The Present Future

Six Tough Questions for the Church

Reggie McNeal
The Present Future
The Present Future

Six Tough Questions for the Church

Reggie McNeal
Leadership Network Titles

*Leading from the Second Chair: Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role, and Realizing Your Dreams,* by Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson

*The Way of Jesus: A Journey of Freedom for Pilgrims and Wanderers,* by Jonathan Campbell with Jennifer Campbell

*Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders,* by George Cladis

*Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens,* by Neil Cole

*Leading Congregational Change Workbook,* by James H. Furr, Mike Bonem, and Jim Herrington

*Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey,* by Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr

*The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation,* by Jim Herrington, Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor

*Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out,* by Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, with Warren Bird

*A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey,* by Brian McLaren

*The Story We Find Ourselves in: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian,* by Brian McLaren

*The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church,* by Reggie McNeal

*A Work of Heart: Understanding How God Shapes Spiritual Leaders,* by Reggie McNeal

*The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church,* by M. Rex Miller

*Shaped by God’s Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches,* by Milfred Minatrea

*The Ascent of a Leader: How Ordinary Relationships Develop Extraordinary Character and Influence,* by Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath

*The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken About Pastoral Transition,* by Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree
To the new tribe;
you know who you are.
May your tribe increase!
There’s a world counting on you.
Contents

About Leadership Network ix
Acknowledgments xi
Preface xiii
Introduction xv
New Reality Number One: The Collapse of the Church Culture 1
New Reality Number Two: The Shift from Church Growth to Kingdom Growth 20
New Reality Number Three: A New Reformation: Releasing God's People 43
New Reality Number Four: The Return to Spiritual Formation 69
New Reality Number Five: The Shift from Planning to Preparation 92
New Reality Number Six: The Rise of Apostolic Leadership 120
Things I Didn’t Say 140
Conclusion 146
References 149
The Author 151
About Leadership Network

Since 1984, Leadership Network has fostered church innovation and growth by diligently pursuing its far-reaching mission statement: To identify, connect, and help high-capacity Christian Leaders multiply their impact.

While Leadership Network’s techniques adapt and change as the Church faces new opportunities and challenges, the organization’s work follows a consistent and proven pattern: Leadership Network brings together entrepreneurial leaders who are focused on similar ministry initiatives. The ensuing collaboration—often across denominational lines—provides a strong base from which individual leaders can better analyze and refine their individual strategies. Peer-to-peer interaction, dialogue, and sharing inevitably accelerate participants’ own innovations and ideas. Leadership Network further enhances this process through the development and distribution of highly targeted ministry tools and resources—including audio and video programs, special reports, e-publications, and online downloads.

With Leadership Network’s assistance, today’s Christian leaders are energized, equipped, inspired, and better able to multiply their own dynamic Kingdom-building initiatives.

Launched in 1996 in conjunction with Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, Leadership Network Publications present thoroughly researched and innovative concepts from leading thinkers, prac-
titioners, and pioneering churches. The series collectively draws from a wide range of disciplines with individual titles providing perspective on one or more of five primary areas:

- Enabling effective leadership
- Encouraging life-changing service
- Building authentic community
- Creating Kingdom-centered impact
- Engaging cultural and demographic realities

For additional information on the mission or activities of Leadership Network, please contact:
Leadership Network
www.leadnet.org
800.765.5323
client.care@leadnet.org
Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to my thinking through the years. As I have formulated my convictions about the missional expression of the North American church in the emerging world, the following people have been most formative for me: George Barna, Warren Bennis, Peter Drucker, Bill Easum, Findley Edge, Carl George, George Gilder, Gary Hamel, Charles Handy, Lyle Shaller, Howard Snyder, and Len Sweet. What makes sense to the reader in these pages is their contribution: the rest is mine.

I am grateful to Carol Childress (Leadership Network) for the encouragement to put this down in print and to Mark Kerr (Jossey-Bass) for his enthusiasm for the project and editorial assistance for light-speed production.

Finally, the three women of my life continue to provide constant inspiration. Cathy, my soulmate and prayer champion, believes for me when I can’t. Jessica and Susanna, my two teenage daughters, excite my efforts to challenge the church. I want them to experience a vibrant, missional Christian movement in North America.
Preface

We think we are headed toward the future. The truth is, the future is headed toward us. And it’s in a hurry (we now know the universe is speeding up, not slowing down). We also generally think that the present makes sense only in light of the past. Again, we need to check our thinking. The present makes clearest sense in light of the future. We humans write history by looking at the past. God creates history ahead of time. He never forecasts. God always backcasts. He began with the end in mind. The future is always incipient in the present. Before the foundation of the world, the Lamb was slain. Calvary was anticipated in God’s kiss of life into Adam. The cross gains dimension silhouetted against the empty tomb. The empty tomb confirmed the invasion of the future into the present. When Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus, he realized the future had been fast-forwarded. That changed everything.

It still does.
This book may not be for you. Not that long ago, it wasn’t for me either. In fact, I am not thrilled about writing this book for several reasons. One is that I am afraid that I will fail to communicate well enough what I want to say about how desperately we need to make some changes. Another is that you won’t be able to hear what I am saying because you are threatened by it or that you will shut down before giving me a hearing.

I also don’t get kicks out of deconstructing a world I was once very fond of. It is a world that nurtured me when I was young and imparted the faith to me and has continued to confirm and legitimize my life calling. I grew up in the home of a bivocational pastor, whose dad before him was a mill village pastor, whose dad before him was a song leader and Bible teacher. My two older brothers are ministers; my two sisters both married ministers; a niece is married to a minister; a nephew is studying for ministry. I began ministry in the church thirty years ago as a college freshman. Ministry and the church have been my world. But it is a world that I increasingly find difficult to feel at home in because it lacks spiritual purpose and missional vitality.

I’m talking about the church world in North America. A world that has largely forsaken its missional covenant with God to be a part of kingdom expansion. It has, instead, substituted its own charter of church as a clubhouse where religious people hang
out with other people who think, dress, behave, vote, and believe like them. This book will separate me from many people who are in that world who will never understand what possessed me to do this (or who may indeed suggest that something did possess me). I don’t like rejection any more than the average emotionally needy person.

I believe there are many people like me in the church who, in terms of their church experience, want to script a story different from the one they are a part of now. I believe this because I talk with these people every day. My work carries me into dozens of congregations to meet hundreds of church leaders every year. In addition, I consult with denominational agencies, teach at seminaries, speak for parachurch organizations. In every arena I am running into an increasing number of people who are expressing fundamental doubts about the viability of the church. These are not critics from the outside who don’t like what the church is doing. These are connected leaders who don’t like what they are experiencing in church.

This morning I spoke with a young pastor who has hopes for the future of the church but is currently captive to club members in the congregation he serves. “I wonder why I am still doing this,” he sighed. He’s only thirty years old! Some of us are asking this question after many more years of investment. If you are, I am writing to give legitimation to your concerns and doubts about the church culture, but also to give you hope. I want to help you by giving you ways of starting conversations that might lead you out of church captivity and into the adventure you anticipated.

This book is not for you if you are content with the way things are. You shouldn’t read this if you are just hanging on to your church job because you don’t know what else to do. You should put this book down now if you can’t separate faith from institutional religion or if you can’t contemplate a God larger than your experience of him in your church tradition. By all means do not read this book if you are looking to bolster your opinion that the