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How to navigate cultural and economic shifts

by Dave Gibbons

Global recession
Credit crisis
Foreclosures
Unemployment
Market volatility
Wars
Climate change
Scarcity of goods
Fragmentation of families

The depth of our current plight is deep. Not only is this an American problem, it's a global dilemma. When looking at his quarterly numbers, a friend of mine said, "This (current economic conditions) is worse than after 911." A recent survey of church operation directors indicates a rapidly growing concern over diminishing dollars being collected. Also, many churches are now doing what they thought they would never do: laying off staff. The rules have changed. Simplistic formulas and old approaches won't necessarily work in this type of environment. It requires us to think differently.

Instead of being worried, let's be thankful. Scarcity brings clarity. While many may be paralyzed by the gridlock of our government and the greed of our society, we must remain confident that light shines brightest in darkness. If there is any time the church needs to focus on what is most important, it's now.

How do we shine in times like these?

How do we lead our congregations through these economic and cultural tsunamis that seem to be constant in this season of history? Whether you're in a small agrarian town amidst the cornfields of Nebraska or in a suburb of a nicely planned gated community, we are all looking for answers to these trying times. How can the church make the greatest impact?

The answer lies in the art of adaptation, that is, *painful* adaptation - what "third culture" churches do well. Being third culture is not normative. It's a call to walk the *via dolorosa*, the way of suffering with the hope of resurrection and radical transformation. Theologically, it's living incarnationally and missiologically, sensitive to given contexts without losing who you are or diffusing the gospel.

The third culture way: the art of painful adaptation

When Bruce Lee was asked what type of martial arts he did, he said, "It depends. You put water into a cup it becomes a cup. You put water into a pitcher it becomes a pitcher. You put water into a teapot, it becomes a teapot. Be water, my friend."

Bruce was talking about the art of adaptation. Specifically, this incarnational approach is about the mindset and will to love, to learn, and to serve in any culture – even in the midst of pain and discomfort. Churches that make a difference have the ability to flow in this way even at high levels of discomfort. While the gospel message doesn't change, the way we communicate it does.

The crux of the problem: our definition of neighbor

We all know the greatest commandments of the church: Love God and love your neighbor. But who is our neighbor? We commonly define "neighbor" as someone like us, but Jesus calls us to love and serve a neighbor who is often someone culturally different than us or someone who may be uncomfortable to be around – or someone whom we may even hate. So rather than just thinking about how to make people more comfortable in our churches, we need to look at what makes us *uncomfortable*.

A theology of discomfort

When Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" he made it apparent that it was someone you would not want to be around. For example, the Samaritans and the Jews were at culturally different poles of the relational comfort zone.

With this in mind, our calling is to embrace the Other. Why is this important? It clearly demonstrates the love of God. John said, "If you can't love a brother you can see, how do you love a God whom you don't see?" Loving God and loving your neighbor are two sides of one coin. Furthermore, it's easy to love someone just like you. When you love someone who you're not comfortable with or prejudiced against, that's supernatural! It's the type of love that drops jaws and leaves people in wonder.

The beauty of this is that when you love your neighbor, which is painful at times, you get the blessing of understanding and knowing the heart of God. You meet him intimately. Matthew said, "If you do it to the least of these, you've done it unto me."

God knew when setting up the two commandments that people would see and experience him through this type of relentless love.

Developing adaptive third culture mindsets, knowledge, and skills

Here are some ways to get started in living out the third culture purposes of the church according to how Jesus defined it:

- **Vision-walk and pray.** Slowly walk through your church, inside your city/town, and in other ethnic enclaves and pray this prayer: "Break my heart for the things that break your heart, O God." Vision emerges from brokenness. Look at Nehemiah 1.
- **Study the prophets and God's interaction with misfits** from the beginning of time, and then launch a sermon series and educational strategies on how God is third culture based on the definition of the second greatest commandment.
- **Read authors and biographies ethnically different than you**, people you may not agree with, or have fear of. A couple books to get you started are *Exclusion and Embrace* by Miroslav Volf and the autobiography of Malcolm X. See this video clip of third culture at <http://3culture.tv>.
- **Visit churches that are doing third culture** and loving on people who are different than them. Experiencing best practices from churches already doing it will fuel you and give you ideas. You'll be surprised how accessible leaders are. Call them and interview them. Have third culture leaders come and consult with you.
- **Do something now.** As a church, plan a unique strategy where you call off a Sunday sermon and go radically love on your community. While it may be a one-time event, use it as a catalyst for something that will be sustainable and owned by the locals. Have people start to experience the joy of loving their neighbors the third culture way.

- **Love the fringe.** Choose to live and serve with people different than you. Third culture is not about skin color or geography, but about where Jesus is. Where is he? In places like Nazareth, the fringes and the margins of our culture. So when you start a new church or ministry, instead of just doing another clone of your church, how about resourcing some young leaders in places totally different than yours? Look at the margins of your city. Who are people that you may have been overlooking? They may be the Rahabs who can help give you the keys to the city.

As you start to pursue third culture, watch how the beauty of God is unleashed in your community. We never become more like God than when we love and painfully adapt to those unlike us.

Article by Dave Gibbons

Dave Gibbons is a social entrepreneur and culture specialist as well as lead pastor of Newsong multi-sites in California, London, Mexico City, Bangkok, India and other places around the world. You can read more about third culture in his new book: [*Monkey and The Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third Culture Church*](#) (Zondervan 2009). Follow Dave at: <http://twitter.com/davegibbons>. Learn more at: <http://3culture.tv>.



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