



Welcome to a 'Whatever' World

By Rick Chromey

The postmodern world is wired differently. Consequently, we need to reinvent ministry to this culture. Last week's article looked at one key approach, relationships. This week we consider two more.

They Thrive on Experiences

Postmoderns are experiential beings. They thrive on thrills and advertise adventure. The restaurant community has learned this truth. The Rainforest Cafe. Planet Hollywood. Hard Rock Cafe. The new hot spot is Dave and Buster's, a restaurant that combines "adult eats" with "kid treats." It's a Chuck E. Cheese for the over-18 crowd (children not allowed unless accompanied by an adult). And it's filled with video games that shimmer and shake, crash and splash. Rich with activity and experiences, it's the ultimate playground for postmoderns.

Active learning is not just trendy; it's effective. Most of what we remember, whether it's a phone number or life lesson, follows personal experience. Postmoderns relish classrooms that are wired with emotional experiences. It's not enough to hear the lesson; they hunger to hold and feel it. Experiential learning provokes a feeling (sadness, anger, frustra-



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Ideas for Reaching Postmoderns

tion, joy, or discouragement) that opens the mind to deeper cognitive truth. Experiential learning is beyond the walls of the classroom. It's a cemetery (death), a fishing pond (fishers of men), a zoo (Noah's ark).

Our faith is filled with spiritual personal experiences. Baptism. Communion. Offerings. Unfortunately, again, the modern church is out of

touch. Who does baptisms? Probably the preacher or staff. Who passes the plates? Elders and deacons. Why is the bulk of Sunday-morning church involved in a nonrelational activity (sermon)? Why is the most experiential part of our service (Communion) tacked on the back of a service like an afterthought? What would happen if we spent 10 minutes imparting a spiritual message and 40 minutes sharing the Lord's Supper?

Does this mean preaching is passé in the postmodern context? No. But it must be reinvented. The adult attention span, conditioned by countless commercials, is 13 minutes (and shrinking). Preachers in the future

Active Learning Resources for Teaching and Preaching

- *Do It! Active Learning in Youth Ministry*, by Thom and Joani Schultz (Group, 2000)
- *Ready, Set, Go*, by Mark Hale (Standard, 2000)
- *Creative Sermon Starters* (Group, 2000)
- *Bore No More*, by Mike and Amy Nappa (Group, 1995)

The Fundamental Dilemma

will need to incorporate more experiences into their sermons. Object lessons. Small-group activities and discussions. Video clips.

Missions and service projects will mark the church of the future. Postmoderns seek to serve in personal, relevant ways. They sacrifice treasure, talent, and time. And don't forget your community. The mission field may be out your back door.

Church leadership also must evolve. The traditional church board is dying. And as postmoderns rise into leadership, more of them will seek interactive, participatory leadership. How open will your meetings be? Can children, teens, and women participate? This isn't about who's leading, but how decisions will be made.

I believe the church is on the cusp of finally restoring New Testament biblical leadership. The traditional church board has no scriptural precedent. In the future, logistical church decisions will be pushed lower, and leaders (pastors and elders) will focus on spiritual leadership.

It's time to empower the whole church, not just a few.

They're Driven by Images

Postmoderns are image-driven. They are visually wired. Images communicate. The golden arches. The Nike "swoosh." Bathrooms are labeled with pictures. The photo of firefighters erecting a flag at Ground Zero is forever etched in our memory. E-mails are rich in keyboard images like ";" (wink and smile) or "<///>" (fish). Popular music was forever changed by the video images of MTV. Body sculpting—including

"The contemporary church has chosen standardization over uniqueness. We have chosen predictability over surprise. And without realizing it, to our own regret, we have chosen comfort and convenience over servanthood and sacrifice. But in the end, what we have chosen is organization over life, and this, perhaps, is the fundamental dilemma we face—that at best the church is seen as a healthy organization."

—Erwin McManus, *The Unstoppable Force* (Group, 2001), 14.

and '90s) removed the images deemed to "confuse" or "alienate." Crosses were de-emphasized or switched to the side, as were Communion tables. Sterile stages and large, blank screens became popular.

The success of seeker-sensitive worship suggested effective outreach, but to postmodern Gen X-ers it communicated institutionalism, not individuality. Consequently, as postmoderns aged, they felt more alienated by "organized" religion. Many confused this attitude with agnosticism, but postmoderns are wildly spiritual.

And they view their spirituality through images.

The Los Angeles postmodern church Mosaic (www.mosaic.org), pastored by Erwin McManus, has wrapped her congregation's purposes in images: evangelism (wind), fellowship (water), service (wood), worship (fire), and discipleship (earth). Water and fire are two primary pictures of our faith. The Genesis flood and Red Sea. Baptism of Jesus. Walking on water. Water of

dyeing, piercing, and tattooing—is the rage.

Perhaps, image is everything.

It is ironic that, while our culture became more image-driven, the seeker-sensitive evangelical church (largely attracting modern "boomers" in the late 1980s

life. Fire of sacrifices. Tongues of fire at Pentecost. Three men in a furnace. Quenching the Spirit's fire.

A southern Kansas City Lutheran congregation encourages each new church family to contribute a cross to hang on the wall at their main entrance. The crosses range from ornate to natural. The image of the cross not only converts, it connects.

Restoration churches have a rich tradition in baptism and the weekly Lord's Supper. Imagine, however, how images might enhance the experiences. A baptism by candlelight or pots of fire. Or a PowerPoint slide of a tomb or grave marker. Actually breaking the bread and pouring the fruit of the vine to distribute it for Communion. PowerPoint slides of Jesus on the cross.

PowerPoint technology creates wonderful opportunities to be image-driven. However, most PowerPoint is limited to song lyrics and announcements. Can a single image replace each point in the preacher's sermon? Possibly. Preaching on Jesus as "the door?" A series of slides featuring various doors (no words, just doors). The Scripture is filled with images. The fruit of the Spirit. The lost coin. Jesus writing in the dirt. The two greatest Christian holidays, Christmas and Easter, are image-driven.

The latest revolution in worship is to move beyond a photo to animation. Video clips (with words for worship) are becoming more popular. Many worship songs are ripe for video imaging. "Mercy Is Falling (Like the Sweet Rain)" can be sung to a soft rain video. Ominous clouds, majestic mountains, and crashing seas are

Video Resources for Preaching and Teaching

- *Box Office Bible Studies* (three volumes), by Jim Eichenberger (Standard)
- *Videos That Teach* (two volumes), by Doug Fields and Eddie James (Zondervan)
- *Movie Clips for Kids* (Group)
- *Blockbuster Movie Illustrations*, by Bryan Belknap (Group)



pictured in “Shout to the Lord.” Even hymns like “In the Garden” and “A Mighty Fortress” could feature videos of flora and forts.

Video also is a preacher’s best friend. Video clips from popular movies and television shows can serve as postmodern parables. Discernment in using all movies—especially R-rated—is encouraged, but most are readily usable.

I witnessed one preacher illustrate his message with a verbal reconstruction of a scene from the movie *Rudy*. His point was made, but he could have saved three minutes by showing the video rather than telling about it.

Object lessons are another opportunity to provide images for postmoderns. Many churches still have “children’s sermons” based upon object lessons that all ages enjoy. Why? Because the object helps portray a truth that will stay in the mind.

In fact, most of the lessons and sermons we remember best were probably connected with drama or object lessons.

Objects also can be incorporated in worship. Pass out slices or pieces of bread and build an entire worship time around Jesus as the “bread of life.” Distribute the Communion emblems as individuals enter, and create an hour of study and song around the images of wine and bread, finally partaking at the end. Hand out objects to confirm sermon challenges. Lights in the world? A small penlight. The fire of forgiveness? Paper matches. Persecution? A stone.

Remember, image is everything.

A Postmodern Parable

At 11:39 P.M. on April 14, 1912, in the icy waters of the North Atlantic, an iceberg punctured the *Titanic*. This gigantic steamship was, according to publicity, unsinkable. Unfortunately, faith in that idea actually cost lives.

Twenty lifeboats were released and

boarded. Only six were filled to capacity. Many, especially the early ones, were less than one-third filled. The crew was actually wary of overboarding the boats (designed for 65 passengers) and were unaware they were previously tested to hold 70 large men.

As the *Titanic* slowly slipped beneath the surface, many people surprisingly chose to remain aboard, their faith unshakable that it would not sink. A band played the haunting hymn “Nearer My God to Thee.” At 2:05 A.M. on April 15, the last lifeboat departed. Over the next several minutes, until the ship sank at about 2:20 A.M., many passengers and crew members jumped into the water.

The Search

“In our postmodern culture, people are looking for experiences to bring them closer to God. Why have we been so unimaginative? Postmoderns aren’t looking for principles to die for; they’re looking for practices to live by.”

—Ron Martoia, *Morph!* (Group, 2002), 59.

Hundreds of frantic voices echoed off the frigid waters and through the frozen night. “Save me!” “Please don’t leave me here!”

Meanwhile, the lifeboats rowed safely away. The saved comforted and convinced themselves it wasn’t their loved ones screaming.

By 3:30 A.M., only four hours after the accident, when rockets from the rescue ship *Carpathia* were spotted by those in the lifeboats, frozen corpses were floating on the water. A couple of lifeboats had returned and managed to save a lingering few.

Of the 2,200 aboard the *Titanic*, only 705 survived (32 percent). Over 75 percent of the steerage (lower-class) passengers died, many within the walls of the ship (purposely designed to keep them from contact

with first-class passengers to prohibit spread of disease).

What’s the message of this tragedy?

The “modern” world is a *Titanic* era that’s slipping beneath the waters of history. A new postmodern era has dawned. In this fluid, icy culture where reputations are ruined, families are fractured, and life is lousy, the church is in charge of the lifeboats. Our culture is a swift current with waves of innovation. The church has the opportunity and ability to save lives. We can eliminate the walls that separate our society (racism, elitism, denominationalism). The outcry is obvious, unless we knowingly turn a deaf ear.

Unfortunately, much of the church today isn’t even in lifeboats. It’s still under a delusion that the “modern” church is unsinkable. The lifeboats are bolted beneath politics, procrastination, and personal agenda. Despite the evidence that our culture has changed and our future is fading, we strike a band to play “Nearer My God to Thee” and trust that the inevitable isn’t.

But, my friends, the ship is going down. The end of 500 years of history is closing. To ignore the obvious is to risk the future. The church will never perish (because it’s spiritually energized by divine mandate), but congregations will fail and fall. Many will die before it’s all over.

It’s time to jump overboard. It’s time to man the lifeboats. It’s time to reinvent. The future is not strapped to a sinking ship. As Leonard Sweet suggests, we need to become an “aquachurch.” We need fear only ourselves—our limitations, our liabilities, our laziness. The water is rising. A new postmodern waterworld awaits.

It’s time to sink or swim.

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