

10-1-2000

Book Review: AquaChurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture by Leonard Sweet

Dan Russell

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Russell, D. (2000). Book Review: AquaChurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture by Leonard Sweet. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 11(3), 51-55. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol11/iss3/4>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the American Society for Church Growth by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Book Reviews

**AquaChurch: Essential Leadership Arts
for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture**

Reviewed by Dan Russell

Sweet, Leonard. *AquaChurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture*. Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1999. 269pp.

Anyone who has watched waves wash away houses, piers, and beaches can understand the use of water as an illustration of powerful sweeping change. Life on land is stable and solid; life at sea uncertain and unpredictable. For many people struggling in today's fluid culture the metaphor of water aptly describes their world. The modern era was a search for order and singularity; the postmodern era is a rage for otherness and multiplicity. "The postmodern culture is an aquaculture." (24)

Author

Leonard Sweet is an AncientFuture historian who has studied the seascape of postmodernism, and sought to understand its waters. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Richmond, Sweet went on to earn his M.Div. from Colgate Rochester Divinity School and a Ph.D. from the University of Rochester. In the early 1980's Sweet felt the Lord challenging him: "Do you want to do ministry in the world you wish you had or do you want to do ministry in the world you have?"¹ Since that time, he has helped others answer the same question.

The author is currently Vice President and Professor of Postmodern Christianity at Drew University, Madison, NJ where

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Fall 2000

he is also Dean of the Theological School. Sweet previously served for eleven years as President and Professor of Church History at United Theological Seminary, Daytona, Ohio. Having written fifteen books and over one hundred articles, the author also travels as a speaker and acts as a consultant to church leaders and agencies.²

Aim

AquaChurch is the second in a trilogy of books released by Leonard Sweet in 1999. The first book, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture*, described the coming wave of cultural change. "*AquaChurch* takes that concept a nautical mile further, providing leadership arts that will allow church leaders to successfully navigate the waters of a culture totally foreign to those of us born modern rationalists." (7) The third volume, *Soul Salsa: The Art of Soulful Living*, focused on personal spirituality and was released late in 1999. Each book has its own website and multi-medial components.³

The purpose of *AquaChurch* was to help church leaders sail in the seas of postmodernity so they can reach people drowning without hope in Jesus.⁽⁷⁾ Sweet argued that a church must go beyond surviving the change to thriving in the new culture. Referring to these trends, the author wrote that Christians must "get it, get over it, get with it, and get in front of it."⁴

A disclaimer was given at the beginning that the book is not a map. No map is accurate, current or impartial. "To navigate your church in the rapids of postmodern culture, forget maps other people have drawn... What leaders need to pilot the church on God's terms are navigational skills that can get them from problem to solution." (19) Sweet did not draw a map; instead he gave an invitation to get wet.

Analysis

Structure

To reach this goal of providing essential skills to pilot in the waters of a postmodern culture the author presented 11 and 1/3 leadership arts. "Why not ten? Or Twelve? Because Postmodern culture is not balance or uniform. It's odd, aberrant, ragged and various. Why one-third? Why a fraction? As mathematicians and philosophers tell us, life itself is fractal." (23) Each of the 11 and

1/3 leadership arts fits into the aquatic metaphor.

Orienting by the North Star: Jesus the Christ. The first essential for navigation is a fixed point for reference. The Christian in the postmodern era must orient his or her life according to Jesus Christ.

Studying our Compass: The Bible. The compass always pointed a sailor in the right direction. The believer's compass is the Bible which keeps a person on spiritual course.

Casting the Anchor: Tradition. The image presented was one of casting the anchor ahead, and pulling oneself forward. When tradition is transplanted, institutions become transformed.

Walking the Gangplank: Risk Taking. No journey can begin without walking the gangplank on to the ship, and no endeavor can be undertaken without some risk. Sailing involves an amount of danger.

Listening to the Sonar: Vibrations. Leaders cast vision, but that vision comes from listening, just as faith comes by hearing. The soundings of sonar allow the mariner to see what cannot be viewed by the eye.

Seeing through Scopes: Vision. Postmodern culture is "and/also" not "either/or." This multiplicity creates double rings and double vision. In the same way ministry strategies should be multi-faceted.

Taking Shore Leave: Sabbath Rest. Life in the fast lane demands frequent pit stops. Every ship and every leader needs to dock regularly in order to restock and recover.

Signaling with Flags and Semaphores: Semaphores used visual images to communicate a verbal message. Today the multi-media of contemporary culture uses icons to communicate.

Valuing the Crew: Collaboration & Teamwork. Modernity emphasized "equipment." Postmodernity emphasizes "equip." Leadership is the empowerment of people.

Using the Gyroscope: Creativity. A gyroscope maintains its axis despite rolling or tipping. Creativity in the same way helps a church keep an even keel in rough waters.

Learning from the Ship's Log and Library: Intellectual Capital. The information age is data rich but wisdom poor. Training then should cultivate evaluation; a disciple is one who has learned how to make correct decisions.

Feeling the Wet Finger: Intuition. Even with all the science of navigation, sometimes the pilot must wet his finger and point

heavenward, feeling for the wind. Spiritual intuition is the final fraction of an art.

Style

The style of the book, like the structure, was chaordic (a Sweetism meaning orderly chaos). Drawing from history, science, art and religion, the author wove together quotations, metaphors and special terms to non-linearly support his point. Anyone interested in diving deeper could easily follow the footnotes and websites that were included.

Along with the deluge of information, each chapter contained the profile of a real-life aquachurch which personified the chapter's theme (for example the "Mosaic" church in Los Angeles illustrated creativity). Also at the end of each chapter was a set of questions for personal reflection called the "Personal Log," and another set of questions for discussion called "Ship's log."

Application

Since Sweet wrote to a situation with which many ministers can identify, the purpose and content of *AquaChurch* lend themselves well to application. Several advantages of this work over other books on postmodernism were its simplicity, its wonderful illustrations, and its study guides or "logs." The book is a good read for anyone seeking to understand postmodern culture and its effects on the church, and it belongs in the bibliographies and libraries of seminaries and churches. The author makes no promises, but encourages the reader that with the right skills the aquachurch can have a fantastic voyage.

Writer

Russell, Dan. Address: Emmaus Baptist Church, 48208 Woodhaven Rd., Tickfaw, LA 70466. Title: Senior Pastor. Rev. Russell holds a M.Div in Biblical Languages and a B.A. in Theology. He is currently a Ph.D. student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Dan has a deep interest in postmodernism, and has published articles on "Postmodern Preaching" in *Proclaim!* magazine.

NOTES

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Fall 2000

1. Michael Maudlin, "A Postmodern Ezekiel" *Christianity Today*, 9 August 1999, pg. 5.
2. "Leonard's Bio" [on-line article] available from <http://www.leonardsweet.com/bio/bio.html>; Internet.
3. Ibid.
4. "AncientFuture Faith" [on-line article] available from <http://www.leonardsweet.com/resources/soulcafe/Editions/2-8-9/page2.htm>; Internet.