

CONGREGATIONS, GROWTH & RENEWAL, NEW FORMS OF CHURCH

Carol Howard Merritt: Five cultural shifts that should affect the way we do church

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2011

Churches aren't the most culturally savvy places. I know that some congregations are still fighting about whether they should be singing "contemporary" songs, which were written in the 1980s. Or they're wrestling over the use of PowerPoint, which can be tiresome for people who have endured two decades of PP board meetings.

It's probably good that most churches aren't all wrapped up in the latest fads. We don't have the cash to keep up with most of it, and if we do, we're probably better off spending that money on feeding the homeless rather than making sure the youth room has the newest flat-screen TV.

But there are cultural shifts that congregations and church leaders need to track and respond to sensibly. Here are five of them.

1) **Finances.** Younger generations are not faring well in this economy. They didn't do so well when the rest of the country was booming either. Why? Younger generations face high student loan debt, high housing costs and stagnant wages (if they're even able to get a job). The shame they bear matches our debt load, and they feel like they need to get their life together before they go to church.

Are people ashamed of their monetary situation in our congregations? Is the first thing that comes out of our mouth at coffee hour, "So, where do you work?" Can we think of another question, like,

“So, what keeps you busy these days?” Do we introduce new members by highlighting their shiny resume? Are we realistic in our giving expectations with young adults?

2) **Work hours.** People who go to [mainline churches are wealthier](#). Or wealthier people go to mainline churches. It’s a chicken-and-egg thing. We don’t know what comes first. But young workers know one thing: many people in their 20s and 30s work retail or in the service industry. The blue laws faded long ago, and you don’t get Sunday mornings off unless you’re management.

Do we have opportunities to worship or engage in the community beyond Sunday morning? In the future, is Sunday morning going to be the best time to have worship services? Can we use new technologies to podcast our services so that people can stay connected when they can’t make it on Sunday?

3) **Families.** People marry and have children later in life. Some people say that adults in their 20s and 30s are just extending adolescence, having fun in their odyssey years, or they’re [too commitment-phobic to settle down](#). Yet, we’re a society that expects financial stability before a couple gets married, and many younger adults can’t manage financial stability.

Does our church leadership operate with rush judgments that condemn the character of emerging generations? Do we expect “young families” to come to our church? Do we have space for single folks or people who don’t have families? Do we expect people to enter our doors two-by-two?

4) **The Internet.** Church leaders have a lot on their plate. Many don’t think they have any time for Facebook or Twitter. They may still be working with the misconception that the only things people are blogging about are what sort of breakfast they had on Tuesday (although if you’re reading this, you probably realize that blogs are good for more than personal over-sharing). But there’s no way to ignore it any longer. Even if a church leader shies away from the web, people may be talking about you on Google Map reviews or [Yelp](#).

Is your congregation keeping up with its online presence? Are you googling your church and finding out what people are saying? Are you using Facebook for pastoral care? Are you staying in contact with emerging adults who move away for education or jobs?

5) **Politics.** A new generation is exhausted from the culture wars. Many people growing up in the last few decades had a difficult time keeping “Christian” and “Republican” in two separate boxes. Emerging generations look at poverty, the environment and war as complex issues, and many younger evangelicals are less likely to vote on pro-life credentials alone. Many young Christians who grew up evangelical are trying out mainline congregations.

Is your church leery of evangelicals who grew up non-denominational or without any religious affiliation? Do we expect people to have the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed memorized before they attend worship? Do we make snide comments about people who “don’t even know what it means to be Methodist (or Presbyterian or Lutheran)”?

There are many shifts occurring in our current religious and cultural landscape. Have our churches thought about the larger changes in an emerging generation? We can become much more effective in reaching out to a new generation if we do.