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Center for Christian Study

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Reaching Postmoderns through Ancient Worship *Generation X's turn to Liturgy*



Several years ago, Robert Webber was at a worship conference at a church in the American south. He arrived early and was able to attend the church's new contemporary worship service. The next morning a nineteen-year-old girl approached him to question him about the service. He recounts the story:

"I heard you went to the contemporary service last night."

"Yes, I did," I answered.

"You didn't see anybody there my age did you?" she asked.

"No, as a matter of fact, I didn't."

"Would you like to know why?"

"Sure," I replied.

"We don't like that kind of worship."

"Oh," I said. "What kind of worship do you like?"

"I like liturgy, mystery, quiet," she told me.

"And your friends? Do they feel this way also?"

"Yes!" was her emphatic reply.

Don't think this is a unique experience. A young man I worked with at Washington University told me how he would go to a contemporary evangelical church every Sunday for the sermon, and leave that church and travel to an Episcopal church for the liturgy and Holy Communion.

Call it Boomer Worship—it's not 'Contemporary'

Did you ever wonder what would happen when the Baby Boomers—the 1960s generation—had children? The Boomers were reacting against what they saw as dead traditional worship in American Protestantism. Worship services became upbeat, high-energy, dynamic, contemporary, and spontaneous. *At least they were carefully engineered by worship teams to look and feel spontaneous.* The engineered worship experience became the hallmark of Boomer worship. It became a textbook truth that the way to grow a church in America was to move to a contemporary worship service. Such services have become the new tradition against which their children—Generation X-ers—are now reacting.

What was once called *contemporary worship* is now being re-named *Boomer worship*. By contrast, the fastest growing worship style among the younger generations—Generation X (20s & 30s) and the rising Generation Y (today's college students)—is liturgical worship.

3 Services, 3 Generations, 3 Styles

I recently read an article by Gene Veith about the Valley Cathedral, a Pentecostal Assemblies of God congregation that has moved to three—yes, three—different worship services to reflect the different generational preferences in the congregation. One service is the 'traditional' service, complete with sentimental old-time hymns and hand clapping, attended by the seniors. A second 'contemporary' service has electric guitars and Maranatha-style praise songs for middle-aged Boomers.

Recently the church has started a third service to target young professional twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings—Generation X (...that's me, though I'm not Pentecostal). The new worship service is "rooted in high-church rites and liturgies." Can you imagine a Pentecostal church service with Holy Communion, bells, candles, responsive readings, kneelers, incense and—*gasp*—recitation of the creeds? It's as if they're trying to be Presbyterians or—more likely—Episcopalians.

Those Pentecostals will do just about anything to get people to come to Jesus!

Liturgical Structure, but Diverse Music

Still, postmodern worship doesn't look quite like the worship of the ancient church. Younger church members often have very eclectic tastes in music. They want their *Trinity Hymnals*, their Maranatha choruses, and their Gregorian chants. But while they're encouraging Jesus to Shine, they might throw in a little Jazz, break for a Negro spiritual, encourage all mortal flesh to keep silence, and then fire up the organ for a night cap. That's the new twist.

Of course, not every thirty-year-old is begging for weekly communion, but the trend is easily observed. The large suburban churches that target Boomers are likely to ride the wave of contemporary worship for several more years. But churches targeting younger families and singles are finding themselves making moves once thought counter-intuitive.

Postmoderns want to experience worship, and they often view the all-contemporary worship service as shallow and manipulative. They want structure, form, and history. They want all their senses to delight in God's presence. They want to be silent before God and to shout before God. They want to contemplate and to feel as well as to think. They want to encounter a transcendent God.

Authentic Encounter with God

Style alone is not the ultimate issue here. Younger Christians want authenticity, a level of authenticity they find in historical and ancient Christian worship forms, forms not as tainted by the marketing frenzy of the 'me-generation'. This observation comes from a Florida pastor, Chuck De Groat, who writes:

My Gen. X peers are flocking to the "High Church" – liturgical Reformed, Episcopal, Catholic and Orthodox churches. In a recent email, a 30 year old friend wrote, "I'm tired of this 'me-and-my-sweet-Jesus' cheesiness...whatever happened to reflection, contemplation...prayer!" The reaction says less, I think, about their preference for liturgical High-Church style and more about a sense of authentic meeting with God.

A sense of authentic meeting with God. A powerful thought. I fear our worship has often become merely human, far too centered on us. If statistics are correct, the rising postmodern generations are the least evangelized in recent history. Yet they hunger to encounter something larger than themselves, something infinite, something transcendent. They seek out experiences that are bigger than they are—a new piercing (been there), a new tattoo (done that), or a new drug (...does caffeine count?)

In Christ, we offer them the opportunity to encounter the One for whom their hearts were made, the Ultimate, the Transcendent, the eternal God. When they respond in faith and worship, they long for the kind of "liturgy, mystery, quiet" that can begin to communicate the glory of the transcendent and Triune Lord in his infinite beauty and humbling power.