
The Church in the Cultural Currents

The following conversation among three colleagues with George R. Hunsberger (GRH) was held in the summer of 1998 to seek from them some insight into the dominant cultural currents that have an impact on the life of the contemporary church. The three come at the question from different vantage points. Kathleen Ponitz (KP) is a senior vice president and director of marketing at Progressive AE, an architectural engineering firm in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that does business with many large churches across the country. Marlin Vis (MV) has served the Southridge Reformed Church, Portage, Michigan, and is now pastor of Beechwood by the Bay Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan. Craig Van Gelder (CVG) is professor of congregational mission at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. He was formerly professor of domestic missiology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids and for more than twenty years has served as a consultant to denominational agencies and hundreds of churches.

The conversation was guided by the terms of the title: church, culture, and currents. Its context was set by two preliminary observations.

1. "Culture," as anthropologists speak of it, is not the same as "trends," but the two are intimately related. Trends arise from a people's culture, that is, from their way of understanding "how things are" and the way they assume things are to be done accordingly. But social trends also create new dynamics and conditions which alter the assumptions, preferences, and values of a culture. So "cultural currents" refers particularly to the underlying culture, "what we think *with*" rather than "what we think *about*" (as anthropologist Paul Hiebert puts it), and to that culture's twists, turns, and permutations.

2. To talk about church "in" those cultural currents raises questions about how much the church as a community is "other than" the general cultural currents and how far those currents are as defining of the church as they are of other communities. Missionary "inculturation" theory suggests the church always lives in terms of its own cultural patterns and is called to the faithful incarnation of the gospel within them. The latter invariably brings about a community that is re-patterned differently from its surrounding society. Thus, each culture is both received as a legitimate "language" for embodying the gospel, and challenged and critiqued as inadequate to the vision and purposes of God.

The conversation below represents the group's responses to the following questions: What are the particular cultural currents you see as significant in light of the mission of God in North America at this time? How does the church presently experience these currents and how have they affected its life and

witness? What are the churches' responses to these currents as they impact their life and circumstances? What appears to be mistaken or hopeful about them?

GRH: Are we all on the same page about culture, society, currents, and trends?

CVG: I find the distinction social scientists make between society as a group of people and culture as their shared meanings and understandings is difficult to maintain when you talk about a particular society and its culture. Take, for example, the postmodern dimension of living in an image society where we are more influenced by images that are shaping our worldview than by rational modes of thinking. The contrast of the visual to the spoken marks on one level a cultural shift in terms of the framework by which one sees and interprets reality. On another level, there are social manifestations of that visual orientation—video, television, and the VCR. Separating the social trends and the cultural currents is difficult.

KP: Dialogue between culture and gospel is what I see is missing. On the one hand, churches do trendy things to be inclusive of the non-churched. But on the other they are rigid about a certain understanding of the gospel, and exclude long-term Christians who have alternative conclusions about things. They want to reach the unchurched while being judgmental about mainline church members. I fear these churches are gaining one population, but losing another.

MV: I think that getting beneath the trends to the currents is the key to moving the church forward to being the church. Because the trends distract us from talking about what is driving them, we never get to the core of the matter. In the pastorate it feels like we are managing the problem instead of solving it. We pastors are managing chaos, hoping we get through today without the roof falling in. I love Eugene Peterson's *The Contemplative Pastor*, but I find it impossible to be one.

GRH: What are the particular cultural currents you see as significant in light of the mission of God in North America at the present time?

MV: Individualism. When the approach of average Christians to their church is individualistic: "What's in it for *me*?" rather than "How will I contribute to the worship?", their natural question to each other afterwards is, "Did you get anything out of it?"

CVG: That is important, but very complex. Our national heritage makes individualism philosophically basic to our identity. It was the Enlightenment's response to a time when the individual's identity was submerged within the higher authority and larger structures of king, bishop, church, and family. The Enlightenment set individuals free from those bonds by giving them rights. The result is a fascinating heritage. No longer in bondage to those larger social structures, we now live with despair. We have an inner individual freedom, but

lack any social identity. Thus, rather than producing free individuals who make wise choices based on personal rights, our heritage has created an iron cage of individualism without identity from which we cannot escape. People are hopelessly locked into individualism now. Philosophically, they think they have to defend it. Experientially, they no longer know how to make connections with other people.

KP: There is so much disconnectedness now. Life is too busy. There is a need for the kind of balance the so-called Generation X is demanding.

CVG: This fact forces us to ask a serious question about the church: How do we even think about structuring it in a way that people will inevitably think of themselves as members of a community rather than as so many individuals? The successful answer to that question would change the rules about how a church is structured and how it worships.

GRH: Kathleen mentioned Generation X. Does that generation give you hope?

KP: Perhaps the church will be stronger because of it. In a fragmented, global world, their yearning for something of substance and authenticity could be energizing.

MV: We have been pushed to make some changes in worship to our detriment. To avoid turning off visitors, who may not understand the sacraments, we have either moved both baptism and the Lord's Supper to different times or have drastically shortened the liturgy. Many of us are questioning the sanity of so radically diminishing their importance.

CVG: Communal expressions themselves have been marginalized.

MV: The sacraments assure people that they belong to the Christian community. Baptism says, "You belong because you have been baptized into it." The Lord's Supper says, "You know that you belong to this community because you are welcome at this table."

CVG: Preaching is affected as well. Any offer of the gospel to an individual as the basis for personal salvation trivializes the gospel and marginalizes the church. Although conversion is to a community as well as to Christ, we usually think about the gospel in terms that emphasize individualism and personal piety. But the fruit of the Spirit is about social relationships, not about individual piety or personal morality. I believe we desperately need to reframe how the gospel functions from a communal aspect. The missionary to the United States who comes from a communal society understands the corporate nature of the gospel, and is able to offer a prophetic voice to anyone who has been birthed in our individualistic culture. In northwest Iowa where I grew up, you were expected to succeed as a self-made individual.

GRH: Are you suggesting that the best thing that could happen to a Reformed, Christian Reformed, or Missouri Synod Lutheran church in northwest Iowa is to have its next pastor be from Africa or Asia?

MV: That would be fascinating in west Michigan as well as northwest Iowa.

CVG: Family still carries some sense of community in those ethnic denominations, but in reality, individualism is rampant there as well. Folks who winter in Florida and summer at the cottage end up with a church year of five or six months. That is highly individualistic.

MV: Because I live with that all the time, I really appreciate the thinking of Kathleen Norris. A resident of North Dakota who had lived away from the church for a long time, she came back to it through experience with community in a Benedictine monastery. Life's communal aspect had been missing from her life.

CVG: If you investigate the counterculture and the Jesus movement of the early 1970s, you will find people who met Christ in that highly experiential, individualistic context, but in later years, moved into Orthodox or Roman Catholic communions. There they discovered a deeper, more historical understanding of church that was communal in its basic assumptions.

MV: One of the church's responses to all this has been a strong, small group ministry. The cell group with its very good dynamics is a recent movement I am just beginning to understand.

CVG: Yes, that development can represent a genuine discovery of community and accountability. Although there will be a tendency to move it into the mode of management and technique, I see it as a genuine *kairos* movement that is one of the brightest spots on the horizon.

KP: We have worked with five hundred growing, successful churches across the country. The large church market represents only two percent of the total church market. My observation is that these megachurches are curriculum driven. With their "campus" and "dean," they are, in a sense, an arm of the academic world. They have a complete performing arts complex, teleconferencing capabilities, and youth and senior centers. Many are developing assisted living complexes on their campus, literally providing programs that service people from cradle to grave. In the midst of all that, they are in a way rebuilding community around the church; not just the church as a community, but the fabric of community our society has largely lost. In them the parish concept seems to be taking form again in new ways.

MV: May I suggest consumerism as another cultural current that may fit in with individualism? Too often the church is caught up in a consumer mentality that approaches things from a business perspective: "How can we be efficient?" or

“How do we measure our success?” Or perhaps success is the cultural current here. Please help me with this.

CVG: Karl Marx had a profound religious insight when he recognized economics as the foundational basis for structuring the social order. His insight is biblical as well as Christian in terms of its impact and potential for unpacking what is going on. With the brokenness of a sinful world, materialism and the material world become the primary controlling reality. One manifestation is consumerism, the belief that we have to possess something in order to be something. Our identity is shaped around what we own and possess, whether in substance or in signs and symbols. We are what we own, and we are what we do. The church follows this pattern of consumerism when it sees itself largely in terms of an organization providing religious goods and services. A powerful entry point for gospel proclamation is calling people to a radically different understanding of the character of the material world.

MV: The notion of success is a part of this. Success becomes everything, and is measured by what you gather and hoard, what you do and how well you do it, how efficient and effective you are. I feel these pressures every day at Beechwood with its impressive building on 88 acres of beautiful grounds. I am under the terrible pressure and burden to measure up to the image that we have created for ourselves.

CVG: Although people’s right of consumption and the demand for success drive a lot of things in the church, it seems to me that these are not necessarily compatible with the gospel. Much of grace functions in the context of failure, shortcomings, and disobedience. Again and again, God’s grace breaks in fresh and free at the point where human inability, not ability, is recognized.

***GRH:* Let me push you a bit. You said success is “not necessarily compatible with the gospel.” Are you suggesting that in some sense success can be compatible with the gospel? Are you leaving that door open?**

CVG: The gospel bears fruit, and that fruit can be labeled success in the right sense of the word. Being obedient even in the midst of pain and suffering produces joy. Success has several meanings. I think that success defined as bigger, better, and faster does, however, run counter to the gospel.

***GRH:* Would this suggest that one of the challenges for the church is to reduce the emphasis on terms like success, the material world, and human identity?**

CVG: I think it is time to recast a Christian language that restructures those terms as well as such familiar ones as gospel, grace, and reality.

MV: The culture has stolen our language. Television commercials demonstrate clearly how advertisers use the music, terms, and themes of Christianity to sell products. I find it a fascinating phenomenon.

KP: A Christian theme that signals another major cultural current is spirituality. People are seeking it in a variety of ways. Perhaps spirituality is a more intrinsic, safer conversation than religion. Everyone is seeking greater depth in their experience while exploring how to express it. Many churches are trying to figure out how to deliver that experience while still valuing the traditional model.

CVG: I remember studying secularization while growing up in the 1950s and attending university in the 1960s. The god-hypothesis, indicating something beyond the human condition, was completely absent from the campus. But in the 1990s, spirituality is assumed. Even in academic circles, the expression of personal and human spirituality belongs to the vocabulary. Television also inundates people with all kinds of strange spiritualities. This cultural current presents some very interesting opportunities for the church.

KP: People are searching for what spirituality means. What do they escape to? And what implications does that have for the church? Should some forms of worship be spiritually rather than structurally based? What role does the church want to play in the quest for spirituality?

MV: I think that this is a great time to be the church. A really healthy and exciting part of the church growth movement right now is that people are tapping into spirituality and giving it some definition. Yet, some of it also scares me.

***GRH:* Can you play that out? Excites? Scares?**

MV: What excites me is the return to story, arts, and drama in worship. What scares me is that while there is some depth there, much of it is shallow and moralistic.

KP: Stories are the important thing. They are the magic part, the soulful part. They are the preamble of strategic planning. The emphasis on the “now” approach of society disconnects from history, story.

MV: Jesus was a master storyteller. Our discussion of success reminds me of Jesus’ story of the man who kept consuming and hoarding and building bigger barns. Instead of living as a person of faith, he said, in effect, “Eat, drink, and be merry because this is it!” But God called him a fool. That is great stuff and we should not be afraid of it. But our tendency is to wrap it all up in twenty minutes and say, “Okay, this is what you have to do today. Go out there and do these four things and you will be successful.” We leave out the mystery of the gospel’s open-endedness.

***GRH:* Are there any other things on your checklist of cultural currents?**

KP: I am interested in Generation X (although neither they nor I like the label). They want things now, immediately. They were raised on infotainment, fast food, and computer games. But there is a backlash. They (and I!) miss reflection time.

CVG: There is an important observation about what shapes Generation X in Alan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Western society has made a cultural shift to viewing the person as a self rather than a soul. The concept of soul implied the intrinsic worth of being made in the image of God, the very essence of a person's identity. Now we have a self devoid of an intrinsic, essential identity. The self is in search of an externally established identity and usually ends up as a composite of the images and scripts written for it in cinema, television, music, and art. In this sense, the emerging generation lacks an "essential" identity. This is at the heart of the individualism we discussed earlier. An identity represented by the concept of soul must also be at the heart of recapturing and recovering the gospel.

MV: About four years ago, while on a personal spiritual retreat, I decided from then on to preach nothing but grace. I think people have little experience with grace in their lives, and only the gospel offers it.

CVG: How important that is for people who have lost a sense of worth.

MV: This puts a finger on a problem I see with much of today's preaching. It seems to preach to the self rather than to the soul. Too often the preacher says, "Here is what to do and here is how to do it." We need to be preaching to the soul.

***GRH:* Help me on this. What exactly is the difference between preaching to the self and preaching to the soul?**

CVG: In my soul there is a deep sense of worth that is part of the essence of what I am. I am something simply because I am. It goes back to the theology that God *is*. God *does*, but God first and foremost *is*. Self, however, starts with something external. Looking at what I must do or experience or have. It does not start with my own identity.

MV: From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible speaks to the soul. Jesus told the story of a man with two sons. The identity of both sons was rooted in the fact that they were part of a family. Their identity did not depend on what they did. Genesis tells us that Joseph was thrown into an evil empire. He had the promise and wisdom of God. He saved the world by being who he was.

CVG: There are two angles to this. One is that we are created in the image of God; the other is the call (election) of God. Abraham was something because God called him.

MV: God rarely chooses the firstborn. God chose Jacob over Esau, the weak to confound the strong.

CVG: It is important to examine the emphasis on spirituality in the postmodern world in this light. Is this driven by a desperate search for essence, or is it still operating out of the sense that I must do something, I must be more spiritual. How do we connect the gospel with that spirituality?

MV: What about addiction? Our culture is one of the most addictive in the world. Is there a cultural current that ties into this?

CVG: Part of it is driven by the success-technique-solution fixation of this culture. Our culture spends billions trying to solve a drug problem while spending billions distributing drugs. There is a hunger and search for some sense of experience that will define the individual.

MV: Where do issues like politics, violence, and defense fit into this discussion? How does nationalism impact the church?

CVG: Contemporary nationalism is different from the kind we had during World War II. There is more of self-interest in it now. As a form of retribalization, it is related to the search for identity, and largely driven by economics.

MV: There is more openness to these themes today than there was sixteen or seventeen years ago. Our increased sense that the world is larger than we are has produced a current globalization.

CVG: Is it not interesting that in a globalized world corporations do diversity training, whereas the church provides space for people at a safe distance from those who are different from them? The church is mostly on the backside of global thinking. Yet, the image of the people of God ought to lead it to the forefront. Or think of the New Testament emphasis on the inclusion of Gentiles. Grace levels the ground. The people-of-God concept is about multicultural oneness. It teaches me that I cannot see through the eyes of God until I can see through the eyes of others.

KP: Multiculturalism is an important trend for the church. St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church in Holland, Michigan, models that well. The congregation is very inclusive of races and ethnicities, and is located in the heart of the community. I hope that trend grows. Many churches *want* it, but location, size, and commitment tend to militate against it. Their heart says one thing, their decisions something else. Churches often struggle about how to be inclusive, as do most groups today. It is ironic that the most obvious institution for inclusion is so challenged by it. However, I believe more churches—especially the large, contemporary ones—are trying to be more aggressive about embracing diversity.

MV: In many mainline denominations the Anglo group is still dominant. We Anglos will have to make a group decision to worship with a Hispanic or Asian congregation. We expect them to give up the most because we have the power. We have to reverse that.

KP: I have used Faith Popcorn's trends as a tool for strategic planning with business and churches. One of the trends she identifies is "female think." How does that translate to the church? Does it mean increased sensitivity to female needs, to male needs? Would more expression in the church be acceptable?

This is another facet of the multicultural current. How do you respond to market trends while maintaining the integrity of your mission?

GRH: What do you see as the most important challenges facing the church?

CVG: I see two important problems that need attention. One is pastoral leadership. The professional-minister model emerged out of the Reformation period where themes like pastor, shepherd, caretaker, preacher, and nurturer were combined into the role of pastor. Sufficient for Christendom, it has become a highly dysfunctional image of pastoring in the contemporary world. When the context is no longer secure new questions arise. How do you provide leadership in a post-Christian world that deals effectively with such issues as vision and contextuality in a post-Christian world? How are they to be dealt with biblically?

The other problem is that we have turned church into worship. Worship *is* church, instead of being what the church (a body of people) *does*. Until we reframe this functional perspective and rediscover church as community we cannot make progress. This points again to the importance of small groups.

KP: I worry about the church becoming “church lite.” In many ways, I wish church was still church in the traditional sense of reverence, reflection, and spirituality. When you grow a church today, what should it look like physically, or in its programs? What is it supposed to sound like? I fear we are losing the idea of “going to church to give of ourselves.” Instead, we seem to go to be infotained every minute. The notion of “church lite” is going to age quickly. Already there is the second generation of the megachurch declaring their uniqueness. I hope the church can be responsive to community without becoming so market-driven.

MV: At Beechwood we are trying to simplify, to lower anxiety about performance. The seeker movement takes context seriously, and we have learned from that. But it also stresses performance. We need to learn from this movement without being overcome by it.

KP: Many smaller and mid-sized churches get hooked by the dynamic of the megachurches. On the one hand, they have no desire to adopt their style (e.g., the contemporary seeker-oriented service); on the other hand, they fear refusing to do so may leave them behind.

GRH: What hopeful signs do you see?

KP: Churches are getting more involved in the community. Perceiving themselves on a common quest, they are forging partnerships to work alongside others. Church as community and community as a reflection of the values of the church can forge strong relationships with schools, businesses, and non-profit organizations.

MV: I see a return to prayer and to open spirituality, two signs full of hope. Increasingly, people are acknowledging a real dependency on God. Another good thing is that churches are dying. I say that because resurrection can only come out of death, and such dying forces us back to God, prayer, and discipline.

CVG: This is the pattern across the board. Things happen at a congregational level. After twenty-six years as a church consultant I am struck by how persistently many congregations hang on to dreams and images long past the point of their viability. They need to go through the death cycle to be reborn with the reality of a gospel that meets their present context. I see that process gaining momentum as churches go through the cycle of death and resurrection.

MV: Actually, we are not dying as much as being killed. We may think the culture is slaying us, but I think the Spirit may be doing it in order to raise up something new. The pastor of a church being slain by the Spirit has said, "We are not going to be here in two years." But he also said, "We have four cell groups going great guns, and I see resurrection coming." Phoenix! A return to the basic church.

CVG: There is still a lot of energy left for the image of a turn-around church, one that seeks to recontextualize its ministry. As a church consultant, I often get caught in the middle of this process, yet it gives me hope. Especially encouraging is the fact that the turn-around process is occurring in denominational agencies and lower-level judicatories. I think their continued changes in structure, especially downsizing, are hopeful signs. Although these changes may bring much personal pain to the people affected, they are also an acknowledgment that we are in fundamental disorientation. The fact that these larger church systems are confessing they have no answers gives me reason to hope.