

**Steckel**, summoned 50 non-profit leaders to Colorado where the chief executive of Robin Hood Foundation, **Jude Mannion**, saw a surprising consensus about a place for business to respond to a wider social crisis.

## Building new values for post-human era

Van Wishard is a worried man, a very worried man. He has spent the best part of his working life leading Washington DC-based consultancy Worldtrends' research that has advised four US governments on global trends. And now, more than ever, he's seriously worried about what he sees.

He's been talking to scientists, who have been telling him we are on the verge of what, scarily, is now called the "post-human" era.

They say that over the next 30-40 years we will have engineered super-human capabilities. We will have redefined life and nature. And, thanks to technology, we will change our lives in ways that will affect our deepest notions of human experience.

But, while much of this change will be beneficial, such as the ability to cure disease, what worries Mr Wishard is just how unready we are for what is to come. Technologically we will progress, he says. But our spiritual moorings will struggle to keep up.

It might sound a familiar theme. But this time it comes from a trend-spotting heavyweight. Like a movie director, Mr Wishard invites his audience to step inside his view of the world and the major trends of the new century. What you see is a world that, even as it advances, lurches deeper into a "loss of collective meaning."

He says we have lost our "frames of reference." As yesterday's crises remain unsolved, we wake up and confront today's.

He sees the fall of the Roman Empire as also a loss of collective meaning. How widespread this might be again today is suggested by research that, staggeringly, shows 48 million Americans now literally expect the world to end in the course of their lives. Christianity is no longer the well-spring of western civilisation. We are now at the end of what he calls the Christian epic. What we need now, is some new form of "spiritual dispensation," he says.

Culture to a nation is what dreams are to individuals, Mr Wishard says, and, caught between world-views, the American psyche is trying to find some fresh new expression of values that will reassert meaning.

He foresees what he calls a "social quake," where we will put new pressure on our notions of value and meaning to keep up with new world order.

And what was most surprising about his bleak but informed perspective was how readily the same conclusion was taken up by a relatively heavy-weight international gathering of business and other leaders.

Fifty of the world's non-profit leaders were invited by Dr Richard Steckel, a leading author on social responsibility for 20 years to his fourth international dialogue in Colorado Springs where Mr Wishard spoke.

From the vice-president of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors to senior academics, non-profit

to business social inventors, and senior advisers on both public and private social issues, all were "disciples of Richard." And, while Mr Wishard's crisis could seem vast, most saw a bigger role for business in shaping a response.

Dick Hubbard, one of three New Zealanders invited, took up Mr Wishard's theme, arguing we are seeing a "power shift," where we no longer look to the state or religion for moral guidance. Instead, business is assuming a new role in shaping societies' values while government plays an increasingly quiet second fiddle.

He argued we have isolated business from the values framework, and cited New Zealand in the 1980s as an example of business and social values spiralling downward to be mutually driven by 'business greed'.

Positive spirals could just as easily occur when business demonstrates positive values. Accordingly, he said, business leaders had better be prepared to find themselves under the spotlight, a very bright spotlight, just as politicians and church leaders have previously.

Corporate Culture UK chief executive John Drummond, who has led some of the largest cause-related marketing initiatives in Europe,

took up the optimistic response.

Business is not bad, Mr Drummond said. It has the capacity to do good, in fact, very good. He was fed up with the assumptions that left to its own devices business could, or

would, do harm.

In fact he noted how governance agendas were widening to prove that business has got the social message, demonstrated by the proposed new Governance Bill in the UK which calls for both operational and financial reviews to be explicit for the long term and contains requirements regarding vision, values and purpose to all stakeholders.

He revealed numerous cases where businesses had asked themselves "why" they existed, rather than "what" they do, often with the outcome of redefining business purpose and values.

He acknowledged the world's blushing accounting industry, perhaps a catalyst for this new response to consumer cynicism, and quoted examples of what was happening when businesses did "get it right."

Equally, many businesses had realised that doing good was also good for business. British Telecom, for example, has established that fully one quarter of its customers view it largely in terms of its ability to deliver on a social agenda.

In New Zealand, similar sentiment could be traced back at least as far as Labour prime minister Michael Joseph Savage, who once said: "There is no way of dealing with poverty except getting to the people who are poorly paid, poorly housed and poorly fed, who cannot reach the main facilities for education and medical services... the people's well-being is the highest law."

'We have isolated business from the values' framework'