

## **An Incomplete Answer**

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### Fragments of postmodern ministry

In the nine years that I have been doing ministry with and for college students, I have often been asked about some tips or tricks on how to minister in the emerging culture. So, here I will try and synthesize some of the thoughts I have so far been unable to articulate clearly. Please understand: this is definitely a Do-It-Yourself type of article, [meaning, don't try and implement the few things I believe are effective in communicating truth, but find your own methods and means and do-them-yourself]. Nevertheless, if you are hunting lost souls perhaps these seven signs, or concepts, are traces of the scent you follow. Please make use of them or discard them at your leisure.

### **The Question: How do I reach the postmodern world?**

Truthfully, I don't know. There are as many different methods and practices as there are web sites and bobble-head dolls, and everyone seems to connect differently with every way of doing things. Personally I believe that God is powerful enough to use even the most ignorant and ill-thought out ministry plans to communicate His truth to a world that needs it; and, though I am sometimes embarrassed by members of my spiritual family who seem to have left tact and diplomacy off their holiday shopping list, somehow God's sovereignty makes up for our incredible obtuseness.

The concepts included here are not fully explained [nor are they fully tested, successfully implemented on a large-scale, or completely grasped by the author], but I do see these kinds of things as essential to establishing a meaningful liturgy in the emerging culture. Like Walter Brueggeman, I see our task being to fund a counterimagination of the world, not to get it all right, right now. So, here is a list of things I don't totally understand, but have still found to be very effective.

Concept #1 **multi-sensory worship**. One of the greatest longings I have consistently seen in the postmodern culture in my years of collegiate ministry – especially amongst Charismatics – is the hunger for traditional, liturgical elements of worship. To be sure, they want it in a new way – but the lust for sacred space, art, and the heaviness of our ancient faith is there all the same. Tattoos of crucifixes and spray paint madonnas are not so rare in our new world. We ought to include every available medium for communicating and connecting with God in our services. Worship services should be tactile, visual, sensual, full of sight and sound, but touch and scent.

Concept #2 **interactivity**. People want to feel like they are an actual part of what is going on. Edwin Schlossberg, museum designer and author of Interactive Excellence says that the economy of the future is shared experiences. Our focus must be on connecting people with Jesus personally, not simply demonstrating for them what that connection looks like. So much of our church programming is visual expression, not emotional immersion. So now the focus must be on what the people do versus what they see.

Concept #3 **core relationships as the basis for community**. Once we reduced the wonder and awe of God to scientific formulae, we lost something – we lost everything spiritual and traded it for integers and fractions. In the modern world, we were so intent on proving the validity of our religion that we lost out on some of its mystery, but relationships with the divine are stunning, evolving processes that wrap us in tender affection and throw us into the blanket of supreme love. Church, then, is a love-in, a commune in the loosest sense where we can freely entertain the Holy Spirit and enjoy the pleasure of one another as we enjoy Jesus. Len Sweet, Dean of Drew Theological Seminary, says that our true belongings are not our possessions but our relationships. The future of the church looks a lot like our past. Revaluing relationships is a timeless necessity.

Concept #4 **creativity**. Try something new all of the time. Try hip-hop worship, try worship without music, try worship in the pitch dark, try contemplation and meditation, try *lectio-divina*, try something that hasn't even been invented yet. Don't copy the mega church down the street, don't copy Dan Kimball, U2 or Billy Graham. Create. Innovate. Find the seed of God's own DNA inside you that will prompt you to bring something new to life.

Concept #5 **EPIC Presentation**. Why do we gather together? What is the point? Again, Len Sweet – who, by the way, is someone worth quoting more than once in the same article – claims that our collective meetings must be Experiential, Participatory, Image-Driven, and Communal. Today, everything that is working is EPIC – museums, coffee shops, films and theatre, reality TV shows, and massive multi-player online video games are acute examples. What about the Church? What are we going to do to engage the world around us? It is no use telling people to enjoy what we serve them on a Sunday. The food may be pleasant, but the presentation is a mess. Remember, in addition to there being several different kinds of learning styles [visual, tactile, auditory, etc...] there are also at least seven different intelligences [verbal/spatial, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal {c.f. Howard Gardener, Frames of Mind}]. Churches, as a rule, are presented only in visual or auditory manners, catering to only those of a verbal/linguistic, musical/rhythmic, or interpersonal intelligence. Think of all of the people who are not even wired to “get” what we are trying to give!

Concept #6 **conversation with God**. One of the frequent disappointments I see registering in people who are spiritually hungry and come to church is that they don't get to actually connect with Jesus. We give them programs and media, messages and textual proof, but they never get a chance to talk to God themselves unless they are spiritually independent enough to tune out the stylized program and tune in to the Holy Spirit. We need to create space for conversation, space for people to personally speak to God in a corporate setting, and silent space which only He can fill.

Concept #7 **the redemption of Earth**. We're not simply talking about ecology, but society and culture and every form of life. Author and Pastor Brian McLaren is like a surrogate Santa Claus to me – not that he knows it [or me, for that matter] - but I get so

many gifts from his books and writings that I feel like leaving him milk and cookies at Christmas. McLaren, in his book A Generous Orthodoxy [which you should never read unless you are slightly charmed by being offended], talks a lot about the redemptive purposes of God for the whole planet and all of its contents. Music, movies, pop culture, animals, the ozone and the wilderness, Russia and Madagascar, oil and clean air are all affected by a theology that compels believers to understand our purpose here is to redeem, not to condemn; to save, not to judge. If indeed we believe God has entrusted this planet into our care, what should we do about it? What does that mean for the environment? For war? For the funny divisions we make between secular and sacred? For Muslims and Democrats, Conservatives and Homosexuals? In our diverse and beautiful world, we must bring Jesus to all people and all things like He presented Himself to the Samaritan woman at the well – uncompromising, but gentle; a sweet presence and a friend.

### **Closing Thoughts**

As I mentioned before, these things are in no way comprehensive – or even necessarily effective in the places where you live [remember, I'm a foreigner, writing like Jules Verne about this strange place called Canada, 20,000 leagues beneath the USA]. But I can't shake the conviction that this stuff needs to be figured out – by you - and the sooner you start making mistakes, the sooner you can fix them.

Just don't stop fighting.