**Excerpt**

Sideline Churches

Bridging the Chasm Between Churches and Cultures

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Foreword by Tex Sample

Preface

1. **The Culturally Ambivalent**

What happened to the “Cultural Left”?

1. **The Liberal Cultural Eclectic**

The emergence of the Extreme Left

1. **The Culturally Righteous**

What happened to the “Cultural Right”?

1. **The Conservative Cultural Wedge**

The Emergence of the Extreme Right

1. **The Culturally Passive**

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1. **The Future of Shared Religion**

Are there signs of a new cultural movement?

Most churches today are like spectators at a football game. They watch. They may sing songs or shout encouragement, or they may shout criticisms and lament mistakes. Occasionally churches will leave their seats to get a hot dog with their friends … or quarrel with their enemies. Occasionally there is a “wave” as sections of the Christendom stadium rise to their feet to celebrate their particular denomination or tradition. Occasionally there is a movement to exponentially increase the number of fans. Occasionally the fans attempt to influence the owners about who can or cannot play for the team, or influence the coaches about what plays do or do not work. Often there are angry confrontations as liberals and conservatives, or this coalition and that coalition, shout insults at one another across the stadium.

The point, however, is that they are not players anymore. They are spectators. Indeed, churches become so preoccupied with what is going on in the stands that they pay less and less attention to the game. For better or worse, society moves on. They cheer and boo as some churches or church members leave their seats and change sides. They project their own hopes and fears on individual players who become proxy representatives for a particular cause or policy.

If we were to reverse the metaphor and pretend that the spectators were actually players, we might see the game descend into chaos and become a brawl. Even more obvious, however, would be the empty stands. Fewer and fewer people will be watching. The very spectacle of Christians brawling with each other has lost appeal. Nobody will buy tickets. The media won’t bother to cover the game.

Of course, not *all* churches are sidelined. And having said this I can mentally picture church leaders grasping at the straw, reassuring themselves that I am certainly not talking about *their* church. Mega-church leaders are particularly prone to this self-deception because they seem so big. How could they be so big if they weren’t so relevant? But look again. The mega-church memberships are remarkably homogeneous by race, age, income, family status, marital status, and language. Yes there are program options. But the membership of the mega-church located on the beltway of the city does not even come close to mirroring the demographic and lifestyle diversity of the city itself. Indeed, its very location on the beltway suggests a church on the sidelines of the city, their penetration into demographic diversity limited to offsite outreach away from the “home” campus.

Not *all* churches are sidelined, but the congregations that aren’t tend to be smaller, nesting in the unique culture of a neighborhood or a particular public. There they will influence individuals for a lifetime, and not amerely increase adherents in a temporary burst of “city-reaching” that will be forgotten in another ten years as cultural diversity relentlessly expands and overwhelms church institutions. They will focus on local, municipal, and sometimes state policy-makers, changing society from the bottom up, rather than lobbying national or international governments to change society from the top down.

Tex Sample explored a crack between church and culture in 1990. But this book is intended to explore the chasm between churches and cultures today. Many churches will never be able to cross that chasm, and already we see the closure of churches accelerating in every denomination and tradition (liberal and evangelical) and the overall aging and declining numbers of church membership. Churches that had a window of opportunity to change in 1990 have seen that window close over the last thirty years, and they simply do not have the critical mass of resources and volunteers to do it. And this is partly because, when push comes to shove, privilege reduces risk and many churches (deep in their hearts) don’t want to change anyway. When it comes to change, they will always worry more about members they might lose than strangers they might bless.

Some churches can and will cross that chasm … or at least die trying. Those that do will discover that the key to the crossing is not dogma or ideology, or music or technology, polity or tradition, or any of the things churches debate as spectators watching the game. The key is empathy. It is empathy of the most intimate and profound kind. It is a true “heart burst” for someone other than yourself.

This book is written from a distinctly empathic perspective. It is intended to help faithful clergy and lay leaders understand the diverse publics around them, and bridge the chasms of intolerance that are growing between churches and between cultures today. I offer suggestions for relevant ministries, but more than this I intend to provide clues to how different people approach, or distance themselves from, religion and spirituality today. I seek insight into how they think about God in different ways, and how different motivations drive their quests for meaning and purpose.

In the chapters that follow, I explore lifestyle attitudes toward religion and preferences for ministry in three distinct groups. I describe these as the *culturally ambivalent* (Chapter 1)*,* the *culturally righteous* (Chapter 3)*,* and the *culturally passive* (Chapter 5)*.* These correspond roughly to the groups Tex Sample described in 1990 as the *culturally left, right,* and *center* (reflecting the sociological terminology at the time). I explore how these groups evolved or morphed over the past twenty-five to thirty years from a religious or spiritual point of view.

I refer primarily to my experience working with lifestyle segments, which are perhaps better described as lifestyle *portraits*. Lifestyle *portraiture* is a significant evolution in demographic research made possible by the digital age. Corporations such as Experian (whose terminology is used in this book) are now able to track the digital behavior of every person in America; collate the data; and create portraits that blend demographic and psychographic information. Today organizations in every sector (education, health, social service, business, entertainment, technology, government, and even law and the military) use this information to anticipate behavioral patterns (lifestyle expectations and needs) to do everything from marketing to strategic planning. Churches and other religious organizations are also starting to use search engines like [www.MissionInsite.com](http://www.MissionInsite.com) to do the same for leadership deployment, worship design, ministry planning, church planting, and more.

The descriptions and extensions of each group will be described in detail. If we were to estimate the proportions for the lifestyle representation of the three groups in the United States today, roughly 50 percent probably belong to the *culturally ambivalent,* 30 percent probably belong to the *culturally righteous*, and approximately 20 percent belong to the *culturally passive.* But I am uneasy about applying these proportions. Lifestyle attitudes toward religion are very fluid. Whether demographic diversity is studied empathically or scientifically, the general conclusions today may not fit the realities of tomorrow. In the descriptions of each cultural group, you will see footnotes that suggest why some lifestyle segments are either divided or shifting between camps.

It may be helpful, however, to observe several trends.

First, lifestyle migration is shifting more toward the *culturally righteous*. This may reflect growing dissatisfaction with religious ambiguity, and desire for religious certainty (whether or not it is real or illusory). This can help us understand why historically mainstream Christian denominations are declining faster than the evangelical denominations are declining. Both are on the sideline.

Second, a larger percentage of the *culturally righteous* gravitate toward the extremes of the *conservative cultural wedge,* than the percentage of the *culturally ambivalent* are gravitating toward the extremes of the *liberal cultural eclectic.* This may reflect the more dilettantish approach to religion of the left compared to the more constant and persistent approach to religion of the right. And it may help us understand the growth of independent churches and faith-based non-profit advocacy groups.

Third, migration is motivated more by the *rejection* of one group than the *affirmation* of another. Migrating lifestyle segments are more like refugees fleeing to a country that they don’t really understand but among whom they feel safer. They are not like intentional immigrants embracing a country about which they have done some careful research. This may mean that neither the *culturally righteous* nor the *culturally ambivalent* should count on the loyalty of migrants over the long term.

Fourth, the ranks of the *culturally passive* tend to be shrinking over time. This may reflect the anti-institutionalism of our time, or the aging of many lifestyle segments in this group. But it reveals that participation in the *culturally passive* is often just a temporary stop as people make up their mind which way to go. This helps explain why, despite every effort of *culturally passive* churches to be hospitable to visitors, the guests don’t stick with that church for long.

Finally, the largest and most profound migration of lifestyle segments is the shift toward personal religion. In part this may reflect a growing dissatisfaction with the dogmatisms and pressures of all three groups, and a desire to take personal control of faith (and perhaps personal control of God). Personal religion may be a smorgasbord of consistent and contradictory values and beliefs, but at least the menu choice is *my* religious diet, and no one has the right to criticize it.