

## The Times They Are a-Changin'... AGAIN!

### How 12 Emerging Churches Are Effectively Engaging A Postmodern Culture With the Good News

“The times they are a-changin’...” intoned Bob Dylan in 1964, as he and other Baby Boomers heralded the advent of their generation’s quest to make sense of the world.

And if you look around you will see that the times they are a changing ... again! This time, Boomer offspring sometimes called Generation X, are reinventing and reexamining our church musical forms, artistic elements, organizational structure and evangelism. The prudent church leader, who wishes his or her church to remain relevant, will want to circumspectly investigate this emerging generational culture. But how is this to be accomplished?

In a recent book titled, *Inside the Organic Church: Learning From 12 Emerging Congregations* (Abingdon Press, August 2006) I analyzed 12 emerging churches that were effectively reaching people under the age of 35 with the Good News. From Canada, the US and England, I found that they reaching out with 36 specific strategies.

Time and space do not permit me to outline all 36 strategies, but let us look at one: how do you decide what parts of a culture must be accepted and which parts must be abandoned for the sake of Godliness?

To answer this question requires a three step process. And, it mirrors what a missionary would do when he or she first encounters a different culture.

Step 1: Practice SIFT.

Eddie Gibbs, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, pointed out that the same way a baker sifts out impurities in flour, church leaders today must be prepared to sift, examine and sort through the various elements of a culture and decide which conflict with the teachings of Jesus and which do not. I’ve adopted a short acronym to help you remember how to do this: SIFT - Study, Itemize, Friendships & Teach.

Studying a culture is where missionary work begins. Read its books, study its art, listen to its stories. Don’t judge, for you will find plenty of areas with which you can disagree. Rather, look for the messages and the stories that are being communicated.

Itemize elements of that culture into two columns: those that conflict with the Biblical message and those that don’t. This will be challenging, because when something is different we tend to lump it in the conflict category. But be honest here.

Establish Friendships with people of this culture who will help you re-itemize your list. Spend extended times in dialogue, making friendships and asking them to help you re-itemize the items in your two columns: conflict or non-conflict. This gives you a good opportunity to share the Good News with this person, as they too learn what items conflict with Jesus’ message and which do not. This is the longest part of the process, but one of the most rewarding, for it lets you connect with a local guide.

Finally, Teach the Good News using insights that have emerged. You will find many biblical stories can be reframed without changing their message. You will also find that

teaching the Good News to people in this new culture gives you opportunities to evaluate your message, your metaphors and your results.

### Step 2: Reject

However, we must be prepared to reject parts of a culture that are in conflict with the Biblical message. My colleague Dr. Ryan Bolger from Fuller Seminary described how young people in Sheffield England who are becoming Christians from the Disco-Club culture are having to come to grips with immodest dress. They realize that lewdness is in conflict with the Good News, and though before they were saved it did not bother them; now they are wrestling with its ramifications. This process is challenging, but necessary. And, if conducted with a local guide, it can be a wonderfully transforming experience for both the missionary and the guide.

### Step 3: Affirm

Remember to affirm those parts of a culture that do not conflict with the Biblical message. For example, young people of Generation X have a heightened interest in helping the poor. This certainly does not conflict with Jesus' teachings, and the prudent church leader, will want to encourage such ministries when reaching out to Generation X. But be careful here. We tend to affirm things that make us comfortable, rather than those that actually do not conflict.

### The Result: A Missional Church

Have you noticed that reaching people in North America is conducted in much the same way a missionary might? And, churches that are successfully reaching out are doing it this way. A group of thinkers called the Gospel and Our Culture Network have coined a term to describe this: a missional church. This is a church where attendees function more as missionaries than they do as spectators. Missionary strategies are studied, missionary successes both at home and abroad are lauded, and missional SIFT is encouraged.

So, where do you start? The best place may be at gatherings such as Break Forth Canada, where you can learn cutting edge strategies that are reaching other generational cultures. Plus, a parallel strategy is to read books about churches that are reaching today's generations.

A professor of mine, a long-term missionary named Dr. McGavran, looked around and said "We stand at the sunrise of missions." I couldn't agree more.

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