

Belonging before believing: reaching out to the emerging culture

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In college I spent two summers working as a Bible worker¹ for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in central California. I was working in the area south of San Francisco known as the Silicon Valley. Each evening I'd get a stack of names and addresses from the student literature evangelists,² and each morning I would plot my day on a map of the Silicon Valley.

Yet I was frustrated. I'd been giving Bible studies for years, but always to those who already believed in the Bible. I'd never been faced with the kind of raw skeptics, people who honestly rejected the whole notion of truth, as I found here in Silicon Valley. My standard study guides were useless with these people because the studies simply fueled the raging cynicism about Christianity that these individuals already had.

I can't criticize the Bible study guides. They were great for those who already believed in the authenticity of Scripture and the divinity of Jesus. But not for this Silicon Valley crowd.

At a loss I started writing my own studies by putting my personal experience into each encounter. Instead of just transferring information, I made our teachings part of *my story*. I didn't know it then, but I had instinctively begun to adapt my evangelism efforts to the requirements of a postmodern society.

Who are postmoderns?

Postmodernism is often wrongly categorized and largely mislabeled. We mix the words *secular*, *postmodern*, *pluralist* and *contemporary*, though they are not the same. A *secular* person doesn't

believe in God. A *pluralist* believes in many gods or many truths. A *contemporary* person is merely someone living in the same time period as you and me. But a *postmodern* individual is more complex. Postmoderns don't necessarily deny God; they just don't have a growing relationship with Him. They don't reject truth; they just aren't sure where to find it.

"Postmodernism is a reaction to the rationalistic outlook of modernism," writes Miroslav Pujic, "specifically a reaction to the concept that truth can be discovered by simple rationalistic induction. The most common caricature of postmodernism is that it is a complete denial of truth, thus relativizing everything. Postmodern people, however, do not deny that there is truth and objective reality. What they question is our ability to distinguish truth from non-truth."³

Postmoderns question any claim to one big answer to everything. In his book *Ancient-Future Faith*, Robert Webber explains postmodernism: "Indications of a postmodern worldview suggest that mystery, with its emphasis on complexity and ambiguity, and community, with its emphasis on the interrelationship of all things and symbolic forms of communication, with an emphasis on the visual, are all central to the new way of thinking."⁴ In other words, mystery and community are integral parts of postmodern culture—they place a high value on visual learning and symbolism.

In this emerging postmodern culture, relationships are typically valued more than facts. To the postmodern, relationship equals personal experience. This is why listing a series of proof texts will never work; they must first know that you're their friend. The days of simply presenting truth, and then backing it up with Scripture, are gone. If your "truth" doesn't show up in your life, the postmodern doesn't want to hear about it. If they can't see the change and connect with your story, then your message is considered worthless.

The postmodern mind

This value placed on relationship translates into a deep need for narrative evangelism. Your story of how God has transformed your life becomes your unique personal narrative. "The church in the postmodern era must continue to tell the 'old, old story' by helping others to consider the plausibility and authenticity of the gospel, not by making a rational defense of its credibility. Narrative evangelism merges 'our story' with 'God's story' through sharing with

others. Narrative evangelism is preferred in a postmodern context. Since it is more personal, the story invites others to enter into it. Today many people make commitments to Christ based on stories that seem coherent and ring true to them."⁵

Consumerism is another facet of the emerging society. People like the freedom of taking back what doesn't fit right, or returning what they bought if they find something better in the next store. This mentality flows over into their view on religion, too. They hesitate to be tied to one congregation or denomination. They shy from what they see as the impersonal distance of organized religion. They'd rather have a spiritual gathering with trusted friends than attend a church full of strangers.

But all this does not mean that postmoderns can't be reached, or that we have to dilute Bible truth in order to try to entice them. On the contrary. Many positive traits within postmodern culture are compatible with discipleship—areas where you can share with them our common ground.

Statistics on postmodernism in North America

- thirty-eight percent of U.S.A. population attends church weekly (according to polls by ABC News)¹⁰
- all others can be considered unchurched
- unchurched American population includes:
 - nominal Christians
 - secularists (against God)
 - postmoderns (spiritual seekers who do not see church and Bible as the only place to find answers)
- majority of Americans under 30 are postmodern

For instance, postmoderns love people. They place a premium on authentic relationships and community. They long to belong—somewhere, anywhere. They want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. They have a strong need to belong in a group of friends, and this sense of belonging

must occur before they can transition to a new belief system. It's about *belonging* before *believing*. Our churches can, of course, at least ideally, fulfill this need.

Unhealthy Christian reactions

The Christian world has reacted in a wide variety of ways to postmoderns.

More than just living.

Many people today are jaded with religion, especially when it appears to hold little relevance for their lives.

Those of us who are active disciples of Christ have found ways to make religion real, but it isn't always easy to share with friends.

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Some retreat within the church walls, isolating themselves. Others water down the core doctrine of Scripture to make truth more palatable to unconverted hearts.

But shouldn't we seek to reach the postmodern generation the way Jesus reached people in His day—caring for their needs, listening to their woes, healing their aches, and befriending each one? Isn't that what Christianity is all about?

Christ gave the Great Commission to go and teach and baptize (Matt. 28:19, 20). Just joining in the postmodern trends doesn't achieve this divine commission. But then, neither does hiding behind the church walls.

Far too often, Christians are oblivious to the power of our words. Instead of tuning into the nuances of language around us, we entrench ourselves in isolated jargon. But we shouldn't be so careless. When we attune to the needs of the emerging culture, "Christians will use words less flippantly, more like lovers and artists and less like lawyers and salesmen. We deal with precious meanings, with love stories, with antidotes and cures that can save lives but can become poisons if they are not prepared with care. Syllogism and story, classification

and metaphor, cause-effect and allegory, rhetoric and poetry, understatement and wild exaggeration for effect—our rhetoric will reflect our increased sensitivity to words and their vast and varied potential for changing people."⁶ Should we turn around then, and embrace every slang or uncouth phrase of popular culture, just to relate? Of course not. However, we *must* educate ourselves to understand shades of meaning in language and to use it cautiously. Relationships include conversation, and wise Christians will become good conversationalists if we want to develop friendships within the emerging generation.

Rather than presenting a specific worship style or playing down core doctrine to make membership more appealing to postmoderns, ministers must show members how to build friendships and gradually present important truths the way Jesus did—within the context of trust and relationships. "This enables members to experience a paradigm shift to view evangelism as dialogue instead of monologue, moving from compelling proof to compelling stories," Pujic says. "It creates a shift from 'Come and see' to 'Go and be,' moving from the gospel presentation to a gospel experience."⁷

Reaching postmoderns: one approach

For years Western Europe has led the trend toward postmodernism. At one time this center of Christianity and mission movements had become the home of skepticism and doubt. But North America is not far behind. Fewer people each year claim to regularly attend church, and more children are growing up without any formal religious instruction or influence. With morality on the decline, even the younger generation clings to each other for community and support.

Reaching postmoderns in your world

It's important to make sure that every form of evangelism imitates Christ's example. He made people feel welcome and loved, and then He shared what they needed to know. LIFEdevelopment uses seven levels of discipleship to accomplish this goal.

LIFEdevelopment Discipleship Pathway

1. Get Connected: making friends
2. Biblical Values: starting conversation
3. Basic Christianity: sharing concepts
4. Blended Worship: small group study
5. Covenant Celebration: baptism
6. Spiritual Nurture: Christian lifestyle and spiritual disciplines
7. Gift-Based Ministry: preparing to serve

According to a recent European Social Survey, the following are the number of people who attend church weekly in European countries:

- Ireland – 56%**
- Poland – 54%**
- Italy – 32%**
- Greece – 26%**
- Croatia – 22%**
- Britain – 13%**
- Netherlands – 12%**
- Hungary – 11%**
- Germany – 9%**
- France – 8%**
- Serbia – 8%**
- Sweden – 5%**
- Norway – 5%**
- Denmark – 3%**
- Russia – 2%**

Most Christian evangelism models haven't changed in decades. You hold a revival at your church, or maybe a series of meetings in a downtown hall. You have Bible studies with interested individuals, but your church members don't think witnessing really begins until the Bible study group has someone asking to be baptized. Unfortunately, that system works for only part of the population. The entire emerging culture lives largely untouched by the message of Jesus' love and saving grace.

Because Europe has been the center of postmodern culture, it is only fitting that new ministry strategies are explored there. LIFEdevelopment.info (LD) is a fresh biblical concept proving successful in the Trans-European Division of Seventh-day Adventists.⁸ Developed by Miroslav Pujic, director of the Center for Secular and Postmodern Mission, LIFEdevelopment equips ministers and

lay members for engaging with their community to share the story of Jesus (cf. Mark 5:19).

Unique among evangelistic models, LD focuses on the value of intimate relationships rather than on public evangelistic meetings. Instead of viewing evangelism as an isolated event, LD introduces process evangelism where witnessing becomes a narrative between two friends sharing experiences and getting connected with each other based on some common ground other than shared religion.

LD presents seven levels of discipleship—from building initial

friendships to equipping new disciples for service. It begins by teaching church members how to connect with the postmoderns around them. Once they are friends, they can converse about biblical themes like love, relationships, and the meaning of life. After these, the conversation can develop toward more Christian themes like the life and ministry of Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Bible.

As time progresses, these discussions continue, and they begin studying the Holy Bible together. Forty Bible talks bring out the main teachings of the church, using postmodern language and nonthreatening vocabulary. This stage brings the decision for baptism and public celebration of a covenant of faith with God.

After celebrating the covenant of baptism, the real nurturing begins. During this phase each new member receives purposeful mentoring to help them adjust to their new lifestyle and to deepen their growing relationship with Jesus and with church friends. This time period is extremely important for newly baptized disciples, giving them time to adapt to their new life in Christ.

The final stage of discipleship trains new disciples into Christian service both in the church and the community. These opportunities should be matched with God-given gifts and skills to minimize burnout and frustration and maximize success. Pujic says, "You need to be intentional about what you're doing. It's fine to say 'witnessing should be natural,' but unless you have a strategy, you'll stay too busy with other things and never get around to it. Even Jesus had a strategy!"⁹ Without purposeful training and nurture, even the most dedicated and zealous new disciple will likely fail in sharing the story of Jesus' love.

Ways to connect

You don't have to feel isolated in the challenge of ministry to postmoderns. Growing research is building the foundation for strategies to understand postmodern culture and to work within it to teach Bible truth.

LIFEdvelopment.info is one of these resources. You can register for upcoming LD training conferences, browse resources, watch video clips, and connect with others at www.lifedevlopment.us or (outside the United States) www.lifedevlopment.info.

More than anything else, as you face the challenges of leadership in a world increasingly neutral or even antagonistic toward church and religion, it is vital to make witnessing a way of life. Without each of us having the desire to emulate Christ, any witnessing effort will be destined for failure, no matter the audience. But when we seek to copy Jesus, when His love flows out into our daily social connections, when our lives reflect a commitment to living out the truth of Scripture in every way—we cannot avoid making friendships that will lead to sharing the gospel. ■

Resources for postmodern evangelism

www.lifedevlopment.us

www.lifedevlopment.info (outside U.S.A.)

Level 1. "GET CONNECTED"—handbook

Level 2. "EVIDENCE through my experience"—10 DVD programs (Biblical Values)

Level 3. "MIND the GAP"—10 DVD programs (Basic Christianity)

Level 4. "EXPERIENCING the JOY"—40 Bible talks, for a group study setting

Level 5. "MY DECISION"—celebrating the covenant of baptism

Level 6. "QUALITY LIFE"—book, personal mentors for intentional spiritual nurture

Level 7. "EQUIPPED to serve"—book, inventory for spiritual gifts and service

-LD guidebook for lay members to use at every step

-LD training conference: March 9–11, 2007, Atlanta, Georgia. (See Web site to register.)

- 1 An individual who studies the Bible in a systematic approach usually with those who are not members of the church.
- 2 Usually college students, who during their school breaks sell Christian books by going door to door.
- 3 Miroslav Pujic, unpublished doctoral thesis, Andrews University, 2005.
- 4 Robert E. Webber *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 35.
- 5 Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 188.
- 6 Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix, Revised and Expanded Edition of Reinventing Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 90.
- 7 Miroslav Pujic, LIFEdvelopment Seminar Lecture, Macon, GA, March 2006.
- 8 This unit of the church is known as the Trans-European Division, which covers a number of European nations, plus nations in other parts of the world.
- 9 Miroslav Pujic, *The Missionary, 3rd Millenium AD: LIFEdevlopment.info Handbook* (Nottingham, UK: Pyramid Press, 2003).
- 10 See "Who Goes to Church? Older Southern Women Do; Many Catholic Men Don't," http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/church_poll020301.html, November 16, 2006.