

Current Christian Trends

Introduction

The “look and feel” of the world Christian movement are constantly changing. We are influenced by:

- political circumstances, actors and events
- the economic environment
- cultural differences and movements
- scientific and technological changes
- God’s intervention

Church life, governance structures, affiliations and even doctrinal distinctives vary from one place and time to another. This course examines some of the main current trends, to enable participants to understand more fully the context in we are all functioning and need to remain relevant in a dynamic world.

*Where is the Christian church headed, in terms of its day to day expression?
What is our real level of influence in the world? Which world?
Is the church an institution or a change agent?*

In order to answer these questions meaningfully it is important to understand where we have recently come from and how events that are unfolding in the world around us will impact our identity and witness for Christ.

We will start by looking at some “big picture” trends influencing the 20th/21st Century church (noting that “the church” is not monolithic). As we move through the course we will look more closely at cultural issues, corporate and leadership styles, doctrinal emphases and the work of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling God’s plan through the Body of Christ in our time. We will take account of competing world views and their implications for global evangelism and discipleship. We will see where we “fit” (as individuals and as movements) and prayerfully consider how our lives can contribute to building the Kingdom of God in our era.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MEGA-TRENDS IN THE 20TH CENTURY:

Post Industrial, Post Modern

A little over one hundred years ago:

- the Western community was in transition to a new century
- most of the globe was controlled by a handful of colonial powers; much of the world was “pink” on Anglocentric maps
- the United States was isolationist
- political structures in Europe were being challenged by Bolshevism and other winds of change
- an arms race was under way in Europe, although many leaders refused to conceive of the possibility of “global” war
- most people lived in rural societies (in spite of the Industrial Revolution)

- aviation was in its infancy (the bulk of technologies we take for granted today were “pipe dreams”)
- social structures were traditional and armchair anthropologists taught that cultures were relatively static (“formalism”)
- new political parties demanded greater access to wealth and the levers of social policies
- Darwinism was having an impact on thinking about the origins of our species and the nature of all things.

In Australia, a newly independent and unified country, the economy was growing (having survived the depression of the 1890s). A new political movement, the Labor Party, was challenging conventional power structures. Roman Catholic and Protestant interests were at ideological loggerheads (manifest in the political divide, partly because of the mixed origins of European settlement and the make-up of the workforce), but Australia was generally regarded as a “Christian country”. The commitment to Empire was almost absolute (Australian citizenship, as such, did not come into being until 1949).

Since then, there have been:

- two world wars
- a Great Depression (and several other major economic shocks)
- a protracted Cold War, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites and client states
- massive decolonisation (leading to the birth of dozens of new nation states and statist philosophies, contributing to antipathy toward the former colonial powers and their real/perceived instrumentalities, including missions organisations, described as “the suasion of the sign” - “colonialism, commerce and Christianity”)
- economic re-alignment (North/South; East/West; the awakening of China and India)
- major scientific break-throughs, including moon/Mars landings (and beyond) and genetic engineering
- an information revolution (“information superhighway” to “cloud computing”)
- an explosion in the population of the world (linked in large part to amazing leaps forward in medicine); in 2008 the number of people in urban environments surpassed the rural population for the first time in history, according to the United Nations

The majority of scientists in history are alive today, leading to pronounced intersections between science and the Gospel. Islam has re-emerged as a force in the global political economy. The clout of the United States has waxed ... and waned. The world has become a global village. HIV AIDS has become an enduring but deadly part of the landscape (not to mention pandemics such as the H1Ni virus). God has variously been declared “dead”, female and “part of every one of us”. Western countries have become much more pluralistic in make-up. The planet has become warmer and the polar regions are melting - “green” has gone from being trendy to a (arguably) matter of human survival.

The church around the world has also undergone significant change. Christians with European backgrounds are now in the minority, but continue to have (disproportionate) access to resources. While there is an emphasis on church growth and the emergence of mega-churches, mass evangelism has largely shifted

to the developing world. Rapidly changing means of communication have revolutionised the way the message is promulgated. The growth of denominations has been exponential.

Let's look at how trends over recent years will put the elements of the course into a clear context.

The Changing External Shape of Missions

The history of missions is characterised by great successes, frustrations and failures, running in part in parallel with the scramble for colonial influence, decolonisation and the emergence of national or culturally aligned churches and more sophisticated tools, but the need for global witness has not diminished.

- Since the late 20th century, there has been greater emphasis on indigenous leadership and church models, tempered by those with interests in maintaining historical once (often with resources attached), travel patterns, legal issues, access, training and the opportunities of globalisation of the Christian community, with outreach in both directions.
- Short-term visits have proven a popular mechanism for Christians in the West to get involved frictionally in church support, evangelism, church planting, teaching in traditional “mission” environments”. Many of these subsequently return in a longer-term capacity.
- There is a renewed understanding of “marketplace ministry” (Christians reaching people in their spheres of influence, eg work places) and local missions in the West. Some models have weakened (eg FGBMFI). The ALPHA model has proven effective in providing a platform for Christians and non-Christians to meet around Christian faith in non-threatening, non-ecclesiastical environments.
- However, personal and financial investment in world evangelism on the part of the vast majority of Christians remains miniscule and much of the current Christian literature remains introspective.
- There remain billions of people who have never had the Gospel explained to them, in their own languages, in terms they can understand.
- A notable area of growth is missionaries emanating from the developing world. For example, the Back To Jerusalem movement, begun in China by Chinese believers, aims to send missionaries to all of the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim peoples who live between China and Jerusalem; influential Catholic and Anglican clergy are increasingly from “the developing world”.

Charismatic Movements

The early twentieth century was marked by the beginning of the charismatic, or Pentecostal, movement.

- On December 26 1900, a group of Christians in the United States who had been praying and reading the Bible reported that they had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues. This movement (which was regarded by alarm within traditional denominations) rapidly spread

throughout the world, spawning hundreds of Pentecostal denominations, the largest being the Assemblies of God.

- Though initially outside mainstream churches (in large part due to misunderstandings on both sides), since the 1960s there have been charismatic movements in many Roman Catholic (largely in Latin America), Protestant and Orthodox churches.
- Pentecostal churches in the West are moving to more mainline forms of expression, however a number of movements, or streams (eg those with a prophetic emphasis; or “parachurches” with particular constituencies), stand out from the majority.
- Most of the largest churches/Christian movements in the world today are charismatic or Pentecostal.

Growth of Cults

The late 19th/early 20th century era saw the emergence of a range of cults, largely driven by millennial emphases (given concerns about international conflicts and the end of the world), disillusionment with the inability of older denominations to cope with social change and new thinking, or striving to meet peoples’ experiential spiritual needs.

- These included Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Worldwide Church of God (Armstrongism). Mormons increased their efforts at growth in the West. Groups such as the Moonies emerged later in the century, along with New Age and syncretistic belief systems (including the cyclical visibility of niche “churches” that combine Christian tenets with alternative philosophies and practices, such as Buddhism).
- The end of the 20th century witnessed the birth of new cults, driven by similar millennial concerns, fixing the Day of Judgement, and diminished influence on the part of others (eg Freemasonry and British Israel). Others, such as Scientology, have been popularised by public figures but encountered legal problems because of their practices.

Some cults are linked to mainstream forms of expression. For example, in Nigeria, anti-witch churches with histories of torture, infanticide and extortion are associated with errant Pentecostal movements. In Uganda the so-called “Lord’s Resistance Army” asserts the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and has waged an ongoing war against the government, claiming divine protection against bullets while committing atrocities. The Church of the Lamb of God, a polygamous sect in the Latter Day Saint movement that was founded by Ervil LeBaron, has been associated with murder for and racketeering in the cause of the Kingdom of God. In the West, extremist forms of Pentecostal worship embrace non-Biblical (sometimes blasphemous) teachings and patterns, in order to reach unbelievers.

Communism

In Eastern Europe and the USSR (and their satellites, eg Latin America and Africa), particularly during the Cold War, Christians were persecuted by communist

dictatorships, starting with the 1905 and 1917 revolutions and the USSR's and China's spheres of influence after World War II.

- Churches in Asia (especially in China) entered periods of persecution after Communist take-overs, starting with Mao Zedong's victory in 1949.
- Churches in other societies under Communism/Marxism have experienced varying levels of persecution/control.
- In Latin America Marxists tried to mix their ideological faiths with Christian tradition; Liberation Theology emerged in Roman Catholic communities, predominantly in Latin America, but was strongly opposed by the Vatican.
- With the fall of communism in Europe, Eastern Orthodox churches began to openly flourish again, however they also created major barriers to non-Orthodox churches and (non-indigenous) missionaries.
- The years immediately following the end of the Cold War witnessed unique opportunities for evangelism.

Contemporary Christianity in the West

The shape, size and influence of Christianity in the West have changed dramatically during the past 30-50 years.

- In much of Western Europe, interest in Christianity and personal faith in Christ have fallen, and it has become perhaps the most secular region in the world, with most people being Christian in name only. For example, Spain has some 28,000 towns and villages without a single evangelical church; France is in a similar situation.
- There is less talk of "Christian countries", even in societies with strong Judeo-Christian roots (although Civic Religion continues to be strong in the US, where the political power of Christian groups to the right on the political continuum ebbs and flows, largely in response to external opportunities and threats).
- In Australia, regular church attendance has dropped alarmingly; many of the stereotypes that were strong just fifty years ago are disappearing, as young people (many of whom remain spiritually "open" notwithstanding) look for alternative belief systems/channels, create their own, or adopt none at all (even if they continue to regard themselves as spiritually aware).
 - By contrast, Christian members of Parliament (on all sides) in Australia are more visible than they were a generation ago.
- People who leave established churches do not necessarily abandon groups.
- Biblical literacy is low and most denominations in the West have chronic trouble recruiting new ministers/priests. This leads to disconnects between comprehensible, credible theology and praxis and the growth of relativism in teaching.
- There is a spotlight on "mega-churches" and "performance" (even though the majority of churches do not fall into this category), with very large

congregations and resources that have the capacity to influence political trends and social justice.

- Church hopping has become a widespread pattern, as members abandon old denominational loyalties and styles; few church members have non-church backgrounds; cross-denominational structures within these cohorts are likely to increase.
- Church programs compete with sophisticated secular entertainment and support structures.
- The church must have credible responses and effective voices regarding dominant ethical issues, eg environmental degradation, stem cell research, the role of the family in the modern world, gender, human rights and industrial matters.
- Western churches that are able to tap into contemporary worship styles continue to be at the forefront in growth trends, but the environment will continue to evolve.

The Church in the Developing World

In the so-called “Third World” the number of Christians is growing exponentially.

- For the first time in history, there are more Christians in Africa and Asia than in traditionally “Christian” countries in the West (this is partially linked to differential population patterns).
- This has occurred as the developing world is increasingly urbanised (in 2008 the urbanised population of the world surpassed non-urban for the first time).
- Significant numbers of Roman Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal churches have been established in these continents, as well as many independent movements, especially in Africa (some of which are characterised by syncretism and extra-Biblical features), continue to be formed.
- As the world population mushrooms, especially in the developing world, the challenges of keeping up with evangelism are significant.
- In spite of persecution, the church in China is by far the largest Christian community in the world, and (while numbers fluctuate and are difficult to gauge) is growing rapidly.
- Translating the Bible into new languages took off in the 20th century, especially with the computer age and development of forms of rapid transportation, however there are still hundreds of dialects without any part of the Scriptures.
- In 1900 one country in the Global South (Brazil) was listed in the top ten countries, by “Christian” population. By 2005, this had risen to seven (only the USA, Russia and Germany remained in the list). By 2050 only one country (the USA) will remain in the top ten; the rest will be in the South.

- An estimated 60% of Christians live in the Global South; however they have access to only an estimated 17% of Christian resources.

Persecution

The level of persecution and martyrdom of Christians has been higher during the past hundred years than at any other time in history.

- The principal sources of persecution have been: communism, Islam and Hinduism, as well as nationalists who have opposed links between older denominations and the legacies of former colonial powers.
- Countries such as Saudi Arabia still prohibit conversion from Islam, on the pain of death (for “apostasy”).
- Some countries (eg the Russian Federation and its satellites, and Israel) do so on religious grounds, expressly banning proselytisation to protect powerful internal religious interests.
- Most persecution of Christians goes unnoticed (in spite of international conventions related to human rights; some of the worst perpetrators being signatory states; and the efforts of organisations such as Christian Solidarity International and Human Rights Watch attempting to highlight areas of concern).

Ecumenism

There has been a growing interest in ecumenism within many mainstream denominations in the later half of the century.

- Several denominations joined together to form the Uniting Church, and the Catholic and Orthodox churches have intermittently discussed the possibility of restoring links, after a separation of more than half a millennium.
- The World Council of Churches was formed in 1948 (NB the Roman Catholic Church is not a member). Despite expectations/aspirations re unity, doctrinal differences have also been growing.
- In the nineteenth century various teachings that were unacceptable to the rest of the church became official Roman Catholic dogma, including papal infallibility, the Immaculate Conception and the sinlessness of Mary; these developments extend the formal gulf between Roman Catholics, Orthodox churches and Protestant denominations.

Liberalism

Within the Protestant denominations there are growing gaps between “liberal” and conservative biblical beliefs.

- Liberal Christianity looks upon the Bible as a collection of narratives, or myths, that explain Christian understanding; this invariably leads to a willingness to interpret scripture without believing in its inspiration or

inerrancy , and without accepting the supernatural (eg the Virgin Birth, the miracles and resurrection of Christ) as literal.

Vatican II

In 1962, Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council.

- There were both a new climate of Catholic-Protestant relationships and sweeping changes brought about by the Council, including allowing and encouraging ordinary Catholics to read the Bible, permitting the Mass to be conducted in the vernacular; and accepting that Christians could be found outside of the formal Roman Catholic structure.
- However, much of the core teaching of the Roman Catholic Church was reaffirmed.

Social Justice Issues

As Christians in the modern era, we are “salt” and “light” in our world. The church has a defining role in approaching the major social justice issues of the age.

- The Christian message has practical responses to AIDS, food security, family planning, economic inequalities, living with repressive governments, racism, conflicts, refugees, gender imbalances, industrial relations, the rule of law, human rights and global warming.
- The current Global Economic Crisis is having major impacts in developing countries, with giving from Western supporters down in real terms, unemployment growing and the international economy facing continued instability.

Moral and Leadership Issues

Protestant denominations are divided on numerous social issues.

- These include whether or not to permit women to become church ministers, the acceptability of divorce and re-marriage, sexual immorality and homosexuality, particularly in ministry. The most liberal churches have emphasised tolerance and are now allowing sexual relations outside of marriage and promotion of gay priests. The unity of the world Anglican Communion is under threat because of polarisation around these developments (cf Barak Obama’s compromise).
- In some countries Christians are continuing to debate the extent to which secular society can and should be Christianised, and the role of the church in shaping political developments.
- Moral scandals in churches (Catholic and Protestant) in the West have contributed to a growth of anti-clericalism.

New Leadership Styles

21st Century Christian leadership is going to be very different (but similar to) older models.

- Denominations, home groups, house churches, virtual Christian communities, orders, and so on are witnessing ongoing re-shaping of the nature of leadership, against the background of the need for effective leaders who are godly but, at the same time, reflect what is appropriate in contemporary leadership styles.
- In some denominations, there has been a shift to team leadership, incorporating varieties of ministries/gifts; many churches have moved into more “corporate” structures and hierarchies, with mixed results.

Technological Revolutions

The past hundred years have witnessed exponential growth and change in communication tools and costs and have effectively “shrunk the world”. We are living in the Information Age.

- Consider life without fast and affordable air travel, mobile telephones, DVDs, television, iPods, the Internet, Skype, FaceBook, Utube (connecting people across borders and cultures) and an avalanche of affordable Christian literature.
 - More information/misinformation is at our fingertips than ever before in human history.
 - People living in traditionally “closed” societies can be reached with the Gospel via some of the best world evangelism tools in Christian history, eg the Internet and satellite.
 - The Christian community can operate in “virtual” space.
 - There is a plethora of teaching options available to Christian leaders (as long as they are linguistically accessible).
 - Many of the patterns (as distinct from the central message) used by churches are outdated; we live in a sceptical, media-soaked culture.
 - Older models of evangelism and discipleship are being re-evaluated, to ensure we are simultaneously geared to the times and take advantage of the unparalleled opportunities delivered by current and future technology, while anchored to God’s purpose and truth.
- see separate paper *Sustained World Mission in a Technological Age*

The Resurgence of Islam

The 20th Century saw the resurgence, radicalisation and geographical expansion of Islam.

- This resurgence was fuelled by the decolonisation experience, economic muscle linked to rising oil prices, charismatic leadership of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda, dissatisfaction over the status of the

Middle East and the promotion of high moral standards (in the context of moral decline in the West).

- The dominant vision is total global Islamisation (but schisms in the world-wide Muslim community prevail; a “civilisation of clashes”).
- Persecution of Christians in Muslim countries continues unabated (while Muslim leaders demand, and secure, equality in the West).
- Some experts believe Islam will be the dominant religion in Europe by the end of the 21st century. There will be a showdown in Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, as burgeoning Christianity and Islam meet.
- The jury is still out on the effectiveness of formalised Christian-Muslim inter-faith dialogue.
- There is widespread evidence of Muslims coming to Christ, often through supernatural events, however overall numbers remain relatively low.

Summary

As we explore the raft of issues associated with trends in the global Christian movement, look for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in paradigm shifts that are taking place.

Use the designated research projects to find out for yourself what trends are evident/emerging.

Jesus Christ *will* build His church; the form it takes and the extent to which we can be involved need to be both Biblically sound and flexible in expression.

We need to be self-aware and highly strategic in our thinking, while walking in obedience to/reliance on the Holy Spirit and in partnership with the rest of the Body of Christ.

Ps Allan Davis