



s a i n t l o u i s

Center for Christian Study

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Reaching the Elusive Urban Young Adult

Postmodern Longing for Community



In last month's newsletter, I discussed the postmodern longing for an AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE OF THE TRANSCENDENT. We considered how Generations X and Y are increasingly finding this longing fulfilled in ancient liturgical forms of worship, together with a diversity of musical styles. This month, I discuss the postmodern longing for AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY and consider what directions this takes the church as it tries to reach the elusive postmodern young adult. --Greg

Why Don't they Just Commit?

"Young people do nothing for the church." A faithful, long-time church member was expressing her frustration finding volunteers to fill staffing vacancies. She continued, "These young people don't stick around very long, and they never do anything to help." It's true that young adults are a transient group, and church growth experts acknowledge they're one of the hardest groups to reach. When you consider the cultural barriers within America's very secular, very liberal urban areas, it's all the more of a challenge. "They walk in one door and out the other and show no commitment to the church," another church member added. Why bother trying to reach young adults?

You can probably guess the church I'm speaking of, and no, I don't take it personally when people tell me that people like me don't do anything and show no real commitment. In my ninth year of service here, I just assume they're thinking of me as an exception. It's the church I love, after all.

Do I Know These People?

Consider however a few other conversations I've had. In a different corner of the church at a different time, a single man in his twenties tries to recruit other members to help greet visitors Sunday morning. "I have commitments from lots of young people," he explains, "but few of the older adults seem interested in our guests." He continues, "What does it say when the only people who'll welcome you to the church are its youngest, newest members? Everyone else seems too stuck in their ways to take any interest in you." You could almost imagine him adding, "Older members never do anything for the church."

Is this not ironic? Older member and younger member each serving faithfully, wondering why the other isn't doing anything. One frames it as a question of not volunteering for programs. The other frames it as a question of getting to know people. There's much to learn about our assumptions here. Consider another discussion later at a small group meeting. A young single woman voices her frustration with the church she's just joined.

"People keep calling me asking me to work in the nursery or to teach children's Sunday school. Who *are* these people and why do they keep calling *me*? I *don't* know them, and they obviously *don't* know me. Why do they assume I should be in the nursery? Is it just an assumption that a 25-year-old woman is incomplete without a baby in her arms? No one has asked me what *my* gifts are, where *my* passions lay. No one seems to take any interest in who I am or how God can use me."

A young married couple chimes in, adding how they've been called by strangers asking to "fill vacancies" in the church so many times, they've decided to say no to all of them. What is going on here? How is it that a ministry's noble intentions to find caregivers for infants and children are misinterpreted as a failure to care, or—worse—as an insult? Why is it that Christians of different generations fail to see the commitment the other displays?

Different Values & Patterns of Commitment

What should be clear from these examples is that the younger postmodern generation tends to display a different pattern of commitment than seen in older, long-term church members. The *builder* generation values institutions and therefore commits to institutions. These are the men and women who survived the Depression and fought World War II. They give faithfully to colleges and seminaries, to organizations and churches. They build and staff programs in the institutional church. When there's a problem, they are more likely to look for a program or institution to address it. When they set up a program, they ask everybody to volunteer. They often feel that if a program ends, they have failed in their responsibility to keep it going. As church members, their pattern of commitment was often to commit to a church first, and then start looking to develop friendships within it later. Their unspoken values include institutionalism, programming, and volunteerism.

Cultural changes over the past forty years have yielded a new generation that no longer shares in these values. (This is not to say

they don't value the church community, ministry, or service, which can be distinguished from institutionalism, programming, and volunteerism). I'll lay it on the line. This is the big point. **IF A CHURCH'S CULTURE AND MINISTRY ARE STILL STRUCTURED AROUND THESE NOBLE 'BUILDER' VALUES IN 2003, IT WILL NOT REACH YOUNG ADULTS AND WILL QUICKLY LOSE THE MEMBERSHIP BASE TO REACH ANYONE ELSE.**

We'll see how that one flies. Before cutting my support, though, let me explain. A thriving church will be defined by its mission field. We would expect a church in Laos to structure its ministries to address Laotian needs, values, and patterns of relating. We would never think to simply clone the ministries of First Church on Main Street and expect it to reach Laos. The same holds true with Generations X and Y. The hesitancy about institutions that my parents' generation fostered has grown stronger than ever in my generation. Does this mean that a young adult can never commit to a local church? No. However it does mean that churches need to radically rethink their outreach, assimilation and ministry recruitment methods if they expect to reap a harvest among the South Park generation. Remember, we'll be the grandparents in thirty years.

Commitment through Relationships

Young adults will rarely commit to a church and then build friendships later. Perhaps the most acute longing postmodern people feel is the hunger for authentic community. My generation wants to be known. We want relationships. We need friendships. People today aren't interested in a friendly church, but friendships in a church. That's our driving quest. When we find that, we're willing to talk about commitment. Never before then, however. Sure, maybe we'll join the church, but we can disappear just as quickly as we appeared. Churches miss the point if they simply view this as a cause for frustration, however. To the contrary, it's a huge opportunity for growth. We could drop the ball on almost every front, and *if we truly know and love them*, they'll usually stay. I've had young people tell me ten things they don't like about their church, then tell me they're committed to it. Why? Because it's where their community is. They commit to people, and only secondarily to institutions.

I know that when a young visitor walks through the doors of my church, we have four weeks to get them tied into a small circle of close-knit Christian friendships. If we do that, they'll stick around, become members, and begin giving themselves in service to the church. If after week four they haven't found those friendships, they're out the door for good. We average two to three first-time visitors a week at Memorial. That totals more than a thousand people since I showed up in 1994. The ones that found community by week four have learned church commitment. The rest have gone elsewhere.

This makes for a huge opportunity. Imagine a church that structures itself intentionally around relationships (not programming and institutionalism). Imagine how it will optimize itself to reach young adults. Through fast incorporation into newly forming small groups, visitors find themselves able to commit to the church. Follow-up small groups, mentoring and ministry relationships connect them intentionally into further relationships with church members of different ages at different stages of life, relationships through which they learn key lessons about life, about walking with God, about who God has made them to be, what their gifts are, and how they should therefore give themselves in service. Within these kinds of relationships—less through tight little programs—tomorrow's leaders are developed.

Don't invite them to a Dinner. Invite them to Dinner.

Postmoderns commit through relationships, not through programs. You can develop a marvelous program for them, and they won't even show up for it. They'll think, "This sounds like a church program. I don't like programs." Try instead asking them to come over and play pool, watch the Super Bowl, or have dinner. (And eat at the kitchen table rather than in the dining room, letting them help clean up. They want authentic relationships, not good table service.) Better still, ask if you can pick them up at 6:00, removing their anxiety at walking into a room of people they don't know. Relationship comes first (knowing), even in developing a relationship.

Don't ask Gen-Xers to "volunteer" to "fill vacancies" in a "program". That young man or woman you see wants to be more to you than a vacancy-plug. They want to give their lives to a cause greater than a program. Moreover, they don't volunteer (it's not one of their values)—they have to be recruited based on who they are and where their gifts lie. They rightly resent being treated as a number. Impersonal position shuffling makes them feel like human cattle. If the house of God reminds them of a cubicle job in Earth City, I assure you they'll leave. Postmoderns are our mission field. We build our ministries around *their* context—not our established ways of doing things. This calls for relationships, understanding, and authentic concern for the young men and women who will be our elders twenty years from now. You can get to know them, their gifts and passions, and introduce them to someone who'll take them under their wing and give them opportunities to "do what they do" for the church.

A Relational Network

"Wait a minute," you're thinking. "I have thirty vacancies to fill in my ministry. How can I develop relationships with all these people?"

You can't. *That's the radical edge to my earlier statement.* A church that's programmed with builder-generation values (like institutionalism, volunteerism, and a programmatic bent) will not reach young adults. If, for example, a church gives to one member the entire task of staffing a large ministry (...Sunday school, Pioneer Clubs), that church will face larger and larger hurdles in the coming decades. Young people just don't respond to volunteer drives. It's not in their software bundle, and the people we expect to *ask them* to volunteer get sick of being told No. A radical change in mindset will be needed for American churches to reach a postmodern generation—and I suspect that these changes will satisfy a lot more than just the young adults. While recent shifts in western culture have made the situation more urgent, this longing for community is a universal human need, one grounded in the eternal nature of the triune God we image.

When a church does develop a relational network where every visitor develops friendships quickly, the church will gain members. When that relational network functions so that new members' gifts are understood and appreciated, where they're introduced to others who take them under their wing and encourage them in doing what they do, then even very large and complex ministries can function effectively. Reaching urban young adults requires more than a new program. It requires larger changes in the culture of established churches, changes that restructure their outreach, assimilation and ministry staffing systems around the values of postmoderns—authenticity, community, and personal relationships—rather than around values like institutionalism, programming, and volunteerism, values which characterized an earlier generation of God's servants.

Postscript: A few other Implications:

GIVING

If space permitted, I could discuss further how young Christian adults are more likely to give their tithe to *people* rather than to institutions—and the challenge that puts before the church to refashion its language of giving. Giving to the church *is* giving to people, to the community, so communal decisions can be made and communal relationships sustained. The challenge is to develop our language of tithing to draw out its human, relational face—the face of the ministers and missionaries we're feeding, the people who are finding new life because we have given, as well as the face of the Savior who receives our gifts through his body the church. Postmodern people commit to relationships, not to institutions, and their generosity toward the church will increase as they recognize the relationships in which they're investing.

SMALL GROUPS

Historically, there have been three main models for small groups in the church.

1. *The church without small groups*, which worked fine for congregations of thirty in pre-modern contexts where everyone lived in close proximity, such that shared community life was easier. If small enough, the church essentially was a small group.
2. *The church with small groups*, where small groups exist as optional extracurricular activities within the church. This is by far the dominant model today.
3. *The church as small groups*, a more radical community-driven model. Membership is not gained by taking a class or by attending a service, but by maintaining a healthy commitment to a small group of the church. If you're part of a small group, you're part of the church and take its vows. If not, then not. No long-term pew warmers as members. The group provides the mutual pastoral care and shepherding in the church, and the Session oversees the groups. Corporate worship is understood as the joining together of the groups of the church into the whole assembly. I'm drawn toward this model precisely because the community relationship—not the individual—is the basic unit of the church. I think American churches would do well to consider this direction as a viable option.

WORSHIP

Few things can make a postmodern feel lonelier than being asked to pray silently in private in a room full of people. The lonely-crowd thing is torture. There are times for silent confession, of course. But a greater focus on *praying together* as one body better develops a sense of community or connectedness. Gifted worship leadership can enable every member to feel himself praying when the worship leader prays, confessing when he confesses, thanking when he thanks, and praising when he praises. Corporate responsive readings, creeds, and confessions—if done with passion—also help. The worst-case scenario is a worship service that feels like 200 individual quiet times.

MERCY

In a postmodern context where Christianity is falsely accused of fostering hate and hypocrisy, ministries of mercy demonstrate through relationships that such accusations are false. In the small group I lead in the Central West End, there are two young men who have each “adopted” little brothers from the inner city through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. When I've found myself in financial need, I've watched as a young adult slips a \$100 bill into my hand. One young man told me about how much joy he took in helping an older friend who had been completely paralyzed—joy in changing a man's diaper even. Postmoderns have a longing to show mercy to others, but again it is a desire they express in relational ways. They aren't drawn to big mercy programs. They are drawn to individual people with whom they can develop a relationship. In recruiting for mercy and helping ministries, we will often do better to ask for a *larger* commitment with a human face and relationship than to ask for a smaller commitment that sounds programmatic.