

Where Are the Young People?

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As a pastor in the mainline church for almost twenty years I have become especially attuned to the dwindling of young people in the local church. The typical American congregation simply makes little sense to the post-Boomer generation. Those between the ages of 20-40 see the church today as complicit in and co-opted by the ways of the world, not the way of Jesus of Nazareth. They have little interest in perpetuating the institutionalism of the Constantinian arrangement.

Church of All Nations, the church that I have the great privilege of serving, was founded with a demographic of 25-35 year-olds in 2004, mostly from the Korean American background. That we now have every generation represented in sizable numbers, and from over 25 nations and cultures, is something that we truly believe only God could have orchestrated. We have gleaned some insights along the way about the future of the church in a post-modern context.

Fundamentally, we need to ask some hard questions not merely about the content of our faith—after all, Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever—but about *the way* we are communicating our ancient faith in the contemporary world. Unlike the Quran in which Arabic is enshrined as holy writ (or the Latin Vulgate throughout the medieval age), the Bible requires translation in every time and in every place, and the church is the living community of believers that does the basic work of translation, that the world might believe. One reason that most denominations are experiencing massive decline or stalling in growth is that they have lost the younger generations. We no longer seem able to communicate the gospel message in a winsome and compelling way in this globalized, multicultural and multi-epistemological age.

The basic problem is that we remain a Eurocentric, white, middle class church wedded to a way of doing faith that is deeply dependent on Enlightenment Rationalism, whether they be liberal or conservative churches. To take the Presbyterian Church as an example, it is common knowledge that the PCUSA has been declining numerically since 1965, but are we aware that hardly any denomination grew as consistently as the Presbyterian Church from colonial days right up to the 1960s? As a strongly rational church (Calvin was a Renaissance man and a lawyer, after all) that rode the wave of modernity and the frontier ethos, which includes within its framework American ideas of democracy, pragmatism, progressivism, and individualism, no religious disposition matched this modern spirit more than Calvinist Presbyterianism. But since the 1960s the US has become a postmodern nation in which the rational is only one of many competing paradigms for interpreting God, ourselves, and the world around us.

Church of All Nations is the convergence of the post-modern and the non-modern hermeneutic in order to live out the timeless faith in Jesus Christ under the timeless authority of the Bible, that we might interpret the times we live in and participate in the wild and unpredictable movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. I am not saying that any particular framework is superior to others. I am making a case against epistemological parochialism, or put another way, the insistence that we mainline Christians be locked into speaking only the language of modernity. When mainliners speak today, the world hears English, but in the King James version so-to-speak, and they tune out.

With that background in mind, here are some of my observations as a local church pastor...

Our young people don't buy the meta-narratives of:

1. Uncritical patriotism and American exceptionalism (my country, right or wrong).
2. Unexamined white supremacy, both the nativism of the Right and the paternalism toward minorities of the Left.
3. Unfettered consumerism at the expense of global fairness and environmental sustainability, and endless consumption as a personal coping mechanism.
4. Rugged individualism and the subtext of the American Dream, which is essentially “the accumulation of enough competence and wealth so as not to be in need of another human person for one's well being.”
5. Christian denominational sectarianism, parochialism and triumphalism in the face of daily encounter with religious pluralism.

Therefore, the local church could drive genuine spiritual renewal if it responds evangelically to these emerging needs:

1. Our young people are searching for their **vocation**. They are educated enough for a job or career in the present order, but are desperately searching for a calling that inspires.
2. Our young people hunger for **healthy relationships**, to meaningfully and deeply relate to another human being (half grew up in divorced or single parent homes, and others in dysfunctional households).
3. Our young people are seeking **Christian community** that functions like a diverse yet intimate family as they are plagued with loneliness, isolation and alienation.
4. Our young people are looking for **stability** in a highly mobile world, **and concreteness** in an increasingly virtual and socially networked existence.
5. Our young people desire **authentic faith**. They are prone to agnosticism or even raw atheism as they see little evidence of a God that makes a difference in the religious institutions of the day, namely the local church.

I wonder if those of us who serve in pastoral and denominational leadership are ourselves the chief obstacles to genuine renewal, as our careers are built on the old order. What other voices must we seek to include and engage in order to fearlessly follow the Holy Spirit into a changing world?