

## **CULTURALLY RELEVANT MINISTRY IN A POSTMODERN WORLD BY ED STETZER**

A fascinating movement has been born. Postmodern churches have begun to spring up across North America. They have been described in different terms—postmodern, Gen-X, even the overused “contemporary.” Leonard Sweet refers to these as “Noah’s Dove Churches” [1] because they are testing the waters of how to reach a postmodern North America.

They are predominately (though not exclusively) young, and their services are geared toward persons looking for different experiences. Spotty reports of these churches can be found on the Internet and in some limited magazines. But no large-scale study has been undertaken.

This is tricky; in a culture that thrives on diversity and disdains uniformity, there is no *right* way to plant a postmodern church. There is no single answer to reaching postmoderns because there is no one, stereotypical, North American postmodern.

Postmoderns do not fit into a nice little cultural box, but all people with a postmodern mind-set have this in common: They need to be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the current pattern of “church” isn’t reaching them.

Despite the obvious difficulty of defining postmoderns, there are some similar patterns in their thinking and feeling. There are *almost* universal values held by *most* postmoderns (note the double caveat). Helping to plant an indigenous church is an art more than a science, but missionaries around the world do it every day. One thing is very clear: postmoderns are different from the people churches have reached successfully in the past. If we write them off as “beyond help”—as some churches seem inclined to do—we will ignore the Great Commission.

New congregations are effectively reaching postmoderns. [2] These may be new worship services within existing churches, intended to meet post-moderns’ needs, or entirely new congregations. Styles of expression change between eras, [3] and new churches should reflect the change of style without any change of substance. Patterns are emerging that fit this changing yet unchanging paradigm.

### **Why Is It So Hard?**

1. Postmodern seekers have never been to church (they’re not ‘coming back’ like modern seekers.)
2. They’ve been educated in politically correct schools that Christianity is bigoted and small-minded.
3. I live in Silicon Valley, not Seattle, so flannel, incense and candles don’t work here—our postmodern seekers make six figures, have retirement plans and families. -Church Planter, Silicon Valley, California

Being a missionary is never easy, but when the culture change has taken place in one’s own home, it is even more difficult. We are much like Anglos living near Eighth Street (Calle Ocho) in 1959, during the era when locals were overwhelmed by new immigrants. Anglos in south Miami had two choices—think like Cubans and understand how to function in their world or move. Most chose to move rather than engage the new cultural shift.

The church does not have such an option. Our job is to reach the lost world and bring greater glory to God. Yet, rather than engaging the new cultural change, the most prevalent Christian response is to pretend that there has been no shift. [4] The church continues to function as it always has—protecting its youth in summer camp, keeping its members listening to Christian music, and, as a whole, staying away from change.

This is the easiest approach, but it is not the way of Christ. Those who are trying to preserve the existing church unchanged have little time to think about what the future of the church should look like. [5] Most churches do not even have the vitality to be a healthy modern church, let alone to make the transition from a modern to a postmodern world.

It will not be a great surprise to even the casual observer that Christianity has been disestablished as the primary belief of

on boards and commissions. Being part of the clergy is now a detriment to such involvement. [6] Self-described "spiritual" North Americans see uniting with a church as unnecessary. [7] On the other hand, many Americans are still "churchgoing." The United States is second only to Ireland as the highest church-attending Western nation. [8] Unfortunately, though these statistics are still high, they are declining. More importantly, it is the social influence of Christianity that has declined. [9] Attending church does not necessarily indicate true belief and may no longer determine lifestyle.

There is a definite need for churches and church services geared toward postmoderns. Few Boomers or older adults would want to sit in a church service geared toward postmoderns. Why should we expect that post-moderns would wish to sit in a service geared toward older adults? Postmodern generations are turning away from institutional Christianity in a way not seen in several generations. [10] This is not because of the gospel—as many postmoderns respond eagerly to Jesus—but it is because of the traditional culture of the institutional church itself. Church planters who are committed to communicating Christ, who are immersed in the postmodern culture, and who do not feel constrained by the traditional patterns of the "old" church will be the best change agents. [11]

### **Where Are Postmoderns?**

Two years ago, I was discussing mission strategy with church leaders in Kumasi, Ghana, West Africa. The mission was seeking to reach the primarily Muslim Walla people from Wa, in northwest Ghana. There were a few minutes of discussion about how best to go about the strategy. During this time, an insightful missionary and former Muslim asserted, "We must go to them." Everyone quickly agreed and started speaking of going to Wa. In the midst of the discussion, he interrupted and explained, "Yes, we must go to Wa and plant churches there, but they are here in Kumasi as well. Almost every man who carries lumber on his head to the market is Walla."

The result was a mission strategy for reaching Wa and another for the Walla. Missionaries went north to the town of Wa, and missionaries went into the lumber markets of Kumasi. Both were focused on the Walla people.

The same can be said for North American postmoderns. Churches need to be planted in Buckhead (metro Atlanta), Marin County (San Francisco), and at the University of Wisconsin. These are just a few of the "hometowns" for postmoderns. But the Walla are not just in Wa! Postmoderns also live in upstate New York, rural Alabama, and New Mexico. We must go to them everywhere.

Postmoderns, like the Walla, are not a *place*; they are a *people*. It is not correct to say that Seattle is postmodern—just that many postmoderns live in Seattle. Postmodernism spread quickly in the last decade of the twentieth century because it became the reigning philosophy of the popular media. Most adults thirty-five or under grew up learning morality on MTV, understanding marriage from TV talk shows, and learning about relationships from sitcoms. Postmoderns are everywhere; postmodern churches need to be everywhere.

Postmoderns do congregate in certain social centers, but they are different from community to community. According to the survey, the most common place where postmodern church planters build relationships is where most would expect—at the coffee shop. For that reason, a planter could assume that the coffee shop in the cultural district of any given town is a good place to find postmoderns—but that might not be true in every case.

### **Won't They Grow Out of It?**

It is natural for church leaders to ask, "Haven't we seen youth cultures that have claimed to have a new way of thinking merge back into the greater culture? Won't they grow out of it?" The 1960s serve as a good example. Many people looked on the hippies with the idea that they would grow out of their values. People rightly assumed that slogans such as "never trust anyone over thirty-five" would not last beyond their thirty-fifth birthday. Most did assimilate into the broader culture, cutting their hair and putting on ties. But they also brought some of their values with them (consider the sexual revolution of the sixties and the sexual antics of Bill Clinton).

Perhaps this postmodern mind-set is a fad that will pass. But if the 1960s are to be used as a barometer, it should be noted that many of today's church leaders were touched by the Jesus Movement while they were still wearing beards and bellbottoms. At that time, they could not have been touched otherwise. The argument for moving aggressively into the post-modern culture—and not avoiding it—is strong. Postmodernism has only a few of the characteristics of an enduring value system (in that it is often described and defined more by what it is not than what it is), but mainstream popular culture has already embraced its values, or nonvalues. This compounds the problem.

*The Oprah Winfrey Show* is a good example of postmodernism expressed through popular media. The influence of the Oprah Winfrey Show is hard to understate. "Oprah 101" has become the cultural classroom of America. A guest will often talk about his or her alternative understanding of morality or spirituality. Oprah then asks the audience for questions where an

embarrassed!) But the person continues, "The Bible says that God's best is found in a committed marriage." Oprah will nod and smile, but say something like, "That may be true for you, but who are we to judge, as long as people are happy and are not hurting anyone else." That is postmodernism, that is media influence, and that is now the majority view of our culture. Oprah might not know that she is influenced by a cultural system called postmodernity, but postmodern values are showcased on her show each day. She is not alone. Talk shows, "reality" programs, and even the news illustrate the values of postmodernism daily. Postmodernism is the reigning cultural paradigm in popular media. Postmodern values touch all those who are exposed to popular media—that is, everyone who watches television! This is virtually everyone.

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[1] Leonard I. Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 23.

[2] <http://www.theooze.com/articles/read.cfm?ID=70&CATID=4>.

[3] Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 13.

[4] Sweet, *Tsunami*, 18.

[5] Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 33.

[6] Sweet, *Tsunami*, 45.

[7] Darrel L. Guder, *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1.

[8] Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 10.

[9] *Ibid.*, 43.

[10] *Ibid.*, 11.

[11] *Ibid.*, 33.