



# Welcome to a 'Whatever' World

By Rick Chromey

**W**e live in a different world.

And two vastly different cultures are colliding within today's society.

The moderns (which include most leaders in today's communities and churches) are those born before 1960. The world they experienced, as youth and (the older they are) as adults, was one built upon reason and words, structure and system. Literacy opened doors. Technology was print- and word-based (telephone, newspaper, radio). Arguments reinforced beliefs. Life was black and white. The world largely revolved around a local context. Local news. Local economics. Local values. (Many older moderns have never left their hometowns.)

The postmoderns, born after 1960, grew up differently. Their culture was wired with experiences and images. From golden arches to Nike "swooshes," from reality-based television to video games, everyone is a participant. It's now a karaoke world where images impact ideas and experiences create beliefs. President Clinton's town hall meetings reached the postmodern while "moderns" George Bush and Bob Dole failed to relate.

Postmoderns are globally connected. Iraq is a live event. The yen impacts the Euro dollar. Via the Internet, a postmodern can chat with people around the globe.

It's a different world. Futurist Leonard Sweet appropriately de-



## Part 2:

### *The Church Must Change or Die*

scribes the difference between the two worlds as "land" and "water." The modern era was solid and systemized, while the postmodern age is fluid and free.

That image is valuable. We're often encouraged to "think outside the box," but that's modern reasoning. In a postmodern culture, there is no box. You can fence land, but not liquid. Consequently, as long as churches build "boxes" rather than "boats," we lose.

Few of today's churches reach postmoderns (Christian or not). Most

church services, programs, and planning still operate from modern principles and the "field of dreams" mentality: "If we build it, they will come." However, postmoderns aren't coming. Despite megachurch successes, few attract and keep young, postmodern, 20- to 35-year-olds. Most are built on the backs of "boomer" (modern) audiences.

Much of the "innovative" church movement is in name only. Its idea of "innovation" is giving the old jalopy a new paint job or mass-producing franchised

spiritual experiences like McDonald's and Starbucks mass-produce franchised fast-food and quality-coffee experiences. Seeker-sensitive worship is often high-modern, native-insensitive worship. . . . The boomer generation's preference for topiaried worship, with highly sculpted performances and Broadway-trimmed productions, is native numb. What God worth his Pearly Gates would call this worship, they ask themselves. Little wonder postmoderns are increasingly distant from both traditional and innovative churches.

—Leonard Sweet in *Carpe Manana* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 45.

The “worship wars” (boomer “praise” vs. G.I. generation “hymns”) will pale in comparison to the upcoming battles as Generation X, millennial, and later postmodern generations rise to church leadership positions. The question will be whether the church will reinvent or die. Many postmodern (Gen X) leaders are leaving the traditional church with the disillusionment that it's impossible to “pour new wine into old wineskins.”

Consequently, postmodern churches have exploded everywhere, and they look much different than the traditional church.

### **New Connections, Different Congregations**

You might call them “whatever” churches. Dot.com churches that are 24-7-365 fellowships meeting anywhere and everywhere at any time. Such congregations are highly experiential, relational, and image-driven. Service projects. Multisensory worship (using smells, sounds, and touch) to experience God. Interactive learning. Video parables.

The Web is also their oyster. E-mail, chat rooms, discussion boards, and Internet-based technologies drive their outreach. The modern approach was clever church signs, bulletins, newspaper ads, and neighborhood canvassing. However, emerging re-

search suggests a church's Internet site might be the single greatest advertisement in today's culture.

In fact, your Web site (hopefully you have one) will bring or bar visitors. Most postmoderns will connect to a Web site long before they enter a church foyer. Ever wonder how many visitors your Web site has turned off?

Nevertheless, postmoderns—both pagan and pious—are finding Jesus through such connections and congregations.

Naturally, this postmodern ethic (“whatever”) about God and church is what upsets moderns. Modern preachers and elders (over 40) expect postmoderns (under-40) to “get with the program.” Give them that monolithic “old-time religion,” they say. But

#### **Boxes vs. Water**

The modern era was solid and systemized, while the postmodern age is fluid and free. Thinking “outside the box” is the modern approach. In a postmodern culture, there is no box.

postmoderns reply, “Give us Jesus Christ, Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, and Billy Graham now.” Just make it 21st century. Postmoderns desire a retrofit faith. They actually love hymns, but prefer guitar to piano, a band to an organist. They don't need lectures in Sunday school, they hunger for relationships rooted in Christ.

Postmoderns yearn for a reality-based religion.

Consequently, postmodern evangelism is less arguments for God's existence as it is simply sharing relationships and experiences. It's incarnational evangelism. Postmodern Christians are those who have discovered Christianity to be the supreme truth, carved not from reason as much as personal experience. Postmoderns don't seek to understand God, but to experience His presence.

Postmoderns will see Jesus first in

us. They will understand the “mystery of God” through my story. The Bible is a living letter, confessed by both my life and my lips. Four spiritual laws and baptismal arguments are meaningless. A rich life in God is an apologetic no postmodern can deny or denounce.

### **Change Or Die**

It's a fact witnessed throughout the natural world. Change or die. Reinvent or decay. Move or stagnate. Need an example? How about my laptop computer? I purchased my first laptop in 1994 (a Tandy 256K). It featured the old green screen and had just enough hard drive to load an antiquated version of WordPerfect on it. Nothing more. It had no CD-ROM drive or modem. Today I am pounding out this manuscript on a 30 gig, Pentium 4 Dell Inspiron. I can watch a DVD on it and connect to DSL Internet.

I've purchased three laptops in the last five years.

Change or die.

I've kept that old Tandy laptop as a reminder of how the church must change . . . or become obsolete. Many postmoderns look at our churches with the same perspective. Our services are hot in homilies but frigid in friendships. Sermons are word-based, imageless monologues constructed on apologetics and arguments, but void of personal story and struggle. My favorite preachers share their hearts and their minds.

Postmodern communicators are transparent and relational. Recently, I preached in a small “modern” congregation, speaking mostly from the floor. I even traveled momentarily to the back rows to share with the “younger crowd.” I often preach without shoes to teens. Not to be disrespectful, but to show my humanness and affirm this is “holy ground.” It sends an image.

So the question remains: How does the church encounter, evangel-

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ize, and edify postmoderns?

Hmmm. I don't know. Whatever. (The moderns have just quit reading this article at this point.)

I don't know if there's any single solution to postmodern ministry. I want to suggest three effective keys to reaching them (one this week, and two more in next week's article). It's nothing new. The postmodern world has already figured it out. Now it's the church's turn.

### It's All About Relationships

Postmoderns are interpersonal beings.

They love to listen to each other. Television is packed with people relating and responding. Why do shows like *Survivor*, *Joe Millionaire*, and *The Bachelorette* score? It's more than just games. It's a microcosm of society as tribes test boundaries, communicate values, and create bonds. The *Survivor* Web site allows everyone to participate in the game. Weekly popularity polls. Discussion boards. Chats. I've engaged in *Survivor* conversations in airports, restaurants, and tire repair shops.

The "modern" soap opera is dying, replaced by *Real World* and *The Osbournes*. Reality television is more than a passing fad. In fact, it's a dominant force on network television, with no end in sight. *My Life as a Sitcom* (ABC Family), *High School Reunion*, and *The Surreal Life* (WB) all debuted early this year.

Interactive learning also is "in." Lectures are history. Discussion-based classrooms where concepts are explored create deeper learning. Moderns will denounce this as "touchy-feely," but postmoderns thrive on it. Why? Because it's relational. The postmodern doesn't need a professor to pour knowledge into an empty brain. With a few clicks on the Internet, postmoderns have ac-

cess to more information than anyone 40 years ago had in 22 years of education. Postmoderns want to see the knowledge work.

Postmodern teachers will be guides from the side, not sages from the stage. Future education will be time-less (no 50-minute periods) and wall-less (outside a room).

Postmoderns yearn to experiment, explore, and even explode ideas. Classrooms will need to evolve into "ask-rooms" and "confess-rooms" and "share-rooms."

And so will Sunday-morning church.

Have you ever considered how non-relational the average Sunday-morning worship service is? Think about it. Most congregations sit in bolted pews and look at the backs of heads. The pulpit occupies center stage and focuses attention on one person. Worship is led by a few. The emblems are passed by a few. The announcements are given by one person. The prayer is offered by one person. The sermon is delivered by one person.

No wonder church is boring to postmoderns.

Imagine round tables and chairs instead of pews. Imagine a message of 15 minutes, followed by 20 minutes of small-group discussion. Imagine the worship team leading music from the floor. Imagine 30-minute Communion experiences. Imagine no time limits.

Imagine a "karaoke" sermon where individuals share spiritual parables, personal testimonies, or favorite biblical insights. Sunday morning would look quite different.

But this would never fly in a larger church? Exactly.

Many futurists, including myself, believe the megachurch era is a blip on the church history time line. It's a late-20th-century, modern phenomenon. In 50 years, the large churches

### Seven Books Every Church Leader Should Read

- *The Unstoppable Force*, by Erwin McManus (Group, 2001)
- *Herding Cats: Teaching and Leading in a Postmodern World*, by Rusty George and Jeff Krajewski (College Press, 2001)
- *How to Change Your Church (Without Killing It)*, by Alan Nelson and Gene Appel (Word, 2000)
- *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, by Thom S. Ranier (Zondervan, 2001)
- *In Search of Authentic Faith*, by Steve Rabey (Waterbrook, 2001)
- *Carpe Manana*, by Leonard Sweet (Zondervan, 2001)
- *Morph! The Texture of Leadership for Tomorrow's Church*, by Ron Martoia (Group, 2003)

that survive will probably have splintered into dozens, even hundreds, of subcongregations that meet anywhere and everywhere throughout the week. Postmoderns no longer view Sunday morning as sacred. Every hour is holy.

Which is why postmodern churches are already using Web-based technology to connect their constituents. Can you imagine Bible study "chat rooms?" It's already happening. E-mailed church newsletters? Already here. Financial gifts online? Ditto.

Smaller churches who catch the vision will find they're already better positioned for postmodern ministry. It's easier to turn a Toyota than a Mack truck. The smaller church has a place for everyone. The larger congregation needs to create a space for everyone, too.

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**NEXT WEEK: Ideas for Reaching Postmoderns**