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Scanning the Environment

What Is Going on Out There?

Far too many evangelical churches have assumed the ostrich position when it comes to knowing and understanding the world that Christ commands us to reach. They have buried their heads in the sand. They have no idea what is going on in this technologically driven twenty-first-century world. Some prefer not to know what is going on. They view this planet as a frightening, somewhat overwhelming, place in which to live, much less minister. Others are so preoccupied with their own internal problems that they have no time to think beyond the boundaries of their properties. Still others apply John's charge not to love the world or anything in it (1 John 2:15) to exploring and understanding this world. They want nothing to do with it, so they ignore it, presuming God's blessing.¹

Ministry Analysis
 Values Discovery
 Mission Development
Environmental Scan
 Vision Development
 Strategy Development
 Strategy Implementation
 Ministry Contingencies
 Ministry Evaluation

If our churches want to relate to and obey the Scriptures, they must spend much time exegeting the Scriptures (the skillful application of basic Bible study methods to the Bible to discover its meaning). If our churches want to relate to and reach our culture, they must spend time exegeting the culture as well as the Bible. In short, they must be culture watchers. We find culture watchers among God's people in the Old

Testament. The writer of 1 Chronicles provides his readers with the number of those who had decided to join David in his battles against Saul. When he gets to the men of Issachar, he describes them as those “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chron. 12:32). How can the church use the Scriptures to address the world that its people live and work in if it does not know what is going on? How can the church know



Figure 16

what to do if it does not know what is happening? Church culture watchers understand the times and know what their churches should do.

This chapter is the fourth step of strategic thinking and acting. It asks and answers the basic ministry question, What is going on out there? In the first step, ministry analysis, the leaders look inward and ask, What is going on in here? A number of church audits answered that question. In this step, the church looks outward. It seeks to discover what is taking place in the world around it and what the future may hold. Once begun, this step never ends but must continue throughout the life of the ministry. The church will always need to know what is taking place “out there” because that information affects what it does, especially its strategy (step six).

In his book, *On Becoming a Leader*, Warren Bennis reacts to our present state of recurring, disruptive change and writes, “For this reason, before anyone can learn to lead, he must learn something about this strange new world. Indeed, anyone who does not master this mercurial context will be mastered by it.”²² He calls this the “Gretzky Factor.” He explains, “Wayne Gretzky, the best hockey player of his generation, said that it’s not as important to know where the puck is now as to know where it will be. Leaders have the sense of where the culture is going to be, where the organization must be if it is to grow.”²³ What is true of the marketplace is true of the church. This chapter seeks to challenge and instruct leaders and churches in how to be self-confessed culture watchers, how to exegete the culture of a radically changing world and then respond strategically.

The rest of this chapter presents an environmental scan that consists of two parts based on 1 Chronicles 12:32. The first, Understanding the

Times, scans the general environment in search of what is going on in our changing world. The second, Knowing What the Church Should Do, scans the church environment in search of how God is working through churches around the world to minister in response to our changing world. This knowledge will, in turn, help churches think and act strategically to minister to and win their world or community for the Savior.

Understanding the Times

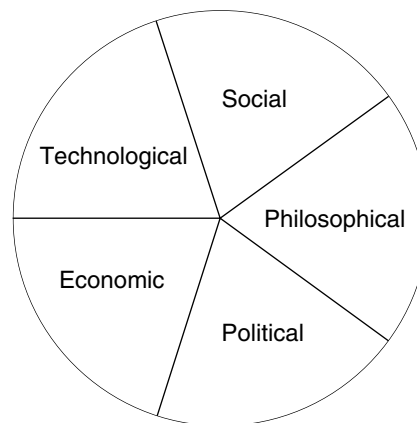
The general environment includes the world and all that is taking place in it, whether on an international, national, or local level. Since we now live in a global community, the church should track all three levels. Scanning the general environment involves examining five specific environments or subenvironments. The church accomplishes this with the help of various culture watchers in the congregation.

The General Environment

When the church exegetes the general environment, not only does it seek to discover what is taking place now, but it is looking for future trends or major shaping forces in five generic environments that will affect its future. They are the social, technological, economic, political, and philosophical environments.

Social Environment

The social environment is all that is taking place or will take place internationally, nationally, or locally in the social world that could affect the universal church in general and the local church in particular. It includes all people from every generation—Builders, Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, and others. (For example, a major social issue in North America over the next twenty-five years will be the gap between people of working age and the growing number of older, retired people.) The social environment encompasses



General Environment

Figure 17

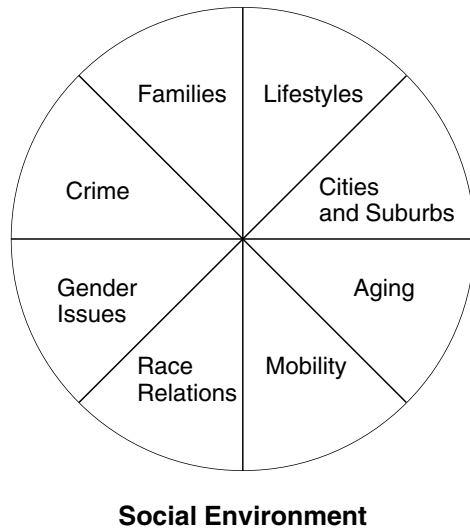


Figure 18

families, marriages, singles, divorce, alternative lifestyles, the cities and suburbs, urbanization, population growth and decline, mobility, ethnic groups, race relations, gender issues, crime, those who are in some way challenged (blind, deaf, hearing impaired, and others), lifestyle issues, collar color (blue and white collar issues), the birth rate, aging, dying, and other social factors.

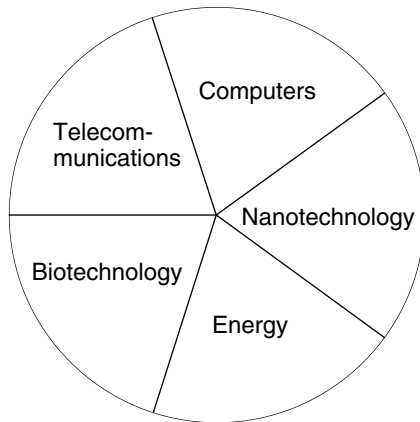
The church would be wise to gather enough information on this environment so that it is informed and up-to-date on what is happening and what will take place. Two most helpful tools are demographic and

psychographic studies. As we saw in chapter 3, demographics tells us who people are, and psychographics explains why they do what they do.

Strategic thinkers should probe each topic and trend with numerous questions. What are the characteristics of the generations? How are they different, and how will we reach and minister to them? Who are the future generations and what must we do now to reach and disciple them? How will we minister to the growing number of older, retired people? Where are our families struggling, and how can we serve them most effectively? How can we serve singles? How will the general population's movement from inner-city urban areas to the suburbs affect our ministry at our location? Can we realistically attract and combine different ethnic groups into one congregation? Do our present facilities make physically challenged congregants feel welcome?

Technological Environment

The technological environment is all that is taking place in the technological world, both now and in the future, that could affect the church. The technological revolution is at the forefront of change in the world. There are five basic technologies—computers, telecommunications, biotechnology, energy, and nanotechnology—that have vast impact on nearly every aspect of life, including the information revolution, transportation, electronics, entertainment, engineering, robotics, artificial intelligence, genet-



Technological Environment

Figure 19

ence call or interactive video conference so that board members would not have to leave their homes? How might these technologies keep the church in contact with its missionaries? How could the revolution in video technology affect preaching and teaching? Should churches incorporate computers into their Christian education programs? Should computer terminals be available to those who wish to take notes during the sermon or a Bible study? Could robots serve as Sunday school teaching assistants or teacher aides? Should churches install and then transform liquid-crystal-display windows into stained glass for effect?

Economic Environment

The economic environment includes all that is happening in the world of finances—international, national, and local economies. It encompasses debt, deficits, trade, taxes, inflation, downsizing, profit and nonprofit organizations, the poor versus the rich, purchasing power, budgeting, spending, saving, investing, debt retirement, and other economic factors.

Leaders who think strategically will need to ask several questions. What is the future of the church's tax-exempt status? What is the church's responsibility to its people who are affected by downsizing? Should the churches replace the Social Security system in meeting the social and economic needs of Americans? What should churches do if Social Security goes bust? As the gap between them increases, what are the respon-

ics, and medicine. In the area of medicine and genetics, for example, Michael Fossel, author of *Reversing Human Aging*, holds that humans are on the verge of achieving indefinite life spans, suggesting a range of hundreds of years of additional life.⁴

Culture watchers should be asking, How will these technological advances help or hinder the work of the ministry? How can the new communication technology, such as e-mail, cellular phones, faxes, and other such devices, help the church? Would it be possible to have board meetings using a confer-

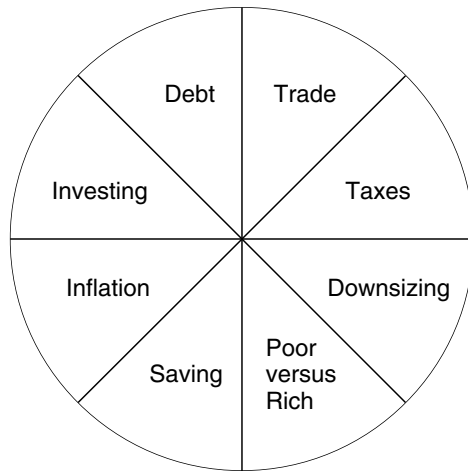
**Economic Environment**

Figure 20

sibilities of rich Christians toward poor Christians? Is it okay for a Christian to be wealthy? Is it okay for a church to be wealthy? Should wealthy congregations subsidize poor congregations? What are the new trends in raising funds for ministries and building programs? Should churches break even every year or should they try to save and invest their funds? Should churches start credit unions to loan money to other congregations as well as to their own people? Should they charge them interest?

Political Environment

The political environment is all that takes place in the political and legal arenas. It includes legislation, the courts, political candidating, law enforcement, civil rights, activism, the environment, church-state issues, zoning, wills, church discipline, litigation, hiring and firing, facilities issues, and other factors that can affect the church.

Strategic planners might ask the following: Should the church become more involved in politics? How should it be involved? If the church should relocate and build a new facility or add to the present facility, what environmental obstacles might it face? What can the church do now to protect itself against future lawsuits? As the country shifts from an age of belief to one of unbelief and becomes less Christian, what kind of treatment can churches expect from the legal and justice systems? What zoning and environmental restrictions will be established that churches will encounter over the next few years?

Philosophical Environment

The philosophical environment concerns all that is taking place in the philosophical realm, including religion and history. It encompasses such areas as worldviews, religions, cults, secularization, pluralization, privatization, relativism, naturalism, pragmatism, the influence of the church, church and unchurched peoples, and other related factors.

**Political Environment**

Figure 21

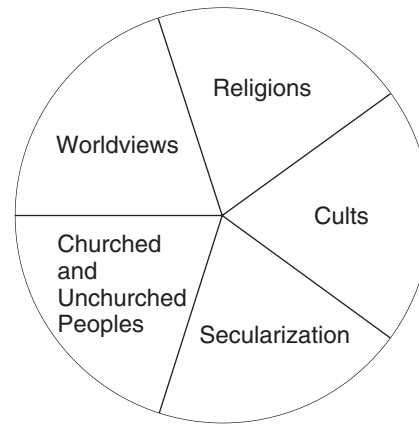
**Philosophical Environment**

Figure 22

Cultural exegetes should ask various questions such as: How will the growth of the number of unchurched and increasing secularization affect the future of the church in North America? What changes will the church have to make to reach the unchurched and unreached people groups? What effects will increasing pluralization have on the church? How will churches reach those who embrace the new postmodern worldview? How can churches counteract the growth of new religions and cults? What role does church planting play in the future of the church around the world?

Culture Watchers

The five environments supply the raw material that strategic thinkers exegete or explore, discovering what is happening and looking for trends and shaping events. But who are the culture watchers and how do they collect and analyze all that information?

Who Watches the Culture?

The senior pastor and his staff should be culture watchers. They need to remain as current with what is taking place in the world or general environment as possible. This involves reading the daily paper, watching the news, and visiting the local newsstand to scan the various peri-

odicals and new books. Church leaders should subscribe to a magazine or two that deals with current events and culture. And maintaining up-to-date folders for each of the environments covered above is essential to effective culture watchers.

The pastor should not depend on himself or his staff alone for this information. A wise pastor will recruit other culture watchers from the congregation. Most congregations have a number of people who attempt to keep current on what is taking place in the world. Not only can a number of congregational culture watchers scan more material than a pastor or his staff, they will probably have an advantage over the church staff because they have more daily contact with the people of the world.

How Do They Watch the Culture?

In the book *Flight of the Buffalo*, James Belasco and Ralph Stayer suggest a system called scan, clip, and review that they borrowed from the CIA.⁵ Academic circles know this system as content analysis. Using this idea, people in the church who have agreed to be culture watchers scan newspapers and a certain number of periodicals and books every month. Each clips articles that he or she deems important to what is taking place now and what signals future trends and shaping events and collects them in a file folder. Some culture watchers could review books by futurists such as John Naisbitt, Faith Popcorn, and Alvin Toffler. They are looking for any information that has the potential to affect the church now or in the future, no matter how far-fetched it may seem.

Once a month they could meet at lunch to review what they have found. At this time, they would look for recurring trends and common themes, such as the growing number of unchurched people or the need for strong family values. They would also eliminate all but what they think is the most important material. Then once a quarter they would bring this information to the pastor and staff, who would ask themselves the following three questions:

1. What are the one, two, or three future events that will have the greatest impact on our church?
2. What will happen when those events occur?
3. What can we do now to prepare for them?⁶

Knowing What the Church Should Do

Understanding our times is only half the battle. The rest is determining what the church should do in response to what is happening in our



**Job Description:
Congregational Culture Watcher**

- Regularly scan, clip, and review newspapers, journals, and books
- Meet monthly to review findings
- Meet quarterly with staff to present findings

times. Remember, the men of Issachar not only understood the times, they knew what Israel should do (1 Chron. 12:32). The information about the current culture will strongly influence the church's strategy (step 6, see chapter 8). Knowing what the church should do is part two of the environmental scan. It involves scanning the church world internationally, nationally, and locally to see what God is doing.

The Church Environments

In spite of growing secularization, God is still working in our world. In Matthew 16:18, the Savior says he will build the church and not even the gates of Hades will overcome it. The church scan simply scans the churches all around the world and asks, What is God doing? What strategies and programs is he using to minister to people who live in this changing world and are affected by it? This is lateral learning. I call it "cross-pollination" or church lateral learning "bumblebee style." Each local church can look at its particular circumstances as affected by our world and then ask, What specifically are other churches in the community, the state, the region, the country, or in some other part of the world doing that could help us minister more effectively in our situation?

Community Churches

Broadly speaking, community churches are those located in your neighborhood, town, or metropolitan area. You should be aware of them and study those that God is blessing. Perhaps some will hold church conferences in which they present the way they conduct their ministry. They will be your best sources of information because they are in your part of the world and may have more in common with you than any churches in other places. In my file, I have collected information, for example, on

Generation X, African American and Hispanic churches, as well as Anglo congregations located in the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex.

State Churches

State churches are those located in the same state or province that your church is in. Here you ask, What churches in this state is God blessing? They will be relatively close, so you can visit these churches to observe as well as read about what they are doing. You can interview leaders, talk to workers, and observe their programs firsthand.

Regional Churches

Regional churches are those located in the same large geographic area. Churches located in these areas may have more in common than they would with those in other regions. For example, the Pacific Northwest has more unchurched people than the rest of America. Churches in the Northwest thus have a common problem—What can we do to reach our higher proportion of unchurched people? What can we learn from one another?

National Churches

National churches are those located in the same country. They may be similar to your church or very different. What they share is participation in the same country and political system, and probably the same language.

International Churches

Churches located in one country may learn much from churches in other countries. For a long time, international Christians traveled to America to study in its seminaries and to learn from its great churches that have sent missionaries all over the world. However, currently the largest churches are located outside North America. For example, Korea has six churches with more than thirty thousand members in each. Santa Fe, Argentina, has one church of eighty thousand. Buenos Aires has a church of seventy thousand. Lagos, Nigeria, has a church of seventy thousand. Santiago, Chile, has one of fifty thousand, and Manila in the Philippines has one of thirty-five thousand. The largest church in America, Willow Creek Community Church, has around fifteen to sixteen thousand people. Clearly the focal point of Christianity has shifted away from Europe and America to the third world.

The question we must ask is, What can we learn from these international churches? What are they doing to reach so many people? The largest

church in the world, Yoido Central Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, ministers primarily through small-group communities. Are small-group ministries the key to reaching more people for Christ? It is difficult to learn from international churches, however, because little information on what they are doing is available.

Emerging Characteristics

As I have studied churches in North America and beyond, I have noted some fairly common emerging characteristics of churches that God has blessed

in the 1990s and now early in the twenty-first century. One is ministry through small groups, especially in larger churches. The slogan in these churches often is “the bigger we get, the smaller we get.” A second characteristic is the use of contemporary Christian music in the worship service. What we must remember, however, is that the adjective *contemporary* is relative. What is contemporary today is traditional tomorrow. There is often a return to the arts in these churches. It is common to find churches ministering through drama, orchestral music, and even dance. Churches are also offering choices or options in terms of their programming because people want choices in the churches they attend. Strong children’s and youth ministries are present in many of the churches God is blessing. Churched and unchurched people alike demand quality programs for their children. Many churches have become more evangelistic and try to minister to seekers. Another characteristic of these churches is growing lay involvement. Churches are implementing programs that help members discover their divine designs, train for ministry, and then deploy. There is a trend away from formal dress to a more casual style. An increasing number of pastors, staff, and men in the congregation are not wearing coats and ties at services. Women are comfortable in slacks, and both men and women wear shorts in some churches.

Some additional characteristics of churches God is blessing are an emphasis on life change, nondenominationalism, culturally indigenous ministries, an acceptance of creativity and innovation, the use of marketing techniques, an accepting and nonthreatening environment, indige-



Church Environment

Figure 23

nous and often nonseminary-trained staff, visionary and proactive pastors, ministry excellence, and practical preaching that addresses people's needs.

Christian Schwarz has written *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*. In this book he claims to present the results of a study of more than one thousand churches in thirty-two countries on five continents. That would make it the most comprehensive study ever conducted on the causes of church growth.⁷ Schwarz found that growing, healthy churches around the world exhibited eight characteristics. They have an empowering leadership that equips, supports, motivates, and mentors other Christians for ministry. They have a gift-oriented ministry that emphasizes Christians serving in their areas of giftedness under the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a passionate spirituality that asks, "Are the Christians in this church 'on fire'? Do they live committed lives and practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm?" These churches have functional structures that affect how the church is organized. There is an inspiring worship service that leads to an inspiring worship experience. Holistic small groups help Christians study the Bible and learn to serve others. These churches participate in need-oriented evangelism—they focus on the questions and needs of non-Christians. Showing hospitality, laughing together, being aware of personal problems, and sharing in loving relationships are common. Schwarz further comments that no one single factor leads to growth, rather it is the interplay of all eight characteristics.⁸

A Warning

Churches must be careful, however, not simply to find a church somewhere that God is using and blessing and adopt the model in its entirety. I believe that no church should mimic entirely what another church is doing. This is because each church has unique leaders who minister in different ways with their personal gifts in churches that are located in different communities around the world. These churches, in turn, serve through people who, themselves, have unique gifts and talents. No two churches are alike. Every church is wonderfully unique. God sovereignly directed this diversity because it takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people.

Mimicking other churches is the mistake that numerous new-paradigm churches made in the 1980s and 1990s. They tried to be like Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago or Saddleback Valley Community Church near Los Angeles. When they failed, they did not understand why. They wondered, *If God is blessing them using their strategies, why did he not bless us when we copied those same strategies?*



Emerging Characteristics of Twenty-first-Century Churches

- Small-group ministries
- Contemporary Christian music and worship
- Use of the arts in worship
- Programming options
- Strong children's and youth ministries
- Increased evangelism
- Growing lay involvement
- Casual dress
- Emphasis on life change
- Nondenominationalism
- Culturally indigenous ministries
- Creativity and innovation
- Use of marketing techniques, such as mailers
- Accepting and nonthreatening environment
- Nonseminary-trained staff
- Visionary and proactive pastors
- Ministry excellence
- Practical preaching

What leaders and churches should be asking is, What are churches like Willow Creek, Saddleback, and others doing that God might use and bless in our communities given our circumstances? They probably have little in common with those churches but might be able to adopt one or two programs they are sure will work. They may decide to take a risk and adopt others they aren't so sure of. Either way, the church and its leadership understand what they are doing as they seek to reach their area of the world for Christ.

The Church Watchers

The culture watchers consist of staff and people from the congregation. However, the church watchers are more likely to be staff and congregants who have a high interest and involvement in ministry. They are those with their fingers on the ministry pulse, who are aware of what is taking place in churches around the world as well as at home. Most often they are pastors and staff people who are exposed to this kind of information through seminars and professional books and periodicals.

They may use the same methods as for gathering information about the general environment. The primary method is the scan, clip, and review



Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Functional structures
- Inspiring worship services
- Holistic small groups
- Need-oriented evangelism
- Loving relationships

process presented earlier. The senior pastor and those on staff not only attend church conferences, but they scan as many periodicals and books as possible. Helpful periodicals are *Christianity Today*, *Leadership*, and missions bulletins. Occasionally someone will write a book that supplies much information, such as Russell Chandler's *Racing toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future*.⁹ In addition, books written by missiologists can provide information on the international scene.

Recording and Reporting the Information

As church leaders observe trends that affect the general environment and the church and discover how churches at home and abroad are addressing these trends, they will use this information in various ways to make decisions about the church's future direction. They may develop various scenarios of what could happen and how to respond in each case, using the scenario concept from chapter 1 and appendix B as a strategizing tool.

Church watchers need a convenient way to record and communicate the information they gather, for their own use and the use of the congregation.

I record my findings on a piece of paper marked off in two columns. The left column is labeled "Understanding Our Times" and the right column is "What the Church Must Do."¹⁰ For practical purposes and ease of communication, the leadership will need to identify only the primary or most important trends and controlling factors that they observe. I suggest that they limit them to five or six over a period of one to five years. These they write in the left column. In the right column list how the leadership has decided that the church will respond to the trends.

The following is a sample format that Rick Warren presented at a meeting of the California Southern Baptist Convention:

Agenda for a Decade of Destiny
California Southern Baptist Convention
Rick Warren

“The men of Issachar understood the time
And they knew what Israel should do.”

1 Chronicles 12:32

I. Understanding Our Times

1. Our state is becoming more diverse.
2. The rate of change is increasing.
3. Time is becoming more important than money.
4. Our population is growing older.

II. What We Must Do

1. We must develop multiple styles of ministry. “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” 1 Cor. 9:22
2. We must change methods without changing our message. (Jesus) “New wine must be poured into new wineskins.” Luke 5:38
3. We must streamline our schedules and structures. “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.” Eph. 5:15–16 (NASB)
4. We must mobilize mature adults for ministry. “God has given each of you some special abilities; be sure to use them to help each other, passing on to others God’s many kinds of blessings.” 1 Peter 4:10 (LB)

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5. The church's influence is declining.

5. We must model Christian discipleship. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." Phil. 2:4-5

I suggest that leaders update this scan as major trends similar to those reflected in Warren's format surface in their cultural environment locally or nationally.

Finally, these trends and factors will affect leaders' visions. That is why I place the environmental scan before the vision in the strategic planning process. The scan provides the current cultural context to which the vision responds.

Questions for Analysis and Discussion

1. Name one or two social trends that could have a major impact on your church. What are one or two technological forces that might affect the ministry? Identify one or two economic trends that could influence the church.

2. Name several political forces that could have a significant impact on your church. What are some philosophy-shaping events that could affect your ministry?

3. Identify the most important five or six trends and forces given in your answers to the two questions above.

4. Who on the church's staff reads broadly? What are they reading and why? Who would be good culture watchers?

5. Who in your church reads broadly? What books do they read? What periodicals are they reading? Who would make good culture watchers?

6. Identify some churches that God is blessing in the international, national, and regional arenas. What are some trends that characterize

these churches? Which trends would help your church have a greater impact for God?

7. Which churches in your state or community is God blessing? How is he blessing them? What are they doing that could help your ministry?

8. Are you attempting to mimic or pattern your church after another church's ministry? If yes, which church? If no, why not? If yes, why might this be harmful? Which church are you tempted to mimic?

9. What could your church do to respond to the five or six forces that you identified in question 3?