



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 present part 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 struggle to understand what on earth is going on and why people younger than them seem so different.

How can you possibly define the present UK culture in less than 2,000 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 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 30 or more years ago.

The Covid pandemic has not changed the list but has speeded some of the items up.

1 **A changing demographic outline**

This is a point that can be demonstrated through the use of census statistics. People are living longer and the birth rate has lessened. So there is an increase in the proportion of over 60s in the population. 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. But this need is not being adequately met, pushing house prices up and penalising those not yet on the housing ladder. Many people now live 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 although in a post-Covid age there is more of a hybrid model for working.

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, sometimes obscure, 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);
- financial institutions using 'fun' names such as Egg (now a trading name for Yorkshire Building Society) or Smile (a trading name of the Co-operative Bank) rather than serious and descriptive names incorporating words such as Legal, General, Mutual – and what about names in broader sectors such as Virgin?;
- 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 (and, in the case of some financial institutions, certainly do 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 or on TV;
- shopping as a leisure activity, with huge importance placed on universal branding and image, designer label clothing and the current fashions;
- the clear decline of the High Street and the growth in online shopping;
- a growing expectation of luxury in the Western world: homes, cars, holidays;
- the power of advertising to shift whole cultures;

- emphasizes on health, diet, physical fitness, gyms and personal appearance – and the downsides that accompany them such as eating disorders;

There is widening gap between the rich 'West' and the 'Global South'.

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 and China appears to be the source of almost everything. 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 – especially AI;
- the world of human relationships (consider family life, marriage v partnership, 'same sex marriage', the current focus on trans issues and assisted dying);
- 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 heats 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 gaming industries to keep us amused;
- the sophistication of children's toys and clothes;
- the power of ever-present music (at a loud volume) to motivate and shape the younger generation;
- the power and presence of TV soaps and so-called reality shows.

The blatant sexualisation of society can be seen across areas such as advertising, styles of female dress and the practice of teenage sexting. Films and TV series contain more violence than in the past. Meanwhile the lack of control that can be exercised on the internet is leading to concern about the availability of extreme pornography as well as the power of social media.

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

The 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. Post-truth is in.

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.

Into this space comes the dilemma of a world of Artificial Intelligence and we have little idea of how that is going to change everything in the years to come.

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

7 **A new expectation of 24/7 connectivity**

This is a point added since these notes were originally prepared. People now expect to be in almost continual contact with where the action is, and that means everywhere. Take:

- the social media revolution – we chat digitally and almost continuously with both friends and people we do not know;
- the speed with which what is deemed to be news now travels round the world;
- the use of smart-phones not as telephones but as means of keeping us in constant contact with everything and everybody – we apparently check them every 12 minutes;
- their use as cameras to record the trivia of daily life, not to mention selfies;
- the expectation that we see work emails at home and on holiday.

The boundaries between work and leisure are not so clear now. We expect to be in touch at all times. Because of this, there is also the use of digital media for graphic forms of personal power and revenge and their ability to mobilise people for a cause in an instant.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN3. 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*, TN59, *Don't you dare change anything!*, TN81, *Changing the scenery*, and TN121, *Making a case for change*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN3 under Planning.

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