

The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era

“Grow a Gen-X church in five easy steps.” The bookshelves are filled with “how-to” books on church change. But discerning leaders know that there is no single prescription which will restore health and vitality to every church.

However Jim Kitchens, in *The Postmodern Parish* (Alban Institute), offers a perspective that is both thoughtful and helpful. Writing as the pastor of a mainline church (PCUSA) with over 20 years in parish ministry, Kitchens knows the dual realities of the shifting cultural landscape and current state of the church. While making a strong case for the necessity of change, he gives insights which provide a foundation for transformation and descriptions of that experience in the life of a local church.

Kitchens begins by drawing a picture of the new context for ministry in which the church finds itself, along with some of the implications that this change brings. He describes the new setting as being postmodern, post-Christian and post-denominational.

Using broad strokes he identifies eight characteristics of postmodern culture. But of greater interest are his observations that many of these changes may actually open the door to more meaningful, perhaps even biblical, ministry. For example, he finds, “By placing a greater emphasis on balancing the individual with the communal, postmodernism will help Christians reassert those resources within the tradition that balance our ‘rights’ as individuals with our responsibilities to one another as members of the body of Christ.” For those who are paralyzed by the changes, there is hope here.

In light of this new environment Kitchens asserts that a renewed church must emerge. Rather than adopting a universal, preplanned program, he thinks the church will need to practice discernment as it discovers its new shape. From his

experience he shares guidelines for this discernment process.

Kitchens highlights four critical areas that must be reshaped in the emerging church: worship, faith formation, the mission of the church and leadership.

Worship is usually the hot button related to change in a church. But instead of focusing on the inflammatory issues around contemporary music he addresses the significant roles of worship. He encourages congregations to think about both what and how worship teaches believers and seekers. He admits that attendees at some mainline churches may leave with their hearts “strangely cooled,” asking, “Where was God in all of that?” A more holistic and experiential encounter is needed by the new worshipper.

Faith formation is often the overlooked feature as churches transition. But it is just as significant to the development of believers and often just as difficult to change. Churches easily become locked into a model, curriculum and even schedule. Kitchens advocates that churches “start from scratch,” in two senses. First, realize that many are coming who do not have any Christian background. They will need basic formation before they can be expected to progress. Second, the whole process of faith formation, including confirmation classes, should be carefully examined. Do the goals and methods reflect what is needed today?

In the chapter on church mission Kitchens describes the difference between a church that does missions and a missional church. Much space is given to descriptions of both successful and failed attempts to live as a missional congregation. While these are helpful, what is often the greatest challenge for the local church is the transformational process of becoming a missional church. Kitchens describes a process that seems to have taken place ministry by ministry. Some churches might do better with a cleared understanding of the big picture, becoming a missional people and then tackling the projects from that foundation.

The most intriguing chapter is the one addressing leadership. He tackles the three issues of: administrative and corporate focus, reliance on an adversarial parliamentary procedure and the professional status granted to clergy. Many lay

and clergy will be challenged to discover that they have adopted concepts about leadership which are more cultural than biblical.

Kitchens offers an interesting primer on church change. He combines both thoughtful philosophy about the church and culture and real-world descriptions of attempts to implement new understandings. Some may be put off by the repeated examples related to his church's decisions about gay issues. But the descriptions do serve as good examples of the process, regardless of the reader's positions on the issues. At times one wishes for more detail, but at 110 pages the work is an excellent and manageable introduction for a wide audience.

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