



5 Trends in 2016 That Will Change Church

By Carey Nieuwhof

There's little doubt culture is changing rapidly.

The question is, are you ready as a church leader?

As I shared in my new book, [*Lasting Impact*](#), if the change inside the church isn't equal to or greater than the change outside our walls, irrelevance is inevitable.

While that thought can be somewhat depressing, think of the flip side.

History belongs to the innovators. It belongs to the leaders who dared to dream, to try things no one else was trying, to experiment, to push the boundaries of what everyone else believed was possible.

As Henry Ford famously said, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."

Or as Steve Jobs put it, "A lot of the time people don't know what they want until you show it to them."

If you are prepared to tackle change with a fully engaged heart, you can help not only *your* church but maybe even *the* church better accomplish the mission before us.

So what's changing before our eyes? I see these five things becoming major players as 2016 unfolds.

1. Church online will become an advance, not just a supplement to or replacement for church. You can make the argument that online options that churches offer—everything from message podcasts to social media to full online streaming of Sunday services—have too often played the role of a supplement to or replacement of church for many Christians.

For a growing number of Christians, online church has become like TV preachers were to some Christians in the 1970s and 1980s who decided Sunday morning viewing at home was better than participation in a local church. Too tired or disengaged to go on Sunday? Just watch online.

Watch for church online to become far less of a supplement or replacement and far more of an advance into the lives of people who don't attend church at all.

Churches will get innovative and more intentional about reaching out into their communities using digital options as a point of first contact with unchurched people.

Think about it: Everybody who wasn't in your church last Sunday is probably on Facebook. And everybody who wasn't in your church last Sunday is probably online.

So go connect with them.

More than ever in 2016, online church will begin to open a door into the lives of people who will never walk through yours.

2. Preachers will preach less often. I've noticed that preachers are both getting better at communicating and speaking less often.

It wasn't that long ago that some preachers were writing 100 to 150 messages a year between Sunday mornings, Sunday nights and Wednesday nights.

Many Sunday evening and Wednesday night services have disappeared in the last decade.

But a growing number of preachers are realizing that preparing 52 excellent Sunday messages is increasingly difficult. Personally, I've cut back from writing 70 messages a year a decade ago to about 35 a year today.

The result? I'm a much *better* communicator.

What's creating all this change?

Simple. It's the wide availability of digital options. (See point No. 1 above.)

A decade ago, people who attended your church only really ever listened to you. Now they can hear *anyone* for free. And they do.

As a result, the local pastor is often being listened to alongside today's best communicators, and local pastors are opting for quality over quantity.

At some point, quantity and quality compete. And in today's digital landscape, innovative leaders are opting for quality.

3. Experience will trump content. Technology has made world-class content both portable and affordable.

Anyone can listen to the best communicators and best bands in the world for free or next to free on any device they own.

And they do.

The attractional churches of the '90s and 2000s built their congregations by offering excellent preaching and amazing music.

The challenge, of course, is that technology has disrupted that model.

What used to be both *exclusive* and something you had to experience *personally* is now portable and affordable thanks to your phone.

I'll blog on this trend again soon, but the short answer is that ultimately, experience will have to trump content.

Why? Because more people are asking this question: *If I can watch and listen on my phone, why would I come?*

If you don't have a good answer to that question as a church leader, you lose. Churches that cultivate a great *experience* will win.

What makes for a great experience?

- Community
- Serving one another in love
- A sense of mission and movement into a city or region
- Amazing kids experiences
- Actual caring, prayer and human interaction

Church leaders will have to sift through what can only happen in person and what can happen online.

Those who do will continue to grow. Those who don't, won't.

It's not that you shouldn't have an online presence. You should have a great one.

But you should also offer something in person you can never get online. This year, the most innovative leaders will get better at figuring out what those differences are.

4. Passion will beat polish. For many years, growing churches focused on doing church *better*.

Better music, better preaching, better buildings, better design, better everything drove much of the growth of the last few decades.

But as every leader knows, eventually *better* gets you diminishing returns.

One more moving light is probably not going to bring another 1,000 people to Jesus in the same way the first moving light did. (OK, moving lights never brought people to Jesus. But church was often so stale and bad in the '80s and '90s that moving lights were a hallmark of churches that innovated and as a result collectively baptized millions.)

The effective churches I've visited and seen recently by no means had the best lights, stage or production. Some had almost no stage and no lights, while others had a pretty decent package, but not nearly the level you see at some churches.

What did they all have in common? Passion.

When it comes to reaching the next generation, passion beats polish.

It's not that polish is bad, but I think it's increasingly trumped by a raw authenticity that exudes from leaders who will do whatever it takes to reach people with the gospel.

In the churches I've seen doing a superb job with young adults, smaller facilities and stage sets were more than compensated for by preachers, worship leaders and team members who exuded passion for the mission.

Passion beats polish.

If you want to read about the other four characteristics I see in churches doing a great job reaching 18- to 35-year-olds, [you can read that here](#).

5. Only the most engaged and the curious will attend. There is a shifting attendance pattern happening in every church, including growing churches and megachurches: Even people who attend church are attending less often.

I outlined [10 reasons why that's happening here](#), but I want to drill down on one in particular that I believe we'll see more of in 2016 than ever before.

In the past, if you were Christian, you went to church on a Sunday. It was almost automatic.

But it led to many disengaged Christians filling up seats on Sundays. They attended, but they didn't serve, didn't give and didn't invite anyone to come with them. They simply attended.

That group is increasingly disappearing, opting for online options (see point 1 above) or has [dropped out all together](#) as our culture becomes more and more post-Christian. This trend will only accelerate in 2016.

As a result, your weekend gatherings will increasingly be attended primarily by two groups: the engaged and the curious.

The engaged are people who are *on mission* with you. They give. They serve. They actually have unchurched friends they're bringing to church. They live out their faith far more than they sit in a back row and "absorb."

They'll be joined on the weekends by the curious. The curious are people who haven't made a decision to follow Jesus but they're open. They're exploring. They're asking questions. They're probably there because a friend invited them or because they found you online and wanted more.

When I look to the future, I see those two groups forming the core of the people who will continue to fuel attendance at your weekly gatherings.

So what does this mean for church leaders?

It means you need to stop valuing attendance more than you value engagement.

Ironically, if you value attendance over engagement, you will see declining attendance.

And if you want to raise attendance, raise engagement.

What Do You See?

Those are five big trends I see emerging in 2016.

I call them disruptive because they will ensure that things never stay the same. And for leaders, that should be exciting. It gives us the chance to innovate and actually advance our mission.

By seeing the trends clearly, you can respond to them.

After all, leaders who see the future can seize the future.

What disruptive trends do you see emerging in 2016?

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