**To change the world - what the churches can do.**

**A conversation with James Davison Hunter**

Friends, we have come to the last presentation of this year’s Winter School and before I start I would like to thank all of you for your presence and participation this year. I think we had a good week with excellent contributions. The theme was spot on and we received a lot of food for thought – and hopefully also for action.

I will also speak on the larger theme for the week, but have formulated my focus for today as follows:

**To change the world - what the churches can do. A conversation with James Davison Hunter**

Let me start by explaining about Hunter …

The theme for this year’s winter school “Changing the world” comes from a book by James Davison Hunter with (more or less) the same title. We discussed the book at a smaller meeting at the end of last year and felt that it was raising such vital issues that we should be discussing it on a wider stage.

Hunter is a well-known sociologist at the University of Virginia and he wrote the book as a commentary/ critique on what is presently happening in the USA around the public impact or role the churches are playing (or not playing!) in the US society.

Hunter (who is a Christian himself) believes that the churches have an important role to play, but is of the opinion that they are not doing it presently – because they are reading the situation totally wrong on vital points. Though South Africa is not the US and the situations are different in many ways, we felt that a good, thoughtful hearing of Hunter’s arguments might be helpful to us also.

So what I would like to do in the time at my disposal is to, firstly, explain Hunter’s surprising analysis of the situation in the US and then to see how this might apply to the situation of the churches in SA. I will follow Hunter’s line of argument but add some of my own comments to it.

1. I think we can summarize Hunter’s surprising analysis of the situation in the US in four points. [It is actually a bit more complicated but this is the essence of his argument].

* He takes his point of departure in this dream that many Christians have that the church can actually help change the world for the better. This is where the title of his book “To change the world” is coming from. Though he has some critique on it (to which we will come at a later stage), and is honest about the ambivalent outcomes of the churches’ effort over the centuries, he is largely positive about this dream. He calls it a “healthy desire”.
* The crucial point of the book, however, is that he is extremely sceptical about the way the churches are trying to do this. He believes that many of the churches are naive about the complexity of societal change and that the social theories they work with are totally inadequate. Even when they do try to engage society, he says, they tend to bark up the wrong trees. “In brief, he writes, “the model on which the various strategies (of the churches) are based not only does not work, but it cannot work”.   
  We do not have time to go into all the detail here, but I want us to focus on what he sees as maybe the biggest mistake the US churches are making at the moment. Because the Churches lost faith in their ability to bring about change by their own work, they now focus on influencing politics! Because they seemingly think that politicians are very powerful, the strategy they opted for is to try to lobby politicians to support their cause. Therefore US churches spend a lot of money, energy and time trying to woo politicians – and to make it even worse: three different Christian grouping are wooing three different groups of politicians!
* As I said, Hunter is deeply sceptical about this assumption and thinks that the churches are signing away their birth right by doing this. “Politics is not nearly as influential as the expectations most people have of it”. He writes: “The belief that the state can help us care more for the poor and the elderly, slow down the disintegration of traditional values, generate respect amongst different groups, or create civic pride, is most illusionary. It imputes far too much capacity to the state and to the political process.” He states it very strongly:” There are (ultimately) no political solutions to the problems most people care about deeply”

His point is thus that the churches are wasting their money and energy to lobby politicians. Politicians care less about these issues and are much less influential than we think. Too keep on doing that is to chase an illusion, which inevitably has to end in deep disappointment, and even tragedy (to refer to the subtitle of his book). Even worse: by doing this the churches surrender their responsibility and have dug themselves into a hole of assumed helplessness.

* Instead of trying to influence politics, Hunter argues that we should rather try to influence culture...This now is the positive side of his argument!  
  Culture goes deeper than politics and its impact is much higher and more sustained over a long period of time. It is something very real that exist in the space between people and the institutions they belong to. Hunter says that culture is largely a system of truth claims and moral obligations – it has to do with what people of today accept as true and right – though these claims might not always be wholly coherent. There is always a story behind these cultural assumptions and it can be very, very powerful. Christians tends to underestimate the influence of culture. We think individuals form culture. It can happen, but we should know that the rule is mostly the other way round: people’s values and worldviews are rather formed by the cultures they live in.

This is part of the sad story of today’s church: we struggle and are ineffective because we did not transform the dominant cultures of our day; on the contrary, these cultures with all its dangerous flaws have formed, and are still forming us!

Hunter’s speciality as sociologist has been cultural studies and he has done a lot of work on how cultures are formed and changed. He makes a couple of remarks about cultural change that is worth looking at:

* + Firstly, he believes that though cultures can change they do not change easily – seldom, he says, without a fight. So, if we want to make a difference to culture, we will have to be very intentional, well-informed and focussed in what we do.
  + Secondly, he says that cultures change from the top down, rarely, if ever, from the bottom up. There will be people who will contest this point but I believe that it is to large extent true.
  + He makes a third remark going with the second one – which is very interesting. He says that change is typically initiated by younger leaders who are presently outside of the centremost positions of power and prestige in society. The church must always be thinking about the future. And the people in power now are has-been as far as influencing future culture is concerned. The focus should be on the younger leaders and young thinkers.

1. Does this argument apply to SA? I believe it does, friends, to a large extent. Especially Hunter’s warning that we tend to overrate the importance of politics. While I read his book, I felt at times that we in SA have this sickness (of being in awe of politicians) in an even worse degree... We (my church) did that in the previous regime – that was our big problem – we trusted politics and politicians more than we trusted God and the Gospel to give us answers to life’s problems. And my concern is that we are doing the same thing again – different politicians, different churches but the same game... As if politicians can save us; the irony is that by doing that we give them even more bad and dangerous power.
2. What must we do? What can the churches do? I would like to make six positive statements in second part of my presentation – and say a little bit about each of them. I will be linking onto perspectives that come from Hunter; but, more so than in the previous part, I will also bring in other, local perspectives.

* Firstly (and this is the most important statement), according to the Bible we should have **no doubt that God expects his church to be an agent of good and positive change in the world**. We hear it in many places in the Bible, may be the most beautifully in the OT when God says that He wants Abraham and Israel to be a blessing to the nations.  
  While Hunter might be critiquing the churches on the way they try to do it, truth is that he wrote the book because he deeply believes that the churches have a vital role to play in making the world a better place. In the last part of the book he actually recommends that the churches take the great commission of Matt 28:18-20 more seriously.

Many people, friends, myself included, absolutely believe that this also applies to SA. In SA, even more so than in the US, the churches are in a remarkably strong position to make a huge positive contribution to life in SA. Around 80% of the people of this country belong to Christian Churches. There is no other institution in the country with nearly this level of support; over many years now S. Africans have indicated time and again that the churches are by the far the institution most trusted by them – more than the legal profession, the newspapers, business, and the political parties, including the ANC. Given this, it is really sad to see churches thinking that they have no power or legitimacy unless they align themselves with the leading political parties.

It would be a mistake, a grave sin, if the churches in SA would give up on this command of Jesus to be a positive influence in the neighbourhoods, the towns and the country we have been placed. Andrew Walls said a couple of years ago when asked about political and financial models in Africa, that there is a way in which a blessed future for Africa is more in the hands of the churches that in the hands of politicians and financial people.

I am also encouraged by the growth of what is called the new missional initiative. We had a conference in January in this hall with 180 delegates from many different churches, saying they think the church can do better – with ideas remarkably similar to Hunter’s...

* But Hunter then goes on to qualify this statement (actually all of the rest is qualifications of his first point), by saying that **not much will come of the blessings of Scripture if the churches do not start to take the work of formation of disciples more seriously**

I must confess that this point was a surprise to me – especially coming from a sociologist!  
This focus on formation is of course part of the great commission as we have in Matt 28. And Hunter knows it well: He quotes the vital passage where Jesus says that part of the process of disciple making is that we teach people to observe/obey all thing that be commanded. He writes: “what has been missing is a leadership that comprehends the nature of this challenge and offers a vision of formation adequate to the task of discipling the church and its members for a time such as ours”. “By misreading the nature of the times and by focussing so much energy and resources on politics, those who have claimed the mantle of leadership have fixed attention on secondary and tertiary problems and false solutions.” Unbelievable words coming from a sociologist!

I believe, friends, that Hunter is absolutely correct with this statement. There are more people now who agree that this is maybe the vital challenge for the church in the next couple of decades. People around us struggle to believe our message because they do not see any positive difference in our lives. We say we are Christian, but we look and live just like all the others!

It is not enough just to say that we are Christians…   
In my own church we thought that a Christian character and lifestyle will be formed by spreading Christian ideas and arguments. It is clear now that we need to do more. As John Stott said Christian holiness and a new way of life is not something we simple drift into.

I am grateful to say that I hear more and more churches attending to the issue of formation. At Ekklesia this is one of the themes that is probably the most frequently discussed. I am also grateful that a number of very good books on this theme have been written the past couple of years. One such book is Jamie Smith’s “Desiring the Kingdom”. Smith’s central thesis is that focussing on people thoughts is not enough. If we cannot help them to convert their desires, not much will change...

Hunter and others admit that for many Christians the problem is that they have an intellectual faith but their habits and desires has to a large extent been formed by the larger post-Christian culture in which most young people grow up today.

* Thirdly; still remaining with Matt 28 and formation, there is a another qualification that we need to attend to**: In the discipling and formation process the focus should always be on Jesus – who He was and what He did.** This is also what is said in Matt 28. The unique identity of the Christian faith does not start with being religious or moral or even believing in a vague unnamed God. What must be formed is not in the first place morality or religiousness or a general sense of spirituality. The Christian faith is about Jesus, the Christ. That is the heart of the Christian Faith. We will not help anybody if we become soft and vague on Jesus and on Christology. I sense at times that people think if we want to be respectful to other people in a diverse society we should tone down our emphasis on Jesus. I do not think that that is the answer, friends, because Jesus is soft, and open, and inclusive and radically gracious. Christians can be rude and disrespectful and arrogant, I know that, but that does not come from Jesus. On the contrary, we must not become less Christian but more Christian: then we will lose the arrogance and lack of decency. The key to a new life and new kind of witness that can help change the world for the better is to be united to Jesus and to follow him as closely as we can. This is what discipleship means.

What the church need now is to be obedient to Christ is a more wholehearted way. Matt 28 says: teach them until they do everything I told you to do.   
Although Hunter does not write extensively on this point he alludes to it in more than one place. He has a beautiful chapter on Jesus and power; where he makes the point that dealing with power in the way Jesus did it, can make a huge difference in our thinking and way of doing.

But there more ways in which we need to follow Jesus more closely and meticulously. At our regional synod we had a good discussion on human dignity and I realized again that this is something that we absolutely need in our country now: learning to look at people, all people, the way Jesus looked at them. Strangers, foreigners, people from another race, the poor and the needy, our opponents and enemies. Christians should lead the way here.

I believe that a deep renewal of the church will start with a new look and a new appreciation of Jesus – and (as Matt 28 says) everything he told us to do...

Lesslie Newbigin did a Bible study on the church many years ago, which had the title: “Doing church the Jesus way...I think this is what we need…

* My fourth point: Hunter makes another important qualification on how we should carry out this mission we received from Jesus. We must deeply believe that the church can help change the world; but, he says, if we are too intentional about this, too fixed in our minds, too keen to do it, and start putting together these 5 and 10 year plans with measurable outcomes, then we are in dangerous waters. The dream of changing the world can so easily become a very carnal and sinful endeavour where we flirt with power and prestige and are ultimately driven by our urge and craving to be the winners, wanting them to admit that we were right.   
  **Therefore the fourth statement: we will help change the world not when we frantically strain ourselves to do it, but when we start to practice a “faithful presence” as Christians in all realms of life**

So, while the church should hope and pray that God might use us to change the world for the better, this should not be the foremost thought or focus in our minds. Hunter proposes instead that we try to live what he calls a “faithful presence” in the world. This term faithful presence (which really appeals to me) is a central theme in the book and dominates the last part of the book where he talks about the church of the future. He ground his call in God’s and Christ’s faithful presence with us and talks about our presence with one another; with our tasks (or work) and within our spheres of influence. It is clear that faithful presence is not only something for Sunday and for the church but a total lifestyle worthy of the Gospel and a grateful response to God’s faithful presence with us.

* This theme of faithful presence culminates in the concluding chapter in what he calls the “New City Commons” – a city, a community where there is place not only for the like-minded people who are like us, but for every-one of Gods’ children. Hunter uses Jeremiah 29 here as a leading text to explain what he means. **He pleads with the churches ”to seek the welfare of the city” in a totally self-denying way (cf Philippians 2:1-11).**   
  Too often the focus of the churches is still on winning the argument, on proving our point, at bringing everybody into our camp. This is not what Jesus asked of us; He asked of us to deny ourselves, and to follow him. Hunter believes that a willingness to help and serve not only fellow-Christian but every human being, especially those in need, indiscriminately of what they believe, is the key to a new, better future for the church.

I am grateful to say that this is also an important value in the new Missional Church Initiative. It is not about the church and the success of the church, it is about the community and how we can serve the communities where we are called to work. This is the idea of the movement – whether we will really do it, remains to be seen.

* **We need faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship.**My last remark: although he does not use the terminology Hunter would agree not only with the first part of our theme for this year’s winter school “to change the world”, but he will also agree with the second part. The answer for the churches lies in the dual command and call to faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship.

What I’ve said up to now had more to do with the vital importance of true discipleship; I want to conclude by emphasizing that this has to be combined with responsible and thoughtful citizenship. When Hunter says that churches in the US are not making an impact because they are naive about societal change, he refers to churches that are serious about discipleship but has no real understanding of the Christian calling also to be good citizens. We have to take this part, this role more seriously!

We are not doing at the moment friends, I am not sure we are ready to do it in a responsible way. To do this we not only need spiritual conviction, courage and resolve; we also need good and workable strategies and plans. We need to study and understand this wonderful mixed (sometimes messed up) African democracy that we inherited and help formulate policies that can take all the people of this beautiful land forward and help them to flourish.

The vital key to this is not wooing the politicians but trying to understand the cultures and the common culture that is being formed in this country, now. And our biggest challenge is to be present, to be faithfully present as Christians, alongside our friends (who might not be believers) when we talk about, think about and makes plans about our future in SA.

At times I have the feeling the churches in SA have also lost faith in our own work and we are looking at other people (the politicians) to make the difference. God helps us; they will not do it. While we are looking at the politicians and others to do something, I have a feeling some people, and may be even God, are looking at us!

May be we are the leaders we have been praying for…