



## FOURTH TURNING NOW

**F**or some time now United Methodists have benefited from the fine work of William Strauss and Neil Howe in their opus book, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. We have learned much about the differences between the GI generation, builders, Boomers, X, and Millennials (names vary for these groups) and how these differences impact church life. These deepened understandings greatly aid in improved relationships within churches. Additionally, we have become much more sensitive in tuning worship and outreach in ways that most effectively connect with these groups. Six years after *Generations* went to print, these authors released another seminal book entitled *The Fourth Turning*. While this was not the sensation for ministry that their previous book was, its impact in the days ahead could be tremendous.

In essence, the authors have chronicled an overlying pattern to the recurrence of generational tendencies. They refer to these as *saeculum*, an ancient Roman word. These are periods that appear in historical cycles much like the four seasons track through the year. The four stages resemble seasons insofar as spring (high) is a time of new life, summer (awakening) is a peak time, and fall (unraveling) is a transition into winter, and as winter (crisis) is a difficult, chaotic period. The beginning of each of these periods is called a turning. The book was written as the authors anticipated that a fourth turning into winter was imminent.

Each *saeculum* is roughly 100 years in duration. Previous crisis periods in these cycles in the United States have occurred during the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Great Depression/World War II. The authors writing in 1997 thought that the next

crisis period could emerge in 2005, marked by the fourth turning, i.e., a highly significant event marking the beginning of the crisis period. In 2012 Neil Howe entered a blog commentary that he felt that 2008 served as this marker. In September of that year, banks were failing and credit markets were seizing up. Spectacular intervention is credited with averting a complete failure of the financial economic systems. The Great Recession ensued. Five years later, the economy is still far from stable, as it continues on life support for an unprecedented duration with 0 percent interest rates, massive money printing (quantitative easing), and trillion-dollar federal deficits. Meanwhile, we have had plenty of craziness globally, also impacting the US. This includes the Japanese tsunami, the Arab spring (perhaps not the best descriptor), and the Euro currency crisis.

Past crisis periods in the *saeculum* have lasted 20 years or so. At the end of this period, the situation is coalescing such that the new, usually improved reality can emerge. However, this does not come easily. In his blog, Howe notes, "There has to be a second or third blow, something that seems a lot more perilous than just the election of a third-party candidate (Civil War catalyst) or a very bad month in the stock market (Great Power catalyst)." (Ed.: Reference to previous crisis periods.) In other words, should history unfold in the same manner that it has, there will be more hits.

Independently of Strauss and Howe's work, James Rickards has recently released a studious book entitled *Currency Wars: The Making of the Next Global Crisis*. He looks behind history's curtains to examine happenings in the world currency markets. He identifies two previous periods that he describes as Currency Wars I and II. He carefully documents how

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we are now seeing the unfolding of the third one. He anticipates four possible outcomes, all of which will come out of world desperation. The US will not fare well in these.

Of course, we all hope that we will avoid any more crises, and we may. On the other hand, it is prudent to pay attention to the times. Should chaos pan out in the next few years, how will we respond as individuals? as local churches? as denominational leaders?

Strauss and Howe have observed that as the crisis, or winter, period moves into the high (spring) period, something new and different emerges. We might wonder how this impacts church. Interestingly, Phyllis Tickle has garnered some attention with her book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, which examines 500-year cycles in church history. She notes that we are due for a massive change in the nature of church, of the magnitude of the Protestant Reformation, which was the last time the church had its rummage sale, as she calls it. When unrelated cycles intersect in key points, the impact is often exaggerated. Can such an occurrence be in store for the church?

The proper response is not to bury one's head in the sand and ignore changes in the broader culture, society, economy, and government. A large dose of this behavior has contributed to the decline of many denominations already. Furthermore, being reactive after these changes have become well established will have far less impact than closely monitoring, or even anticipating, the changes and moving swiftly. Some pastors and churches are skilled at this, but most are not. Denominations are definitely sluggish at best. General Conferences, with their quadrennial meeting that sometimes accomplishes no more than the most recent one, are not the most nimble venue.

Local churches and annual conferences can take some positive steps in being more prepared for uncertain times. For example, a greater emphasis on stewardship is always in season. God tends to honor sound stewardship in providential ways, especially in challenging times. Furthermore, ministries can take

a closer look at their overhead. Most churches now spend the majority of their budgets on staff salaries and building expenses. More than ever, we need to focus on our mission of making disciples. Challenging times often make more people receptive to the Gospel.

As needs increase across the land, opportunity for ministry escalates in tandem. United Methodists are known for their willingness to respond to disasters such as Katrina. This same care for others in need will surely be broadly necessary if chaotic times come along.

Of course, prayer is always in season as well. While all dimensions of prayer are appropriate, seeking God for leading and discernment is especially valuable in these times. First Chronicles 12:32 tells us of the sons of Issachar, who had understanding of the times to know what Israel should do. If these times we face are not just passing rough patches but are marking a widespread transition into something new, it is even more critical for local churches and denominational leaders to be hearing from God to become creatively vital ministry in the emerging context. Furthermore, the church can become a shaper of a new reality, and not just a survivor in it, if that. After all, our mission calls us to be making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The world is transforming. Will the church be leading in the midst of it, or will the transformation leave the church somewhere else?

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475 Riverside Drive, Room 1473  
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**Tel:** 212-870-3840

**Email:** [research@umcmmission.org](mailto:research@umcmmission.org)

**Website:** [umcmmission.org/newsletters](http://umcmmission.org/newsletters)

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**John H. Southwick, Editor**