

The Present Future

Six Tough Questions
for the Church

Reggie McNeal

A LEADERSHIP ✕ NETWORK PUBLICATION

 **JOSSEY-BASS**
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To the new tribe;
you know who you are.
May your tribe increase!
There's a world counting on you.

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About Leadership Network

Since 1984, Leadership Network has fostered church innovation and growth by diligently pursuing its far-reaching mission statement: *To identify, connect, and help high-capacity Christian Leaders multiply their impact.*

While Leadership Network's techniques adapt and change as the Church faces new opportunities and challenges, the organization's work follows a consistent and proven pattern: Leadership Network brings together entrepreneurial leaders who are focused on similar ministry initiatives. The ensuing collaboration—often across denominational lines—provides a strong base from which individual leaders can better analyze and refine their individual strategies. Peer-to-peer interaction, dialogue, and sharing inevitably accelerate participants' own innovations and ideas. Leadership Network further enhances this process through the development and distribution of highly targeted ministry tools and resources—including audio and video programs, special reports, e-publications, and online downloads.

With Leadership Network's assistance, today's Christian leaders are energized, equipped, inspired, and better able to multiply their own dynamic Kingdom-building initiatives.

Launched in 1996 in conjunction with Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, Leadership Network Publications present thoroughly researched and innovative concepts from leading thinkers, prac-

titioners, and pioneering churches. The series collectively draws from a wide range of disciplines with individual titles providing perspective on one or more of five primary areas:

- Enabling effective leadership
- Encouraging life-changing service
- Building authentic community
- Creating Kingdom-centered impact
- Engaging cultural and demographic realities

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Preface

We think we are headed toward the future. The truth is, the future is headed toward us. And it's in a hurry (we now know the universe is speeding up, not slowing down). We also generally think that the present makes sense only in light of the past. Again, we need to check our thinking. The present makes clearest sense in light of the future. We humans write history by looking at the past. God creates history ahead of time. He never forecasts. God always backcasts. He began with the end in mind. The future is always incipient in the present. Before the foundation of the world, the Lamb was slain. Calvary was anticipated in God's kiss of life into Adam. The cross gains dimension silhouetted against the empty tomb. The empty tomb confirmed the invasion of the future into the present. When Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus, he realized the future had been fast-forwarded. That changed everything.

It still does.

Introduction

This book may not be for you. Not that long ago, it wasn't for me either. In fact, I am not thrilled about writing this book for several reasons. One is that I am afraid that I will fail to communicate well enough what I want to say about how desperately we need to make some changes. Another is that you won't be able to hear what I am saying because you are threatened by it or that you will shut down before giving me a hearing.

I also don't get kicks out of deconstructing a world I was once very fond of. It is a world that nurtured me when I was young and imparted the faith to me and has continued to confirm and legitimize my life calling. I grew up in the home of a bivocational pastor, whose dad before him was a mill village pastor, whose dad before him was a song leader and Bible teacher. My two older brothers are ministers; my two sisters both married ministers; a niece is married to a minister; a nephew is studying for ministry. I began ministry in the church thirty years ago as a college freshman. Ministry and the church have been my world. But it is a world that I increasingly find difficult to feel at home in because it lacks spiritual purpose and missional vitality.

I'm talking about the church world in North America. A world that has largely forsaken its missional covenant with God to be a part of kingdom expansion. It has, instead, substituted its own charter of church as a clubhouse where religious people hang

out with other people who think, dress, behave, vote, and believe like them. This book will separate me from many people who are in that world who will never understand what possessed me to do this (or who may indeed suggest that something did possess me). I don't like rejection any more than the average emotionally needy person.

I believe there are many people like me in the church who, in terms of their church experience, want to script a story different from the one they are a part of now. I believe this because I talk with these people every day. My work carries me into dozens of congregations to meet hundreds of church leaders every year. In addition, I consult with denominational agencies, teach at seminaries, speak for parachurch organizations. In every arena I am running into an increasing number of people who are expressing fundamental doubts about the viability of the church. These are not critics from the outside who don't like what the church is doing. These are connected leaders who don't like what they are experiencing in church.

This morning I spoke with a young pastor who has hopes for the future of the church but is currently captive to club members in the congregation he serves. "I wonder why I am still doing this," he sighed. He's only thirty years old! Some of us are asking this question after many more years of investment. If you are, I am writing to give legitimization to your concerns and doubts about the church culture, but also to give you hope. **I want to help you by giving you ways of starting conversations that might lead you out of church captivity and into the adventure you anticipated.**

This book is not for you if you are content with the way things are. You shouldn't read this if you are just hanging on to your church job because you don't know what else to do. You should put this book down now if you can't separate faith from institutional religion or if you can't contemplate a God larger than your experience of him in your church tradition. By all means do not read this book if you are looking to bolster your opinion that the