

COLLEAGUES:

The "worship wars" that exist in many congregations today often split the congregational family into two camps. Critics argue that in order to speak convincingly to those outside the congregation's walls, worship practices must accommodate trends in secular society. The traditional and the contemporary are couched as polarities that attract opposing factions: clergy v. laity, Gen-Xers v. Baby Boomers, orthodox v. conservative, organists v. band leaders, newcomers v. tenured members.

Can congregations explore worship styles without creating two entrenched camps? Within the faith community, there is a need for leaders who understand their particular tradition's texts and history and can provide a critical faithfulness in these debates. But the most effective leaders will also bring a wise openness to the culture outside the congregation, differentiating between those changes that would be consistent with, or opposed to, the convictions of a particular religious tradition.

Whether you regard your congregation's worship to be *alternative*, or an *alternative to alternative*, I'd like to know how you consider both worship and culture in your planning. Let's keep in touch.



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ALTERNATIVE SERVICES

Sunday evenings in the sanctuary of Trader's Point Christian Church, the lights are dimmed, a rock band takes the place of the traditional church choir, and the pastor delivers his message without props, at pew-level, rather than from behind the platform pulpit.

The young adults ministry at Trader's Point Christian Church, 7860 Lafayette Rd., of which this service is a component, is called "Common Ground." The service draws more than 300 people each week, with attendance steadily rising. Essentially, Common Ground has become a church within a church.

Common Ground will move into its own space by September 2000, possibly in Broad Ripple, where a dissolving congregation has offered to donate its building. In the short term, Common Ground's autonomy from Trader's Point will involve only spatial separation. The long-term nature of the relationship is an open question.

Common Ground dates to the summer of 1995, when Trader's Point hired Jeff Krajewski as its singles pastor. At the time, the young adults ministry amounted to a handful of people who met for Sunday school. Soon, Krajewski enlisted several leaders to help him build the ministry and began holding an informal mid-week Bible study. Incrementally, through several variations in format and location, the Bible study grew into Common Ground—a ministry with the resources to become a self-sustaining congregation.

There is little overlap between attendance at the Trader's Point morning service and the Common Ground evening service—intentionally so. Trader's Point appeals to church-goers who are comfortable with a traditional worship atmosphere and format, while Common Ground attempts to reach people who are wary of the old church routine.

The evening-only service is due in part to the necessity of sharing space. But it is also intended to break a mold; there will be no Sunday morning service even after the ministry has its own building.

The dim lighting at the services, the loud guitar-driven music, and the conversational preaching style are aimed at appealing to young adults. Krajewski, himself a member of the so-called Generation X, mingles among the audience and cultivates the air of a storyteller rather than a preacher.

The cliché has it that this generation—which presumably has little patience with staid church forms—is "spiritual but not religious." Still, Krajewski believes they will listen to the church's message, if only traditions don't get in the way.

A small industry has grown up around the articulation and dissemination of the "alternative" message. Foremost among its proponents is Leonard Sweet, a lay leader of the United Methodist Church and Professor of Postmodern Christianity at Drew University in New Jersey.

Sweet's theme is that changes in American culture demand fundamental changes in the way churches package their message (see the "resources" section below). This "postmodern" culture is modeled presumably on the ethos of the Internet. The young—skeptical of hierarchy, bureaucratic structures, and authority in all guises—reject emotionally sterile formats in which they are simply preached at. They are visually rather than verbally oriented, and prefer a worship service that encourages interactivity.

A number of alternative-style worship services have appeared recently in churches around Indianapolis—a dozen or so in the past half-decade—usually as supplements to a church's regular service. Krajewski believes that these alternative services represent the church's future.

"This is the beginning of the natural reformation of the church, which happens regularly throughout the decades," he said. "This will eventually become a norm of sorts; it will become mainstream."

But does Common Ground's approach reflect changes that all churches must adapt to for survival? Or does it represent simply the tapping of a niche market—young adults who like their music loud and their sermons "conversational," but who will settle back into more traditional forms of worship as they advance into middle age?

Passing fad or revolution? Time, of course, will tell.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAY HUDSON

Jay Hudson is an associate executive with the Synod of Lincoln Trails, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) based in Indianapolis at 1100 W. 42nd St. His primary responsibilities are new church development and old church "redevelopment"—a task he describes as helping churches "consider an alternative future." Typically, redevelopment involves a change in the church's leadership, and it almost

always involves a fundamental reformation in the church's operating philosophy and worship style. Hudson says that his goal as a consultant is to help churches "take seriously the changes that have taken place in the culture." Like many of the authors and thinkers that he cites, Hudson believes that churches face life-threatening challenges in the emerging "postmodern" world. The culture that postmodernism has created, he says, driven in large part by the tastes and habits of Generation X, rejects the paradigm that reigns in most churches. This generation prefers visual to printed media, and participation to passive worship formats.

As a consultant, Hudson takes this message to Presbyterian congregations across the nation. A member of First-Meridian Heights Presbyterian Church, 4701 N. Central Ave., he attends the church's alternative worship service, called "Alive Time."

Clergy Notes: What do you mean by 'postmodernism'?

Hudson: Postmodernism is the movement from a linear, rational world to a world that's relational, where knowledge comes more from the heart and less from the head.

CN: What challenges does this movement pose for traditional religious institutions?

Hudson: We're stuck between two models—one involves becoming a disciple and follower of Jesus, and the other involves being a church member. The church has become an institution unto itself, so that you can do church without following Jesus, and you can follow Jesus without the church. Those two things have become almost separate tracks; we're caught in that tension. A lot of churches are not looking for disciples of Jesus, but to plug in another giving unit when an old one has died, or to find people to serve on a committee. I don't believe that model will survive in the future. Not many of our churches have made the transition. You can't muster enough energy to build a new church by getting old Presbyterians together and having them try to build a programmatic church. It takes a commitment to following Jesus. It takes a whole different level of loyalty, that an institution is not going to evoke.

CN: How does technology factor into the transformation you've talked about?

Hudson: In the traditional church, if you make a faith commitment, you respond by making a pledge, coming to worship on a regular basis, committing to some kind of Bible study. Well, there are a lot of different ways to respond to Jesus other than those institutional responses. On the Internet, you can respond however you want and remain somewhat anonymous. In church, you may find what you already expect—that the church is going to say, 'Whoa, that's not a way to respond to Jesus.' The invitations to respond semi-anonymously on the Internet give a lot of freedom for new expressions of spirituality. Moving into the postmodern world requires that you do decentralized networking, as opposed to structured kinds of things. The electronic media lend themselves to this better than print. The print media are much more connected to the old structures and hierarchical ways of doing things with committees.

CN: Do you worry that repackaging the Christian faith to fit the postmodern world will change the essence of the message?

Hudson: You can be conservative in theology but also have a dynamic relationship with God that is changing you on a regular basis. The fundamental question is, 'How is this living Lord changing your life?' Faith isn't just a cognitive system of belief; it's a dynamic relationship. If you just have a rigid set of beliefs, it's brittle and dead, and it's not going to make it in the world.

CN: What room does all of this leave for the traditional congregation?

Hudson: To become a catalyst in bringing about the new church, or die. Those are the options. We continue to target an aging and declining segment of the market, yet we're surprised that the church has been declining for 20 years. Meanwhile, there's a whole huge, expanding market of people out there who are not interested in the traditional church, but who are spiritual people.

RESOURCES

In 1999, Leonard Sweet published the first two books in a projected trilogy about the "postmodern reformation" in Christianity. *SoulTsunami* and *AquaChurch* are written in a fragmented and epigrammatic style designed to mimic the postmodern culture that Sweet believes churches must learn from and adapt to. The books are marked by Sweet's flair for grand pronouncements and sweeping judgments. "A continental drift of the soul has taken place where spirituality is less creedal, less propositional, more relational and more sensory," he writes in *SoulTsunami*. "Not meaning but purpose in life is the key to postmodern self-identity. People are looking for primal experience. People long for the mystery and mysticism of an encounter with God, and expect the church to help them get in touch with their experiences. Hence the growth of primal spiritualities like Pentecostalism, the fastest growing and most important religious movement of the 20th century." Each book has a dedicated Web site: www.soulsunامي.com and www.aquachurch.com. Sweet's home page is at www.leonardsweet.com.

The crucial on-line publication for anyone interested in this general subject is *The Ooze* (www.theooze.com), which advertises itself as "a full service site for the Postmodern Church." *The Ooze* organizes conferences centered on "the church in transition" and hosts chat rooms on the subject. The links page is divided into subsections on churches, ministry, the arts, and worship. The churches links page connects to congregations that are considered trendsetters in the "postmodern reformation": for example, www.ginghamsburg.org and www.marshallchurch.org. The latter site, maintained by Mars Hill Fellowship in Seattle, has an intriguing take on "postmodernity," written by pastor Mark Driscoll. Go to the "Kairos" section of the site and click on "postmodernity essay." (See also the "Articles" section of *The Ooze* for pieces on similar themes.)

Locally, the alternative congregation at First-Meridian Heights Presbyterian Church maintains a site at www.a1.com/alivetime. Common Ground's site is at <http://common.ground.org>. "Be Real," an independent Southern Baptist alternative congregation, can be found at www.bereal.net/first.htm. (Be Real meets at the ministry center of Northwest Fellowship Church, but is not otherwise associated with the Church.)