

**Entrepreneurial Evangelical Ecclesiology:  
Towards a Critical Evaluation of the Willow Creek  
Seeker-Sensitive Model**

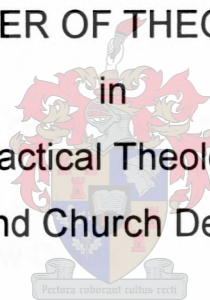
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## Declaration

I the undersigned hereby declare that the work contained in this study is my own original work and has not previously, in its entirety or in part, been submitted to any university for a degree.

AD Cameron

March 2001

## Abstract

Willow Creek's celebrated seeker-sensitive model ostensibly offers an alluring alternative ecclesiology for many congregations seeking a different way to 'do church' viz an attractive communication ambience and an effective process of persuasion. It reflects both the strengths of evangelical entrepreneurial ecclesiology as well as the weaknesses of first generation independent ecclesiology. It espouses a pragmatic, populist approach, reliant on managerial, therapeutic and marketing techniques. Whilst there is much to commend in the Willow Creek model, uncritical imitation of the attempt to reach a secularized post-modern North American society results in unwitting theological reductionism and cultural accommodation of the gospel not least in the following respects: The temptation of image places a premium on performance and appearance. The allure of psychology distorts the ethical framework of Willow Creek. The stress on marketing and measurable results unduly shapes the gospel. A 'user-friendly' canon within a canon results in a minimalist dualism. A marginalization of theology leads to baptised pragmatism and a deprecation of truth. The resultant re-imaged ministry model owes more to contemporary business methodology than it does to the historic theological magisterium of the church.

## Opsomming

Willow Creek se beroemde soekersensitiewe model bied klaarblyklik 'n aanloklike alternatiewe ekklesiologie vir baie gemeentes wat 'n ander manier van 'kerk-doen' soek, aan, te wete, 'n aantreklike kommunikasie ambience en 'n doeltreffende oortuigings proses. Dit weerspieel beide die sterkte van evangeliesgesinde ondernemings-eklesiologie so wel as die swakheid van eerste geslag onafhanklike ekklesiologie. Dit omhels 'n pragmatiese populis benadering vertrouend op bestuurs-, terapeutiese- en bemarkingstegnieke. Alhoewel daar baie in die Willow Creek model is wat aanbevelingswaardig is, kan onkritiese navolging van die poging om 'n sekulariseerde post-moderne Noord Amerikaanse samelewing te bereik, eindig in 'n onbewuste teologiese reduksie en kulturele aanpassing van die evangelie, ten minste in die volgende opsigte, te wete: die versoeking van beeld plaas 'n premie op vertoon en voorkoms; die aantreklikheid van sielkunde verdraai die etiese raamwerk van Willow Creek; die klem op bemarking en meetbare resultate vorm uiteindelik die evangelie; 'n verbruikervriendelike kanon binne 'n kanon lei tot 'n minimalistiese dualisme; die vermindering van teologie lei tot 'gedoopte' pragmatisme en afkeuring van die waarheid. Gevolglik het die nuwe beeld van die bedieningspraktyk skuld meer te danke aan eietydse besigheidsmetodes as die historiese magisterium van die kerk.

## Preface

It is with some ambivalence that I attempt this critical analysis.

Academia is based upon the premise of detached neutrality and dispassionate assessment. However, practical theology - even more so ecclesiology - is never simply a descriptive discipline. It invites participation. So I had better nail my colours to the mast.

The first time I read *Rediscovering Church* by Lynne and Bill Hybels, particularly the former's poignant story of the church's infancy, I found myself profoundly affected. I like to believe that it was not mere sentimentality; rather the profound conviction that God blesses passionate mistakes more than dispassionate correctness born of theological orthodoxy gone to seed.

I come from Reformed stock where excess is invariably regarded as suspect, where grace is hardly extravagant, where things are done decently and in order. Whilst profoundly grateful for one's heritage, at time one's experience is that of the elder brother, safe and secure; whilst it is the younger brother who, for all his excesses, plumbs the depths of prodigal grace.

Willow Creek is based upon the epistemological preference for the unchurched. Hybels et al may well be right. Their concerns are hardly those of the nuanced niceties of a theological critique. They are passionate practitioners hardly reflective onlookers. They may well be bemused that one should attempt such a critique - like a shrimp assessing a whale - when their rollicking ride requires such creative energy and stamina simply to stay in the saddle.

Alan Cameron  
Epiphany 2001



## Chapter One : Introduction

The following critical analysis of the Willow Creek seeker-sensitive model is prompted by a two-fold premise viz

- A theological quest in that Bellville Presbyterian Church (hereafter referred to as BPC), of which the writer has been colleague minister since 30 November 1989, is presently engaged in a re-assessment of its ministry practice. The commitment to *ecclesia reformata, ecclesia semper reformanda* assumes a continual process of reformation and contextual sensitivity, lest slavish repetition of past solutions leads to a theological hardening of the arteries and an ossified tradition.
- A pragmatic quest in that a proposed church plant in Oude Westhof, Tygerberg, reflects a similar demographic profile, in a South African context, to that of Willow Creek Community Church's celebrated 'baby boomer' target market in South Barrington, Illinois.

The purpose of the study is to ascertain whether the Willow Creek model is viable in the context of BPC. As such the task will be limited to an analysis of the model. Although a detailed strategic plan lies beyond the scope of this study, strategy will be alluded to in the concluding chapter.

The first quest arises from the perception that the congregation's present ministry practice needs to be revised, given a changing community context. The congregation is situated on the edge of the former Central Business District of Bellville. The business heart has shifted to the Tygervalley Corridor some 7 kms away. A resultant depressed ambience has evidenced increased 'crime and grime' surrounding the church.

The second quest arises from reservations as to whether the ministry praxis of Willow Creek - a sophisticated business model committed to efficiency and excellence - is

suitable to BPC's context given the strictures posed by Burger (1999:38,39):

Rondom die verskynsel van die sogenaamde 'Megachurches' in die VSA is daar ook konstant nuwe publikasies. Hierdie publikasies is baie sterk praktyk-gerig en deel gewoonlik die 'suksesresep' van die gemente aan ander mee. In die verband dink 'n mens aan ...Bill Hybels se *Willow Creek Community Church*.

Die meeste van die boeke is teologies baie lig en oppervlakkig en deur hulle eensydigheid mislei hulle oorywerige navolgers dalk meer as wat hulle werklik help... Die patroon wat 'n mens redelik algemeen in die soort publikasie aantref, is dat een of twee nuwe bedieningsmoontlikhede wat iewers 'gewerk' het, aangryp word. Die verleidelike van die boeke is dat die plan gewoonlik maklik implementeerbaar lyk en dat dit 'n paar maande lank selfs kan lyk of dit vrugte afwerp - totdat die gemeente-sisteem op 'n ander plek begin kraak. Dit is die soort komplikasies wat ontwikkel as jy kort en maklik antwoorde soek vir ingewikkelde probleme.

Schreiter describes congregations as unique social constructs in that

... they are focussed on God, in whom they live, move and have their being. Their members congregate to remember how God has acted in the history of the world and in their own lives. They congregate to discern what is happening to them and to the world today, and to listen for where God is leading them (Ammerman 1998:23).

As such Dietterich eloquently pleads for a pneumocratic model (rule of the holy Spirit) as opposed to autocratic or democratic rule in the church since the gift of discernment is dispersed throughout the whole body through the illumination and empowerment of the Spirit.

... the democratic process of one person, one vote is considered the best way to make decisions. Yet the presuppositions are seldom examined... The ecclesial practice of discernment in missional communities indicated a different approach. Discernment is a process of sorting, distinguishing, evaluating, and sifting among competing stimuli, demands, longings, desires, needs and influences, in order to determine which are of God and which are not. To discern is to prove or test 'what is of the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.' (Rom 12:2) Thus the goal of decision making in the church is not simply to discover the will of the community, but instead to discern

together the will of God... Discernment requires this guidance because God acts and speaks in and through the ambiguous circumstances of worldly life. Thus the church is called to 'test the spirits to see whether they are from God' (1Jn 4:1) through cautious, attentive and humble discernment... that articulates and correlates with listening, hearing, testing, planning and obeying together in the power of the Holy Spirit (Guder 1998:172).

Hendriks concurs

A critical correlational hermeneutic calls for discernment... a process in which the faith community depends on the Holy Spirit's initiative to lead the community in discovering God's will in order to take part in God's missional praxis.

Theology can only be done from within the community of the faithful. This implies that everyone within that community has a direct role or place in the process of discernment (Hendriks 2000:62,63).

## 1.1 The Research Problem and Hypothesis

### 1.1.1 The Problem Stated

*Given the desire for a change in ministry practice at Bellville Presbyterian Church, is the Willow Creek seeker sensitive model a viable option for the congregation?*

Reliant upon secondary sources, notably Pritchard (1996) and Wells (1993, 1994, 1998) one will attempt

- an engagement of the North American evangelical theological tradition and sub-culture
- a critical reflection, within the parametres of the evangelical tradition and sub-culture from a Reformed confessional perspective.

### 1.1.2 Hypothesis

- *Willow Creek reflects both the strengths of Evangelical Entrepreneurial Ecclesiology and the weaknesses of first generation independent ecclesiology.*
- *Willow Creek espouses a pragmatic, populist approach, reliant on managerial, therapeutic and marketing techniques.*
- *Whilst there is much to commend in the Willow Creek model, uncritical imitation of the attempt to reach a secularized post-modern North American society, in a South African context, results in unwitting theological reductionism and cultural accommodation of the gospel.*

### 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of the study is two-fold

- A personal need to assess the nature of seeker- sensitive ecclesiology and the requisite professionalised role of ministerial leadership the model espouses. Given the writer's painful awareness of his own inadequacies and shortcomings he has taken heart from the divine paradox of power through weakness (2Cor 12:9) and the Pauline experience of 'weakness and fear, and much trembling' (1Cor2:3) He is of the belief that the re-imaged ministerial role diminishes grace as a subtle form of neo-pelagianism, reminiscent of the 'super-apostles' of Corinth and Luther's 'theologians of glory'.
- A general need to offer an alternative ecclesiology and ministerial role for those tempted to embrace a more efficient and professional way to 'do church' as the writer shares Peterson's concern that pastors are not first and foremost called to 'run churches'. The revised model effectively denies the primacy of ministerial 'being functions' in favour of pragmatic 'doing functions'.

### 1.3 Research Methodology

Ammerman et al (1998:9) profer the invitation

to move beyond technical fixes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic life that animates each individual congregation.

To this end one's study needs to be placed in a theological context lest it be overtaken by pragmatic concerns and utilitarian strategies. The descriptive and reflective analysis is not mere prolegomena to theology but an integral part of the theological process.

Anselm's classic definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding' is qualified by Schreier.

Faith seeking understanding, then, is about... discernment, worship, making sense of our lives, and transformative action. Seen in this light, theology is more than an added value that a congregation might seek when everything else is in place. It is really at the heart of the life of the congregation... affirming identity, dealing with change, and making decisions about the future... How your congregation understands itself and how it decides to move forward is informed by how it sees God at work (Ammerman 1998:23,24).

Theology rescues a congregation from pragmatic expediency and earths it in its religious ethos and tradition. It will offer the congregation

a distinctive edge as it discovers its defining moments from the past and discerns whether those moments engage well the challenges of today (Ammerman 1998:24).

Recently a new way of theologising has emerged viz Practical Theology. Schreier elucidates:

Rather than moving from faith to life (theory to practice), it moves from life to faith and then back to life (practice to theory to practice) Practical theology begins therefore by describing the situation of the congregation and then correlates that situation with the

faith and the beliefs of the congregation. From there, practical theology moves back to the life of the congregation to a refocused practice (Ammerman 1998:25).

Accordingly, theology can never be simply abstract. It is always grounded in a context, and that context, in turn, is laden with the values and perspectives of the observer.

Various models have been proposed with regard to the task of practical theology. Schreiter, following Groome's five 'moves' and Browning's four 'movements', suggests the following sequence:

- Describing the congregation's corporate culture i.e.  
Groome: *naming the present praxis*  
Browning : *descriptive theology*
- Examining the historic resources of one's faith tradition i.e.  
Groome: *making accessible the Christian story and vision*
- Critical dialogue between historic sources and current situation i.e.  
Groome: *dialectical hermeneutic* whereby two sets of stories interpret each other and offer each other new insights and perspectives
- Action viz a renewed practice and faith i.e.  
Browning: *strategic practical theology.*

Schreiter concludes that congregational theology is both process and product:

The end result is not intended to be only a demographic, sociological, or financial profile. It is, rather a picture of a living community that struggles to be faithful to its understanding of God and God's purposes for the congregation and for the world (Ammerman 1998:27).

Fowler (1994:4) defines practical theology in the following terms:

Critical and constructive reflection by communities of faith  
Carried on consistently in the context of their praxis'  
Drawing on their *interpretations* of normative sources from Scripture and tradition  
In response to their *interpretations* of the emergent challenges and situations they face,  
Leading to ongoing modifications and transformations of their *practices*  
In order to be more adequately responsive  
To their *interpretations* of the *shape of God's call to partnership*.

Practical Theology is essentially

... a *hermeneutical* activity. The community of faith is a *community of interpretation*  
(Fowler 1994:5).

Hendriks (2000:8) offers the following definition of theology:

God	The praxis of the triune, missional God
Church	His body: an apostolic faith community
Context	The situation at a specific time and place
Interpretation	A critical analysis of church and society
Truth	Interpreting Scripture and tradition
Discernment	The will of God for the present situation
Vision	Being a sign of hope and the Kingdom
Strategy	Participating in transformative action

Hendriks' model is not a systematic ecclesiology, rather a dynamic spiral-like process offering a set of markers or orientation points. It embraces the past (Scripture and tradition), the present (discerned will of God) and the future (eschatological hope).

Following Dingemans (1996:89) a hermeneutical approach, as apposed to an empirical-analytical or critical-political model, will be pursued. A hermeneutical analysis offers

...[a] 'thick description' in contrast to the 'thin descriptions' of empirical research... The hermeneutical approach does not usually provide a 'sharp' picture of the religious reality, but it provides a drawing of the history and the background of churches and church members, and it gives insight into people's values and norms. Morevoer, it is able to build bridges between biblical explanations and interpretations of the present reality.

The recent methodological debate has stressed the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology. Van der Ven (in Dingemans 1996:91) traces the development in the following way:

- *monodiscipinarity* prescriptive theology is the dominant modality
- *multidisciplinarity* polite acknowledgement of social sciences
- *interdisciplinarity* authentic dialogue between theology and social sciences
- *intradisciplinarity* social sciences enjoy epistemological advantage

One has endeavoured to take cognisance of the five dimensions of human scientific research, admitedly with varying degrees of effectiveness.

- Sociological dimension

The study was initiated by the writer and forms part of the requirement for a graduate degree in practical theology, focusing on ministry and church development. The writer is a white South African male in his mid-forties with degrees in arts and theology. He is of evangelical persuasion with moderately conservative socio-political beliefs.

In as much that the study was based on secondary sources, one has not been able to



eliminate entirely the inherent limitations. However, the sources are reliable and have been subjected to rigorous academic scrutiny. One has endeavoured to overcome the *ecological fallacy* by not drawing personal inferences on the basis of group observation. One has attempted to avoid simplistic *reductionism* by incorporating sociological and other empirical data in one's analysis.

- Ontological dimension

Although the study is essentially cross-sectional, it has endeavoured to safeguard some of the inherent limitations of conclusions based on observations made at only one time, by approximating a longitudinal study.

- Teleological dimension

The study has a descriptive foundation from which an explanation of the present situation and circumstances is attempted.

- Epistemological dimension

Both a sociological microscope and a theological lens have been used in the study. Whilst much can be learned from a rigorous study of empirical data, the writer affirms a belief in a spiritual, invisible reality that profoundly impacts the visible.

- Methodological dimension

One has endeavoured to maintain high standards of accuracy through inductive as well deductive theological analysis.

#### 1.4 Chapter Overview

The study comprises of four chapters.

## Chapter One : Introduction

Contains the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the study.

## Chapter Two : Overview of Willow Creek's Early History

Offers a brief insight to the antecedents of Willow Creek and three seminal influences on Bill Hybels

## Chapter Three : Towards an Evaluation of the Seeker Sensitive Model

This is the heart of the study. There are two positive intentional consequences of the seeker sensitive model viz.

- an attractive communication ambience
- an effective process of persuasion

However, the five unintentional consequences warrant closer scrutiny viz

- the temptation of image
- the allure of psychology
- the elixir of marketing
- the reductionism of theology
- the marginalisation of theology

## Chapter Four : Conclusion

This section includes a systems, leadership and socio-cultural analysis.

The study concludes with the ironic observation that evangelicalism has succumbed to liberation theology in its therapeutic guise, resulting in a skewed ecclesiology and ministry praxis which owes more to business methodology than missional theology.

## Chapter Two : Overview of Willow Creek's Early History

In order to understand the phenomenon of the seeker sensitive model espoused by Willow Creek and to test the veracity of one's hypothesis, we need to place Willow Creek in context. Accordingly, we will trace its early history and highlight three seminal influences on Hybels.

### 2.1 Antecedents of Willow Creek

In August 1972 Bill Hybels began, co-leading with Dave Holmbo, a group of 30 high school students in South Park Church, Park Ridge Illinois.

Both were infectious creative dreamers, 'big picture' people, optimists, risk takers, and - to one degree or another - rebels, sharing a common frustration with church as it always had been done ...Both were evangelists at heart, so that mind-set constantly filtered through the arts and teaching. Together they were always casting the vision for those on the outside (Hybels 1995:34).

The group soon grew to 75 students whereupon in May 1973 'Son City' was birthed as an 'outreach to non-believing youth'. The environment, music and message were intentionally adapted to the audience. During the next two years the group grew to some 1000 young people. Out of his experience at 'Son City', Hybels made a commitment that shaped his future.

God, with your strength and for as long as I am in ministry, I will always make sure that our strategy includes a regularly scheduled, high-quality, Spirit-empowered outreach service where irreligious people can come and discover that they matter to You and that Christ died for them (Hybels 1995:40).

*In [September] 1975 the leadership of Son City answered God's call to implement these same biblical principles on an adult level by starting a church. (Cousins in Pritchard 1996:32) in Palatine, Illinois some 30 km west of Park Ridge. Pritchard notes,*

Thus, at least in part, Willow Creek based its beginning philosophy and methods on an evangelistic youth ministry.

These influences are discernable in various ways viz.

- leadership emerging from within the congregation
- the importance of seeker service
- volunteers' high level commitment
- an emphasis on spiritual gifts
- the significance of teams
- the influence of entertainment.

#### 2.1.1 Leadership

From the outset Willow Creek preferred to hire staff from within. Over 90% of staff are hired from within the church, having demonstrated authenticity and competence over a long period.

After 15 years and 20 000 regular attenders, the central leadership of virtually all the church's work has remained firmly in the hands of people who shared the common experience of the youth group (Pritchard 1996:33).

#### 2.1.2 Seeker-Sensitivity

Hybels' experience as an evangelistic youth leader is salutary.

Where would those kids who received Christ tonight be if there hadn't been a service designed just for them, a safe place where they could come week after week and hear the dangerous, life-transforming message of Christ? ((Hybels 1995:40).

The Willow Creek seeker service is an extension of its Son City precursor.

### 2.1.3 Commitment

Youthful idealism of the late 1960's and early 70's associated with the 'Jesus Movement' unleashed enormous commitment and willingness to sacrifice, reflected in the popular Son City phrase *Whatever it takes!* A perceptive Willow Creek phrase expresses a similar theme: *Exhaustion is next to Godliness* (Pritchard 1995:34).

### 2.1.4 Spiritual Gifts

Early in the history of Son City the concept of spiritual gifts was emphasized. Students were placed in specialized groups to accomplish different projects relating to their interests and abilities ranging from art, photography and drama to audio-visual, sound and lighting. This belief and practice evolved into the church's present emphasis on the identification and use of spiritual gifts, spelled out in Willow Creek's *Network* seminar.

### 2.1.5 Significance of Teams

Son City's use of teams to achieve goals, provided an internal structure to the large group. This influence continues in Willow Creek: a programming team plans and reviews each seeker service and staff work together in teams throughout the church.

### 2.1.6 Use of Entertainment

Whilst evangelical para-church organizations like Young Life and Campus Life pioneered entertainment in youth ministry, Son City stretched these boundaries. Their motto was *Anything bigger, better, and more bizarre* (Pritchard 1996:36). This emphasis flowed naturally into the programming of Willow Creek.

### 2.1.7 Summation of Willow Creek's antecedents

Son City was the prototype for Willow Creek.

The vast majority of our philosophy was developed during the son City days. All we have done since then is put handles on what we did by instinct then (Cousins in Pritchard 1996:30).

Linn Hybels is disarmingly honest and vulnerable in her assessment.

Years ago God accepted our flawed efforts, wrapped them in his love, and poured His blessing out upon them in extraordinary ways. We were young and incredibly mistake-prone when we started Willow Creek ... I've seen the results of immaturity and inexperience and sin ... But I've also seen the awesome and overwhelming movement of God at Willow Creek (Hybels 1995:54).

## 2.2 Influences on Hybels

Two diverse influences were to impact Hybels' life from very different perspectives. Both were initially from Reformed backgrounds as indeed Hybels himself was. Both were impatient with the traditional church. One provided theological vision, the other pragmatic acumen to implement the former. One was an expatriate French academic lecturing in Chicago, the other an entrepreneurial celebrity pastor from California.

### 2.2.1 Gilbert Bilezikian

Bilezikian exercised a profound influence on the young and impressionable college student, Hybels. Having grown up in France, attended a conservative reformed church and drifted away, Bilezikian experienced as a teenager the brutal Nazi occupation of France. At the age of 20, he and fellow students went to ridicule a Salvation Army tent meeting. Instead he was converted.

I had this overpowering sense of the presence of God... I fell to my knees and immediately I felt this sense of love and acceptance. I knew right then that I was a new person. I knew that I couldn't do anything else but go into God's service (Pritchard 1996:44).

Graduate studies brought him to the United States. He taught at Trinity College in

Deerfield (1972-74). Hybels was a student there for two years and registered for two of Bilezikian's courses in Christian Doctrine and 1 Corinthians. His vision of the church as an alternative community had a powerful impact on Hybels who at the time was teaching and co-leading the Son City youth group. Much of what he learnt from Bilezikian he was able to implement and simultaneously teach the students.

In Bilezikian, Hybels found a mentor who echoed his frustration with the traditional evangelical church. At the time Bilezikian records his anger with the traditional church;

Attending church on Sundays became a torment from which I would return home livid with anger... It was as if the ideals that were assiduously pursued were tedium, inertia, mediocrity, rigidity and close-mindedness - and all in the name of Christ (Pritchard 1996:45).

Several aspects of Bilezikian's cheerful optimistic Arminianism, particularly influenced Hybels not least of all the following:

- Intimacy with Christ

Hybels's background was Calvinistic.

I was raised in a denomination that stresses God's transcendence. We thought of God in lofty and exalted terms... I knew what it meant to fear God, and I understood the importance of serving him. I expected to one day stand under his judgement, and I believed it was my duty to obey his commandments (Pritchard 1996:47).

In contrast to the Reformed emphasis of a holy transcendent God, Hybels heard the Arminian-pietistic emphasis of God's immanent presence and a warm intimate relationship with Christ. Thereafter, a strong pietistic influence coloured Hybels' practice and teaching.

- Importance of the Church

Hybels recalls Bilezikian's striking lectures.

You've got to live for the kingdom. And you've got to live for the church (Pritchard 1996:48).

Two aspects of Bilezikian's theology particularly influenced Hybels:

- The Church as Community

Hybels' background in the Christian Reformed Church of America stressed independence and stoical self-reliance. Emotions were distrusted. In contrast to his reformed heritage, Hybels experienced the attractive counter-cultural emphasis on intimacy and authenticity during the early 1970's. Bilezikian's emphasis on the church as community gave Hybels insight to understand his experience. Henceforth, authentic relationships became an integral part of his vision for Willow Creek.

- The Mission of the Church

Hybels' reformed background encouraged continuity with tradition as opposed to evangelistic innovation. Self-sustaining churches were by nature resistant to change. In contrast, Hybels heard an angry Bilezikian lambast the church as institution committed to maintaining the status quo instead of turning *the world upside down*. Accordingly, he shifted the inward focus of his home church to an outward vision viz. a church for the unchurched. Hybels recalls Bilezikian's lectures:

You've got to live for the lost. And you've got to, live with one eye on eternity from here on out (Pritchard 1996:49).

Hybels had received from Bilezikian a vision of what the church should be and do. From Schuller he would gain a model to implement it.



### 2.2.2 Robert Schuller

Hybels was frustrated with the church. He chose a mentor in Bilezikian who was also angry with the church. Yet he did not have a model for how church could be done differently. Then he discovered the writings of Robert Schuller.

He was attracted to Schuller's message of the church's *unlimited potential* in *Your Church has Real Possibilities*. In 1975, prior to starting Willow Creek he attended the Robert Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership, an annual conference sponsored by Schuller at his Crystal Cathedral in California. This experience consolidated a profound influence that Schuller was to exercise on Hybels and Willow Creek.

In 1955 as a visionary 28 year old minister in the Reformed Church in America, Schuller was called by his denomination to start a new church in Orange County, California. He started Garden Grove Community Church with two fundamental innovations:

- He modified the method of communication.
- He modified the content of communication.
- The Method

Schuller claims that his shift in methodology initiated a significant trend in Christianity. The central core of his methodological shift was the application of marketing concepts to the church. He claims,

I advocated and launched what has become known as the marketing approach in Christianity... If you want to succeed in marketing a church, you cannot ignore the retailing principles (Pritchard 1996:51).

The major focus of Schuller's ministry was to impress the unchurched community in Garden Grove. He selected speakers, topics and music with this end in view. He gave optimistic, inspirational talks on topics helpful to the unchurched. Entertainment

became a major part of his church services. He sought to create a pleasurable, relaxing environment for the unchurched.

Schuller stressed the importance of convenience for his religious consumers. Serving the customers of the church requires a trained and mobilized laity.

The job description of our key staff is to recruit, train and motivate the lay people.

Effective pastors needed to model themselves on business leaders and learn how to plan strategically

If you fail to plan you're planning to fail.

Schuller was also on the forefront of innovative technology for religious communication. He became one of the most prominent television evangelists, utilizing the latest and best in technology.

- The Message

Schuller argues that adopting this new orientation to church has profound effects on his message. He believes that pastors should not *try to preach heavy theology* on Sunday mornings. Instead he adopted a variation of Norman Vincent Peale's 'positive thinking' in a gospel of 'possibility thinking'. Imitating Peale, he began to communicate a message of Christianity that focussed on meeting emotional and psychological needs.

Schuller believes that there is a need for a new reformation to move from a 'theocentric' focus to a 'human needs approach'. Without this radical change the church will be a 'failure in mission'. The church needs to address the deepest needs felt by humanity viz. self-esteem.

- Schuller's Influence

In 1976 Hybels took 25 members of Willow Creek's core leadership to California to be trained in Schuller's strategy. He cultivated a personal relationship with Schuller and invited him to speak at a major fundraising dinner at Willow Creek in 1979. Schuller reciprocated by inviting Hybels to address his Institute for successful Church Leadership.

- Methods

Hybels' initial community survey in September 1975 was based upon Schuller's strategy. Schuller argues that a pastor needs to develop an inventory of his community. *You should establish a goal of canvassing door to door, all of the homes in your community.* Accordingly Hybels and three others conducted a survey for four weeks to ascertain why people did not attend church. *One frequent answer was that the church was irrelevant to daily life.* (Hybels 1995:57) The most common answers were:

- The church was always asking for money
- I am unable to relate to the music
- I am unable to relate to the message
- The church does not meet my needs
- The services are predictable and boring
- The church makes me feel guilty

The results of the survey provided guidelines for Willow Creek's preferred future. Based upon the information, the church formulated its strategy along the following lines:

- Visitors were specifically requested not to participate in the offering
- Music was chosen with visitors' preferences in mind
- Messages were directed to the felt needs of the audience
- Services were designed to be exciting
- Care was taken not to make participants feel guilty

Much of the strategy that ensued from this survey and marketing focus resembles Schuller's own church strategy:

Churches that are willing to become 'missions' will succeed. Churches that are incapable of understanding what it means to become a mission, or are unwilling to pay the price of dying as a church and being born again as a mission, will disappear entirely or will perpetuate themselves as fringe elements that are largely ignored. The first step to becoming a mission is to understand the audience, or market, that one is addressing (Pritchard 1996:55).

Schuller observes,

I was the first person to introduce real church growth to the American Church... He [Hybels] became the first person to take these principles, refine them and maximize them to the ultimate length of their potential.

From Schuller's perspective, Hybels is the *son* who has become a success.

I think of him as one of the greatest things to happen in Christianity.

- **Message**

Hybels' commitment, adopted from Schuller, to be relevant and meet human needs brought with it much of the latter's 'cheerful Christianity'. In the early years of Willow Creek, Hybels preached Schuller's message of God's unconditional love with a therapeutic emphasis. Messages were 'positive, uplifting, non-threatening, non-judgmental, inspirational, helpful and joyous experiences'.

However, after 1979 Hybels began emphasizing sin and the holiness of God. He attempted to maintain Schuller's method of being a mission to the unchurched whilst discarding or at least radically modifying his theology. He was willing to confront the unchurched with the demands of the gospel in a way that Schuller shied away from.

However, Willow Creek's seeker services still contain a strong therapeutic element. Hybels' and Willow Creek's reliance on psychology, whilst not as emphatic as Schuller, is still very real. While Schuller emphasizes 'self-esteem', Hybels stresses 'personal fulfilment'. While Schuller underscores 'human needs', Hybels refers to 'Christianity 101' or 'user friendly doctrine'.

### 2.2.3 Dave Hlombo

In addition to Bilezikian and Schuller, a third person exercised a profound influence on Hybels viz Dave Hlombo who co-led and then co-founded Willow Creek with Hybels.

Hlombo rebelled against a strict fundamentalist upbringing. *The fact that Hlombo was a silent dissident is one of the crucial characteristics of his life.* (Pritchard 1996:36) Music was the means whereby he was drawn into mainstream evangelicalism when South Park Church hired him to initiate an alternative contemporary worship service. His musical creativity flourished in the more tolerant atmosphere and he started Son Company a singing group comprising South Park's youth group. He recruited Hybels as acoustic guitarist to accompany the group, describing him as *a hack [who] sort of banged on the guitar.* Pritchard (1996:36) wryly observes that *this was the inauspicious beginning of the future Willow Creek team.* Hlombo subsequently recruited Hybels to teach the Bible study.

Hlombo, like Bilezikian, was a rebel who was frustrated with the traditional church. He was fascinated with contemporary music and was familiar with what communicated to students and his peers. A visionary dreamer, he created a new artistic direction for the youth group and subsequently the church. His programming strategy evolved over time. A pragmatic symbiosis involving programme initiative and student response elicited innovative change. Clearly the approach was not market analysis as in the later Hybels; rather intuitive foresight on the part of Hlombo.

Hlombo brought his gifts, interests, and creativity and intuitively shaped a new way to think about youth programming (Pritchard 1996:38).

Hlombo's contrast to Hybels provided some of the original strength of the group. While Hybels provided the teaching and practical emphasis, Hlombo provided the creative music, drama and programming. While Hybels tended toward a business-like bottom line approach, Hlombo was visionary and ethereal. Together they forged an attractive blend of visionary direction and fun. It was neither Hlombo's nor Hybels' youth group or church. Their mutual leadership fostered an environment where students, and later adults, could develop a sense of ownership. A common passion united their differing gifts and personalities.

They shared a mutual frustration with how it [church] had been done in the past; and a mutual yearning to do it another way (Hybels L in Pritchard 1996:38).

Hlombo's creative gifts and personality had a profound impact on the church. Pritchard argues that a decade after his departure, Hlombo's personality was still evident in the programming and creativity of Willow Creek.

#### 2.2.4 The Camelot Era : 1975 - 78

Hybels (1996:57) describes this period as the 'wonder years'. Church services commenced in the Willow Creek Theatre (whence the name of the church) on 12 October 1975 with 125 in attendance. The facility was deliberately chosen because of its proximity to main roads and easy accessibility, adequate parking and 970 seating capacity. A nearby warehouse was converted into offices and a 50 seater conference room.

Two indispensable factors made the seeker sensitive venture possible.

- Commitment to a Cause

Sacrificial commitment by a part-time unpaid staff of some 20 people saw long hours given to the work of the church in the start-up phase.

Our goal, to which every member of our core was sold, was to reach unchurched adults, lead them to Christ and establish the kind of community of faith we had experienced in Son City. We knew how to use our gifts and talents in a complementary way to bring out the best in one another... *We have become convinced that any seeker-sensitive start-up venture needs a similarly 'stacked' team* (Hybels 1995: 61 italics added).

- A Clear Call

Along with an unmistakable call of God, came an unquestioned confidence in God, reminiscent of the pioneer missionary to the Indian sub-continent William Carey's watchword 'Believe great things of God, Attempt great things for God.'

We had seen first hand how God could use the illogical, the unexpected, the foolish and the weak to accomplish His purposes... It didn't make sense to try to reach out to adults when you're 23 years old. It didn't make sense to step out on faith, with no outside backing. But it did not have to make sense (Hybels 1995:63).

Hybels drew a parallel to Luther's famous dictum,

Here we stood. We could do no other.

Their sense of call was severely tested. Attendance initially plummeted.

Sometimes during that first winter, there were more people on stage than in the congregation.

They were vehemently criticised by traditional churches as a deceptive and fraudulent cult. However, among the unchurched they were slowly gaining credibility. Attendance steadily increased. By the end of the first year some 1000 people were attending weekend services.

### 2.2.5 The 1979 'Train Wreck'

When Willow Creek commenced as a church, commitment to friendship, team ministry and servant leadership prevailed. Hybels was the co-ordinating pastor. There was no eldership or staff structure. The church was run by a staff team with no formal theological training and no formal configuration of responsibility or authority.

After two years, Camelot's romantic lustre began to fade. Hybels, Hlombo and the fast growing staff were incredibly busy in the large and growing church. Eighty hour weeks were the norm. The pace was fast and furious. Relationships became strained. At one point nearly six months elapsed before a staff meeting was held. The fabric of the church was frayed and unravelling. Hybels responded to the open-ended ambiguity by calling a staff-meeting and proposed a change in structure .

In the spring of 1978 Bill [Hybels] rented a conference room in a local Howard Johnson and called the entire part-time and full time staff together. 'We're falling apart', he said, 'We need a staff reporting structure... There has to be designated leader'. He suggested they choose the person according to giftedness. 'Who has the strongest leadership gifts', he asked. Silence. 'Well I think I do'.

Clearly without a mandate, Bill left the Howard Johnson as the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church (Hybels 1995:75).

In effect, Hybels succeeded in placing a hierarchical authority structure, with himself at the top, into what was once an informal organization. Pritchard (1996:39) almost understates the situation when he suggests that , *This precipitated a number of events.*

Hlombo's and Hybels' relationship had clearly changed. Where once Hlombo was co-leader, he now reported to Hybels as supervisor. The perception existed that, in the light of Willow Creek's success,

There were things at stake bigger than friendship... we were starting to retreat into ourselves... We were protecting ourselves (Hlombo in Pritchard 1996:39).



The premium placed on relationships as foundational to ministry began to diminish. Hlombo reveals that,

There was a feeling of decline in ownership. The pronoun 'we' became less evident. The idea of 'this is ours' started to deteriorate. It started to happen in very subtle and insignificant ways (Pritchard 1996:39).

The dream had faded. The allure of adventure was not as attractive as it once was. As a result Hlombo began 'not to discount' other means to relieve his confusion of identity and existential pain. During this time he made 'critical errors' in his 'personal moral life and integrity'. The official view was that 'he became enmeshed in sin', in this context evangelical jargon for adultery. Hybels eventually became aware of Hlombo's sin and in 1978 decided to do something about it. He created a board of elders comprising of himself and three others, in part to deal with the crisis. In addition there were complex relational conflicts and philosophical disputes to deal with. Hybels (1995:80) observes,

The Willow Creek start-up team was stacked with mavericks who by nature hated to be reined in. They were bold, independent freethinkers - they had to be to start a church like Willow Creek - but now they were chafing under the increased accountability necessitated by growth and complexity.

The situation demanded a full year of meetings with numerous 'tragic moments' and profuse weeping.

The first stage of the crisis concluded in September 1979 when Hlombo submitted his resignation because of 'philosophical difference'. The next Sunday Hybels coincidentally announced that Hlombo, co-founder of the church, had resigned,

By the way Dave Hlombo resigned yesterday. He felt like he was going in a little different direction with his life than we were going as a church, and so we wished the best for him.

Pandemonium ensued. Hybels recalls that,

People just went nuts (Pritchard 1996:40).

Hybels and the elders concealed Hlombo's sin in the hope of salvaging his marriage. However, the backlash was protracted and severe. The congregation was polarized. Many members accused Hybels of grasping for power with the collusion of the elders. Many left immediately, others drifted away over the next two years. There was much hurt and suspicion of Hybels' motives. There were no easy solutions and the tension did not easily dissipate. The turmoil involved the very core of the church. Eventually one-fourth of the staff and one-third of the lay-leadership left, about 200 hundred people in all. Those who stayed identified closely with Hybels who came to describe this time as the '*1979 train wreck*'. The church survived the crisis, due in part to the large crowds attending the seeker service over the weekends. The weekend congregation was virtually unaware of the turmoil.

As a result of the 'train wreck' several important changes were made:

- The teaching content was changed.
- Structure and management of the church was fundamentally changed.
- Relational attitudes, particularly among leaders, was substantially changed.
  
- Theology

Hybels was convicted that hitherto there had been an over emphasis on grace. An antinomian ethos had led to cheap grace (a la Bonhoeffer). Due to the corrective influence of evangelical theologian RC Sproul, Hybels commenced a new series on the holiness of God. This new emphasis, combined with the fact that the creative core of the church had left, created a new ambience. Celebration gave way to sombre assessment. Hybels (in Pritchard 1996:42) comments,

For many people the tone was hard to take. It was such a departure from the first three years when it was so warm, open and no-questions-asked unconditional love.

However, the change was short-lived. The former emphasis on celebration and acceptance soon returned.

- Management

The young congregation had experienced a sharp learning curve. The former open-ended management style was replaced by emphatic lines of authority, accountability and business management. In order to develop accountability, the staff assumed a well-defined reporting structure. Management consultant Peter Drucker's writings were avidly read. *Even to this day Drucker's book The Effective Executive is used almost as a managerial Bible for some staff.* (Pritchard 1996:42) Other resources were consulted to inculcate effective management. Blanchard's *Leadership and the One Minute Manager* became required reading for all new staff. Structured supervision and productive business relationships characterised staff interaction. Son City's atmosphere of a religious party had evolved into Willow Creek's religious business. This new thrust stifled artistic creativity. It took some two years before a new creative core emerged in the congregation.

- Relationships and Loyalty

The third change wrought by the 'train wreck' was due to the pain of conflict. Initially idealistic, open and vulnerable, congregational staff and leaders were willing to take on the world. In the aftermath of conflict, failure and profound disappointment, none emerged unscathed. Caution and reserve prevailed. Trust was not easily given or earned. Relationships that had survived the 'train wreck' were paramount.

Loyalty and longevity became the distinguishing characteristics of the inner circle (Pritchard 1996:43).

Staff and lay-leaders who remained and survived - or more to the point, who remained loyal to Hybels - became the new core of the church. Loyalty had become the quintessential virtue at Willow Creek, disloyalty the worst vice. There is no question

that the 'train wreck' left an indelible imprint on the church. Its long shadow cast subsequent developments in stark relief.

### 2.3 Summation of Willow Creek's Early History

The preceding people and events have one thing in common; an association with Hybels

- Son City provided the initial strategy and personnel that Hybels then led to start Willow Creek.
- Hlombo was influential in helping Hybels shape the youth group and the early direction of the church.
- Belizikian was significant in that he inspired Hybels in his quest for a Biblical model of the church and provided his basic theology.
- Schuller was influential in providing Hybels with a model of how the church should adopt new methods and a new message.
- The 'train wreck' pruned the staff to those who were loyal to Hybels and prompted him to reorganize the church along business lines.

Hybels' presence and personality is the central motif of Willow Creeks history. Pritchard (1996:58) concurs;

The importance and influence of Hybels on Willow Creek has, if anything, increased during the history of the church.

Willow Creek has yet to escape the mixed blessing of the 'Christian celebrity' motif associated with evangelicalism's fixation with success. It would appear that Willow Creek's early history underscores the first part of our hypothesis viz.

- *Willow Creek reflects both the strengths of Evangelical Entrepreneurial Ecclesiology and the weaknesses of first generation independent ecclesiology.*

## Chapter Three : Towards an Evaluation of the Seeker Sensitive Model

In order to test the second component of our hypothesis viz.

- *Willow Creek espouses a pragmatic, populist approach, reliant on managerial, therapeutic and marketing techniques,*

We will attempt an evaluation of the Seeker Sensitive Model using a hermeneutical analysis.

Evangelical critics, like Wells, Webster and Guinness, dismiss Willow Creek's overall strategy as an inevitable compromise of biblical faith, given the premises of the model in affirming contemporary culture as value free.

Willow Creek advocates, like Hybels, Barna and Schaller defend the strategy as it stands.

A third option, advocated by Pritchard and Carson and pursued by this critique, affirms the basic mission of Willow Creek whilst posing fundamental questions as to Willow Creek's methodology.

Accordingly, one's approach will be tempered by Carson's telling observation:

One cannot listen long to Hybels in person without recognising his personal commitment to Christ and to the gospel, his passion to see men and women converted and genuinely transformed. It must be said, too, that compared with some experiments Willow Creek is still remarkably conservative. And whatever the 'entertainment' factor in the Sunday meetings, and however many spurious conversions, there are still so many genuine ones that *one must not criticize too quickly, or on the wrong grounds* ... the fact is that many who become believers today first made contact with Christians in 'seeker-sensitive' churches through divorce-recovery workshops, athletic teams, various support groups, and the like (Carson 1996:475 italics added).

### 3.0.1 Principles of the Willow Creek Seeker Service.

Two major principles emerge from the Willow Creek seeker service:

- A Church for the Unchurched

The understanding of a church for the unchurched is a creative innovation, reminiscent of Wesley and Whitefield's open air preaching in the Great Awakening, that has great potential for the communication of the gospel.

It is probably more effective in secularized, modern and urbanized cultures. Members of such a culture are socially uneasy outside the matrix of their routine relationships. A seeker service provides a 'safe' environment in which the gospel can be presented and explained.

- Creative Persuasion

Willow Creek's basic model of communication offers a useful model of persuasion viz the inherent attractiveness of the gospel.

Pritchard (1996:189) argues that,

modern evangelicals have emphasized proclamation and diminished or denied the importance of persuasion.

Apologetics remains a Cinderella discipline, and if pursued, more often than not, is tied to an enlightenment rationalist paradigm. Creative persuasion is central to the Christian gospel and Willow Creek's seeker services recover the importance of creative persuasion.

Whilst the central thesis of comprehension, credibility and identification can be affirmed as integral to an effective biblical strategy of contemporary persuasion, much of the content of these creative ideas begs closer scrutiny.

### 3.0.2 Consequences of Willow Creek's Seeker Service

#### 3.0.2.1 Intentional Consequences

The two intended consequences of Willow Creek's seeker service are:

- Creation of an attractive setting to communicate the gospel
- A process of persuasion to assist the unchurched become believers.

Willow Creek is eminently effective in both these basic goals.

#### 3.0.2.2 Unintentional Consequences

However, there are a number of latent, unintended consequences of the Willow Creek seeker service. Hybels et al approach the various aspects of culture as merely pragmatic tools to further the communication of the gospel. In this respect, they are naive; they fail to understand that these cultural tools are double-edged swords which often cut those who use them.

Following Pritchard, Wells and Guinness, the unintended consequences of Willow Creeks methodology are as follows:

- Media energizes the message.  
*This creates the temptation of image.*
- Therapeutic categories and concepts are used to enhance identification with the unchurched.  
*Psychology ultimately distorts the ethical framework of Willow Creek.*
- Marketing tools are utilized to facilitate understanding and communication with the unchurched.  
*Marketing methodology shapes the presentation of Christianity.*

- Willow Creek seeks to be relevant in presenting the gospel to the unchurched.  
*Unchurched Harry's concepts, language and priorities shape Willow Creek's theology.*
- Willow Creek focuses on pragmatic, measurable goals.  
*A populist minimalist approach deprecates the centrality of truth.*

### 3.1 The Temptation of Image

Hybels and Willow Creek's programming team have been extraordinarily successful in identifying with unchurched Harry and Mary; literally thousands have been converted to Christianity. However, there is an unintentional shadow side to this strategy of intentional identification. Their strategy raises the question of image.

Hybels believes that Harry places an 'enormous emphasis on appearance'. Accordingly, image matters a great deal to Willow Creek in the following respects:

- Church Plant

The appearance of Willow Creek's grounds, buildings and auditorium is immaculate. The hi-tech facilities, reminiscent of corporate headquarters, are in pristine condition.

- Stage

A strategic visual effect endeavours to bring colour and light and interest to the stage.

- Performers

Clothing is carefully colour-matched for optimal professional appearance.



- Programme

Every moment is carefully choreographed and scripted. Nothing is left to chance. There is no room for improvisation.

Clearly Willow Creek has developed a highly self-conscious methodology, designed to elicit a right response from seekers.

### 3.1.1 Image Management

The management of image is an integral part of modern communication. Schuller, Hybels' former church-growth mentor, affirms this goal of self-consciously creating the right images. He encourages pastors, *You must be an inspiring impression-maker*. Players' roles are carefully choreographed at Willow Creek, whilst Hybels' addresses are precisely scripted and honed to a razor-edge of excellence.

In marketing, image sells products. There is pressure to perform or posture in such a way that a measurable goal is achieved. Willow Creek's goal, which the programming and message are designed to achieve, is seeking to get unchurched Harry to become a believer.

Intuitively, over time, Hybels and Willow Creek have become acutely aware of what unchurched Harry responds to. They have developed a pragmatic expertise in pursuit of this goal.

### 3.1.2 The Shadow Side of Image Management

Two temptations are implicit in the management of images:

- Manipulation

In the context of Willow Creek's high powered world, individuals feel a constant need to achieve and a consequent pressure to perform. One's being functions are subsumed by one's doing functions.

- Pretense

The second danger of image management is to operate on pretense. This temptation of pretense is built into this model of doing church (cf Hlombo's tragic demise). It is increased by the social pressure to produce. One's status in the organization is tied to the ability to perform and produce.

Pritchard's observation (1996:217) is incisive:

One of the major reasons that Willow Creek has been relatively stable is that Hybels has been able to maintain a consistent presence with the Willow Creek audience. Hybels is an exceptionally gifted communicator, and he also seeks to be honest and authentic. These characteristics create emotional intimacy that is fresh and appealing.

However, Hybels' intimacy from the platform is consciously processed and his vulnerability after the fact, once the issues have been successfully resolved.

In fairness, Willow Creek staff are genuinely concerned with truthfulness and authenticity. Hybels' speaking style is *transparent and authentic* (Pritchard 1996:217) and like other staff members, he consciously seeks to avoid emotional manipulation. At worst they stand guilty by association, in that they are naively unaware of the 'hidden persuaders' inherent in the model they zealously espouse.

### 3.2 The Allure of Psychology

Hybels' desire to be relevant motivates him to move toward the perspectives and priorities of popular culture. There are both strengths and weaknesses in this insistence on relevance

- The strength of the strategy is effective communication. It 'plunders the Egyptians' (a la Origen), utilizing the language, perspectives and priorities of the prevailing culture. It starts where people are.

- Its weakness is that it often leaves people where it found them. An inherent lack of self-critical awareness impairs this preoccupation with relevance.

Willow Creek's understanding of relevance, by definition, affirms the surrounding culture. Hybels seeks to identify as closely as possible with unchurched Harry. Immersed in its language, perspective and felt needs, it becomes increasingly difficult to be critically aware of the prevalent culture; reminiscent of the Chinese proverb, *If you want to know about water, do not ask a fish.*

Willow Creek's theological message is uncritically accommodating of North American culture and adopts much of the American psychological world view. A therapeutic framework is accepted as a necessary tool in Willow Creek's philosophy of ministry. However, there is no accepted model of integrating psychology and theology at Willow Creek. An eclectic variety of psychological models are employed with no consistent theological critique or framework to serve as a hermeneutical lens. Psychological theory is uncritically and naively baptized as part of their world view.

Hunter (in Pritchard 1996:232) observes that America's preoccupation with identity flows from social dislocation.

As people have lost relationships, roles and institutions that once provided a sense of self, identity has become a central problem for modern humanity.

Given this hiatus, therapeutic categories are providing Americans in general, and evangelicals in particular, the means of self-understanding.

A similar use of therapeutic language is apparent at Willow Creek. A prevalent theme of seeker service teaching is to provide this self-understanding. Hybels helps visitors clarify their psychological identity by teaching on topics such as temperament, family history, emotions and addictive behaviour.

Classical evangelical thought has often emphasized the importance of self-understanding, but always from a prior understanding of God. Calvin clearly states,

Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves (Institutes 1:1) .

It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself (Institutes 1:2).

In contrast to this God-centred self-understanding, Willow Creek more often than not provides a psychological self-understanding. Instead of looking at God's face, believers are encouraged to look in the distorted modern therapeutic mirror, reflective of a subjective psychological search for self-identity.

Roberts (in Pritchard 1996:234) argues that

The various psychological therapies and personality therapies that are influential today are not just neutral medical technologies or scientific theories; they are philosophies of life that endorse particular virtues, character traits or features of personality.

These are the traits a person would have if the therapist succeeded in making him or her into a fully functioning and mature person - mature, that is, by the therapist's reckoning. And they are the traits the therapy is designed to foster.

Willow Creek has unwittingly encouraged Christians to know and accept themselves on a skewed concept of self-esteem, rather than foundational theological principles such as justification by faith and sanctification. In essence a psychological framework has supplanted a theological understanding of self-identity.

Roberts continues

Those who seriously interpret themselves in Christian terms will tend to have Christian selves; those who seriously interpret themselves in Rogerian or Jungian terms will tend to have Rogerian or Jungian selves (Pritchard 1996:234).

### 3.2.1 Psychological Relationships

Willow Creek seeker services address relational issues in psychological terms such as *boundaries*, *codependency* and *detachment*. Psychological theory differs from a

biblical perspective. Instead of using a theological concept such as sanctification and the fruit of the Spirit, psychological concepts prevail and distort one's outlook. The consequences of this shift are profound; cognitive categories influence behaviour.

Two examples will suffice. Pritchard (1996:236) highlights the following:

- Divorce

Hybels has often lamented the number of Willow Creek marriages that end in divorce. The statistics are on a par with the community average. Ostensibly Christian values have not been successful in countering the trend because of their skewed psycho-ethical foundation.

- Infidelity

Barna's survey of the congregation's sexual preferences and lifestyle clearly reflects that therapeutic ethics have little restraint on the activities of single members of the congregation. In effect, Willow Creek's relational ethics have reconciled commitment to an intimate relationship with God to the pursuit of 'illicit sexual relationships'.

### 3.2.2 The Accommodation of Evangelical Faith

Willow Creek's accommodation to a therapeutic world-view is unintentional. Hybels et al are attempting to stress that Christianity is relevant and attractive to the unchurched. They use psychological categories as a pre-evangelistic bridge to reach the unchurched. However, whilst a judicious use of psychological theory may well enhance understanding of human behaviour, its ethical framework is essentially antithetical to the gospel.

Pritchard (1996:238) estimates that less than 20% of the seeker service attendees are strictly unchurched. Thus Hybels' message is directed to a small minority of the audience. The evangelism and conversion process is two-directional.

As the unchurched Harrys in the audience (10%) move closer to Christianity, the Christians in the audience (90%) are often becoming more psychological and worldly.

The effect of this pervasive world view is profound. The unwitting accommodation

leads to a disappearing boundary between religious beliefs and other beliefs, thus rendering religion irrelevant because they are indistinguishable from a secular viewpoint (Hunter in Pritchard 1996:239).

The supreme irony is that in an effort to be relevant, Willow Creek is in danger of becoming irrelevant, reminiscent of Dean Inge's cogent adage 'The church that weds itself to the spirit of the age is in danger of being a widow in the next.'

### 3.3 The Elixir of Marketing

Marketing the church is one of the most controversial issues in evangelicalism today.

#### 3.3.1 An Assessment of Marketing

The 'marketing concept' is a central feature of a global market economy. The issue of Christianity and marketing is controversial because evangelicals have widely divergent opinions of how they should respond to their culture.

Advocates like Barna, Warren and Shawchuck et al, endorse marketing enthusiastically and unequivocally, in the belief that the gospel can be communicated more effectively using these tools. Christian advocates of marketing are willing to interact with the modern world to understand and use its resources in their Christian goals and strategies.

On the other hand evangelical critics (Wells, Webster, Guinness, Carson) and mainline critics (Willimon, Kenneson and Street) bluntly believe that a market-driven strategy fatally compromises the Christian faith and guts the gospel. The truth of the gospel is compromised with this use of modern marketing methods.

From the perspective of modern business, marketing is the science and art of understanding customers and markets and creating or adapting products to meet their needs. Successful modern businesses require effective marketing. Marketing is an integral part of American culture and an ever increasing American bowdlerization of

global culture.

Hybels argues that Willow Creek is in the business of God's work. He believes that like any business, if their business is going to be successful they need to understand their customers and their needs, clarify a target market profile and develop or package products to meet these needs.

America's open-ended environment provided considerable latitude in entrepreneurial Christianity. If congregations are to effectively market themselves to the ubiquitous Baby Boomer demographic profile they must ruthlessly reevaluate along the lines advocated by management specialist Drucker, a copy of which hangs above Hybels' desk viz.

- What is our business?
- Who is our customer?
- What does the customer consider value?

Although Willow Creek fits the historical paradigm of entrepreneurial Christianity that creatively communicates the gospel and charismatically leads new movements, it has moved beyond the model in that it has adopted the terminology and methods of the modern business discipline. Willow Creek's marketing strategy of 'target audience profile', 'felt needs' and 'product' is decidedly different from, for example, the camp meeting revivalism and evangelism of early Methodism. Willow Creek understands itself as operating within a marketplace and is using modern marketing categories to strategize in how to do this.

### 3.2.2 The Logic of Christian Marketing

The application of marketing strategy affords a new way of understanding the ends and means of the Christian life. This prism, or interpretative lens, identifies several elements of Christianity as high priorities. Several of the ideas that marketing emphasizes can be critically and gainfully used by the broader church.

- Vision

Hybels argues rightly that much of the American church has lost its outward vision. Many churches have become “lifestyle enclaves” (a la Bellah) which are similar to quasi-religious recreational clubs. These churches satisfy social needs but have stunted spiritual or moral effect. The marketing strategy criticizes the American church’s loss of vision and tries to reestablish the importance of the local church’s mission.

- Stewardship

Hybels et al argue that the church needs to take responsibility for its resources and be faithful stewards. This principle has often been neglected by traditional churches and this reminder is both helpful and necessary.

- Strategy

Hybels makes much of the root meaning of strategy derived from Greek (*stratiotes*) for soldier. Adopting the biblical theme as soldiers in Christ’s army (2 Tim 2:3), Willow Creek believes that the church needs to establish effective strategies, an example of which is the creation of a church service for the unchurched. Many unchurched individuals will attend a seeker service who would not consider attending a traditional church.

- Persuasive Communication

Willow Creek’s marketing strategy has assisted them to create the persuasive process of their seeker service. The seeker service (with critical caution) is an effective process of leading the unchurched to Christ.

To a greater or lesser degree all of the above four principles have been emphasized at Willow Creek in part because of their marketing strategy. To the extent that marketing has clarified these concepts, the marketing concept has been helpful.

Conversely, the danger in using marketing tools is the temptation to allow them to



shape Christianity. Willow Creek's use of marketing language and reasoning has been adopted wholesale from the marketplace. The marketing perspective of needs, research, target markets, market share target-audience profile, and product inevitably modifies any human endeavour to which it is applied.

Many of the advocates of marketing are blithely unaware of the effect of marketing ideas and methods. Barna's enthusiastic endorsement is at best naive, at worst a dangerous distortion.

Don't underestimate the marketing lessons Jesus taught. He understood His product thoroughly, developed an unparalleled distribution system, advanced a method of promotion that has penetrated every continent, and offered His product at a price that is within the grasp of every consumer.

Marketing categories distort the method of Christian evangelism. Marketing distorts how Christians view nonbelievers and the process of telling others the gospel. In fact, if followed consistently, marketing strategy even distorts the gospel itself.

Marketing shapes how one views the world. People become 'consumers' and 'target audiences'. These consumers have felt needs which 'research' discovers in order to modify the 'product' to meet those needs. Marketing shapes both the communicative process and eventually the product itself.

Marketing is not a neutral methodology that can be adopted without consequences. Marketing shapes both the process and content of communication. The church and the gospel are not commodities to be marketed to consumers by Christian salesmen. If marketing principles are followed consistently, one ends up with a Schullerian version of Christianity that emphasizes performance and psychology and presents a reductionist understanding of anthropology and theology.

### 3.3.3 The Allure of Success

The final goal of the marketing strategy is the bottom line of success viz. numbers and quantity. Marketing is not ultimately concerned with quality or aesthetics. The ultimate focus of marketing is growth for growth sake. All other criteria are subservient.

Not surprisingly, those Christians who have explicitly applied the marketing concept to the church are aggressively focussed on 'measurable results'. The goal of marketing Christianity is numerical growth.

Schuller blandly states,

The growth of the church is the only thing that matters.

Barna is equally unequivocal

For the local church to be a successful business, it must impact a growing share of its market area.

In response to growing criticism, Hybels and his staff have sought to downplay their use of marketing categories. Indeed, Hybels has averred that it was never his intention to 'grow a large church'.

Since success is so revered in America, people are attracted to numerical growth. In the guise of spiritual growth, the purpose of the church can become numbers, success and achievement, rather than seeking to faithfully honour God.

Undoubtedly, Willow Creek's motives are laudable. Their deep desire is to honour God. Yet built into their strategy of the church, like a Trojan horse, is a preoccupation with success and numbers. This idolatry of success needs to be challenged. Practitioners need to be critically wary of marketing terminology and strategy that easily shapes and distorts the best of intentions.

#### 3.2.4 Temptation of Manipulation

Marketers are skilled in exploiting their target audience, in effect practising refined managerial manipulation. There is something clinical and calculating about a true marketing method. One cannot baptize a corrupt methodology. The business logic in marketing analysis reduces everything to a utilitarian purpose. Crass commercial marketing loses sight of the compassion and love of Christ. Marketing is a modern mutation of the gospel.

The marketing approach also warps the evangelist's motivation. It involves a subtle but fatal shift in Christian witness. To love someone in order to communicate the gospel distorts the very gospel we communicate. Love is no longer unconditional. Our love is not genuine if we use it to engender response from a preferred market profile. People become spiritual targets as a result of the marketing method. Compassionate respect precludes manipulative marketing.

### 3.2.5 The Illusion of Fulfilment

Marketing distorts the gospel by fixating on the audience's felt needs. Marketing makes the audience sovereign as it shapes or creates products to satisfy the audience's felt needs and desires. Hybels inherited from his erstwhile mentor, Schuller, the emphasis on the value of Christianity for daily life. Following Schuller, Hybels emphasised self-esteem in the early years of Willow Creek.

Early in my ministry I realized the importance of self-esteem ... It was tremendously exciting for me to see people developing a healthy self-esteem as I and other members of our church staff began to teach about the love of God and the value of man. We knew that this was the key to their personal satisfaction and productivity ( Hybels: Christians in the Marketplace 1982:98).

After the 1979 'train wreck' Hybels modified Schuller's concept of connecting to the felt needs of the unchurched. Hybels was more astute in that he diagnosed unchurched Harry's most important concern as personal fulfilment and thus had a more attractive message than Schuller.

The shift at Willow Creek has been subtle. However, the consequences of following the marketing method are huge. Using the marketing approach, Hybels teaches that Christianity will satisfy Harry's felt needs and provide fulfilment. These can be met only when he begins a relation with God and grows in it. Willow Creek's canon within a canon is how Christianity brings fulfilment. At Willow Creek, Christianity is presented as the answer to anxiety, pain, meaning, identity, self-esteem, loneliness, marriage, sex, parenting and work.

As Willow Creek markets Christianity, marketing shapes Willow Creek's Christianity.

Marketing logic does not leave the product unaffected. In fact, changing the product is one of the most crucial elements of a consistent marketing method. The difficult or unpopular elements of the Christianian message are smoothed over by a marketing methodology. As a product to be processed, packaged and priced, the gospel assumes the image of the marketer's target audience.

Willow Creek needs to critically reflect on Philip Reeff's astute observation,

Religious man was born to be saved, psychological man was born to be pleased.

Willow Creek's weekend messages combine the marketing emphasis on satisfying felt needs with the psychological ethos of seeking fulfilment. Willow Creek's fulfilment theology stands in a long American tradition of Christianity being presented as a means to success and happiness.

#### 3.2.5.1 American Self-Interest

Hybels's message resonates with a pervasive note in American character. De Tocqueville's 1830 analysis of American character and culture, *Democracy in America*, insightfully observed that,

Self interest is the principal means that religions themselves employ to govern man.

Classic morality, he observed, was to do good for good's sake as a pursuit of virtue. Self-interest morality was seeing self-interest as the means of motivating the pursuit of virtue. Seen from this perspective, Hybels has simply provided continuity with the past. In the present context, this self-interest embraces a search for fulfilment and satisfying felt needs.

#### 3.2.5.2 Assessing Fulfilment Theology

Wisdom literature often highlights the positive effects of a faithful life and the gospels are replete with Jesus' stress on spiritual freedom and celebration. Sacrifice and pain are not innately more spiritual than joy and happiness.

However, Willow Creek has taken psychological evidence of the benefits of religious commitment as justification for teaching that Christianity necessarily brings fulfilment. In effect Willow Creek's fulfilment theology is an ironic variant of South American liberation theology, whereby the Scriptures become a nose of wax to justify a prior assumption based upon North American abundance. The gospel is not an ideology to be used for some pragmatic end. Christian truth evaluates and judges all human systems.

To argue for Christianity from a utilitarian perspective of satisfying felt needs is to ultimately gut the gospel. Teaching Christianity as a means to an end is to suggest that the gospel is ultimately dispensable if other means can be utilized to achieve the same end. In the final analysis, fulfilment theology does not do justice to the Biblical framework. The goal of Christianity is faithfulness, not fulfilment. The desire for happiness is not wrong. Indeed the Westminster divines saw joy as the chief end of man. The question is, how does this desire for happiness shape and influence one's life? Does it distort the decision making process? Does it shape the presentation of the gospel to nonbelievers?

Fulfilment theology has an inadequate understanding of sin, theodicy and the role of suffering. The fallen nature of humankind is never eradicated fully this side of the parousia. Suffering is a constant companion. To argue that Christians should invariably be fulfilled is at best simplistic, at worst dangerous. It adds the weight of ersatz spirituality to the burden of affliction. It is an American cultural distortion of the gospel.

Marketing brings modern tools of communication that are basic elements of American, and increasingly, world culture. Creekers have borrowed these methods in their efforts to reach their unchurched friends and family. Although their intentions are good, the methods have tended to warp the content of the Christian gospel. As they seek to market the gospel, the gospel itself has been distorted (Pritchard 1996:257).

### 3.4 The Reductionism of Theology

Willow Creek is unashamedly seeking to present the biblical gospel. Few evangelicals would have qualms about that. However, closer scrutiny of Willow Creek's emphases reveals a subtle alteration of the content. The method of communication induces an insidious dualism.

#### 3.4.1 Stress on God's Immanent Love

Hybels constantly emphasizes God's unconditional love. Three quarters of weekend messages assessed by Pritchard (1996:259) emphasized God's compassionate love. This theme is encapsulated in Willow Creek's motto 'You matter to God' and another popular slogan 'What a wonderful God we have'.

A song that Hybels described as crucial in comprehending Willow Creek has the same emphasis

In heaven's eyes, there are no losers  
In heaven's eyes, no hopeless cause  
Only people like you, with feelings like me  
Amazed amazed by the grace we can find in heaven's arms.  
(Pritchard 1996:259)

Hybels often describes God as the compassionate father who has deep feelings of love toward the visiting unchurched Harry and Mary. One of the unique emphases of Hybels' teaching is the idea that God is emotional: "God has feelings too. And they can be wounded and ruptured just like yours can and just like mine can." Hybels argues that God's most powerful emotion is love: "God's deepest feeling for all of his people and for the world is love."

Wuthnow, from a sociological perspective suggests that contemporary America has moulded theology to satisfy people's needs:

God has, in a sense, become 'subjectivized' rather than existing as a metaphysical, transcendent or omnipotent being ... God is relevant to contemporary Americans mainly because the sense of God's presence is subjectively co-opting: that is, religion solves

personal problems rather than addressing broader questions.

This subjective, immanent understanding of God is apparent in Hybels' description of how God seeks to meet people's needs and make them happy:

- God satisfies
- He does things for us and in us that we can't do for ourselves
- God meets inner needs
- He quiets restlessness and turmoil
- He ministers to human longing
- He soothes wounds
- He calms fears
- He satisfies our souls

Hybels' sanguine portrayal of cheerful Christianity may be summarized as 'God loves you and will meet you where you are, forgive you, and meet your felt needs and make you fulfilled'.

Unchurched Harry and Mary are attracted to this optimistic affirmation of God's loving kindness. The positive message of God's love strikes a resonant chord in North Americans. Hybels' college-educated middle class audience is particularly receptive to stories about Jesus' 'loving compassion'.

However, pollster George Gallup Jnr observes (in Pritchard 1996:261) that Americans' strong belief in God's immanent love, requires qualification.

When we use measurements to probe the depth of religious conviction, we become less impressed with the sincerity of our faith. We believe in God, but this God is often only an affirming one, not a demanding one.

#### 3.4.2 Avoidance of God's Transcendent Holiness

In contrast to the persuasive emphasis on God's love, seeker services downplay God's holiness. Pritchard's evaluation (1996:261) revealed the following:

The words 'holy' or 'holiness' were used only 145 times during the year's messages; 'love' or 'kind', however, were used 928 times. While Hybels taught about God's holiness, he put the spotlight on God's love and compassion ... For every message that stressed God's holiness, there were about ten messages that emphasized God's love.

Moreover, Hybels tended to stress the utilitarian nature of holiness in that it saved one from nihilistic relativism, although he would be loathe to use such terminology.

### 7.2.1 God's Moral Law

Central to the Protestant Reformation was the tenet that law precedes gospel. The Reformers argued that one was not teaching the biblical gospel if one did not emphasize how God's transcendent moral law calls one to account.

Luther believed that salvation through faith is only possible if individuals see themselves clearly. He asserted that God's law is the means of this self-revelation:

God wants to teach man to know himself through the Law. He wants him to see how false and unjust his heart is, how far he still is from God, and how entirely impotent his value is ... thus man is to be humbled, to creep to the cross, to sigh for Christ, to long for His grace, to despair of himself, and to base all his confidence on Christ.

Luther argued that the law provides a transcendent mirror for the individual to see himself and especially his sin. Luther said that God's means to humble people was for them to hear preachers proclaim the transcendent, holy truth of God's moral law.

Calvin argued that God's law is a preparation for the gospel:

By comparing the righteousness of the law with our life, we learn how far we are from conforming to God's will.

Thus God's moral law serves as a means of condemnation in that it reveals who we really are:

However remarkable an opinion of his powers he formerly held, he soon feels that they are panting under so heavy a weight as to stagger and totter, and finally even to fall down



and faint away. Thus man, schooled in the law, sloughs off the arrogance that previously blinded him ..

The law is like a mirror. In it we contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both - just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face....

The severity of the law takes away from us all self-deception and by its accusing moves us to seek grace.

In essence, Willow Creek's gospel is not the whole story. Hybels' desire for relevance, viz God wants to meet individual's needs and make them fulfilled, unduly shapes his gospel message. The holiness of God and the convicting nature of God's moral law are conveniently obscured. Hybels' overall message for seekers is a rather optimistic approach to Christianity. It is not as if Hybels does not speak of God's holiness and the need to repent; it is merely that the message of God's transcendent holiness is dwarfed by the broader emphasis on God's immanent, compassionate love.

This sanguine attitude is reflected after a church-wide survey revealed compromising Christian behaviour. Hybels complimented the congregation

Put your chest out a little bit - we are acknowledging our unrighteousness and we are exposing it to grace and truth. And we are banding together learning how we can have it forgiven and learning how the Holy Spirit can help us walk a little differently next week and next month and next year.

However, the congregation had neither confessed their sin nor repented. They had simply noted on a survey form that they had committed adultery, lied, viewed pornography etc.

The next week Hybels noted that a large percentages of single members admitted having illicit sexual relationships in the last 6 months.

In response Hybels emphasized God's compassionate love:

We are a love-starved people, with broken parts that need the kind of repair that only he

can give long-term. We need to bring our brokenness out into the light of his grace and truth.

The over-emphasis on God's loving compassion and willingness to forgive, at the expense of God's moral holiness has resulted in a subtle process of distortion.

### 3.4.3 Cognitive Minority

Berger (1981:7) suggests that any cognitive minority in society is in an invidious position. Evangelicals are clearly a cognitive minority in North American society.

The status of cognitive minority is ... invariably an uncomfortable one - not necessarily because the majority is repressive or intolerant, but simply because it refuses to accept the minority's definition of reality as 'knowledge'.

According to Berger, a minority often adopts one of three different responses to the broader culture's symbolic universe

- cognitive defiance (as in fundamentalism)
- cognitive surrender (as in liberalism and ironically Schuller) and
- cognitive bargaining (the Willow Creek option).

#### 3.4.3.1 Cognitive Bargaining

Cognitive bargaining occurs when 'there are two conflicting views of the world and they start to negotiate with each other'. The goal of this strategy is to 'arrive at cognitive compromise'. Willow Creek has followed this strategy of cognitive bargaining.

Cognitive bargaining is more subtle than the cognitive surrender exercised by Schuller and from which Hybels repented after the '1979 train wreck'. Cognitive bargaining is a variant of evangelical civility according to Hunter.

Civility is most noticeable when those who have already accepted the Evangelical message interact with those being introduced to it.

The civilizing process entails a de-emphasis of Evangelicalism's more offensive aspects: the notions of inherent evil, sinful conduct and lifestyles, the wrath of a righteous and jealous God, and eternal death in hell.

The de-emphasis has been more quantitative than qualitative. The offensive elements are in the main, neither substantively devalued nor glossed over as unimportant. They are simply not referred to as they have been in the past.

This evangelical civility is the quintessence of Willow Creek. Few evangelicals would have qualms about Willow Creek's basic gospel. However, the problem is that Willow Creek is not consistent in their teaching and application of the gospel.

In part this stems from Hybels' topical method of teaching. Seeker service messages are not exegetical. Scripture does not provide the framework and content of the talks. More often than not, Scripture serves an illustrative role for Hybels's canon within a canon viz Christianity as the most fulfilling way to live, whilst conveniently downplaying God's holiness and the moral law.

#### 3.4.3.2 The Churched Larry Phenomenon

Pritchard (1996:268) astutely observes how 'churched Larry' has superficially understood and responded to the gospel. One former Willow Creek counsellor lamented that 'Willow Creek is a mile wide and one-half inch deep'. This jaundiced view notwithstanding, a staff member acknowledged the limitations of the seeker service

'The philosophy of the church ...[is] the danger-side of reaching out to unchurched Harry and holding him and encompassing him and meeting some of his needs and making him feel comfortable and all that, and even letting him continue to be anonymous (Pritchard 1996:269).

In effect, unchurched Larrys are caught in spiritual inertia, because by attending only the weekend service they are not exposed to the key elements for spiritual growth.

### 3.4.4 Assessment of Christianity 101

A vision of God's transcendent holiness elicits a response of contrition and humility (Isa 6:5) resulting in forgiveness and assurance. However, there is no spiritual short cut to a long obedience in the same direction (a la Peterson)

Lamentably, American evangelicalism of which Willow Creek is the celebrated exemplar, has lost this vision of God's holiness. An alluring pragmatism has seen God as merely a means to the good life with Christian embellishments. Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised Land 'because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites (Deut 32:51). The jury is still out on whether Willow Creek will ultimately be able to deliver on its promises, given the skewed premise upon which Christianity 101 is based.

## 3.5 The Marginalization of Theology

Pritchard (1996:272) astutely observes that

All of the weaknesses in Willow Creek's strategy have one root cause: Hybels and his team have not thoroughly evaluated the American culture from a Christian perspective. In short, Creekers generally do not think with a consistent Christian worldview.

The fundamental reason for this failure is the unwillingness of Hybels et al to engage in critical reflection within the framework and content of Christian theology.

Pritchard (1996:273) remarks

I found many volumes of business management and pop-psychology on staff-members' bookcases but I never found a volume of classical theology. The vast reservoir of Christian wisdom is virtually untapped at Willow Creek.

Noll's celebrated lament (1994:3) 'The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind' is prophetically apposite with regard to Willow Creek. The pragmatic mind is quick to baptize the latest management or psychological

technique whilst resisting serious study or critical reflection.

Pritchard (1996:273) wryly observes that one staff member explained his fulfilment with the Willow Creek ethos,

My fellow staff members don't think like 'ministers', they approach Christian work as marketplace people.

### 3.5.1 Lack of Theological Acumen

Theological education is not a prerequisite for Willow Creek staff members. 'I regularly found former real estate brokers, house painters, and salesmen who were directly hired into staff positions'. (Pritchard 1996:274). The only requisite training was participation in the Willow Creek programme for some time. No theological training is required, even for key note speakers and teachers.

None of the three teaching pastors has seminary training. Their lack of theological insight results in an inadequate critical analysis of the American therapeutic worldview. Their weekend seeker sensitive messages are replete with psychological theory which they simplistically tend to equate with biblical principles.

The lack of theological acumen is particularly telling when one considers that the vast majority of Willow Creek talks are topical in nature. Sustained exegesis and detailed scriptural analysis of relevant pericopes are not part of Willow Creek's frame of reference. Topical preaching, without a substantial theological framework, is at best cursory, at worst simply a reflection of the preacher's most recent eisegetical insights.

### 3.5.2 Loss of a Biblical Mind

Willow Creek affirms a conservative evangelical theology. However, this framework is not consistently communicated at weekend seeker services. A number of factors contribute to this viz.

### 3.5.2.1 Emphasis on Evangelism

Evangelism is the dominant motif of seeker services. Pritchard (1996:275) observes,

Hybels wants to persuade the unchurched to become believers and uses his considerable talents accordingly, teaching a simple theology on the weekend. In a purely evangelistic setting, this strategy of simplifying Christian theology is appropriate ... Yet the majority of Willow Creek weekend attenders are churchers who have already made a commitment to Christ. They do not attend the weekday worship services, so the only theological teaching they receive is the weekend user-friendly Christianity 101 and the basic salvation message.

Willow Creek's truncated seeker gospel emphasizes the loving immanence of God at the expense of His transcendent holiness. Although a third of the Willow Creek congregation also receives more substantial teaching during the week, the majority of Willow Creek weekend attenders do not.

### 3.5.2.2 Willow Creek's Pragmatism

Willow Creek does not embrace fundamentalism's rejection of the broader intellectual world. However, Pritchard (1996:278) views Hybels as

the ultimate pragmatist who is willing to use any aspect of academia - if it helps further his agenda.

Pritchard's analysis reveals Hybels' preoccupation with three disciplines viz psychology, apologetics and business management.

- Hybels' use of psychology: *It works.*

Hybels embraces psychological theory to the extent that it pragmatically endorses the view that Christianity works. He attempts to convince Harry that Christianity is an attractive and superior means to satisfy his felt needs in pursuing personal fulfilment.

- Hybels' use of apologetics: *It is true.*

Hybels liberally quotes philosophers, historians and archaeologists to buttress his apologetic agenda as to the truthfulness and intellectual credibility of Christianity.

- Hybels' use of business management: *It is useful.*

Hybels endeavours to persuade Harry that Christianity will not simply elicit happiness, but will be useful in the marketplace. He repeatedly refers to management experts and business professionals as part of his pragmatic endorsement of the gospel.

Underlying Hybels' pragmatic utilization of academic credentials in each of the three disciplines, there is an ambivalence and insidious disdain for higher education. Pritchard (1996:279) observes,

...staff would often assert that they did not want to be 'academic'. In their view 'academic' means dry, abstract, archaic and useless. Pragmatic common sense in contrast is real, down to earth, relevant and practical...

The root of this pragmatic approach to knowledge and the mind, like most things at Willow Creek, is found in Hybels. Don Cousins explains: The whole seminary curriculum - three years of studying God's Word, Hebrew, Greek - holds no appeal for a Bill Hybels. Why? Because we're not book people in the sense that we're activists. We're people people. We're leaders. We want to make things happen.

Willow Creek's pragmatic reaction is reflective of evangelicalism's generic distrust and scepticism of graduate theological education.

105 - The positive side of Willow Creek's flexible innovation is the ability to respond to exigencies as they arise. However, the shadow side is seen in Willow Creek's attitude to education. Hybels' pragmatism effectively debunks education.

Pritchard (1996:280) laments

Hybels' pragmatic bias against academia has intellectually impoverished Willow Creek Topics, books and scholars that fit within the parameter of what is useful for Willow

Creek's purpose, gain wide circulation. Those outside the parameter are neglected.

This is ironic. Although pragmatically arguing that Christianity is true, Willow Creek has devalued the place of the mind in the Christian life. When academic disciplines are approached only as an intellectual smorgasbord of intellectual tools, the value of the mind is tied to its pragmatic usefulness ... A subject is studied only if there is a possibility of immediate results.

Learning that is not immediately applicable and reflective of measurable results, is dismissed as not worthwhile at Willow Creek .

Willow Creek evaluates people's gifts by their results. Individuals prove themselves by the standard of utilitarian productivity. In this narrow preserve of pragmatic utilitarianism, the cultivation of the mind is a low priority reflective of 19<sup>th</sup> century revivalist Charles Finney's call for 'a Copernican revolution to make religious life audience centred'. While Presbyterians emphasized theological training and precision, Finney argued for the 'language of common life'.

The inherent strength of this pragmatic approach is the ability to communicate to a popular audience. Its inherent weakness is its lack of staying power. Without being rooted in the mind, through theological reflection, it gives way to the next more emphatic and attractive theological fashion and transient fad.

Willow Creek , like most of American evangelicalism, is shortsighted . Like a business unwilling to invest in long term research and development, it favours short term dividends. Willow Creek flirts with the appearance of immediate success. There are no deep roots and trained minds to offer theological depth and stability.

The pragmatic impulse ultimately drains the vitality of any movement(Pritchard 1996:282).

### 3.5.3 Willow Creek's Dualistic Theology

Deeply embedded in Hybels' theology is the primacy of evangelism. The fundamental driving force of the church is evangelistic. Willow Creek theologian and Hybels' theological mentor, Bilezikian writes,



The appointed task of the Church is to change men and therefore affect society through spiritual means not by force but by persuasion, not by coercion but by conversion.

Hybels echoes his mentor

There is no higher calling in life. There is no greater challenge; there's no more significant task that you can be committed to.

The commitment to evangelism is powered by the conviction that the physical world will ultimately be destroyed. Hybels exhorts people to be committed to eternal things and abstain from the temporal. This simplistic dualism motivates and guides Hybels. Eternal activities are valued. Temporal activities are deemed wasteful.

Hybels' dualistic theology is ultimately self-defeating. If the identity and purpose of the church is primarily evangelism and the saving of souls, there is no logical justification for any vocation or ministry that is not connected to evangelism. All other activity is a waste of time and energy.

The shadow side of activist evangelicalism is spiritual and emotional burnout. Hybels himself fell prey to this in 1989-90. Recreation is permissible as long as it facilitates evangelism. Highly motivated and committed volunteers and staff at Willow Creek regularly burn out after years of faithful effort. The Great Commission is not the Great Commandment.

The logical outcome of dualistic theology is to devalue the doctrines of creation and redemption. It also devalues education in general and theology in particular. The Reformation concept of vocation as honourable in itself is consumed by a voracious dualistic appetite where identity and reflection are consumed by performance and productivity in the name of evangelistic activism.

The devaluation of Christian thinking has helped create a church where the majority of church attenders are passive observers, and where churched Larrys feel very comfortable with a minimal commitment (Pritchard 1996:286).

One astute staff member observed,

They just know they come to a nice weekend service that sounds good and helps them. And therefore they must be Christians. (Pritchard 1996:286)

### 3.6 Summation of the Seeker Sensitive Model Evaluation

One has attempted a critique Willow Creek's seeker sensitive methodology and examined its unintended consequences viz

- The temptation of image
- A therapeutic distortion of Willow Creek's ethical framework
- A marketing 'spin' on the presentation of Christianity
- A canon within a canon viz minimalist Christianity 101
- A pragmatic marginalization of theology.

It is our contention that a descriptive and hermeneutical analysis of Willow Creek's seeker sensitive model has sustained the second component of our hypothesis viz

- *Willow Creek espouses a pragmatic, populist approach, reliant on managerial, therapeutic and marketing techniques.*

## Chapter Four : Towards A Conclusion

Even though it has been alluded to throughout the study, we will endeavour to sustain the third component of our hypothesis in the concluding summation viz

- *Whilst there is much to commend in the Willow Creek model, uncritical imitation of the attempt to reach a secularized post-modern North American society, in a South African context, results in unwitting theological reductionism and cultural accommodation of the gospel.*

To that end, three further principles require explication, the first directly applicable to Willow Creek, the latter two, using Willow Creek as an example, of application to Evangelicalism in general.

### 4.1 Systems Analysis

Willow Creek remains an enigma to many, encapsulated in the contrasting evaluations of two leading publications. The national religious magazine *Guideposts* named Willow Creek 1989 Church of the Year for *presenting timeless truth in a contemporary way*. The Easter 1990 supplement of *USA Today* described Willow Creek as *McChurch*, implying it was the religious equivalent of the fast food chain McDonalds. (McGrath 1993:96) The 'truth' lies somewhere in between.

Armour and Browning's incisive conceptual systems analysis may go some way to explicating the paradoxical views.

Willow Creek is both homogenous and diverse. It's stated 'target market' is decidedly homogenous - unchurched Harry, white male, college educated, middle class, upwardly mobile baby boomer - the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the marketing rainbow. However, a multiplicity of diverse 'entry points' to the congregation afford a widely divergent clientele a veritable smorgasbord of options to address their needs and concerns. The shadow side is that there is an equally large 'revolving door' whereby many erstwhile members disembark from the frenetic pace of Willow Creek

involvement.

The prototype of Willow Creek was the fun loving carefree ethos of 'Son City' a post-traditional youth group whose co-founder Dave Hlombo indelibly stamped his creative free-spirited personality upon the fledgling church. Son City and the early Willow Creek exemplified System 6 and 7 modalities, the latter more reflective of Hlombo than Hybels.

The prevalence of System 7 principles, saw little pressure to conform to some stereotypical image as all the leaders were pioneering mavericks. Hlombo in particular had broad creative and artistic interests. The open-ended ethos, highly flexible structure and ready acceptance of people as they are, was contagiously attractive. Unthreatened by change, indeed passionately committed to constant innovation and aversion to protracted routine and repetitive activity as a necessary precursor to effective ministry, Willow Creek continues to exemplify passionate engagement with avantgarde, cutting edge technology.

System 6's aversion to elitist practice and procedure, coupled with a genuine desire for community reflective of intimacy, trust and mutual care, saw a strong egalitarian ethos prevail in the early Willow Creek. Affirmation, concern and support were prized attributes and activities. Authority structures were accordingly flat. Networking and mentoring saw interactive learning and sharing come to the fore.

However, with the aftermath of the '1979 train wreck' and Hlombo's demise, there was a decided downshift from Systems 6 and 7 to the predominant modality of System 5 which is the quintessential reflection of Hybels' personality and style. His inventive and energetic, indeed frenetic, personality was committed to efficiency and effectiveness at great personal cost as he was willing to sacrifice anything and everything for the cause of reaching unchurched Harry and Mary. Insight and technology were seen as the panacea for every obstacle. Consultants, charts and surveys provided the necessary wherewithall for effective ministry. The adolescent spiritual party atmosphere of Son City was a decided thing of the past. Willow Creek was now unashamedly committed to religious business with a bottom line concern for results.

System 6 and 7 modalities were not discarded. They were simply taken on board as part of a utilitarian pragmatic means of 'doing church differently' in a more efficient manner. Neither is Hybels averse to utilizing system 4's desire for control with strict lines of accountability and reporting to superiors. He is the quintessential powerbroker and unashamedly used his high-profile friendship with the incumbent president of the United States to foster the Willow Creek cause despite decided reservations of colleagues and staff at the mixed moral signals this sent to both church and unchurched communities. Moreover, Willow Creek is not averse to religious censorship. For all its commitment to egalitarian principles and openness, Hybels ensured that Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* was barred from the church campus, because it advocated a non-essential evangelical view about ordination and gender roles that differed from the official view of the congregation.

For all its ostensible commitment to diversity, Willow Creek remains a homogenous, sharply focused ministry that is unwilling to brook dissent or deviation from the party line as that would be interpreted as disloyalty to the cause of the kingdom, perhaps the supreme irony in that Willow Creek was birthed some twenty-five years ago, as a protest movement against the then prevailing traditional evangelical status quo.

## 4.2 Leadership Analysis

In the final analysis, Hybels has an intuitive grasp of what makes for effective leadership which he has finely honed and developed to a fine art and science. He models Armour and Browning's emphasis (1995:205) on systems-sensitive leadership skills viz.

- Developing a congregation-wide atmosphere of forbearance
- Maintaining feedback loops in decision-making
- Practising systems-sensitivity without using systems terminology
- Becoming diligent in vision casting

It is particularly in the last skill, viz. vision casting, that Hybels reveals his mastery of this particular model of strategic leadership (Armour and Browning 1995:215)

Today if leaders fail in the role of vision-casting, nothing else can fill the void.

- Leaders must have a clear picture in their own minds as to where the church is going.
- They must identify the key strategies that will move the church from where it is to where it needs to be.
- That vision and those strategies must become internalized in each leader's heart. They should come to mind immediately and succinctly every time a leader faces a consequential decision or is asked about congregation plans.
- Leaders must work tirelessly to find simple clear-cut ways in which to explain this vision and the strategies that support it.
- Leaders must communicate, communicate, communicate to the congregation.

However, there is a shadow side to the ministerial role which uncritically embraces this model. One needs to explore these implications further.

The church is more than a spiritual army committed to strategic battle. The church is more than a religious business committed to entrepreneurial growth. The church is a covenant community birthed in promise and sustained by grace. As such, its structures and leadership profile need to reflect the latter more than the former.

Granted that leadership in traditional churches has been domesticated and tamed - a reward for faithfulness and loyalty. Granted that institutionalized bureaucracy has blunted the cutting edge of leadership, especially when fresh ground has to be broken or tradition questioned. However, in post-traditional churches the pendulum has swung too far. The well-intentioned 'commitment to excellence' has embraced an ethos which owes more to contractual agreement than covenant relationship. Their mentors are not the magisterial theologians of the historic church, but contemporary business gurus. The consequences of this Faustian pact are seemingly attractive and beneficial; however they have effectively marginalised the centrality of truth and made essentially peripheral issues the heart of the faith and the hub around which the church revolves. Baptised self-reliance, despite all its evangelical trappings, can never pass for the emperor's new clothes. Ahistorical myopia will never discern his nakedness simply because the rose coloured spectacles of human potential distort and disguise his appearance. Only the unabashed view of the little boy who has no axe to grind, no constituency to defend, will see through the charade and expose the fraud. Oh that the issues were simply those of folk-lore and not the future of the church!

Corporate excellence according to Drucker, Peters and Waterman et al, means that customers reign supreme and workers feel they are part of a winning team. Corporate culture is upbeat and positive, generating a feeling of excitement and competition. The individual belongs to a winning team, a learning organization (a la Senge) that is open to change, responsive to needs and has a built in bias for action. This approach to excellence dominates the managerial style and strategy of progressive churches aiming to impress 'baby boomers' in terms they can understand. What is good for business is good for the church. This is simplistic at best, a dangerous half-truth at worst. In so doing, the church succumbs to the temptation to accept a criterion of excellence and truth that is determined by the market place rather than the Word of God. The marketplace is a heartless place; it is ruthless and unforgiving. It knows nothing of covenant, simply contract. It knows nothing of grace, simply performance.

God's people are not meant to be perpetual innovators, rushing headlong like lemmings to meet peoples' felt needs' by setting up a golden calf in contemporary guise. They are meant to wait patiently and obediently upon God even when it seems that the world is passing them by. The motif of congregational life is Bunyan's 'Celestial City', not 'Vanity Fair'; the touchstone of pastoral identity, 'Pilgrim' not 'Worldly Wise Man'. Our view of ministerial vocation is too humanistic. Entrepreneurial 'street smarts', not 'pilgrim's progress', prevails. Little wonder, that the 'perplexed profession' of Niebuhr has reached crisis proportions, 30 years hence, amidst the seismic changes of contemporary society.

The new clerical order, responding to its perceived marginalization by society, has donned a professional cloak. This transmutation has seen technical and managerial competence in the church dominate the understanding of pastoral identity and practice.

The older role of the pastor as the broker of truth has been eclipsed by the newer managerial functions... reflective of the shift from profession as vocation to marketable competence in a particular field (Wells 1993:233).

Hauerwas and Willimon rightly argue that where professionalization is at work, there the ministry will typically be deprived of its transcendence and reduced to little more than a helping profession. The consequence is practical atheism, irrespective of whether a fundamentalist or liberal label adheres.

The pastoral ministry is being robbed of its vitality and authority by participating in a charade of protecting people from the truth that is the gospel, which is our true empowerment (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989:169).

The values by which professions operate are not conducive to pastoral calling and character. Wells tellingly argues that

Pastoral ministry... is being anchored firmly in the middle class, and the attitudes of professionals are increasingly defining who the minister is. Once again, it is the old market mechanism at work - ministers defining themselves as a product for which there is a market. And so they feel they must present themselves as having a desired competence and that competence, as it turns out, is largely managerial. *They must be able to manage the unruly and painful forces within the human psyche as well as the turbulent and equally unruly forces in the organization of the church* (Wells 1993:236 italics added).

Carroll (1991:62) debunks Shaw's socialist dictum that *every profession is a conspiracy against the laity*. His antidote to the managerial and therapeutic practitioner is that of reflective practitioner. Authority does not lie in status or the initiate's knowledge and prowess as in an asymmetrical relationship, but in the sharing of power among equals in a symmetrical relationship, whilst not negating the need for differentiated leadership. A threefold task viz the interpretation of meaning, community formation and empowering public ministry at large will ensure that the primary leadership role is fulfilled viz.

The primary task of leaders, ordained and lay, is ensuring the congregation's identity as the Body of Christ in ways that are appropriate to its particular culture and context (Carroll 1991:98).

Two additional counter-cultural voices deserve a hearing

Stevens and Collins' portrayal of the *shaliach* as a pastoral model has startling implications for leadership analysis:

In himself the shaliach had no meaning... His meaning was discovered in terms of the one who sent him on missions. His authority was not in himself, but in the one who sent him... So it is for those who serve as Christ's ambassadors. They serve God. And their service is not dependent on the acceptance by those to whom they are sent



(Stevens and Collins 1993:114).

Ministers have to resist the temptation to allow the life of the Church to define their pastoral identity and practice. Anthropological pragmatism, centred on human ingenuity and ability, has taken ecclesiology captive. We need to resist the temptation to substitute techniques and programmes for the presence and power of God. The church is not a place to get things done and a minister's fidelity and ability are not determined by the activities he co-ordinates or arranges.

Both Wells and Nouwen make the prophetic plea for the 'sacred order of fools' as the motif for ministry.

Those who are most relevant to the modern world are the most irrelevant to the moral purpose of God, but those who are irrelevant in the world by virtue of their relevance to God have the most to say to the world (Wells 1993:301).

The leader of the future will be the one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there... The Christian leaders of the future have to be theologians, persons who know the heart of God and are trained - through prayer, study and careful analysis - to manifest the divine event of God's saving work in the midst of the many seemingly random events of their time... train[ed] in true discernment of the signs of the times. This cannot be just an intellectual training. It requires a deep spiritual formation involving the whole person - body, mind and heart... Everything in our competitive and ambitious world militates against it. But to the degree that such formation is being sought for and realized, there is hope for the Church of the next century (Nouwen 1989:22,68,69).

Drawing upon CS Lewis' metaphor from *The Abolition of Man*, Wells ironically observes

We allow our pastors to be rendered sterile through their yearning for professionalization and then bid them to be fruitful in their work. (Wells 1993:247)

#### 4.3 Socio-Cultural Analysis

Culture has been described as the grammar of society. If one truly wants to understand a language, spoken proficiency is not enough; one requires a theoretical

knowledge of syntax, conjugations and sentence structure. Likewise society will not reveal its secrets to those unwilling to pay the price of carefully studying the prevailing culture of the day.

Twentieth century Western culture is essentially consumerist. Globalization and American cultural boulderization has spawned a global cliché consumer culture and mentality. Shopping malls have become the definitive expression of commerce. Likewise mega-churches have emerged as the definitive evangelical expression of the church. Both are adept at reading the times, both are perfectly in tune with the prevailing consumer culture.

Wells (1994:61) argues that the primacy of the consumer mentality has unleashed two connected revolutions on the modern world - therapeutic and managerial:

- The former assumes that all human badness is but disease. Healing is available through the application of correct technique available from the self-help, self-recovery marketplace.
- The latter assumes, as all secular practice does, that efficient control, through spreadsheets, flow charts and organization, will produce maximum profit from maximum efficiency.

Together, the therapeutic and managerial revolutions presume to offer a kind of secular providence, transferring the control of the world from the hands of God to managers and therapists... [Both] have managed to take root in the church because they are typically viewed as innocent, as simply the most productive way of doing business, religiously speaking (Wells 1994:62).

Finke and Stark argue that failure and success of churches can be understood in terms of the market model. They postulate the existence of religious economies in the same manner as their commercial counterparts. Their theory offers a fascinating framework for understanding past cycles of church growth and decline. Barna also uses this model. However, Finke and Stark provide a far more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of what constitutes market forces, because they see a market as comprising far more than simply consumer need.

Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market made up of a set of firms seeking to serve the market. The fate of these firms will depend upon

- (1) aspects of their organizational structures
- (2) their sales representatives
- (3) their product
- (4) their marketing techniques

Translated into more churchly language, the relative success of religious bodies (especially when confronted with an unregulated economy) will depend upon their polity, their clergy, their religious doctrines, and their evangelization techniques (Finke and Stark 1992:17).

Barna's strategy for realigning and re-imagining the church reflects the Willow Creek model. He advocates a heady combination of big business techniques and recovery group therapy. He believes that the traditional church needs deliverance from the addiction to smallness and mediocrity. If they would but avail themselves of marketing techniques they would discover the secret of growth. Only a fool would argue with success, and marketing succeeds. However, on closer examination the analogy breaks down, as Wells so devastatingly makes clear:

A business is in the market to simply sell its products; it doesn't ask consumers to surrender themselves to the product. The church on the other hand, does call for such a surrender. It is not merely marketing a product; it is declaring Christ's sovereignty over all of life and declaring the necessity of obedient submission to him and to the truth of his Word. When the church is properly fulfilling the task it has been assigned, it is demanding far more than any business would ever think of asking prospective customers. Simply put, the church is in the business of truth, not profit. Its message - the message of God's Word - enters the innermost place in a person's life, the place of secrets and anguish, of hope and despair, of guilt and forgiveness, and it demands to be heard and obeyed in a way that not the most brazen and unprincipled advertisers would think of emulating. Businesses offer goods and services to make life easier and more pleasant; the Bible points the way to Life itself, and the way will not always be easy or pleasant. At most, businesses are accountable only to stockholders and a variety of regulators; the church is accountable to God (Wells 1994:76).

In contrast to Barna who seems to believe that truth, at best, is peripheral, Finke and Stark regard the importance of truth as *the* central factor in the rise and fall of churches.

The use of economic tools in no way suggests that the contents of religion is unimportant;

that it is all a matter of clever marketing and energetic selling. To the contrary, we will argue that the primary market weakness that has caused the failure of many denominations, and the impending failure of many more, is precisely a matter of doctrinal content, or lack of it. That is, we will repeatedly suggest that as denominations have modernized their doctrines and embraced temporal values, they have gone into decline (Finke and Stark 1992:17).

Moreover, in contrast to Hybels who wishes to minimize cultural distinctives vis-a-vis church and society, Finke and Stark underscore aggressive commitment to *vivid otherworldliness* as another central factor in the fortunes of the church.

*...religious organizations are stronger to the degree that they impose significant costs in terms of sacrifice and even stigma upon their members.* Herein lies the key to the trends noted throughout this book. People tend to value religion on the basis of how costly it is to belong - the more one must sacrifice in order to be in good standing, the more valuable the religion. A major reason people rate religion this way is that as religious bodies ask less of their members their ability to reward their members declines proportionately. Thus in terms of real costs and benefits, the more 'mainline' the church (in the sense of being regarded as 'respectable' and 'reasonable'), the lower the value of belonging to it, and this eventually results in widespread defection (Finke and Stark 1992:238).

It is indeed ironic that those who seek to promote a 'user friendly' church have adopted strategies that effectively obscure its essence, i.e. a place where God is worshipped, where the Word of God is prophetically preached and faithfully practised, where worldviews are subjected to searching examination. These cannot be marketed to consumers. Instead incidental issues like location and appointment of the church, adequate programming, and attendance convenience are promoted. The central issues are marginalized and the marginal issues are made central.

Guinness' lament is not far off the mark.

Under the influence of modernity, we modern Christians are literally capable of winning the world while losing our own souls (Guinness 1993:43).

#### 4.4 Afterword

In many respects Willow Creek is the story of evangelicalism writ large. It has inadvertently bought into the conventional wisdom that says the major human predicament is not hubris but lack of fulfilment. How ironic that evangelicals resisted the liberation motif in its political and gender guises, reacting vehemently against liberation and feminist theology, but have been less than astute in their lack of discernment in its therapeutic guise. Just as the redemption of society lies in more than the transformation of its structures, so too personal salvation lies in more than rearranging the cognitive and emotional furniture of the soul. Sin is more than unjust structures or psychological pain or relational conflict.

The sober truth is that without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting (Platinga 1995:199).

Origen's ancient dictum remains appropriate; *Christians are free to plunder the Egyptians, but forbidden to set up a golden calf*. The temptation to worldliness in contemporary society is both grave and subtle. It stems from seemingly innocent sources and appears very attractive. We need to heed Berger's contemporary warning

They who sup with the devil of modernity had better have long spoons. By all means dine freely at the table of modernity, but in God's name keep your spoons long (Guinness 1993:90).

However, the temptation is not pragmatism per se, it is essentially spiritual. As such our struggle should never be construed as simply one of description, analysis and critique, reflective of this present study, as if then we have discharged our brief. Rather our response is one of prayer, supplication, repentance and obedience.

The huge modern heresy is altering the human soul to fit its [social] conditions, instead of altering the human [social] conditions to fit the human soul (GK Chesterton).

Congregational life cannot be reduced to simplistic strategies and structures. Its corporate culture is entrenched and resilient. It resists change and is unwilling to pay the price of change unless a compelling attendant presence (*presensie*) accompanies

the process (Smit et al 1995:36). This has less to do with the technique and ability than the attitude and values espoused by those involved in the process. At the end of the day the congregation's culture, its story and myths, cannot be manipulated.

However, hope for the congregation lies in revisiting its past. Stevens and Collins (1993) argue that

each church has something like a 'genetic code' embedded at the time of conception that determines most of what the church will become.

This systemic DNA offers a solution for BPC's future. The congregation was birthed in mission as the *Bethel Undenominational European Mission*.

Towards the close of the last century, Bellville residents desiring Reformed worship approached the South African Railways for the use of the ladies' waiting room. This was granted and evening services began. Later a Sunday School was started in the goods shed with Miss Anna Neethling as its first Superintendent (BPC Archives 1955).

The congregation subsequently relocated once, before moving to its present location and becoming a constituent congregation of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa in 1927. As such the motifs of adaptability and pilgrimage inherent in its birth, are the keys to its future.

Roxburgh writes eloquently of the imperative need for leadership.

The key to the formation of missional communities is their leadership.... fundamental change in any body of people requires leaders capable of transforming its life *and being transformed themselves* (Guder 1998:183 italics added).

Willow Creek, reflective of the remarkable gifts and abilities of its charismatic entrepreneurial leader Hybels, proffers an attractive and alluring model into which many churches have bought. This study has endeavoured to show that this model is fundamentally flawed. Time alone will tell whether it promises more than it can deliver.

Carson's observation must not go unheeded.

In our desire to maintain or attain a certain professional status at a time when ministerial credibility is in decline, we have lost something even more important: passionate God-centredness, passionate gospel-centredness (Carson 1996:478).

I suspect that one of the reasons why in God's good purposes Hybels has seen as much fruit as he has is that he evinces this passionate God-centredness in his own living, his own personal priorities. It is perhaps unwise to speculate, but I suspect that he would have seen no fewer genuine converts (though probably smaller numbers at his large Sunday meetings) if his concern to reach those untouched by the gospel had been challenged in somewhat more traditional channels (Carson 1996:479 footnote 65).

We need more than practitioners (if the pastoral vocation can be reduced to such a term) skilled in technique, committed to technology and honed in methodology. Transformation involves more than managing a system. Spiritual reality is more than baptised human ability. Covenant communities need leaders who do not find it beneath them to become novices in order to learn the necessary spiritual disciplines.

This is more than a schedule and management issue. It involves introducing students into a [new] way of life (Roxburgh in Guder 1998:219).

We can take heart from the observation of a business management specialist.

No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew... We will have to muddle our way through... and make it up as we go along, not because we lack expertise or planning skills, but because... reality changes shape and meaning because of our activity (Wheatley 1992:5).

If our faith and hope are ultimately in God and not in ourselves, we need not sell the family silver. We do not necessarily need better tools or more efficient techniques. We do not need better education or better paradigms. What we do need is a new heart, a new spirit born of Christ's transforming friendship. We need the courage and conviction reminiscent of Israel's shepherd-king.

And David shepherded them with integrity of heart  
with skilful hands he led them.

Psalm 78:72

## Appendix

### A1 Willow Creek's Strategy

1. Build an Authentic relationship with a nonbeliever
2. Share a verbal witness
3. Bring the seeker to a service designed especially for them
4. Regularly attend a service for believers
5. Join a small group
6. Discover, develop, and deploy your spiritual gift
7. Steward your resources in a God-honouring way

### A2 Willow Creek's Values

1. Anointed teaching is the primary catalyst for transformation in the lives of individuals and in the church.
2. Lost people matter to God and therefore ought to matter to the church.
3. The church should be culturally relevant, while remaining doctrinally pure.
4. Christ followers should manifest authenticity and yearn for continuous growth.
5. The church should operate as a unified community of servants stewarding their spiritual gifts.
6. Loving relationships should permeate every aspect of church life.
7. Life change happens best in small groups
8. Excellence honours God and inspires people.



9. Churches should be led by those with leadership gifts.
10. Full devotion to Christ and His cause is normal for every believer.

### A3 Desired Qualities of Willow Creek

1. Grace
2. Growth
3. Group
4. Gifts
5. Good Stewardship

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