



The bewildering world of change

TN3 Training Notes series: Planning

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These notes give a brief summary of the culture of society in the early years of the 21st century. They provide an outline of one possible section in my training events on managing change and on planning ahead.

What follows is based on the thinking and writing of several Christian leaders who specialise in this field. It is set out here as a straightforward introduction for all who dive for cover whenever they hear the word 'post-modern'!

How can you possibly define the post-modern culture in 1000 words? There are hundreds of points that could be listed. What brings clarity is a relevant grouping under a restricted number of headings; this is what these notes seek to do. This list is deliberately practical rather than philosophical. The points relate to the UK, and would need some amendment for other cultures or in a broader context.

Christian activity today cannot be effective in a mission context without a proper understanding of the culture in which we work and witness. It is startling to note how different are the thought-forms and attitudes of people in their 20s, say, compared with those of us whose '20s' were 20 or more years ago.

1 **A changing demographic outline**

This is a point that can be demonstrated through the use of census statistics. The population is broadly static in number, but people are living longer and the birth rate is declining. So there is an increase in the proportion of over 50s. This, in turn, is having a significant impact on health and social services, an effect that will increase sharply over the next few years.

People are living in smaller family units, many now on their own, necessitating the construction of more houses. This leaves many people exposed and unsupported by a wider family. The rich are getting richer with some people (especially some entrepreneurs, some in the financial markets and most in top management) getting very rich indeed.

However the UK is, increasingly, a multi-cultural society, growing more cosmopolitan in background, religion and norms of behaviour. There are considerable areas of deprivation both in our cities and, increasingly, in rural areas.

A possible move towards 'home working' has not taken off in the way predicted. Social interaction in the workplace is essential for most people.

2 **An increasing informality in issues of authority**

This comes from a philosophy of doing what *feels* right rather than what a previous generation has deemed to *be* right. This is true across a wide spectrum of life. At one end there is a range of small, visible changes such as:

- a much greater use of Christian names (alone) when addressing strangers, and the new names now chosen for children at birth;
- the current relaxation of the need for men to wear ties and business suits for work (the position for professional women is more complex!);
- new financial institutions using 'fun' names such as Egg, Smile, Goldfish, rather than serious and descriptive names incorporating words such as Legal, General, Mutual;
- key leaders of new industries often being in their 20s and 30s, rather than their 50s and 60s.

At the other end would be issues of attitude such as:

- a growing unease about hierarchy and vertical structures for accountability;
- the decline of traditional institutions built on structures of safety, and their replacement by risk-taking ventures which may succeed or fail;
- different styles of leadership with 'team' being one fundamental concept;
- changed attitudes to authority from the earliest ages (as any teacher will testify).

3 **A growing move towards consumerism**

Changes here range from the shape of industry (from manufacturing to service) to:

- the bewildering range of choice available in the supermarket, on TV screens, etc.;
- shopping as a leisure activity, with huge importance placed on universal branding and image, designer label clothing, and the current fashions;
- a growing expectation of luxury in the Western world seen in homes, cars and holidays;
- the power of advertising to shift whole cultures;
- emphases on health, diet, physical fitness, gyms and personal appearance – and the downsides that accompany them such as eating disorders;
- a move towards perfect designer-babies born at a time to fit into our schedule.

There is widening gap between the rich West and the Third World.

4 **An increasing rate of global change**

Nothing is permanent. Not that it ever was, but fundamental changes that would have taken a century in times past can now occur in a few years, or even months. Linked with this is a move to a global society where one country can manufacture a majority of the whole world's consumption of an item (eg. computer chips, footwear). We currently see a shift away from permanence in:

- the world of technology: computers, mobile phones and the internet are all changing significantly on almost a monthly basis – and the pace will increase;
- the world of human relationships (family life, marriage, divorce, same-sex partnerships);
- the confusion of role and gender in the male-female social and workplace transition;
- the concept of a career for life – or even of paid work for life;
- forms of travel, with greater choice of cheap long-distance travel available for many more people (but a growing concern about the effect on the planet).

All of which produces stress and pressure as the pace of life hots up. Meanwhile, the shrinking of the world means that we are losing local distinctiveness. Consider:

- the similarity of dress styles throughout the entire world;
- the similarity of every UK shopping centre (with the lack of small, local traders);
- the loss of community and the fragmentation of society.

5 **The increasing emphasis on leisure and entertainment**

Today's culture seeks to banish boredom in ever-dramatic ways. Consider the following:

- the TV culture, where even serious topics such as news are treated as entertainment with slick presentation requiring minimal attention;
- the multi-media revolution giving us information through all our senses, rather than in words alone, and in ever-changing bursts to hold our interest;
- the rise in the leisure, sport, travel and catering industries to keep us amused;
- the sophistication of children's toys;
- the power of ever-present music to motivate and shape the younger generation;
- the power of TV soaps and human investigations.

6 **A growing desire for experience rather than objective evidence**

The post-modern philosophy is one of doing what feels right and following ideas that can demonstrate their power to deliver what they offer. It is a DIY morality which is both rootless and selfish. Personal fulfilment is eagerly sought after. The past is unimportant, the future may never come, so we live for the present.

The icons of our age are sports and media heroes (the culture of celebrity is a feature), or innovative leaders in business who have fought traditional organisations and won. People are much more open with their emotions. If it does not feel good, we scrap it rather than work at it. It is a throwaway age.

But with this goes a search for something to hang on to, a spirituality that works. Anything that offers meaning and purpose can be tried. Truth is where you find it.

All this gives tremendous opportunities for Christians – but places the institutional church in a difficult position.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/training/tn3.pdf. They cover one aspect of a possible training event for churches on managing or handling change. See also Training Notes TN12, *Fifteen ideas to help people change*. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running a training event on this theme for you.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN3 under Planning.

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