
Pro Rege

Volume 21 | Number 1

Article 2

September 1992

Church Growth in a Pluralist Society

Carl E. Zylstra

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zylstra, Carl E. (1992) "Church Growth in a Pluralist Society," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 21: No. 1, 9 - 17.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol21/iss1/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Church Growth in a Pluralist Society



by Dr. Carl Zylstra

There are probably few things more alluring for a snowbound Iowa pastor than the chance to spend a week in Southern California. So when invited to attend Robert Schuller's Institute for Successful Church Leadership in Garden Grove, last January, I didn't take long to accept.

The problem is that the conference turned out to be as much unsettling as it was refreshing. For someone who has spent almost two decades in ministry, just sitting in the Crystal Cathedral for a

Dr. Carl Zylstra is pastor of the Immanuel Christian Reformed Church of Orange City, Iowa. This article is based on a lecture delivered this past spring at the annual Dordt College Ministers' Conference.

week was an eye-opening experience. As the ad says, I don't drive my father's Oldsmobile and the Crystal Cathedral certainly isn't father's church either. A lot has changed in 20 years. And as the speakers at the conference kept reminding us, anyone who hopes to market the gospel in this changing world had better be prepared to make some changes too.

You can call it mid-life crisis if you want. However, I still find such reminders of how fast life is moving and how fast the world is changing downright unsettling both personally and professionally. Particularly difficult is the soul-searching process to determine whether these world-shaking changes have left one's own skills and insights outdated.

The speakers at the conference, however, didn't exhibit much sympathy for aging pastors who find themselves out-distanced by the current pace of change.

The Changing Sensorium

Those who addressed the group and led the seminars appeared far more concerned that, by failing to adapt to the changing world, the Christian church will find itself left in the dust of irrelevance by the speed of a society racing full speed into change.

To be honest, for the first few days of the conference, I rather enjoyed these reminders of the need to change. After all, hadn't the Apostle Paul himself described his own ministry as one in which "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel" (I Cor. 9:19-23).

Besides, from a communication point of view, all these conference leaders did was describe what Walter J. Ong a couple of decades ago called "the changing sensorium."¹ On a very basic level, all have to agree that the sensorium—those cultural and informational assumptions which make up our ability to hear and understand a message—simply keeps changing. So for messengers to be heard accurately in the changing sensorium, the form and style of that message obviously will have to change as well.

After all, what was it that enabled a Northwest Iowa farm boy, still called Harold by his friends, to become the suave and instantly recognized Robert Schuller of international television fame? Probably it was the same factor that all the widely diverse but commonly successful speakers at the conferences shared. To a person, they all demonstrated a keen awareness of the changing sensorium—and a passionate willingness to adapt themselves and their ministries to it.

In fact, George G. Hunter III from Asbury Theological Seminary presented a thorough and systematic analysis of the new changing sensorium in which the church must present its message. Taking the cue from his own newly-released publication, Hunter titled his presentation "How to Reach Secular People."²

Basically, Hunter argues that the church's environment at heart has changed from a religious to a secular environment. According to Hunter 120,000,000 Americans over the age of 14 are secularists³—(about 75% of the population). These folks grow up biblically illiterate and wouldn't know John the Baptist from Fred the Presbyterian.

The critical issue for Hunter is that such secular folks simply don't share the cultural assumptions of Christianity which once were foundations of the American common culture. Not that Hunter's point is new. E.D. Hirsh and others have noted the same shift.⁴ However, such writers decry the loss of a common culture, while Hunter is concerned only that churches haven't realized just how radically they will have to change their style and format to present the gospel effectively in this changing sensorium.

In short, Hunter argued that the era of Christendom was finally over.⁵ Hence, the methods of church growth based on renewing individuals and revitalizing institutions had now become useless in the secular era. After all, said Hunter, in the secular

era there just are no previous Christian commitments to be renewed and no meaningful institutions to be revitalized. Those approached worked only in an environment where most people shared Christian values as a cultural assumption and Christian concepts as cultural givens.

So to summarize Hunter, who more than any other speaker, epitomized the central assumptions of the conference—the sensorium has become secular and the Christian church must adapt to it.

Throughout the conference, speakers suggested ways for churches to accommodate the secular mind: use contemporary music, adopt "non-religious" language, and revamp facilities and programming.

Now, for anyone tuned in to contemporary talk about growing churches and ministries this is all old hat. In fact, one of the most striking impressions of the Crystal Cathedral in January of 1992 is how old and almost passé it is quickly becoming. The building is showing wear and attendance at Schuller's institute has dropped dramatically as Bill Hybels and his Willow Creek Conference attracts the forward-thinking crowds these days.

But all this only reinforces the basic tenets of the conference. For what sets Hybels apart from Schuller is his far more radical adaptation to the secular sensorium. Schuller still built a cathedral, Hybels built a mall. Schuller still holds a fairly traditional service of worship, adapted for secular ears. Hybels structures the entire gathering for contemporary secular culture.

The current trends in growth and outreach are clear. In a secular world the church must express its message in secular terms or no one will listen any longer.

Yet the more I reflected on what I was hearing, the more I began to realize that my unsettled feeling ran considerably deeper than just the typical pangs of mid-life adjustment which I was experiencing. Something about all this secularizing talk was jarring me at the level of my basic commitments. Something just didn't set right with my own sociological observations, my theological convictions, and my ecclesiastical commitments.

Sociological Soundness

First, there was the sociological problem. Is it really true that the sensorium is becoming secular?

If "secular" means that people are becoming non-religious, oriented only to the sensate world experience, this premise seems dubious. All anyone has to do is think of 50 acquaintances, and start sorting through them. Are 35 out of those 50 acquaintances (Hunter's 70%) living without reference to religious experiences?

Now if we're talking about biblical illiteracy, that's another matter. It's probably true that 35 out of 50 acquaintances would have trouble naming the 12 apostles or reciting the books of the Old Testament.

It may be that America is becoming less Christian. The rise of Islam and Buddhism brought on by changing immigration patterns probably makes that inevitable.

But no sociological evidence indicates that American culture is becoming less religious. Richard John Neuhaus and others have assembled an impressive array of statistics, in fact, that describe a quite decidedly "unsecular America." At various times during the early eighties 79 percent of Americans said they got comfort and strength from religion. Indeed, only 18 percent said they never or practically never attended church. And when asked point blank whether they believed in God, 98 percent said that they did.⁶

And surely no researcher is more eager to prove the secularizing of America than George Barna whose book, *The Frog in the Kettle*,⁷ has become almost a manifesto for adapting the church to its supposedly secularizing context. Yet Barna's own statistics describe the United States as a country in which almost 70-75 percent of the population say they attend church and 89 percent agree that "There is a God who watches over you and answers your prayers."⁸ This is a strange finding in a population supposedly 70 percent secular.

What then explains this contradiction—the simultaneous de-Christianization of American society along with a surprisingly robust religiosity throughout the culture?

One answer could be that the American jeremiad, described so persuasively by Perry Miller,⁹ is continuing. Miller points out that Puritans wrote about religious decline already in their time. Ever since the 1600's Americans have persisted in thinking that their generation was far less Christian than the preceding one. It is very American to assert that Christian influence is declining, whether it is or not.

But perhaps such careful critics of contemporary Western culture such as Egbert Schuurman¹⁰ and Lesslie Newbigin¹¹ explain better. Each agrees with Hunter that the collapse of Christendom is well underway. Yet each also argues persuasively that Harvey Cox's much heralded "Secular City"¹² will not replace Christendom, but rather a new religious pluralism, a mix of traditional religions, contemporary folk religion, and plain old paganism.

Personally, as a veteran of the sixties, I think American culture did flirt with replacing Christendom with secularism. One could even argue that the naturalistic, self-seeking spirit of the eighties was America's fling at living the secular vision. Yet the

When the church attempts to make peace with the spirits of the age, it forfeits the right and ability to discern those spirits by the word of God's Spirit.

movement never really took hold. "Yuppie" soon became a pejorative term. The essential religiosity of American culture held, even though that religiosity may not have remained as traditionally Christian as it once was.

It's possible, of course, that other cultures are secularizing more thoroughly. But, if so, none of the speakers at the conference presented any hard evidence of this.

In Hunter's published work, he cites Os Guinness who stated in the Lausanne II gathering in Manila that 21.3 percent of the world's population is secularist.¹³ However, while inserting a tenth of a percentage point in your conclusions gives an appearance of validity to your premise, it's hard to imagine how anyone actually could even have gathered such information on a world-wide scale with any sort of scientific reliability.

Consider the following problem with such an attempt. Guinness's figures counted the entire "communist world" as secular. Yet since the Lausanne gathering the collapse of decadent Eastern European totalitarianism has revealed that, in reality, those societies never had become as secular as they had claimed.

Besides, if Guinness's figures were correct, Hunter's claims simply could not be true. Guinness

claims 20 percent secular worldwide which means that 80 percent of the world is religious. Yet since Guinness claimed the communist world (at that time 25% or so of the world's population) was almost entirely secular, then the non-communist world would have had to have been almost 100 percent religious to balance the figures. Yet Hunter claims that America (which Barna and others have demonstrated to be a relative hot bed of religious activity) was in fact only 30 percent religious!

In short, the figures adduced to prove the secularism of America actually tend to demonstrate the opposite.

All of this sociological criticism, however, would be just so much academic squabbling if it weren't for a fundamental theological problem with the conference's assumption that the church must adapt itself to secular culture.

Thinking Theologically

The rub of the theological argument is this. If America is a secular culture, then all religions are competing on an equal footing and the only question is who will make the best "marketing" pitch (a term Barna, Hunter, and Hybels use without apology and which most contemporary outreach consultants simply assume).

In such thinking, American culture resembles one mammoth ethnic food fair in which every religion gets its own booth and competes with every other group in calling folks in from the midway so that they'll at least sample a bit of what we have to offer. Indeed, if the premise is right ("American culture is secular") then the conclusion is probably valid too ("therefore the church must adapt itself to it").

But what if, as argued above, the premise is wrong. What if, instead, contemporary American culture is not a neutral secular slate on which each religion is free to write its message but instead is a pluralistic mosaic of competing religions? If such is the case, then the church adapting itself chameleon-like to the culture of its day will turn out to be a dreadful and fatal mistake.

Now a marketing-oriented approach assumes that we are offering a product which can appeal to all segments of the culture. Indeed the upbeat market-oriented concepts of the Schuller Institute, taken by themselves, would have been as equally

applicable—and genuinely helpful—to the operator of a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise as to a pastor.

The problem for the Christian church, however, is this. If those aspects of a contemporary culture that are non-Christian, turn out to be not secular but pagan, then by adapting itself to its "market," the church will inevitably conform the church to the same pagan loyalties and principles that underlie that culture and its subculture.

And that won't work. It would be as if the 7-Up company added caffeine to its product in order to attract Coke and Pepsi drinkers. Once you've given up your principles, why would anyone bother to switch?

Surely any religion that compromises its basic character really winds up signing its own death warrant. Muslims or Hari Krishnas don't do it. And it probably doesn't make any sense for Christians to try it either.

On this point, maybe the mini tempest over New Ageism which has been brewing during the past few years would be instructive. In fact, whether you think the New Age is the apocalyptic Antichrist, or whether you think the whole flap somewhat overblown, the point of the controversy is probably well taken. Really it's just the same message that radical Calvinists have been trying to make, at least since the days of Abraham Kuyper: culture simply isn't neutral. Spirits revealing its direction and allegiance pervade it.

If the church then attempts to make peace with the spirits of the age, it also then forfeits the right and ability to discern those spirits by the word of God's Spirit (I John 4:1). At the very least, it becomes difficult to proclaim any gospel that would deliver from the pagan culture to which the church has just finished adapting itself.

Now, if a theology is sufficiently Pelagian, it can accommodate these concerns. Hunter, for instance, claims that the process for becoming a Christian is "inform, influence, convince, and invite."¹⁴ As he says, "entry into the faith is an act of the will."¹⁵ This statement may sound vaguely heretical from a Pauline point of view, but it helps explain the eagerness of Hunter and others to have the church not only adapt to, but also adopt the culture of the day.

Listening to leaders at the January seminar, I saw that they wanted every church to translate the gospel

into terms that non-Christians would understand and to present it to them in a setting in which they would feel at home. But, in such a situation, what happens to the Apostolic warning that the message of the cross "is foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews" (I Corinthians 1:18)?

However, isn't the fact that people don't understand the gospel exactly the point? If they did understand, in the biblical sense, they would already believe! And isn't the fact that they're uncomfortable with the Christian community exactly what's at issue? If they did feel at home among God's covenant people, then—again according to the biblical concept—they would already be on God's side of the great antithesis!

In a recent article, John Bolt has suggested that we resurrect Langdon Gilkey's framing of the question, "How can the church minister to the world without losing itself?"¹⁶ It surely seems evident that the church certainly can't lose itself in our neopagan pluralistic world and still expect to have any integrity left with which to minister to the world.

Ecclesiological Misgivings

Now what about the ecclesiological criticism of the assumption behind much of contemporary church growth talk?

At the California conference it became almost a mantra to intone the new insight that the church in North America now has to see itself as a "foreign mission station." Each local church, speakers repeated endlessly, needs to understand itself as an outpost for the gospel in an alien culture.

Actually, that the church is an outreach center in a hostile culture is fairly biblical. Only the excess eagerness for church growth and institutional development within a Christendom framework had buried the concept for a time.

So it's all well and good to remind churches that they should model themselves after foreign mission stations. But then why would the Institute for Successful Church Leadership bombard its participants with a roster of Southern Californians whose cross-cultural experiences seemed limited to hosting travel tours to the Holy Land?

If the church in North America needs to learn to do foreign missions you would think conferees would have to hear from at least one speaker who has some actual experience in establishing churches

in a religiously hostile culture. After all, North American churches have a two-century old history in foreign missions, dedicated to establishing churches in non-Christian cultures. "Hubris" almost seems too polite a term for describing the attitude of those who act as if they are the first to discover the problem of evangelism in a culturally hostile environment and hence need no advice from those who have been at it for a century or so.

In fact, had they been willing to listen to a few veterans of evangelism in pluralistic societies, the speakers possibly would have been less eager to encourage churches to conform to the religiously polyglot culture of the late 20th century. A classic

How can the church attract people to a Christian perspective by holding a Sunday morning party that celebrates the very cultural perspective out of which we want to call them?

formulation of this concern comes from veteran cross-cultural missiologist Lesslie Newbigin who has stirred the ecumenical community by insisting that the church proceed authentically and effectively only when it "challenges in the name of the one Lord all the powers, ideologies, myths, assumptions, and world views which do not acknowledge him as Lord."¹⁷

Now such a way of thinking does not always play well with those who measure the value of a church's ministry by the numbers of persons who sign on the dotted line. As Newbigin says, "In a pluralist society there is always a temptation to judge the importance of every statement of truth by the number of people who believe it."

Perhaps those who work from an Anabaptist ecclesiology (which is willing to separate the gospel from culture) don't find it strange to adapt the church to whatever culture it finds itself stranded in. True, more traditional Anabaptist ecclesiology stresses the importance of setting up church communities that reject all culture. Yet the principle is really the same. If it's true that the gospel touches people apart from their culture, then there really is no reason why the gospel can't (temporarily at least) adopt the shell of an alien culture much as certain

bacteria invade a host cell in order eventually to destroy it.

However, those who insist that the gospel is an historical religion that is incarnate in human history will fear that adopting such a strategy may sell out to the response even before there's been a chance to present the message. Semi-Pelagians, who believe that faith is an act of the human will responding to the enticements and pressures of another human will, are sometimes willing to adopt even religiously distasteful tactics in order to carry out what they believe is their appointed task to "by all means win some" (I Cor. 9:19). Yet those who hold that faith is a gift of God and that the kingdom is the work of God's Spirit will emphasize the responsibility of the Christian church to witness to the reality of the gospel rather than to attempt to bring that kingdom about.

If the caretakers of contemporary church growth conferences listened more carefully to those experienced in "foreign missions" they would likely discover what global missiologists are also rediscovering, namely, that the church as a missionary outpost in an alien culture describes the New Testament world itself. It also describes the progress of the gospel as it spread among the tribes of Europe and more recently as it moves across the Southern Hemisphere.

In fact, Charles Van Engen sees the local church as the center for global witness in a comprehensive concept which at last brings "foreign" and "homeland" missions together in one comprehensive movement.¹⁸ If he and his fellow missiologists are right, then the task of the church, far from being one of adopting the forms and styles of our host cultures, instead will be one of setting North American churches back in step with where the New Testament church once was and where, in fact, most of the world-wide church is still today. Living in a realistically pluralistic culture, the church makes clear that all the present structures of our world "are created in Christ, and for Christ" (Col. 1:16), but have been "disarmed," robbed of their totalitarian claims by Christ (Col. 2:15). It follows, then, that it is the privilege and calling of the church to make known to the principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

Seeker Services and Christian Worship

The fundamental error, it seems to me, of all this current church marketing theory is a basic

misunderstanding of the nature of the Christian mission. It's an error pointed out at mid-century by Harry R. Boer in his missiological classic, *Pentecost and Missions*.¹⁹ Boer took to task those who see the church's outreach as something the church is commanded to do. Recovering the authentic biblical understanding, Boer reminds us, means that the church has to see outreach as part of what the church is, not just what it does. Acts 2 does not command that a spirit-filled church *must* witness. Instead it announces that the Pentecostal church *will be*—by its [renewed] nature—a witness to its Lord.

At the same time, the church should never allow its heresies to inhibit it from faithfully articulating the truth. Neither should the late 20th century church allow these sociological, theological, and ecclesiological aberrations to keep it from carrying out its authentic call as God's missionary people.

Nor should the church ignore the realities of the changed sensorium in carrying out its witness. An increasingly pluralistic society will, indeed, require changed forms and shapes for Christian proclamation.

The difference will be whether the church uncritically adopts the forms of its pluralistic society or whether the church merely adapts itself for the explicit purpose of witnessing to and challenging the prevailing assumptions of the pluralist society of the day.

One example of the difference could be illustrated by what are sometimes called "seeker services," services designed expressly to attract non-church members. At the California conference we were advised to sing only contemporary music in such services. Singing contemporary music was advocated as insistently and repetitively as the drum beat in contemporary rock. But does such advice make biblical sense?

For instance, everyone (especially, its performers) knows that acid rock arises out of a particular value system. "Rhythm and blues" does too, although admittedly it comes out of a somewhat more benign value system than does acid rock. However, both types of music illustrate that music in general both expresses—and reinforces—a deeply held value system.

But if so, then how are Christians supposed to challenge our contemporary generation by using the values that pervade our pluralist society today?

A few years ago I visited Japan to represent a denominational mission agency at a meeting with the leaders of its Japanese partner church. This partner church, although small, had been blessed with highly intelligent, well-educated, deeply experienced, and profoundly spiritual leaders.

However, as I headed for the meeting my interpreter warned me not to make the same mistake as had a previous representative of our mission agency. It seems that this American churchman had visited Japan, made a two-day instant analysis of the church, and then proceeded to upbraid these dignified, intellectual and spiritually mature leaders of that church for failing to use more native Japanese music in their worship services.

These Japanese Christians still felt the sting of that insult when I visited several years later. And I felt their lowered estimation of my denominational leaders that had resulted. These folks could hardly believe that some patronizing Westerner was really so presumptuous as to insist that they should use in their worship of Jesus Christ the very music which expressed the Shintoistic pagan impulses of their own culture.

Perhaps all of us ought to share similar amazement that so many church leaders seem to be insisting that the church in North America use the very music that expresses the pagan impulse of our contemporary culture as a means to praise the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What holds for music, then, also holds all the more for other manifestations of the so-called “seeker services.” It is certainly true that worship services need to be as intelligible and accessible as possible to the inquiring mind. And it is also true that Christian worship needs to be updated continually so that it truly does express the contemporary impulses of truly Christian praise.

But does that mean that the church has to design worship services that the contemporary pagan mind finds alluring? It seems incredible that the church now must attract people to a Christian perspective by holding a Sunday morning party that celebrates the very cultural perspective out of which we want to call them.

So what’s the point? Do these sociological, theological, and ecclesiological criticisms of the marketing approach to church growth mean that the church can ignore the changing setting in which the gospel must be communicated today?

Hardly. The newly pluralistic environment in which the church finds itself today will require the church to adapt to ensure that today’s people hear its message. What it will mean, however, is that—the Schuller Institute and like-minded gospel marketers notwithstanding—the church will have to resist the paganizing and relativizing trends of the culture. But it will also mean that the church must embody and express the gospel themes in ways that witness to the communities of competing faiths that surround it in the pluralistic sea.

And that’s where the church can learn from those who are urging the church to be sensitive to its surrounding culture. The church needs five

All the church really needs to do is witness to the kingdom that God himself is bringing.

characteristics to witness faithfully to a pluralistic world.

Faithful Witness Sensitive to the Surroundings

First, the church increasingly will have to become a community of conviction, not a community of custom.

In short, to be heard above the cacophony of competing voices in our pluralistic world, the church will have to speak with conviction that what we believe is just plain true. And we will need to say with confidence that some other beliefs are just plain wrong.

The church cannot afford to play the game of pitching its message as “the most helpful” or “the most fulfilling.” Such a “world-view boutique” approach would relegate the church to just another costume jewelry stand in the shopping mall of American culture. Instead, amid the glitz and glitter of competing social and religious customs, the church must call on people to believe a message that, more than any of the others, simply is true.

This means customs will have to change—church customs included. Elevating cultural customs to the level of principles reduces the church and its message to just another cultural curiosity. At the same time, the church needs to be aware that principles always come expressed in custom. There

simply are no naked principles. The trick is to update the custom in order to embody the old principles in the new day.²⁰

In any event, a community based on principle at least has a fighting chance of holding its place and attractiveness in a pluralistic sea. On the other hand, a community based on custom will find itself awash except in those isolated areas where it is able to create and maintain an island of sociological homogeneity in which the old customs themselves are able to be sustained.

Second, the church will have to become a community of salvation rather than a community of sociability.

The old denominations are dying because they forgot this fact. The churches that are viable today are those that preach salvation through the blood of Jesus.

It is true that some of these growing churches are offering false salvations—mere friendship, for example. But only a church asking for repentance and preaching forgiveness through Christ is going to gain a hearing in a pluralistic arena.

So too, if denominations are going to survive at all, they are going to have to radically revise their churches orders. Most churches are governed by documents that, at their core, define sociability rather than explain the way of salvation.

Most church orders must be stripped to their minimum. They need to tell us which documents express their beliefs and how the church is ensuring that the gospel message is proclaimed faithfully and all members are instructed thoroughly in all the dimensions of Christian doctrine. And that's all. Any denomination that tries to hang together socially will either fragment or wither. Possibly both. In any event, it will die.

Third, the community will have to be a community of mission, not a community of membership.

There was an old phrase my mother used to use when she would greet people after a church service in which we ourselves were the visitors. If she spotted someone she knew, she would ask, "Are you just visiting too or do you belong here?"

Sorry, but no one asks whether you "belong to" Willow Creek or the Crystal Cathedral. In the new sensorium, we "belong" to the pluralistic society in which each of us is our own person. Perhaps in some cases you may be able to convince a few

people that they belong to the body of Christ. But they don't "belong to" your church.

Those who have been in the ministry for a while have observed this phenomenon in the trend toward an increasingly carefree attitude toward church membership. Increasingly people will attend the church regularly, participate fully in the mission of the congregation, but just never get around to having their membership assigned to that particular church.

A generation ago people were attracted to churches because they sensed a need to belong. In the pluralistic society people are attracted by those with whom they believe they can work, not by the idea of being attached to some sort of permanent organization.

Fourth, the new community will have to be one of care, not one of "causes."

Even Reformed churches may have to become more like the traditional Anabaptists and a little less like their more traditionally Reformed predecessors. The Reformed, ever since the Belgic Confession was first tossed over the castle wall, have been once and forever trying to find sponsorship among those in control—or to control them in turn.²¹

In contrast, the Anabaptists have tended to warn that people in power either will corrupt the church or eventually turn on it. They suggest, instead, that Christians simply form their own communities of faith and become living examples on earth of what the kingdom of God will be like. Such communities then can also become attractive lights by which others will be drawn out of darkness into the glory of Christ.

Now is probably the time, however, for the Reformed to join the Anabaptists in admitting that in a pluralist society, the most powerful witness of all will be a community that embodies the gospel principles in its communal life together.

Gone is the day when people will be attracted to a church because it is fighting for the causes they support. After all, in the pluralist society, such types of associations will be ad hoc and a dime a dozen.

Instead, where the church will stand out as an attraction in our pluralistic society is exactly where it stood out in the similarly pluralistic society of the New Testament day. The church will stand out from the pluralistic crowd only when those around can see the community and say of it, "Wow, look how they love each other. Maybe they know some-

thing I don't know. And maybe they'll love me too."

Which brings up the fifth characteristic. The church will have to be a community of inclusion, not a community of selective invitation.

The traditional church attitude, that we're doing folks a favor by inviting them to join us in a concept of the church, just will not be heard in the pluralist age. We need to remember that, as much as evangelists like the term "invitation," the implication behind any invitation is that you really don't have any right to be here but, in your case, we'll make an exception and let you in by special invitation.

Now maybe that was an attractive appeal in the age when the church held power and others were thrilled to be invited to share that power. In a pluralistic age, however, the response is more likely to be a curt and cynical, "Who needs it?"

Instead, the church will have to be seen as a community of inclusion—a family that always has room for one more, yes, many more. And that appeal needs to be made in such a way that people know we really do believe that they too, by rights gained in Jesus Christ, ought to be included in the community of God's people and all we are trying to do is encourage them to exercise those rights by faith.

After all, that really is the timeless appeal Paul made to the first century Greek pluralists as recorded in II Corinthians 5. And, in the end, that is also the same appeal that will enable the church today to continue gathering God's Growing Family²² in the 21st century as well.

Yes, it's always good to spend a week in January taking in the California sunshine. And it's great to be reminded of the need to speak the timeless gospel to the time-changed world that hears that message with ears newly tuned to the pluralist harmonies of the day.

But it simply will not do to try to sell the gospel as just another attractively presented alternative in a pluralistic world already crowded with alternatives. Besides, we don't really have to sell the gospel at all. In fact, if the church is to be effective at all in serving God in the newly pluralized sensorium, then all the church really needs to do is point to—witness to—the kingdom that God himself is bringing. And that need not, indeed cannot, be done by adapting that witness to the kingdoms of

this world, even though our churches might grow in the process.

End Notes

- 1 Ong, Walter J. *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
- 2 Hunter, George G. III. *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).
- 3 Hunter, 41.
- 4 Hirsch, E.D. Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).
- 5 Hunter, 21-39.
- 6 Neuhaus, Richard John, ed.. *Unsecular America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).
- 7 Barna, George. *The Frog in the Kettle* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1990).
- 8 Barna, George. *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1991) 709.
- 9 Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
- 10 Egbert Schuurman. *Reflections on the Technological Society* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1977).
- 11 Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).
- 12 Cox, Harvey. *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965)
- 13 Os Guinness quoted in Hunter, 33.
- 14 Hunter, 35.
- 15 Hunter, 35.
- 16 Bolt, John. Review of "How My Mind Has Changed" by James M. Wall and David Heim, eds. *Calvin Theological Journal*, 27, 1 (April 1992): 196.
- 17 Newbigin, 221.
- 18 VanEngen. *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).
- 19 Boer, Harry R. *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1964).
- 20 For an extended treatment on this point see also my dissertation. Zylstra, Carl E., "God-Centered Preaching in a Human-Centered Age: The Developing Crisis Confronting a Conservative Calvinist Theology of Preaching in the Christian Reformed Church, 1935-1975" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1983).
- 21 Note also the long history of dispute over Article 36 of the Belgic Confession regarding the role of Civil Government in supporting the church.
- 22 "Gathering God's Growing Family" is the name given to the current home missions project of the Christian Reformed Church. The conference at the Crystal Cathedral referred to in this article was part of a larger conference on "Gathering God's Growing Family" sponsored by and subsidized generously by Christian Reformed Home Missions. Criticisms of the Schuller Institute speakers in this article should not be interpreted as a criticism of Christian Reformed Home Missions or its personnel.