

Series: "The Church: 21st Century or 1956?" (Part 1)
"How Much Hope Is There for Congregations?"

Ah...1956. (Picture of 1956 Chevy). Some of you can remember 1956. Dwight Eisenhower was President. Nikita Khrushchev was Soviet Premier.

The top song of the year was Elvis Presley's *You Ain't Nuthin But a Hound Dog*. Some other popular songs were Dean Martin's *Memories Are Made of This*, Bill Haley and the Comets *See You Later Alligator*, The Platters' *The Great Pretender*, and Elvis Presley's *Love Me Tender*.

The film *The Ten Commandments* grossed the most money of any film that year (remember that movie - we found out Moses looked like Charlton Heston!). The Yankees beat the Brooklyn Dodgers to win the World Series, including pitcher Don Larsen's perfect game in game #5.

In 1956 you could buy a new Ford for between \$1700 and \$3100. Gas was 25 cents a gallon. Bread cost 18 cents a loaf. A 1st class postage stamp was 3 cents. And let's see, I was in what grade at school.....ah, never mind.

Why are we looking at life in 1956? Well, it reminds us of how much the world changed since then. Actually, never before in history has change occurred so rapidly as the time in which we live!

Back in 1970 Alvin Toffler wrote a book called *Future Shock*. The basic thesis was that change was accelerating at such a rapid pace that we would be hard pressed to keep up with it. In many ways, that book was prophetic!

Leonard Sweet, one of the most creative Christian thinkers of our time, talks about how rapid change is occurring: "The speed of life is leaving skid marks. Scientific information doubles every 12 years. General information doubles every 2½ years. We know the first law of computer programming: 'Any given program, when running, is obsolete.' Moore's Law (Named after Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel Corporation), which says that the power of computer chips doubles every 18 months, is much too conservative...in fact, Intel now boasts that it is *doubling* the computer power of the world every year."

A church leader named Reggie McNeal argues rather convincingly that ever since the World War II generation (*Builders*) each new generation represents a different culture in the U.S. So, move from Builders to Baby Boomers to Busters to Millennials – each of these new generations has different values and sees life through different lenses than previous generation.

Yet in many ways the Church has not taken seriously the monumental changes taking place in world. Many congregations are "frozen in time", trying to do church like people did back in the 50's or 60's or 70's. While people in business and education and the medical fields try to keep abreast with how the world and people are changing, many churches cling to ways of doing things that are outdated and often irrelevant to how people really think and live. The result: many congregations are declining and dwindling in numbers.

Over the last 30 years, mainline Protestant denominations have lost around 10% of their membership every 5 years. The United Methodist Church has seen a steady decline in membership for decades. From a high of 10½ million members in 1970, in the next 10 years we lost almost 11% of those members (while the U.S. population during that same period increased by 11%). Membership in 2015 was about 7.2 million, down about 1.6% from the previous year. We lost 1.6% the previous year also, from 2013-2014. One person said that's like losing a congregation of 318 members *every day for a year*.

One statistic I've seen indicates that 80% to 85% of congregations are either stagnant or declining. In particular, many churches are failing to reach our youth. It's like we're losing a whole generation from coming to Christ. Look around the sanctuary this morning. How many children? How many youth? Does that not bother you?

Yet not every church is declining. Some churches are thriving and growing. They are winning unbelievers to Christ, and discipling people. Not too far from us is one of the largest, fastest growing churches in the U.S. - LCBC. A few years ago someone who goes to that church told me that they had had 200 kids out on a recent Saturday morning for a mission emphasis. LCBC is establishing other campuses, including one in Ephrata. They opened in September of 2012. They got over 2500 people the first Sunday. There were 389 children (birth thru 4th grade) and 124 children (5th thru 8th grade). They offered 3 Sunday worship services. (By the way, please don't tell me that they get large numbers of people just because they are "entertaining" people. That is simply not true).

Is there hope for the church today? *Positively yes!* But here's the key: ***The church must be willing to change to meet the needs of people as they are in the real world!***

Let me be clear about one thing: Please hear this! The gospel doesn't change. God's Truth does not change. The enduring message of salvation through Christ does not change. The old old story of Jesus and His love will never change. *But how we present this message has to change if people are going to listen to what we have to say. And how we function as a church has to be constantly re-evaluated if we're to be relevant to people in a world so different than it used to be!*

Jesus talked about this. Hear what He said: "No one puts new wine into old wine skins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (Mark 2:22). In Jesus' time there were no glass jars or plastic bottles. Wine was kept in animal skins. As skins age, they become brittle and are less able to give and bend. Fresh wine would still be fermenting and would expand and give off gases. If you put new wine (fermenting wine) in old brittle skins, the pressure of expanding gases would break the skins.

New wine represents the gospel! Jesus' life and message was new and fresh and collided with the ***rigid structures, hardened thinking, and fossilized traditions*** of the religion of His time. Church structures and organizations and methods can become outdated. Old, hardened ways of

looking at things can get in the way of the new wine of the gospel!

We're talking about being *culturally relevant* here! **Jesus** met people where they were, as they were. He spoke the language of the culture He wanted to reach. For instance, He would teach in parables. He talked about farmers and crooks and fishermen and brides, the kind of practical images and experiences that people would understand.

The **Apostle Paul** tried to be culturally relevant. Look at what he writes in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." Now if you know anything about Paul, he never compromised the *gospel message* – but he did try to convey it in the language and thought forms of the people he wanted to reach.

Let's think of just one area where this matter of being culturally relevant plays out...that is in the area of **church music and worship**. Many churches have fought "worship wars". Often in this worship war the two sides battling each other are those who favor "traditional worship" verses those who want "contemporary worship". How many church fights (and even church splits) there have been over this issue!

Consider traditional worship. Having an organ, robed choirs, typed-out prayers and responsive readings goes back about 200 years to *European* origins. In some ways that Christian Church has taken that style of worship and etched it in stone as the *norm* for church worship. Yet, the Bible doesn't say we have to worship that way! In fact, Hebrew worship was much more loud and boisterous and demonstrative than our traditional worship services. Worship in the New Testament church took place in a much smaller group, in house churches, and instead of one preacher or worship leader, group members shared in worship. 1 Corinthians 14:26 says, "When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation."

I value traditional worship. It has been a part of my life through all my years. But you can't set that style of worship up on a pedestal and say that is the *only* way to worship! I will always remember an older woman who was connected to a congregation I served. She was a member of a neighboring church in town. But she left that church when they got a new pastor and he changed things to a more contemporary style of worship. She started coming to our church until she developed some health issues. So I would visit her and her husband in their home. During one of these visits she told me about her former church and why she left, and how upset she was with the changes the pastor had brought. I can still hear her angrily saying, "That's not church!"

The reality today is that fewer and fewer people – especially young people – find traditional

worship services meaningful or enriching. When you think about it, who listens to organ music anymore? Do our children and grandchildren listen to organ music on their iPods or boom boxes? Do we adults listen to organ music on our car radio? Go into a store that sells music. Look at the CD titles and artists. Most of them I never heard of! If you're hunting the Christian music section, if there is one, it is usually very small. The kind of music played in a lot of churches is simply not the kind of music most people are listening to. Most church music bores our young people – and we wonder why kids don't want to come to church! Actually, most people don't even buy CD's anymore, they download their music from iTunes or some other venue.

Remember this, there are no “Christian” tunes, rhythms, or styles. It's the *words* that determine whether a song honors Christ or not! So nothing says the music in our churches has to fit a particular rhythm or style.

You may say, “Harry, are you saying that the church should change its worship style just because people on outside don't like the way we worship?” Well...are we interested in winning people to Christ or just serving ourselves? Are we interested in anyone else besides those of us already in the church? Who do we want to reach? That helps determine what kind of worship we have.

I served a church in Easton, PA. It was within the city limits, located in a changing neighborhood. The area surrounding the church building was no longer white, middle class as it had once been. Now its residents were African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics. The way we worshiped just didn't fit their culture. Yet our people were asking, “Why don't they want to come in and be like us?” We should have been asking, How can we change the way we do things so it is relevant to *them*?

I'm not proposing that all churches ditch traditional worship. Many people still love traditional worship, and we should not just simply ignore their needs. Today, many churches offer *both* styles of worship, and have separate services for each. Some mix the two in a “blended” service (much like we are doing here). But the fact is, most younger people and younger families prefer more contemporary music and worship, and most churches that are growing are offering this.

Much of what we do in the church is based on human tradition, not Scripture! Often in churches we do things for years and years, and no longer question its value or relevance. These traditions become “sacred cows” – things you just don't touch! Unfortunately, these ingrained traditions often mean nothing to people on the outside of the church.

Jesus said you don't put the new wine of the gospel into brittle, hardened wineskins. You need *fresh wineskins* – fresh ways of looking at things, and new ways of doing things in the church.

This is the first in a series of four messages dealing with the church, and how to be the church in the 21st century. I realize what I say today and the next three weeks might make some of your feel uncomfortable. It may confront what you believe about how we should function as a church. It may irritate, and even anger, you. *But I have to preach these messages to be true to who I am,*

and for you to know how I am trying to lead this congregation.

What I say in these messages has emerged out of my own experiences over the last 18-20 years of my ministry. During the first 30 years or so of my pastoral ministry I functioned as most pastors carried out their ministry. I did what I learned in seminary. I felt I was good pastor – not setting the world on fire – but having a good ministry in whatever church I was serving.

However, about 20 or so years ago began to feel a restlessness and frustration. I was doing things I had always done as a pastor – taking care of the flock, preaching, teaching, visiting etc. – but something seemed to be different. People just didn't seem to be responding as they once did. It seemed as though the world was changing. I knew what I doing was no longer working very well, but I had no idea didn't know how to fix it. I considered going into counseling fulltime, but decided to stay in pastoral ministry.

Just before I was to begin my work in a new appointment, the pastor leaving the church I was going to asked me to attend a Bill Easum seminar, along with several lay people from the new church. He said that congregation was heading in some new directions, and that it would be good if I could get on board with those changes. So I went. And it was like lights began to come on. Things I had vaguely sensed about the church – its weaknesses, areas where it was no longer relevant - were articulated. I caught new vision of what church could be, and should be.

This marked the beginning of an incredible journey. During my 12 years in that church I learned an awful lot! I retooled how I functioned as a pastor and how the church should operate. Those 12 years were the most exciting years of my ministry. By the grace of God, that congregation grew significantly, and we reached many people for Christ. We were beginning to make a more powerful impact on our community, and the world. I made a ton of mistakes. There were rough times, and the church was still far from perfect when I left. But I knew from those 12 years I could never go back to doing ministry like I had done the first 30 or so years of my ministry. After I retired I took a small church. After four and a half years I was appointed to another. I used some of the same principles of pastoral leadership in those two churches, and although it took a while, God blessed those churches and new life emerged.

I don't have all the answers. No one knows everything about how best to be the church in a rapidly changing world. But I learned some things that I hope are worth sharing. Next week, I'll talk about how to become a "permission giving" "lay driven" congregation, and the thrill of being that kind of church. The following week we'll look at streamlining the organization, and having meetings that matter, and the power of small groups. In my last message we'll consider how absolutely essential it is that churches get outside of themselves and be in mission to the world.

I will close with some words of Jesus. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" In response, Simon Peter makes a bold confession of Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Here is Jesus' response: "Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in

heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:17-18).

Jesus says the gates of hell will not prevail against the church! The Church is not going to die! No matter how much congregations decline or how ineffective some churches are, there is not going to be any funeral service for the Church of Jesus Christ!

But...when congregations...or denominations... become self-focused, resistant to change, and irrelevant to those people God wants to reach – God chooses others to get His work done! And we see this happening today.

I have lived many more years than the days or years I have left on this earth. I don't want to spend my remaining time being a *hospice chaplain for a dying congregation*. But, I'm willing to give my all to be a *church leader open to the new directions God is leading His church today*. I hope you'll want to join me in the journey!

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