take residence and make themselves at home in the Christian faith,⁹ thus being nourished and

cared for in the ongoing process of becoming better disciples of the living Christ. The second challenge is to provide people with the capacities to negotiate the situation of pluralism, namely, to help them develop a sense of tolerance rather than ignorance. It is encouraging that the motto of our days—"choose your life!"—corresponds with the fundamental doctrine and basic structure of The United Methodist Church as a "free church" (which in Europe has a different meaning than in North America) or one that permits us to "think and let think." We want people to make up their minds to become followers of Christ and to join a congregation of believers to grow spiritually and socially. Our task is to identify and communicate the values of our doctrines and biblical roots and the goals of our Christian understanding of life in order to make this a viable option.

2. "Me, Myself, and I!"—Individualization and Segmentation of Life

The February 2001 issue of *Der Spiegel* showed the face of tennis star Boris Becker beside the title "Me." Becker, like other international media stars, can be understood as a representative of the "ego society" of the turn of the millennium. From a historical perspective, there has never before been a time in which the Western man and woman thought and lived in such a self-centered way as today. Sociologists confirm that in Western civilization it seems the only authority left is the individual.¹⁰ The increasing number of options to choose from inevitably brings with it a higher degree of possibilities for individual development, but it likewise fosters enormous pressure for deciding among alternatives. So many persons seek actively to escape from the "gray mass" and yearn for an individual and differentiated lifestyle. While variety and pluralism have grown, so, too, has the compulsion to mold one's individuality. The destandardization of life patterns that accompanied the thrust of individualization (leading to what has been called *patchwork identity* or *bricolage*) has now revealed its shadow side. Under the guise of individual freedom, new standards have been established based upon certain patterns of enjoyment or pleasure, leading to distinct milieus or subcultures with characteristic sets of rules and conventions. People are attempting to invent themselves anew daily; but it is clear that this is not viable. As human beings, we need stability and continuity to be able to live in a multioptional society.

The most significant change to be noticed in terms of the philosophy of life is that large numbers of people cease to follow their "native" religions and go through a selection process among different religious alternatives on the market. As proclaimed in Bob Dylan's song "Universal Soldier," people feel free to choose and change their religion or even to create their own by blending aspects of different world religions with neopagan fragments.¹¹ Sociological studies and various questionnaires include the category of "religious preference."¹² As the term indicates, religion is a choice that we can subjectively take or leave: tomorrow things can be entirely different as long as the religion fulfills our personal needs. Individualism and pluralism have led to an unprecedented level of secularization of religious life. However, as Edmund Burke had supposed in his day, the human creature "is constitutionally a religious animal," such that the quest for meaning in a chaotic world cannot be cut off entirely by secularization, even as it is disguised in the language of self-fulfillment and self-definition. When it comes to the question of truth, the consequences of that change are glaring. If "what concerns us ultimately,"¹³ as Paul Tillich described the subject of theology, becomes a matter of individual construction from various traditions and sources, it will lose its ultimacy and its power. As Jesus said to his disciples, it is God who chooses us: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name" (John 15:16).

3. "I Want It All, I Want It Now!" — The Quest for Holism

"I want it all, I want it now!" is one of the most popular songs of the British rock group Queen. The title can also be heard as the motto of society at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Published research indicates that adventure is a key concern for scores of people in Western societies and that the desire for instant gratification has become a shaping life-pattern for many.¹⁴ Material possessions, however, can neither grant or guarantee true meaning nor create quality public spirit; the quest for instant fulfillment and accumulating material goods can hardly mask the inner void that remains unfulfilled. American writer and Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow speaks of a kind of longing that is characterized by the inability to comprehend that something is missing. Bellow explains that we are surrounded with everything

we need for a comfortable life, a life filled with movement and pleasure. Yet he adds, "And there is something in us all that says to us: What's next? And what now?"¹⁵

Undeniably, a longing for fulfillment of wishes and dreams is deeply planted in our human hearts and minds. In our day, the pursuit of holism, a well-rounded life, or as some would say, a life "in unity with the cosmos," typifies the understanding of our generation, including the understanding of religion. We may live in an age of "transcendent homelessness" (Lutz Friedrich),¹⁶ in which people are stirred and moved by expectations of conducting their lives according to their own desires; nevertheless, people also hold deeply sensed expectations toward "God" or an unnamed transcendence as a meaning-making authority.

What makes life worth living in a time of high expectations? Austrian psychologist and founder of logotherapy Viktor E. Frankl, who survived a Nazi concentration camp, pointed out that a life filled with positive experiences and ample self-reflection is not the only life worth living.¹⁷ Indeed, he reminds us that crisis and suffering and even stagnation can prove to be sources of growth and development. German philosopher Odo Marquard offers a similar appraisal, when he claims that what we need today is a diet in terms of meaning-making. Not everything, he argues, needs to make sense; not all the chapters in our autobiographies need to be pleasurable. We don't have to persistently check our "individual satisfaction" pulse and run from one highlight to another to be able to say at the end that it was a good life.¹⁸

I remember what theologian Fulbert Steffensky said at a church congress in Stuttgart, Germany. He argued against a totalizing compulsion, saying this:

There is a suffering that comes out of excessive expectations. The expectation that my marriage is perfect, that my partner fulfills me utterly, that I get wrapped up in my work totally, that the education of my children works out exactly as it should: Life just isn't that way. Most of our loves succeed halfway, most of our parenthood is at half measure; we are half-good as teachers, half-happy as human beings. And even this is quite a lot. Against the terror of holism, I want to praise a successful halfness. The sweetness and beauty in life does not lie in perfect success and wholeness. Life is of finite nature, not only in the sense that we have to die. Life is finite in itself, in the limited happiness, in the limited success, in the limited fulfillment. Great passion can hide in half a thankful heart.¹⁹

Indeed, the urge for holism in many lives has to do with the dwindling of trust in God. Those who believe in God do not have to play God with their lives, but when faith in the Creator and Sustainer of life shatters, the creature has to bear the full burden of responsibility for the entirety of life. When it comes to talking with people about expectations in life, we can share the prescription for some kind of diet in terms of meaning-making. Furthermore, we need to make sure that we ponder all possibilities to show to what extent the Christian message and faith are capable of providing direction for living in uncertain times and refreshment that quenches the spiritual thirst and deepest longing for warmth and security in a hostile world.

4. "Faster!"—Life's Accelerated Pace and the Shrinking of the Present

The individualization of life brings not only the sense of greater freedom and relief from conventions, but also increasing demands on our ability and willingness to change. Employment, life partnership, cultural interests, religious life, and other features of life are in flux and subject to constant change. The tendency in highly developed societies is toward the continuing acceleration of the pace of life, which leads to a consciousness that philosopher Hermann Lübbe calls the "shrinking of the present."¹⁹ Transportation and communication means get faster and faster, and our physical and mental limits become strained. Sociologist James Gleick, in his book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, projects the twenty-first century as an age of "speed."²⁰ Is he right?

A characteristic of what we can call an "acceleration society" is that the pace of change occurs gradually and tends to be underestimated. Sociologist Robert Levine has compared ways in which different societies deal with time.²¹ He highlights the global diversity in a number of areas such as the precision of public clocks, the speed at which people walk, and the speed at which people work. The result can hardly be considered surprising: eight of nine countries with the quickest pace of life are in Western Europe; Japan is ranked fourth, immediately after Germany. The slowest societies are countries like Brazil, Indonesia, and Mexico, where people work and live in an attitude characterized by *mañana* (tomorrow). Furthermore, there is a remarkable difference between rural and urban areas. Levine found that, in general, the more productive, industrialized, and mechanized a national economy is, the faster the pace of life

becomes. As Levine puts it, wasting the time of a businessman is as bad as robbing his wallet.²²

How do the accelerating pace of life and the consciousness of a "shrinking present" affect people? On the one hand, many people are willing to adapt to the heightened pace. Their hunger for adventure and success is a strong motor that keeps them on track, and this is especially the case with younger people. They enjoy living in an active, exciting world. But the reality is that the increasing commercialization of today's Western societies requires an emphasis on achievement and higher output. This emphasis puts pressure on people with which they must cope every day. Some people are driven by the dread of social regulation and feel heavily constrained by their life circumstances. Others suffer from a social context that focuses on money and achievement as status symbols. In many cases, the price to be paid by those who will not or cannot adapt to the faster pace and demands is a reduced quality of life.

This megatrend has consequences for our church work as well. As church leaders, we love high levels of attendance and vigorous participation by our members, but we also sense the challenges of leading and preaching in a rapidly changing congregation. Have we learned how to cope with people dropping in and dropping out of our congregations? For example, when a person who has attended our church for a year or more moves to another city and discontinues his or her church activities, we can say, "We're losing another active member," or we can say, "We are sending out a disciple of Jesus into the world." In the twenty-first century, flexibility will be one of most important skills we can have. We will need to practice and teach the skill of flexibility in our local churches if we want our congregations to continue being homes for people who live in this fast-paced, success-oriented world.

The Bible testifies to a God who is dynamic. Yahweh tells Moses "ehyeh asher ehyeh," or "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14). This statement is to be read not as a word of arbitrariness, but as one of constant love and care through shifting times and ages. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, the risen Christ promises his enduring presence to the disciples after entrusting them with the Great Commission: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Christ, who "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8), is not abandoning the world; therefore, we can count on God's presence through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) when we seek to mold our congregations to be

present-day places of rest and spiritual renewal. As Christians, we live according to a different understanding of time.

5. "You Are as Young as You Feel!"— The Blurring of the Generation Gap

I recently read an article in a local newspaper that argued that inline skating is just the right exercise for senior citizens. As a father of three children, I know how dangerous this joyous sport is, and I can only surmise that the author of the article is subsidized by an interested company. This random example may be typical of the trend of diminished or even vanished generational boundaries. Everything seems to be just right for everybody. Journalist Florian Illies, biographer of "Generation Golf" (the cohort born between 1965 and 1975), makes this point in assessing the marketing of the new Volkswagen automobile: "In the advertisement for the new Golf model, a smart looking and handsome thirty-something man sits next to his 75-year-old father. Both seem to enjoy life. . . . Then the younger one says or thinks: 'I wanted to do things completely different from my old man. And now—we are driving the same car.'"²³

Sociological surveys of central Europe and North America confirm this image: younger and older people adapt to each other or, at least, involve themselves with each other. Young and old find a way to cooperate based upon a partnership involving mutual advantage or necessity. A prominent survey of German youths indicates that never before, in the history of such surveys, have children seemed to be as content with their parental generation as they are today.²⁴ Although such findings point to a spirit of mutual understanding and respect in numerous families, this result needs to be interpreted *cum grano salis* (with a grain of salt). Especially in those Western European countries where studies on youth violence are being done, it has been suggested that many teenagers today lack the opportunity to demarcate their territory from that of the adults. To live in opposition and distinction from the adult world has been considered an important element of successful adolescence by educators and youth psychologists. In putting their interests first, many parents neglect what is in the best interest of their children. Yet this is a new kind of neglect attending to affluence and material accumulation: these parents neglect their youngsters' needs not by refusing to furnish them with enough material goods or give them various rights, but by depriving them of personal attention and sufficient self-determination to develop a healthy

personality. In many cases, education today is delegated—as we delegate services of all kinds to "authorities"—to kindergartens, grammar schools, nannies, and so forth. But boys and girls need parents, who show their love not only by turning themselves toward the kids with patience and trust, but also by providing education as *pedagogues* (Greek: to lead a child), that is, by demonstrating values such as how to live with limitations and how to go through conflicts with mutual respect.

Perhaps more significant than the changes in lifestyle, sociological studies indicate that countless young people have reduced expectations not only in relation to adults but also toward their own adulthood. There are as many children acting remarkably mature as there are adults acting like little children. "It's the end of the world and I feel fine," a line from a song by the group REM, represents the stance of many people across the generations when it comes to facing the world's problems. A tendency toward an "infantilization" of Western societies has been observed; a brief look at magazines or the average TV program can easily convince those who doubt that propensity. If children and youths see adults existing in an attitude of easy-living and striving for instant gratification to a significant extent, it is no surprise that, among young people, a spirit of doubt toward the problem-solving ability of adults is growing. Indeed, the adult world of doubtful politics and unbridled capitalist economies has proven in many cases to be incompetent or unwilling to overcome hunger and war. We appear to be unable to establish peace and justice—ideals and values that have been talked about for decades, in the church no less than in society. We can't blame young people who display an openly disinterested or even cynical mind-set and wonder, "What good is it to become an adult?"

Although in the year 2000 youth and societal surveys showed a more positive outlook on life and the world among younger folks,²⁵ after September 11, 2001, experts predicted an increasingly pessimistic attitude toward the future and the problem-solving competence of adults. We don't yet know how the awareness of the latent danger of terror, and news about political mismanagement, economic downturns, and the depletion of natural resources will affect the upcoming generations. Certainly, the credibility of adults is a key to providing youths with a perspective of the future that is worth living. The interaction and cooperation among the generations are crucial challenges for the church, which must not be underestimated in its importance. Programs that link the age and social cohorts, which in daily life are separated, help mutual

understanding and exchange of thoughts. This can be realized by all-age worship services, by common educational, cultural, and leisure amenities, as well as by common projects of various kinds where the energy of the young is needed as much as the experience of the older generation. These forums would also enable young people to take responsibility in various ways. Beyond such programs, adult Christians are challenged to rethink how we are modeling expectations, ways of relating, and values for the young.

6. "How Nice!"—Aesthetics as a Leading Category for Decision Making

By the rise of the aesthetic dimension of life, we mean a fundamental alignment of human thinking and action according to its spirit of adventure or the general excitement generated by an object or event. "Nice" and "ugly" more and more replace "good" and "bad" as the values of our days. "To look good," "to feel attractive," and other ways of expressing positive appearances have become a leading category shaping daily life. Sociologist Gerhard Schulze, author of the influential work *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (The Adventure Society),²⁶ perceives this development as an increasing orientation toward "the project of a pleasant life." No matter if it is in the sphere of consumption or healthy interpersonal relationships. In the Western world, assessments related to quality or durability have fallen behind external assessments or whatever may give the impression of being good. *Good is what makes you feel and look good.*

In order to have some relatively stable framework for living (which becomes increasingly indispensable in times when we sense constant change is the reality of our lives), people form diverse clusters, milieus, and subcultures that follow distinctive aesthetic schemas, and they tend to dislike those from whom they want to differentiate themselves. This development shows up in the church in a similar way and affects our evangelism and mission. It is often stated that we simply want to do just one thing: to powerfully communicate the gospel in its essence. At the same time, a growing number of churches accept the notion that whatever you do in communicating the gospel, there is always a cultural aspect to it.²⁷ As hard as it may sound, our congregations are not open to everybody in the true sense. What we do or leave undone has to do with culture; each of our programs *de facto* has its target audi-

ence or, for those who dislike this term, spectrum of people. If the cultural facet of mission is not attended to, however, people with enjoyment patterns other than our own may quench their religious thirst in some other church or denomination or outside the Christian church. The challenge for the evangelizing church is to make it clear—and credible by deed—to the people they want to reach: "We want you to become and continue being Christians, but you don't have to become exactly like us!" We should give careful attention to this point in our worship services, outreach ministries, children's care, and educational programs. We have to ask ourselves: What role do matters of taste play in our congregational life? And due to this, who is included, and who is excluded?

7. "What Do I Get Out of It?"—The Pragmatization of Religion

In the early 1910s, Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology (of religion), developed the concept of *Zweckrationalität* (rationale of purpose). He meant that the lives of people tend to be progressively determined by a logic that is function-oriented and focused on embracing life before death. The main reason for this development, Weber argued, is the increasing comprehensive commercialization of modern societies. An implemented rationale of purpose, for example, shows up in an occupation that becomes a mere job whose function is to provide for living on a desirable level. Interpersonal relationships, which are basically purpose-driven, are determined by individually validated performance ratios and lead to new definitions of love and fidelity. One significant indicator of the tendency toward a dominating rationale of purpose is the falling birth rate in the so-called highly developed countries. Having children for an increasing number of couples has become subject to stringent calculation and evaluation of individual options. It is hard to deny that a spirit of "gain or lose" has been pushed forward along with the global economy and is reaching deep into the hearts of our societies and their value systems, including religion.

In faith issues, the key question no longer is "How can I be righteous before God?" as it was for Paul, Luther, Wesley, and other forebearers of the Christian faith, or even more basically the question of truth itself, but instead, the "economic" question of "What do I get out of it when I believe in (your) God?" This trend also resonates within our churches

and provokes constructive reaction from the leadership. In our congregations, too, a pragmatization of the faith and church relationships can be detected, and the primary interest has shifted toward personal gain in religious practice.²⁸ As church leaders, we have our problems with this development. God's supreme love is the same for all people of all times, and "God shows no partiality" (Deut. 16:19; Rom. 2:11). Trusting God, worshipping Christ as Savior, praising the presence of the Holy Spirit, and loving our neighbor stand alone without any special interest added on. The gospel isn't a message promising sustained personal health, unbroken happiness, and affluence to all. Protestant doctrine makes the point that it is exactly in *looking away* from our individual interests and personal gain that we can gain the freedom to believe, to trust, and to love. Salvation in Christ and a new life as a disciple are gifts of the gracious God that cannot be earned or worked out in the way the market reaches; and that is truly good news for those who suffer under the daily pressure of achievement. For others who are fully adapted to living according to a business-shaped schedule and value system, it is hard to accept a gift and trust in love that is freely offered. The gospel, nevertheless, reaches just that message: "We proclaim Christ crucified," as the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23).

On the other hand, we need to take into account what surveys have indicated,²⁹ much like the experiences in many local churches have demonstrated, that people *do* have—against myths that may say the opposite—substantial expectations about the Christian church and its message. As countless stories in the Old and the New Testaments testify, it is not only justifiable but legitimate for people to come with expectations toward God and his "ground personnel"—the church. As Methodists, we know that seeking "holiness and happiness" is a virtue of our tradition. We need to say a decisive "No!" to any attempt to turn the Christian message into a "gospel of prosperity," just as surely as we welcome those who knock at the doors of our churches or homes expecting significant change for their inner and outer lives. The gospel isn't a lifeless memorandum to be passed on, but a dynamic, life-changing message. As Paul said in Romans 1:16: "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." Do we still have the basic trust that the living God not only can but will change lives for the better?

8. "My Little Kingdom!" — The Privatization of Life

From a historical perspective, the process of modernity in the Western world can be described as a step-by-step development away from common to individual interests. Property, occupation, sexual preference, social bonds, and religion have become almost completely private matters; any interference in those areas from outside will be questioned, if not repudiated. In tribal societies, the common worldview and religion were identical; in premodern times, religion shaped the general image of the world. Since the Enlightenment, instituted religion and the common philosophy of life have been moving apart, such that in our postmodern era we face a plurality of equally ranked world concepts and individual, privatized forms of religion.³⁰ Modern democracies are eager to guarantee a maximum of personal freedom and individual self-determination; freedom of religion is a precious element therein. To talk about a personal decision for a particular faith does require a certain amount of religious freedom, and in our postmodern societies, it generally takes the shape of personalized and privatized faith options.³¹ As twenty-first-century people, we are the makers not only of our own luck, but also of our own salvation, and what is true for us is not necessarily true for others. Since personal faith belongs to the private or even intimate sphere—the legacy of the modern and liberal mind-set—influencing others will likely be seen as an intervention into private affairs. Those who live a "missionary" lifestyle, who speak about their faith publicly and claim truth for what they believe, are suspected of religious fundamentalism. Authentic evangelism, for that reason, needs to state clearly what is decisive and distinctive about the Christian faith without touching the individual's realm of freedom.³² George Morris and Eddie Fox have discussed this issue and suggested speaking of "non-manipulative dialogue" in order to develop means for appropriate *faith sharing*.³³

Sociologist Richard Sennett has comprehensively described "the decrease and end of public life." He has spoken of a "tyranny of intimacy," pointing to the radical shift away from public and common interest toward the private life in Western societies.³⁴ Certainly, distrust and disinterest toward political affairs or social tasks compromise the notion of democracy and jeopardize a future with communal sensibility. Moreover, from a psychological point of view, the private sphere has come to be a place of compensation. Those elements of the personality

that cannot be lived out in one's work will be compensated in the private sphere, which can and often finds expression in the field of religious practice. Lacking influence, status, power, emotions, and so forth provides the subject matter for conscientious parish and evangelistic counseling, as well as for competent congregational leadership.

The fact that the megatrend of privatization exhibits these two sides can be found in the word itself. The Latin verb *privo* unites two opposite meanings: to liberate and to deprive. The liberation that came with a privatized society is the valuing of the individual by which all of us benefit. We should not too quickly wish ourselves back in the Middle Ages. The deprivation that came along with privatization of life is the loss of the "big picture," the slackening of the social fabric that holds us together as human beings, as nations, regions, congregations, or families. From a theological perspective, the love of God is poured out for the individual but, by all means, aims to the public. Because *ekklesia* stands for a public concept, proper evangelism can't teach or foster an individualistic perception of salvation,³⁵ but will lead persons into responsible discipleship. Consonant with John Wesley's claim that there is no holiness apart from a social holiness, to live faithfully in the realm of God's kingdom can never be reduced to a wholly private matter.³⁶ The tradition of a Social Creed was begun by The Methodist Episcopal Church North, followed by The Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1946 with its Social Principles; both traditions are still breathing within United Methodism and need to be kept going further by women and men with warm hearts and cool heads. The biblically and historically handed down connection between *proclamation* and *incarnation* of the gospel must not be discarded, but displayed powerfully and publicly without shame.³⁷ Indeed, a church's withdrawal from the public and social spheres of life is not without consequences; it will most likely lead into a severe crisis of credibility for those who are entrusted to bear witness to God's care for the world.

9. "God Yes—Church No!"—

The Decreasing Influence of Public Institutions

In the days of the early Christian church, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (ca. 190–258), made the statement: "You cannot have God as your father unless you have the church as your mother." By this he meant that being a Christian necessarily means accepting the given rule for everyday life.

For Augustine (354–430), even the authority of scripture is dependent on the church: "I would not believe in the gospel if it weren't for the authority of the catholic church which made me to do so."³⁸ By insisting on the most common conviction of the early church, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (there is no salvation outside the church), institutionalized Christianity has succeeded for centuries in determining "what has to be believed by everybody, every time, everywhere" (Vincent of Lerinum, ca. 450 CE).

Logically, the greater the degree to which individualization and privatization exist in a society, the more the influence of public institutions will decrease. This development is true not only for most public authorities like elected officials, political parties, and such, but also for the field of religious life. In central Europe, the vast majority of institutional functions (of whatever religious cult and practice) have suffered from a serious loss of influence and power; and in North America, the situation is not all that different. Standing under the "heretical imperative" (Peter L. Berger),³⁹ people have extended their search for spiritual fulfillment and orientation in a chaotic world, their quest for excitement far beyond the church walls to overcome daily routine and their longing for interhuman solidarity. The effect is that churches and denominations are facing massive losses in membership; the trend is toward further "de-churching" and "de-confessionalization" of the religious market. Especially in central and northern Europe, congregations and denominations have to come to terms with cutbacks in parishioners' donations, with federal withdrawals of tax allowances, and other benevolent communal privileges; in numerous cases, churches are forced to reduce their public services and ministries. At the same time, pastors and other church officials can no longer benefit from the supposed status that attends their office, but are challenged to practice a lifestyle that demonstrates distinct and faithful Christian witness.

While we should not underestimate the painful consequences that this megatrend will bring for many, there also exists an immense opportunity for evangelism. If church leaders, trusting in God's enduring love, model what they believe and teach their parishioners to do the same, the outcome will be telling. Wouldn't people in our world today be willing to seriously consider the Christian faith as the basis for their lives? Many encouraging stories of faith-sharing congregations suggest the answer is yes.⁴⁰ In times of privatized religion, it no longer is a paradigm of "doing church for others," but one of "being church with others" that can make

the Christian community attractive, relevant, and persuasive once again. The church must be a *community of seekers and believers*. In turn, the church, as institution, can reclaim cultural significance, integrity, and a healthy amount of authority and public influence. What the General Conference of The United Methodist Church agreed to in 1996 points the way:

The local church shall be organized so that it can pursue its primary task and mission in the context of its own community—reaching out and receiving with joy all who will respond; encouraging people in their relationship with God and inviting them to commitment to God's love in Jesus Christ; providing opportunities for them to seek strengthening and growth in spiritual formation; and supporting them to live lovingly and justly in the power of the Holy Spirit as faithful disciples.⁴¹

Finally, by practicing evangelization and social action in the sphere of the kingdom of God and not just within the limitations of a single denomination, and by seeking further cooperation with other Christians and church bodies, Methodism can be released from an unhealthy fear for its continued existence, which so often in church history has paralyzed courageous steps forward.⁴² The time for ecumenical cooperation has come, and we must seek to move from striving for "unity with others" as well as "unity within ourselves." The "dismembering" of the historical Body of Christ has created a major credibility gap in terms of its mission down through the centuries; the biblical perception in John 17:21 "that the world may believe" testifies to a missionary perspective for Christians working together.⁴³ The ultimate goal of evangelization is not to build a strong denomination of whatever kind, not even to develop strong local churches, but to help people to live their lives according to God's will and to develop a living and dynamic faith that grows to maturity.

10. "We'll See about That!" — Changes in Bonding and Commitment

In many areas of public life, we notice significant changes in the way people bond with each other or make commitments in the personal or public sphere. Concerning jobs, life partnerships, religious habits, and other aspects of life, a diminishing longevity can be discerned; commitments often are made hesitantly or partially. In many churches through-

out Europe and North America, a tendency toward an attitude of "wait and see" can be observed when it comes to becoming a full member of a congregation or denomination or accepting the responsibility for occasional tasks. A survey published in 1994 by the German government's minister for family and generational affairs compared figures concerning active membership in various societal groups. The results were thought-provoking: "If you compare the percentage of young people who are active in church-related groups (8%) with the percentage of those who are active in political parties (1%), labor unions (3%) or civic action groups, it is proven that the church is an organization, which, at present, can fall back on the largest reservoir of active youth."⁴⁴ The church's position as the frontrunner offers little comfort. Figures like these vary from country to country and from region to region; in our case, we must read them as indicators of a *social listlessness*, a trend that has reached far into our fun-oriented societies across the generational boundaries.⁴⁵ Despite our individualistic societies, as public catastrophes such as the terror attacks in the U.S. in 2001 or the devastating flooding over large parts of central and Eastern Europe in summer 2002 have proven, there remains an interest in joining forces to help others; but this desire tends to be situational or project-oriented, and does not lead, for the most part, to a regular, ongoing engagement in a social group or organization.

Experts have been questioning the reasons for this unwillingness to participate in communal and social groups, especially among young and middle-aged persons in Western societies. It is not just the overwhelming market of consumer and leisure amenities available, but as psychologists have suggested, there is a growing incapacity to develop and sustain relationships in the personal and the social spheres. What journalist Florian Illies claims about his own "Generation Golf" has a self-critical undertone: "Because we, high-handed people, aren't afraid of anything as much as the feeling of disappointment, we always have a ripcord in our heads. We enter into a relationship only so far as we sense that we can get out of it."⁴⁶

As a denomination that historically has been and presently is dependent on spiritually devoted lay participation, both theologically and practically, we have the challenge to find healthy and persuasive ways to talk about the call to dependable service that comes with the gift of discipleship in Christ. Calls for solidarity and appeals for charity will not necessarily reach deaf ears. It still is a minority of social scientists, such as Amitai Etzioni, who suggest that the tide is turning in regard to communal

activities in individualized societies. In his book *The New Golden Rule*, Etzioni sums up indicators for a future society in which responsibility for one another will be normative to some extent.⁴⁷ He envisions a kind of communitarian *me-and-you-paradigm*, arguing that in the U.S. one out of two people already engages in an average of 4.2 hours of volunteer work per week, without neglecting individual interests and needs. In Germany, too, there are signs of an emerging “ego-fatigue.” A representative survey across generations indicates that 40 percent of the interviewees answer the question, “What is important for your meaning in life?” with the notion of “working for a better society.” This figure represents an increase of 9 percent in comparison to the year 2000.⁴⁸ Examples like these may encourage church leaders to take the chance to talk with people about social involvement and responsible commitment. In talking to new church members, I have found that positive expectations have been communicated to them, in many cases, and this attitude was one crucial point for newcomers to stay and become involved. I believe that entrusting others with meaningful work on behalf of the kingdom of God, like Jesus entrusted his disciples, will always be a significant factor in winning people to join a caring community of seekers and believers.

Megatrends: Threats or Opportunities for the Church?

1. Finding a Critical “Yes” to Societal Change

In talking with fellow Christians about megatrends, I repeatedly hear lament or resignation. In addition to those people who are working for a progressive church and critiquing its lethargy, there are a number of church folks who long for the “good old days” of traditional evangelism and church growth to be restored. This is understandable since many of those people had their formative spiritual experiences in years past and have been serving faithfully since then. But at the same time, they realize we need to go forth from that point. How do we go about it? Two points demand our consideration.

First, we must recognize that not everything about the late- or post-modern period is bad or to be rejected. We enjoy tremendous individual liberty and mobility, personal self-determination, and independence in various spheres of life, which benefit most of us. The variety of options and the (relative) freedom to choose from among them have proven to

be more suitable for individuals than an enforced uniformity of any kind. I believe that is also true for personal faith development. We should not underestimate the efforts of those who have been working for political and individual rights, including freedom of religion in our societies and nations.

Second, the flip side is also true: not everything about the late- or postmodern period is good or to be accepted. The loss of the “big picture” is the price we have to pay for a galloping plurality, which fosters abandoning traditions, as well as an increasing pace of life. If a rationale of purpose is lived out as egoism, it will lead to ever more privatization. Privatization includes within itself, as previously noted, an aspect of dep-ri-va-tion. In a number of publications, the present situation has been compared or even identified with the early Christian missionary situation of the ancient world. There is some truth to this comparison, but it needs to be added, that for large parts of central Europe and parts of North America, we have to speak of a post-Christian era.⁴⁹ It is not just secularism and new religiosity that mark our Western religious situation; there is also a widespread *civil religion*, as Robert N. Bellah has noted,⁵⁰ that still has Christian characteristics, seemingly vaccinated and immune to the gospel message itself.

If we accept that people in our societies are striving for meaning in life and spiritual fulfillment, who would not be encouraged by the story of the apostle Paul in Athens, confessing the crucified and risen Christ in the face of similar obstacles to faith? Facing the altar “To an unknown god,” he publicly stated, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23). Critical to the future of evangelism and church development is the incarnation of the gospel: To what extent will we manage to be contemporary Christians who take societal changes as a challenge to make proclamation relevant in our own day? From its beginnings the Christian community has been built *within* the world, yet without being *of* the world (John 15:19). The saying, “Who gets married to the spirit of the times most likely will be a widow,” in our case challenges a church that says “Yes” to the present situation as the basis for faith and congregational development. We must identify those points of societal development where it is necessary, in the tradition of biblical prophecy, to say “No.” When people are denied fundamental human rights, when commercialization and an unhealthy spirit of success gain ascendancy over humanity, then the church must speak in a prophetic voice, modeling a *contrast society*, to use Gerhard Lohfink’s phrase,⁵¹ that

goes beyond simply "being against" something to display positive images of "succeeding" in life without harming others.

2. Learning to See People Through God's Eyes

If we speak a critical "Yes" to the society in which we live, we are talking primarily not about structures, but about people. People want to be treated as people, with all their obvious needs and hidden desires, which is exactly what many stories in the Old and New Testaments testify that God has been seeking to fulfill. People are central to evangelistic endeavors of all kinds: those whom God has created so different from and yet but a "little lower than God" (Ps. 8:5), those who will miss their final destination in life if they do not cultivate a relationship with their Creator.⁵² It is those people who join in singing the chorus, "I just want to live while I'm alive," as rock star Jon Bon Jovi has put it,⁵³ for whom God's passionate offer of life, now and in the future, is intended.⁵⁴ If we, as a church, want to treat people as people, then we must learn to see them through God's eyes. God's passion to save and renew people as shown in Jesus Christ must come again or cease to be ours.⁵⁵ Since God is "the first evangelist," we are called to follow Christ and be evangelists, following his example. An evangelizing church, for that reason, will be careful to respect the needs, capacities, and limits of those to whom it is reaching out, including respecting their cultural proprieties.⁵⁶ At the same time, a promising evangelizing church must provide the same attention and live according to the same values when dealing with its own employed and volunteer workers. In fact, this may be an even greater challenge. The way we "are" and "do" church must be identical, in its spirit of love and truth and forgiveness, within our walls as beyond them.

3. Keeping the Faith: The Good News Remains

The megatrends we have explored are bundled together like a kaleidoscope as they reflect today's reality in its colorful fragments. When the church accepts the challenge to enter into conversation with thoughtful persons of any age or ethnic group, discussing the questions and realities of their lives in light of the gospel message, churches that care about people are most likely to gain or reclaim relevancy and develop a positive energy that people will find attractive. It is the gospel, the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, that was, is, and will be providing life-unfolding

truth for us and the generations to come. It is the gospel that directs and inspires our mission and evangelism in all ages and through all of life's trends and challenges.

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