

Person-Centered Ministries: Elders, Boomers, Busters and Mosaics

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December 30, 2013

What if the church were to focus on supporting believers to learn to present Divine Principle and support wanderers to learn about other faiths without casting judgment—and discover universal truths through the science? What if the church listened to exiles and understood their vision and calling, supporting them by sharing their stories in appropriate ways, making resources available to them without raising suspicions of hidden agendas? What if the church loved prodigals unconditionally? What kind of church would we have?

Many of us are re-thinking our ministries, particularly how to reach the 19 – 39 year old demographic and how to implement a person-centered ministry. To do this effectively, we start by understanding those we intend to care for. While looking for resource material, I came across a book titled UN Christian by David Kinnaman, a researcher with the Barna Group (The Barna Group conducts cultural research for church organizations and has surveyed over 250,000 people over the course of its 10 year history) on how conservative, evangelical churches are perceived by young adult “outsiders”. I found that many of the issues he raises, and points he makes about changing the culture of the church in general are relevant to the discussions and concerns taking place in my community.

Kinnaman identifies characteristics of the four generations sharing the planet:

Elders are the WWII generation, predominantly practicing Christians, strong family values, patriotic, growing up in close communities.

Boomers were the counter-culture generation, searching for greater meaning, disillusioned by the Vietnam War, drugs, sex and rock and roll, new religious movements and revolutionaries.

Busters are the fall out from the boomer generation, extremely skeptical, focused on their own careers, consumerism, oriented toward science and technology.

Mosaics are primarily characterized by their access to information. They pick and choose ideas and values from many sources. Their primary value is “relationships”. Where Boomers gather around common beliefs and ideologies, Mosaics view each person on their own individual path. They support each other on their own journeys and value the relationship more than what they believe. They don’t consider themselves “right” or “left” and are more likely to say they are “spiritual” than identify with a particular religion.

Kinnaman’s research focused on late Mosaics and early Busters (19 – 39). He surveyed a cross section of that group to discover how they perceive the Christian church. First, they generally didn’t have a problem with Jesus. They incorporated much of his teaching in their worldviews, although not well versed in the bible. But they are critical of those who represent Jesus.

On the positive side, they view Christianity as friendly, as having good morals and principles, and generally not much different than the core values of other religions.

On the critical side, however, Outsiders tend to define Christians by what they are against, not what they are for, an “us vs. them” mentality.

Their three big perceptions of Christians are: 1) Bigoted toward homosexuals (97%). They have a mistaken belief that homosexuals are organized against Christian values, and they leverage political solutions against them. 2) Judgmental (87%): They think Christians have an air of moral superiority and don’t relate well with people who don’t share their beliefs. 3) Hypocritical (85%): They think Christians do not live up to the image they project. They doubt Christians really love others, and they feel treated like targets rather than people.

Many outsiders don’t condone homosexuality, but they have gay friends and acquaintances who they accept as they are. They “have their backs” so to speak. Christianity does have standards to uphold. But outsiders observe that Christians struggle with the same vices they do, yet behave as if they think they are like Jesus. It’s OK to fall short. Outsiders do not think a person hypocritical if he confesses his weaknesses. Dealing with our demons is part of the journey.

I ran a more thorough presentation by some of our young adults ages 19 – 35 to get some feedback from them. They all agreed that they have these perceptions of our own church. In fact, some said that they would not invite friends and acquaintances with whom they have deep conversations to a church service,

because they think it would undermine the relationships they are forming and their own method of sharing their faith.

There are two aspects to ministry. One is to develop faith, family and community among our own families. The other is reaching outsiders. Kinnaman also wrote a book entitled *You Lost Me* about young adults who left the church. He identifies four categories of young adults who grew up in a church. First he observes that they are most active during their teenage years. As they mature, some remain faithful and committed. These he calls “believers”. Others maintain a positive relationship with the church community, but explore outside the faith, picking and choosing what suits them. These he calls “wanderers”. Another category is made up of those who keep the faith, but are engaged in professions where they have to be careful how they express and share it with others. They typically don’t attend church often, but they feel and practice a calling in their respective fields. They are often not understood by the church community. These he calls “exiles”. Finally, there are those who have abandoned the church and consider themselves completely separated, “prodigals”.

Our internal ministries can address each of the four categories of our own young adults. They see themselves on their own unique journey. They respond to support, not so much to being lectured to. Modern education tends to be less instructional and more supporting a path of discovery. Kinnaman uses an encyclopedia metaphor. Our parents’ generation turned to World Book Encyclopedia for authoritative information. This generation turns to interactive Wikipedia, composed of many contributors, peer reviewed by many others.

There is some debate over whether our church should continue according to a traditional model—inviting people to events, bringing them to lectures, preparing them for the blessing, and expecting them to attend Sunday Service regularly. The old model is a “program-centered approach,” the, “Build it and they will come,” approach. The other approach is to focus on supporting members as they build natural relationships in their extended families, at school and at work. This model assumes that everyone is on a unique path and the faithful can support each person by accepting him as he is and being there for him as God works in his (or her) life. The latter approach is a “person-centered approach”. It puts the believer in a servant position rather than a superior one.

I’m an advocate for the person-centered approach. I see it working in my work with people with disabilities. People who used to be institutionalized are now supported to live as independently as possible in communities and the work place. There is evidence to support the notion that the church as an institution no longer has the means to bring people to God and hold families together. Responsibility for faith and community has devolved to individuals and circles of friends and families.

Some of my peers disagree and defend our traditions. We probably need both. Even so, to make our services inviting to young adults, our programs need to reflect a culture of unconditional acceptance, respect for each person’s personal journey, honesty about our own struggles and avoid an “us vs. them” mentality.

To reach outsiders Kinnaman suggests:

“Listen to Me” Talk less, understand my needs and background

“Don’t Label Me” I am a person first, who happens to ____.

“Don’t Be Too Smart.” Don’t pretend to have all the answers. Even if you know a great truth, you don’t have a perfect understanding of the universe. I’m more interested in a relationship where we can grow together.

“Put Yourself in My Place” as Paul said to “be all things to all people”.

“Be Genuine”, support me on my own journey.

“Be my friend with no other motives”

A person-centered ministry means: “to start with the person first, not the program.” By building sustainable, loving relationships, opportunities to discuss our faith will naturally arise.