

# THE LAW OF CONTEXT: TWO REVOLUTIONS BREAKING UP THE BIG-BOX CHURCH

BY WILL MANCINI AND CORY HARTMAN

In the chapter of Future Church on the Law of Context, we observed how the trend toward local cuisine resembles a fresh awareness that the local church has to truly be local to be effective in the mission of God. We also contrasted this local focus with the big-box model of church that has been so influential since the new permission era. Here we want to go deeper to talk about how sweeping changes in community structures once made the big box the logical ministry model and how both the digital revolution and new urban development priorities are pushing it past peak.

## THE TECHNOLOGY THAT BIRTHED BIG-BOX CHURCH

The twentieth century witnessed a vast transformation when the great majority of families could afford an automobile for the first time. Later, when GIs came home from World War II, married, and launched the Baby Boom, these new families needed places to live. Thanks to the car, suburban colonies threaded by limited-access highways sprang up on the fringes of American cities to accommodate the demand, and the footprint of metropolitan areas mushroomed in size.

The new suburbs and exurbs came to resemble each other no matter where they were located, from the ranch houses of the 1950s to the McMansions of the 1990s. Soon, local stores, restaurants, and hotels were enveloped by regional chains and in turn national and multinational ones. In time, specialty retail businesses were smothered by big box stores. Downtowns withered as shopping malls, strip malls, and shopping plazas proliferated.

It got to the point that you could leave your suburban home for a suburban airport, fly to another suburban airport halfway across the continent, drive around suburbs there, and see mile after numbing mile the same surroundings as the place you left. James Howard Kunstler calls it “the geography of nowhere.”<sup>1</sup>

As suburbs exhibited the geography of nowhere, pastors got to work building the church of nowhere in those suburbs. As a result of their success, the rootless Christian family from any metro area, region, or even nation could anonymously breeze into a church as safely familiar as the one in the suburb they just moved from.

### THE TECHNOLOGY THAT'S BREAKING BIG-BOX CHURCH

For decades, churches have been able to succeed by the big-box blueprint, because it fit the way society and the economy at large were structured. Yet now those are rapidly changing, which forces churches to make a choice in how they adapt.

Technology is the stuff we make that makes us, none more profoundly than advancements in transportation and communication. The automobile and the airplane were invented in the early twentieth century, but it was not until we organized our economy and communities around them in the middle part of the century that our way of life (and church) permanently changed. Likewise, the microprocessor and the internet were invented in the mid-twentieth century, but it was not until recently that we began organizing the world around them and our lives changed again.

These latter technologies have pushed the geography of nowhere to an extreme we could not have imagined, especially with respect to our economy. With each passing year, life as a worker, as a seller, and above all as a buyer is more detached from where our bodies are located. To consume what you want, it does not matter where you are. With a swipe and a tap from anywhere, you get the product you want at the price you want.

Pragmatic church leaders shaped by the geography of nowhere recognize the threat this poses to their brick-and-mortar enterprises, which dramatically intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic, which struck North America in 2020. The detachment of service from location is one of the biggest reasons for the attendance frequency crisis: people expect to get what they want without going anywhere, including to church. For this reason, even before the pandemic, many churches began following retailers' lead by creating a full-service digital interface so that a curious person can get as much out of the church as they want online without leaving home. The hope was that this would eventually lead the prospect into the church building.

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We celebrate the opportunity of digital tools; in fact, we are very positive about the ways they can accelerate disciple-making in Future Church when they are done well. They can facilitate connection, communication and even intimacy and accountability for highly mobile Christ followers. They can mobilize worship services on Sunday morning in soccer fields and parks. They can help nourish people who are homebound due to physical or mental illness. They can serve as sharable "neotraits" in relationships between believers and unbelievers. They can enable new ways of giving and

investing in kingdom work. They can augment leadership development under the coaching of a trainer.

Yet when online church functions as content delivery with no connection to a local community, the church has been radically severed from its context. Think about it: online church is the logical extension of the church of nowhere.

### THE NEW URBANISM AND THE REBIRTH OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

While the tide of the digital revolution continues rising, however, another movement has been growing that has the potential to change our lives in the opposite direction.

However, the seeds of a counterrevolution in urban planning were planted in the 1980s. The “new urbanism” heralded an attempt to do twenty-first-century development with a nineteenth-century feel. Little by little over the ensuing decades, hollowed-out cities started reinvesting in their downtowns. New buildings featured more architectural embellishments and older construction materials (such as brick and stucco) in their facades. They were set against the street with limited parking behind rather than acres of spaces in front. Architecture began reflecting the peculiar character of its region, culture, and ecology rather than looking the same as everywhere else. Prime right-of-ways were given to pedestrians, cyclists, and mass transit. Regional planners began putting effort toward making smaller, integrated local communities rather than facilitating bland sprawl of segregated residential and commercial zones. All these changes were intended to make communities livable again—indeed, to make them feel like communities.

When online church functions as content delivery with no connection to a local community, it is the logical extension of the church of nowhere.

The contrary movements of the digital revolution and the new urbanism are evidence of a deep inner conflict in our society. On the one side is consumption: we want to get what we want as conveniently and inexpensively as possible. The digital revolution delivers on that. But on the other side is community. Deep down we somehow know that if life is only consumption, it isn't much of a life; the market cannot meet all our needs, no matter how efficient it gets. The new urbanism responds to a desire for beauty, uniqueness, and human touch that is part of the image of God in everyone, and our artificial world cannot erase it.

Both the digital revolution and the new urbanism meet genuine needs. Neither of them is inherently wicked or righteous. Yet the profound question for the church is which movement it naturally belongs to. Does the gospel primarily advertise a product to consume or a community to join? Is the church mainly a marketplace or a meeting-place?

Jesus answered our question with his relationship to the temple. Twice he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple courtyard and drove out the merchandise, proclaiming, “Stop turning my Father’s house into a market,” and, “My house will be a house of prayer” (Luke 19:45–46; John 2:13–16). Then, after his ascension, his followers met in the temple courtyard to pray while also breaking bread in homes every day (Acts 2:42, 46). The apostles and the disciples they led did not act like peddlers but like priests.

Future Church is not a spiritual Walmart, a “phygital” fusion of online and brick-and-mortar sales channels. It is the assembly of the saints, the city of God, radically local, gathering seamlessly both in flesh and blood and camera to screen not just Sunday but everyday.

It took a generation of new urban planning thinking before tired communities started becoming local again. We believe that now is the time for the latest generation of ministry thinking to make the church local as well. In their book **Slow Church**, C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison capture this new way of thinking beautifully when they write,

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One of the keys to understanding Slow Church is captured in the seventeenth-century French phrase *le goût de terroir*, which can be translated “the taste of the place.” Carlo Petrini, the cofounder of Slow Food, writes often about *terroir* as “the combination of natural factors (soil, water, slope, height above sea level, vegetation, microclimate) and human ones (tradition and practice and cultivation) that gives a unique character to each small agricultural locality and the food grown, raised, made, and cooked there.” Thus, a Pinot noir from Oregon’s Willamette Valley takes on the taste and texture of the grape, the soil, the barrel and the late frost. In the same way, Slow Church is rooted in the natural, human and spiritual cultures of a particular place. It is a distinctively local expression of the global body of Christ. “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (Jn 1:14 The Message).<sup>2</sup>



### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James Howard Kunstler, **The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape** (New York: Touchstone, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, **Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus** (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 42–43.