

**Contours of the Postmodern Generation: Critical Observations for a Relevant Missional Approach by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church in Following the Missional Example of Jesus Christ**

**by**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine if you will, be it in the present or future, a time in which the third world countries are more actively engaged in Christianity than the countries of the West. Envision a world where the number of Angolan believers far surpasses that of those in the United States of America. Or the small Korean population of professing Christians outnumbering those found in the large country of Canada. Envision a time when the tiny island of Fiji accounts for more brothers and sisters in Christ than any country found on the continent of Europe. This would go so far as to assume that rather than the West sending missionaries to the third world, the prevailing missional trend would be for the third world to reach the West with the Good News of Christ (Altrock 2004:4). One must not look far ahead to imagine times such as these, because in fact, this is the situation that we, as Westerners, currently find ourselves facing. What is causing this sweeping and dramatic change?

According to Altrock (2004:4), missiologists have pronounced that we, as a Western civilization, are in the middle of a paradigm shift. This shift is one in which the church must rise to the challenge of a new and revolutionary missional approach (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:10). The rising culture has been recognized as *postmodernism* and has been the source of much debate and discussion (Altrock 2004:8).

Within the Western culture three eras have been identified, each representing radically different worldviews (Altrock 2004:7). The first is known as *pre-modernism*. Within this era, truth was defined by tradition, and myths were held in high esteem as the choice conduit in passing on knowledge (Altrock 2004:7). Secondly, *modernism*, which began with the Enlightenment, was characterized by its appreciation for absolute truth and desire for knowledge by way of scientific means (Altrock 2004:7). By the 1970s, *postmodernism*, the third era, became recognizable (Altrock 2004:7-8). Relativism and pluralism are characteristic of this culture, which come from their belief that all truth is subjective and can be determined by both experience and interpretation, as each

individual views the world in a unique way (Altrock 2004:7-8). Therefore, unlike in modernism, postmodernists believe that truth cannot be determined by human or scientific reasoning alone (Altrock 2004:7-8).

But postmodernism has not stopped with leaving only the effect of relativism and pluralism in the worldview of each individual. Rather, it has touched every aspect of life as we know it (Dockery 2001:12). Everything including literature, fashion, architecture, art, morality, and self-identity has been affected by this contemporary culture that has crept into our society (Dockery 2001:12). The one aspect of life, however, that has not developed, or has only adapted minimally, to becoming postmodern is the church. This is the one thing that is still holding onto modernism with a death grip (Burke and Pepper 2004:25). Many churches, in their effort to attract members of this newfound generation, have made shallow attempts at transforming into a postmodern, culturally-relevant community of believers (Burke and Pepper 2004:25). In making diminutive changes to the styles, appearance and manner in which church is done, they have barely scratched the surface in reaching this alien culture (Burke and Pepper 2004:25).

What is the church's responsibility in reaching this generation with the Good News of Jesus Christ? If we look at the example of Issachar in the Old Testament, we are told that he and his men understood their times and knew what Israel should do in response to the things that they had learned (1 Chronicles 12:39). We, as the church, should in the same way understand the times that we live in order that we might know how to effectively handle the situations that we are faced with. In many ways, this emerging culture has opened a mission field at the door of the church (Long 2004:33). This presents an unequalled challenge but at the same time a wonderful opportunity to make a difference (Dockery 2001:180).

“God is a missionary God, so the church is to be a missionary church” (Stetzer 2003:114). God desires for His people to be actively engaged in bringing in those who don't know Christ. This, however, is not meant to be merely an activity, but a lifestyle (Frost and Hirsch 2003:18). The church should

fundamentally be a missional church, which entails that it is mission-minded and focused on reaching the world around them. This means that we not only reach the far corners of the earth but also the culture and society surrounding our own sphere of influence where we are (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:55-56). If the church continues to function as it currently is, it will continue on its downward slope to extinction (Drane 2000:156). Therefore, the church must stand and acknowledge the urgency of the missional challenge ahead (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:10-11).

The objective of this thesis is to clearly present how we, as the church, can look at the example that Jesus Christ gave us in His missional approach to mankind as a pattern for missions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will further discuss more briefly the characteristics of the generation that we are living in and the contours that define them. Finally, it will propose ways in which the missional church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can effectively and relevantly approach the discussed mission field, that is, the postmodern generation.

## **Chapter 2: The Missional Approach of Jesus Christ**

In our quest to find answers for the issues at hand, we have no farther to look than the life of Jesus Christ. He is the key example or model of what it means to reach a foreign culture with the Gospel (Frost and Hirsch 2003:112). Therefore, it seems only logical to initially look at His approach to missions in order to further develop how we as the 21<sup>st</sup> century church are to reach this postmodern culture. Several characteristics of His ministry are evident throughout the writings of the Gospels.

### **2.1 He applied a “Go-to-them” rather than a “Come-to-me” approach**

The church as it is today is very much an *attractional* institution (Frost and Hirsch 2003:40). Those involved within the community of believers expect the outside public to come to them in order to be adopted into the body of Christ and to find their way to the kingdom of God. But if we examine the life and behaviour of Jesus Christ, we'll find a much different approach, or rather, a complete opposite method to that practiced by much of the Christian world. Frost and Hirsch (2003:36) quote from an outside source, “If we want to make a thing real, we must make it local.” This pinpoints God’s approach to mankind as He incarnated Himself into the person of Jesus Christ. John 1:14 tells us that the Word (Christ) became flesh and lived among us. As God saw the need of His creation on earth, He modelled what was the biblical approach in addressing the missional crisis that He observed. Rather than expecting mankind to come to Him, He portrayed what would be His command to all believers following in His footsteps, “Go then and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19). Jesus made our home His home, taking up residence in the midst of the mission field (Frost and Hirsch 2003:36).

It is also clear in the way Christ lived that His “go-to” was not only seen in the fact that He left heaven to come to earth. But as we read through the gospels, we see that rather than spending the majority of His time in the religious institutions of the day, He spent time in the houses and environments of the

sinners. Take for instance the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Within this story, Jesus is not standing in the temple or waiting in the synagogue for Zacchaeus to come to the realization that salvation is needed. Rather, when Jesus sees the small pagan tax collector, He goes to Zacchaeus' house to dine with him, announcing that the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Christ is our Good Shepherd who goes and looks for the sheep that are lost. He doesn't wait for them to gather at the pen (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:181). He is a "Go-to-them" God.

## ***2.2 He manifested the character of God***

Colossians 1:15 tells us that Christ was the exact likeness of the unseen God. In the Amplified Bible, it continues by saying that He is the "visible representation of the invisible." When people saw Jesus, they saw God (Frost and Hirsch 2003:37). They didn't need to look to any other source because Jesus portrayed for all observers the character and attributes of His Father (Frost and Hirsch 2003:37).

This attribute of portraying the holiness of God was something that attracted the people in His day (Frost and Hirsch 2003:114). It wasn't a self-righteous, holier-than-thou attitude, which, He displayed; rather it was a humble, authentic quality, which identified Him with His Father. Frost and Hirsch (2003:114) have even described it as "infectious holiness." This not only attracted the religious, but also the sinners and pagans who came into contact with the exemplary nature that He possessed (Frost and Hirsch 2003:114).

## ***2.3 He identified Himself with His target group***

In His missional approach, Jesus fully identified Himself with mankind. Frost and Hirsch (2003:36) describe His identification as being unlike a king who puts on an outer garment in order to win the heart of a young beggar girl in a nearby village. Rather, as Philippians 2:6-8 tells us, He laid aside everything in order to become like mere human. He even took upon himself the feelings,



emotions, troubles, and temptations that each one of us, as mankind, face throughout our lifetimes (Frost and Hirsch 2003:36). Jesus dealt with the weaknesses, the struggles, and the doubts and fears that are a part of being a fragile human. He fully identified with those whom He was on a mission to reach (Frost and Hirsch 2003:36). He wasn't known as Jesus, the Almighty God from heaven. Rather, He took the name of Jesus of Nazareth, by which all people knew Him during His time on earth (Frost and Hirsch 2003:36).

We can continue to see Jesus' identification with those that He wanted to reach in that He didn't keep Himself busy and confined to the walls of the synagogues and places of religious teaching (Frost and Hirsch 2003:36). He didn't hold Himself in a place "above" those that He interacted with. Rather, He became one of them (Frost and Hirsch 2003:36).

Jesus was involved in the lives of the people. He became a part of the community life and what was taking place in their culture (Frost and Hirsch 2003:84). He played with children and took part in dinner parties with the tax collectors and other notorious sinners. He spent time with Peter on the beach while frying fish over a fire, and contributed the finest of wine for a friend's wedding (Frost and Hirsch 2003:84-85). He moved outside of the cultural context that He knew and was familiar with in order to become a part of a community whose culture and lifestyle was alien to the one that He had come from (Frost and Hirsch 2003:84-85).

#### ***2.4 He engaged the people with culturally relevant and acceptable dialogue***

As Jesus' approached and interacted with the people that He came into contact with from day to day, He didn't attempt to communicate with them based on His own cultural characteristics (Frost and Hirsch 2003:44). Rather, He engaged them with illustrations, lessons, and conversations that were culturally relevant and understandable to the community at large. We can see several examples throughout the life of Christ.

### **2.4.1 The use of stories with the Hebrew people**

There are certain common characteristics that describe the way in which the Hebrew people thought. They were very dynamic and enthusiastic about action. They not only focused on reason, but took into account all aspects of what comprises a person. So they were concerned about both the mind and the heart. They also placed a great emphasis on relationship and community. Jesus became culturally relevant concerning these characteristics of the Hebrew people in that He used stories which stimulated them appropriately. It encapsulated their minds and allowed them to more actively engage in what was taking place (Long 2004:203).

### **2.4.2 The use of local knowledge or understanding**

Jesus didn't only come with amazing news from the God of heaven, but He also communicated that news in such a way that made sense to the people who were listening to Him (Frost and Hirsch 2003:44). He used illustrations, stories, and situations in His teachings and conversations that the local people would understand as they were hungry for what He was saying (Frost and Hirsch 2003:44). For example, when Jesus was making His selection of who would be among the twelve men who would go with Him and be His close companions, He used specific words that would be understandable by those people. He gave the invitation to these individuals to be fishers of men (Mark 1:16-18). In choosing His illustration and wording in this way, He communicated something that made sense to these everyday fishermen. He made use of something that those men were a part of day after day, and incorporated that into his dialogue in order to relate to the people on their level and in ways that would make sense to them (Frost and Hirsch 2003:44).

## ***2.5 He placed an emphasis on the importance of community within the body of believers***

“By this shall all [men] know that you are my disciples, if you love one another [if you keep on showing love among yourselves]” (John 13:35). These words of Jesus clearly portray His emphasis on the importance of community amongst and within the body of believers (Dockery 2001:114). But not only did He teach that unity and love between individuals was vital in the Christian faith; He displayed this by the way in which He lived. In order for people to understand the true meaning of a community which is vibrant and healthy, a community where love among one another is plainly evident, and a community which portrays the love that God has for each individual, a person didn’t have to look any farther than the relationship that Christ had with His disciples (Long 2004:101). He gave us a model in how we should relate to and function with our brothers and sisters in Christ (Long 2004:101).

## ***2.6 Concluding Comments***

As we discuss later the importance of the church actively engaging in missions within the culture, we have a perfect example in Jesus Christ of what it means to enter a new culture and flourish within it. We can both learn and be inspired by the ways in which Christ used the culture of the people that He came into contact with, in order to better make known the mystery of the Gospel (Frost and Hirsch 2003:35). Murray (2004:316-317), describes Jesus as, “Friend of sinners, good news to the poor, defender of the powerless, reconciler of communities, pioneer of a new age, freedom fighter, breaker of chains, liberator and peacemaker, the one who unmask systems of operation, identifies with the vulnerable and brings hope.” All of these things were possible because He chose to be like the people He ministered to and adopted their culture in order to modify His communication with them. He became like one of them, taking upon Himself the practices of the Jewish lifestyle, actively engaging in community life and participating in the culture in which He found himself (Frost and Hirsch 2003:114). It is important to see that in doing this He never compromised the integrity of the news that He carried. But He identified with them in order that He

might bring the kingdom of God to the doorsteps of a culture of people who were lost without it (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:16).

## Chapter 3: Postmodernism: The Up Rise of a New Way of Thinking

Frost and Hirsch (2003:3-6) introduce their book *The Shaping of Things to Come* by describing a festival that encapsulates the postmodern desires. The name of the festival is called Burning Man and it is held in the Black Rock desert just outside of Reno in Nevada. This celebration has been highly successful and one of the largest displays of postmodernity within the United States. People from different parts of the country gather together each year for several weeks to create a community that is devoted to generosity, environmentalism, celebration, and spirituality. But the main attraction of this festival is the common interest in art. Artists of all varieties including musicians, bohemians, punks, taggers, rappers, and traditional artists, gather together to have a time of experiencing life and culture. This event offers belonging, survival, empowerment, sensuality, celebration, and liminality which are some of the most attractive characteristics to the postmodern generation. Many would see the secular elements to Burning Man and immediately shun it, but a different suggestion is offered. We, as the church, should investigate the elements of this celebration that are so inviting to the culture that we find ourselves immersed in, and implement our findings into making the 21<sup>st</sup> century church more culturally relevant (Frost and Hirsch 2003:3-6).

We may like it or we may not. We may choose to embrace it or we may not. We may be prepared for it or we may not. No matter how we feel about the shift that is taking place in our culture, we cannot prevent being fully immersed in postmodernism (Burke and Pepper 2004:25). Every area of life including movies, literature, art, architecture, business, politics, etc, have been affected and influenced by the waves of the new culture that are rapidly settling over our society (Burke and Pepper 2004:25). This is not to say, however, that postmodernism has reached every part of the world (Stetzer 2003:115). But it has had a drastic effect on the countries of Western civilization.

Postmodernism has already infiltrated our society in such an immense way that we have only one of two choices. We can choose to ignore it and allow ourselves to be lost and irrelevant in this new century of opportunity, or to embrace the changes. This would mean that we must find ways in which we, as the community within the body of Christ, can adapt to be relevant and effective to this new missional challenge that we are facing. If we are to do the latter, it will require study and examination to determine ways in which we will be able to be culturally appropriate and to keep ourselves from drowning in the present worldview.

As previously stated in Chapter one, postmodernism is preceded by the era of modernism. It is important for us to know about this culture, this worldview, which came before the current, so that we can know where we have come from in order to better grasp and understand the changes that have, and *are*, taking place in our society today.

Modernism was influenced and formed by the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment periods (Crepes 2002:54). Creps (2002:54) lists several characteristics which define the modern culture in the Western world. They are (1) the emphasis on the centrality of the individual; (2) the reliability of human perception; (3) the primacy of reason; (4) the objectivity of truth; (5) the inevitability of progress; (6) the certainty of absolute; (7) the uncertainty of the supernatural; and (8) the uniformity of worldview. These eight qualities have characterized people for centuries and many consider this to be the ideal way in which to perceive the world. As a result, church has been formed and fashioned around these different characteristics. The traditions, the practices, the way in which church is conducted are all a result of the modernistic worldview. And for years this was a good and effective way in which to conduct church and the practices within the church. But in the eyes of a postmodernist, this worldview has many faults and has not brought about the utopia that it once was thought to (Grenz 2005:117). In fact, to many, the modernistic approach to life and church has brought about nothing more than irrelevance in the lives of individuals and a lack of any voice that can really speak to them where they are (Drane 2000:71).

As a result, they are searching for a way in which to salvage what was lost during the era of modernity (Grenz 2005:106).

As we enter into this new generation which possesses a radically different worldview than that of its predecessors, it is important for us to know what characterizes them, to know the audience that we are trying to reach, and to know what sets them apart from those that came before them (Altrock 2004:6). It is vital, for the life of the church, to study the culture and the generation that it currently finds itself immersed in. We are facing a missional challenge of epic proportions, and unless the church begins to study and strive for an understanding of the postmodern individual, then it will cease to be effective and will be regarded as irrelevant (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:16). Within this chapter we will engage and explore the contours that are characteristic of the postmodern generation.

### **3.1 Uninformed**

This generation has little or no knowledge about the fundamental aspects of the Christian faith (Altrock 2004:9). Whereas in the past, those who preached or engaged in missional activities could assume that the individual they were communicating with had at least some prior knowledge about the Gospel and its message, this can no longer be assumed. The Biblical stories, doctrine, and vocabulary are foreign to them because they lack any memory of Christianity. They are an *uninformed* generation (Altrock 2004:9).

According to the research findings of George Gallup, only a mere 34% of adults can connect the Sermon on the Mount with the person who delivered it, Jesus Christ (Altrock 2004:15). Less than 50% of people know that the first book of the Bible is the book of Genesis (Altrock 2004:15). And only a fractional percentage of people can identify two of the Ten Commandments found in the Bible (Altrock 2004:15).

Another survey was conducted and found that the definition of the Great Commission is unknown to nine out of ten Americans (Altrock 2004:15). The

term 'John 3:16' is almost completely foreign to these people and hardly one third of these individuals know what term "the gospel" signifies (Altrock 2004:15). An unbelievable 4% are able to give the accurately define all three of these concepts: the Great Commission, John 3:16, and the gospel (Altrock 2004:15).

The postmodern generation is an uninformed generation when it comes to matters and issues of the church (Altrock 2004:15). In fact, films and movies account for more given knowledge about such things than the church or any other organized religion. This means that the generation that we live in is being informed about Christianity and its message not by the community of believers, but rather by the media and the messages that it is conveying (Altrock 2004:16).

### **3.2 *Spiritual***

Although uninformed regarding Christianity, the postmodern generation is not unspiritual. In fact, they are desperately searching out spiritual matters (Altrock 2004:73). They are intensely fascinated by anything supernatural and are in fact longing and searching for authentic, spiritual encounters with god (Altrock 2004:61). This is completely different from the moderns before them, who were more focused on science and its reasoning than any transcendent experience with the Almighty (Grenz 2005:118). They recognize that, as Grenz (1994:333) states, a 'right heart' is more important than a 'right mind.'

The percentage of true believers in America is approximately 30%, but a shocking 80% of Americans have taken part in praying throughout the week and the same percentage are searching for a personal, spiritual encounter with God (Altrock 2004:18). The reasons that these 80% are not all a part of the community of believers in the church could be anyone's guess. But part of the issue is that these individuals find too much religion, and not enough spirituality in the church (Drane 2000:71). McClaren (2000:14) states that these searchers are looking for churches that "promote a healthful, whole, hearty spirituality rather than an ugly, thin, hateful, and insipid religion." Therefore, they are turning to more unorthodox ways of expressing and experiencing this hunger for spirituality



(Long 2004:55). But that does not deny the fact that this new culture that we are immersed in is desperately seeking for a spiritual resource, in order to appease their human need for spirituality (McClaren 2000:14).

### ***3.3 Anti-Institutional***

As one views the traditional, modern church, the universal hierarchical model of church and leadership is plainly seen (Frost and Hirsch 2003:21). In most cases, the church is distinguished by rows of chairs facing a central stage in which one main speaker brings a message from God to the people week by week (Creps 2002:56). This appealed the modern generation because as a result of their deep, natural respect for authority, they desired a strong, self-sufficient, admirable leader who would take them safely through the Christian walk (Tiplady 2002:18-19). Times, however, have changed.

Postmoderns are characterized by their apathy towards institutions and organized religions (Altrock 2004:9). Moynagh (2001:31) states that postmodernism is defined by a “rejection of hierarchy, suspicion of religion, and strong emphasis on personal choice.” Rather than finding the church as a safe haven where the community of believers meet together and grow together, they see the institutional church as a stumbling block to their faith (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:21). Gone are the times when unwavering and steadfast commitment and dedication is given to the church (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:23).

In the same sphere, postmoderns not only see the church as an irrelevant and unwanted religious institution, but they are also rejecting the authority within the church. They show antipathy towards any authority that is outside of themselves or unwelcomed (Davies 2007:164). Individuals are no longer looking up at a leader, but rather sideways to their brothers and sisters within the community (Moynagh 2001:42). They do not allow others to decide their values and the course of their life. Rather they place themselves in that position to make decisions instead of giving utmost respect to just any person deemed to be in an authoritative position (Moynagh 2001:52).

### **3.4 Pluralistic**

Fewer than 20% of all Americans believe that there are any absolute, moral truths. More than two-thirds of adults and four-fifths of teenagers consider truth to not be absolute at all times, but rather relative and dependent upon the circumstances and the individual. Three quarters of Americans believe that instead of there being one way to God, there are a variety of religions that offer true paths to God (Altrock 2004:25). Postmoderns embrace the notion that they can have as many different religious faiths as they think is good for them (Altrock 2004:25). These shocking statistics show the state that our culture is in concerning the belief of absolute moral truth. Whereas the modern generation firmly believed that there were absolute truths and only one way to God, the postmodern generation has strayed far from that. There is no universal worldview that would describe them, unless one can consider an openness to many different worldviews as a worldview in itself (Stetzer 2003:110).

Take for instance a text, any text; Maybe a novel, a theological article, a historical book, or the Bible itself. Moderns would look at the text and determine what it was trying to say. They would examine the words and try to find the one meaning to the information contained within the writing (Grenz 1994:326). But postmoderns, on the other hand, would read the same text and rather than trying to find the universal significance, they would look for ways in which they can interpret it in order to fit their situation or how they see the meaning of the text (Grenz 1994:326). They construct their own reality, their own worldview (Middleton and Walsh 1995:56). And they typically do this by way of “whatever works for you” (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:29).

This generation is not looking for ABC’s or a one-size-fits-all morality (Moynagh 2001:31). Instead, they appreciate diversity and support tolerance of any choice that one makes concerning the worldview or *worldviews* of his or her choosing (Grenz 2005:118).

### **3.5 Pragmatic**

Many times when presenting a gospel message, individuals would begin by asking the question, “If you were to die today, what do you think would happen to you?” This was very effective in the modern generation because it fit their worldview. But in this new culture, however, it will be irrelevant and ineffective. Today’s society is pragmatic, meaning that it searches for meaning to life. Rather than worrying about the future or what might happen after death, each individual is concerned about what they can do to make their life on earth, the immediate situations, more enjoyable and fulfilling (Altrock 2004:10). This is why in decision-making, many moral decisions are made, not based on the consequences or outcomes of the future, but rather based on what will be most satisfying and fulfilling right now (Altrock 2004:30). Gibbs and Coffey (2001:29) address this very issue in saying:

*The world of postmodernists is a world of image rather than of substance. They are concerned with the immediate rather than with the long-term, because history is meaningless and the future is too scary and unpredictable to contemplate. The present is lived out in a tumble and tangle of fleeting experiences.*

Christianity has its appeal to postmoderns in the sense that it offers hope, and joy within the immediate context of their lives (Altrock 2004:30). It does have futuristic elements, but it also addresses the problems that we face now and how those problems can be handled and dealt with (Alrock 2004:30).

### **3.6 Relational**

Moderns were comfortable and embraced individualism, in which they depended upon themselves and were content to be isolated in some ways (Altrock 2004:10). But postmoderns, on the other hand, have completely and radically altered this. They are characterized by being in community, which works together, grows together, and offers encouragement and support (Altrock 2004:10). This characteristic has been aided by the growing popularity of the

World Wide Web, in which all people in all parts of the world can be in one cyber community together (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:29-30). The people of this generation are looking for community, one in which will be welcoming, accepting, and where they can be a part of what is taking place and the decisions that are being made (Frost and Hirsch 2003:134).

In the same respect, postmoderns will typically not accept the gospel message before accepting the community surrounding it. Once they place their faith in the supportive community of God's people, then they will most likely later begin to acknowledge the message of God (Altrock 2004:77). It is nearly impossible to expect one to be a part of God's "family" without first experiencing the embrace, compassion, and love of the family (Altrock 2004:83).

### ***3.7 Experiential***

The final characteristic of the postmodern generation that will be discussed is the experiential nature of their culture. With a rapidly growing demand for Reality TV and Extreme sports, the emerging culture's desire for experiencing life is becoming more evident (Tiplady 2002:5). Being a "couch potato" is no longer desirable to this new culture, but rather trying new and diverse things and experiencing life is what is in the heart of these individuals (Tiplady 2002:5). Postmoderns are characterized by an adventurous spirit in which they love to experiment and give everything a shot at least once (Drane 2000:72).

In the area of Church life, postmoderns are unlikely to want to just hear the theology about God's work in the lives of His children (Altrock 2004:10). Rather, they would be more inclined to be impacted by stories and testimonies of the actual work that God did in the lives of different individuals. And they themselves also want to experience God, rather than just hear facts about Him (Altrock 2004:10). They want to know His presence, rather than fight through the services of a traditional church (Tiplady 2002:26).

All believers in Christ residing in the Western world are dealing with a radically different people than before. In many ways, they are alien to the ways in which the traditional church thinks and operates (Creps 2002:57). However dramatic the differences, this new generation is pleading to be heard. They are longing to find a community where they can feel that they belong, a place where they experience and encounter the presence of God. They are looking for sensuality and empowerment, rather than being oppressed by another hierarchical leader (Frost and Hirsch 2003:5). The question is will the church be prepared to adapt in order to be relevant to this arising new generation? Will the church change its ways in order to be effective missionaries in this radically different culture? The following chapter will suggest ways in which the church can successfully bring in the harvest of the postmodern generation.

## Chapter 4: Adaptations to Achieve Relevance

We have seen the dramatic changes that have taken place in transitioning from a modern society to a postmodern one. Instead of developing new ways of communicating with these people and creative approaches in reaching them, the church persists in using methods that are not current and effective. We try to implement strategies that worked decades ago but are useless and irrelevant now (Altrock 2004:8). To illustrate this, one gentleman once said, “If the organ and the great hymns of the faith were good enough for Jesus and Paul, they must be good enough for us” (Malphurs 2007:36). Trying to reach the postmodern generation with the methods of modernism will never be sufficient, adequate, or effective. They want a God who will be able to make a difference and be relevant in their lives, not one that is weighed down with modernistic ideals and philosophies (McClaren 2002:52). We must recognize that within this responsibility to make Christ known, there is also a responsibility to be relevant to the contemporary, postmodern culture (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:216).

But it is not merely the surface issues that need to be addressed. Many falsely believe that if we implement the right worship format, or hold our meetings in the right location such as a café or shopping mall, then we will be a postmodern church (Grenz 2005:113). However important as these are to the life and vibrancy of the church, they are not an instant recipe to become a church of the postmodern generation (Grenz 2005:113). We cannot use a plug-and-play approach in which we study the most recently effective church method and then put it into practice within our church, expecting it to have the same results as with the previous community (Lewis and Cordeiro 2005:44). It is becoming the norm to find the latest “fad” in church growth and development and use it within our church in hopes of it being the new miracle treatment that we needed. We don’t need any more theories we need an approach that is new, God-breathed, fresh, and revolutionary (Frost and Hirsch 2003:6).

We need to consider the people that we are trying to reach before we select the “tools” that we are going to use to reach them (Frost and Hirsch

2003:153). Unfortunately though, many times the church switches it around. They build the building, select the program, choose the songs, and then lastly invite the people. For example, when looking at the programs and styles in which churches conduct their Sunday morning gathering, the “template” by which one carries out church is virtually the same and devastatingly predictable. There are minute differences from church to church, but it appears as if all churches follow the same template. And this isn’t in the same city or even in the same country! In fact, the church program remains the same from the U.S. to Europe, from Israel to New Zealand, and from South Africa to England (Frost and Hirsch 2003:182). Can people of the world truly be so similar that no variations of church are needed within different cultural contexts? Rather than conducting church and missions as it always has been, we should be looking at the people we are targeting and then determining what would best suit them in order to effectively communicate the truth of the Gospel (Frost and Hirsch 2003:182).

Any missionary entering the mission field knows the importance of understanding the language and the culture. But the 21<sup>st</sup> century church has skipped this step in their missional approach to the postmodern mission field (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:20). Verbal, linear, and abstract messages define the church’s approach to communicating the gospel. But when viewing the culture that it is communicating with, we see that they are a culture stimulated and influenced not only by words but also by sound, visual images, and experience (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:20). We, as the missional church, need to learn the “language” and culture of our mission field. We need develop ways that will make an impression on their specific culture, rather than trying to use the cultural approach of a foreign people (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:20). Bridging the gap between Biblical truths and the postmodern generation is vital in the times we are living in (Johnston 2001:10). The following are ways and ideas in which the church can adapt and transition from the modern to the postmodern.

#### ***4.1. Create a mentality of “going” rather than “inviting”***

The church has adopted a pattern of being an *attractional* institution. McClaren (2000:37) stated it precisely when he said:

*This is the church as we have too often practiced it in the modern era. The world exists as a source of raw materials for the church. It's ok to tear people out of their neighbourhoods as long as we get them into the church more. It's ok to devalue their "secular" jobs as long as we get them involved in the church world more. It's ok to withdraw all our energies from the arts and culture "out there" as long as we have a good choir and nice sanctuary "in here." It's ok because, after all, we're about salvaging individuals from a sinking ship; neighbourhoods, economics, cultures and all but individual souls will sink, so who cares.*

We must overcome this and follow in the footsteps of Christ. We must be a church that goes to the people where they are because a missional church is not characterized by being attractional but rather by being incarnational (Frost and Hirsch 2003:12). This means that in any situation, we as the church, rather than waiting at the door of our churches for the lost to come to us, disband, spread out, and infiltrate every nook and corner of society in order to make a broad impact on every life that we come into contact with (Frost and Hirsch 2003:12). We must fully plunge ourselves into their culture and way of life in order to identify with them. It is important to go to their culture and become a part of it rather than trying to remove them from their surroundings in order to convert them to Christianity (Gibbs and Coffey 2001:45).

Just as Christ did, the missional church should be taking part in the very lives of the people they are trying to reach. They should be eating with them, sharing with them, crying with them and rejoicing with them (Frost and Hirsch 2003:57). They should be living and working so near to them that the unbeliever becomes intrigued by the different character found within the person they are spending so much time in community with (Frost and Hirsch 2003:57).

#### **4.2. Create identification with culture**

Missional churches are beginning to be seen all over the postmodern world – those regions and groups of people which embrace the postmodern



worldview. Although unorthodox, they are having a large impact on the community than that of the traditional modern church (Frost and Hirsch 2003:37). That is because they have become *incarnational* churches. They are engaging in incarnational missions, which, reaches groups by identifying in every way possible with the target community without compromising the Word of God and their integrity and obedience to it (Frost and Hirsch 2003:37). As we engage in this kind of mission, we must become a part of the community and an abiding presence with the people we are trying to reach (Frost and Hirsch 2003:39). Frost and Hirsch (2003:39) illustrate this by using a group of gangsters. If one desires to reach them with the gospel of Christ, he or she cannot sit in their upper-middle class home and hand out tracts once a week, inviting them to come join them for a service where a former gangster will share his testimony about how God changed his life. Rather, the missionary will live with them, become a part of their life and geography, and become acquainted with their cultural rhythms (Frost and Hirsch 2003:54). In doing this, however, they do not compromise their beliefs. But they will live and be an example of the truth while engaging in the lives of the people they want to reach. The goal of this is that others will then see the attractiveness and magnetism of the Gospel (Frost and Hirsch 2003:54).

#### ***4.3. Create simple methods of learning***

Because so many are uninformed of biblical facts and terminology, it is important for the church to start at the beginning (Altrock 2004:11). The vocabulary, images, and illustrations that come from the Bible must not assume that the listener is already knowledgeable in regard to the meaning of these things. In the same manner, our approach and messages that we preach to this generation must be basic Biblical messages, starting from scratch, and guiding them through the Biblical story for the first time (Altrock 2004:11).

Disciple making could be a part of seeing that people in this generation are informed. It is important to walk a road with each individual, and this would

ensure that each person can be communicated with on the level that he or she is at (Creps 2002:55).

#### ***4.4. Create a spiritual experience for the community***

An openness for the spiritual and supernatural defines the postmodern generation. In fact, it goes beyond an openness to being virtually a craving for the things of God (Long 2004:154). In the past the institution of the church was important to the community. Now it is not the practice of taking part in the church service on a weekly basis that is important but it is the desire of experiencing God and His presence that defines this culture. Rather than attending church, they desire to *be* the church (Malphurs 2007:33). There is a craving for mysticism and rituals within this new culture. They want to experience the Divine, and if they cannot find that in the church, then they will go elsewhere until they discover what they are looking for (Burke and Pepper 2003:54).

The church must find ways in which to bring people to the point of encountering God. They must make a spiritual experience available to all members of the body of believers. They must ensure that they do not just let this become a Sunday ritual, but must teach the community how to experience God throughout the week (Altrock 2004:62).

#### ***4.5. Create a new church and leadership methods***

As a result of modernism, the structure of church became very much hierarchical (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:21). It involved the leaders speaking and vocalizing the message that God gave them to the members of the congregation, who did little more in the church than listen (Murray 2004:127). The community of believers, rather than actively engaging and encouraging one another as seen in the early church, became a spectator religion in which performance ruled. Rather than being a time when all participate, it was transformed into one, or maybe

more, leaders who were “performing” week after week while everyone else watch the show (Murray 2004:126-127).

This will in no way be effective in the new culture that we find ourselves in because as stated in chapter 3, postmoderns are very anti-institutional individuals and are sceptical of most authority in the church or elsewhere (Creps 2002:56). Interaction and participation are two key traits for postmoderns to be able to fully and more readily grasp the truth that is trying to be present (Creps 2002:56). Therefore the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be highly participative and give opportunity for all to take part in the worship, in order to be effective (Lewis and Cordeiro 2005:87). Murray (2002:239) describes it as a “roundtable dialogue” in which the information and truths do not come from the “head” of the table, but rather all are actively involved in the discovery process.

The church needs to abolish the preacher-listener method that it has embraced for so long. It needs to open up to a more dialogue-centred approach to communication so that each member of the community can actively participate in not only discovering and learning, but also in sharing (Davies 2007:170).

The method itself within the church is not the only thing that needs to be re-examined for change but we also must develop a new way of leadership. Within the modern tradition, there was a separation between the leaders and members, clergy and laity (Murray 2004:258). Not only is this irrelevant for our society, but it is neither biblical, as it is not seen in the life of Christ or other great leaders (Burke and Pepper 2003:39).

This style of leadership needs to be done away with in the new culture that we are entering. The organizational structure needs to be flattened from the hierarchical triangle (Frost and Hirsch 2003:21). Rather than one person being the guide to the entire community of believers, all need to recognize that we are on the same journey and are growing, learning, and experiencing different things while we are all travelling together (Burke and Pepper 2004:37). All should play an active role in the corporate worship service, and in the body of believers. Tiplady (2002:42-43) gives four characteristics of the new leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. First, the leader isn't above all of the others, rather he is in friendship

with the community. Secondly, the leader respects each individual and the giftings that God has placed within him or her and recognizes the contribution that that person can make to the whole body. Thirdly, the new leader has integrity. The new generation quickly identifies falseness, hypocrisy, and hidden agendas therefore it is vital for each leader to be authentic in his lifestyle. And finally, openness and vulnerability will characterize the new leader. Whereas the modern generation looked for a super-leader who was strong and stable, this generation is looking for authenticity. They require and will respect a leader, who will recognize their own weakness, emotions, fears, and feelings, rather than wearing a mask.

Our society is not looking for perfect leaders who exemplify the holiness of God, but they are looking for leaders who are honest (Creps 2002:56). They want leaders who recognize that they are weak, who admit to their failures, and admit that they don't have all of the answers. These admissions would be considered preposterous in the modern community, but this is exactly what the postmodern culture is looking for – real, authentic individuals (Creps 2002:56).

It is time that we, as a community of believers in Jesus Christ, adopt a new way of leadership. We need to leave the past in the past and take up the new responsibility and necessary changes that need to take place (Tiplady 2002:42).

#### ***4.6. Create a safe space for discussion of truth***

As a result of this generation being very pluralistic in their way of thinking, it is important that we don't chase them away by demanding that our way is *the* way. It is characteristic of this culture to not accept being told what to do. So we should not try to tell people what they should believe concerning our Christian faith because this is in fact useless (Stackhouse 2004:103). But they are typically open for discussion, especially about things concerning truth and spirituality (Long 2004:202). We can share what we believe, but we need to allow them to have a safe space in which they can share their views without feeling they are being forced or pressured to accept the beliefs of others.

#### ***4.7. Create an emphasis on application of the practical***

Because the 21<sup>st</sup> century culture is very much pragmatic, we as believers need to shift our focus a bit from emphasizing how a relationship with God will ultimately give them a much better future after life, to how a relationship with God can make a difference in their life now on a daily basis (Altrock 2004:112). In the postmodern mindset, if a relationship with God doesn't address the problems and issues of life on earth but only leads to a bright future, then it is futile and not worth knowing more about (Altrock 2004:112). As we come into contact with postmodernists, we must show them how the Word addresses issues that are a part of life here on earth, and not just the after-life. Not only did Jesus use this approach, but Paul did as well. He made reference to issues such as taxes, sex, anger, speech, marriage, parenting, and other common issues and struggles that the church was facing during the time (Altrcok 2004:113). God never meant for salvation and a relationship with Him to be confined to the after-life, but He designed it to impact our everyday lives as well (Altrock 2004:115).

#### ***4.8. Create an authentic, biblical community***

Relationship and community plays a vital role in reaching the postmodern generation, be it the church or a secular function. This is because the people of this new culture are desperate for intimacy with both other people as well as with God (Long 2004:155). Therefore, a missional strategy in this new era can be narrowed down to one characteristic: relationship (Sweet 1999:196). In the past, the primary model of evangelism and mission was creating programs and activities that attracted people to a place where the gospel could be presented in a systematic way. This will have to be transformed into evangelism by way of building authentic relationships with those outside the body of Christ (Frost and Hirsch 2003:44).

There are several suggestions that are given by various authors in ways to create an atmosphere and culture of authentic, biblical community. The first is

through the incorporation of small groups. This will play a major role in effectively reaching people of this new generation. In these small groups, intimate, personal, and real relationships can be formed and developed, whereas it is more difficult for this to happen when the entire community meets together (Long 2004:140). The second way to engage with others in order to build relationships is through proximity spaces. These would be neutral places where Christians and people who are not yet a part of the community of believers, can fellowship together and get to know one another without the pressure of forcing anything religious upon them (Frost and Hirsch 2003:24). Finally, shared projects allow meaningful interaction between those in the church and those still not set apart from secular society. This engages believers and unbelievers in activities that not only build relationship, but also are essentially valuable to the community at large (Frost and Hirsch 2003:25).

There is a danger, however, in identifying relationship-building as an approach to missions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because many times believers befriend those who are not saved *in order that* they might become a part of the community of believers. This immediately cancels out authentic friendship because, even though a friendship may be formed, it is done so under ulterior motives. There isn't genuine interest in getting to know the person and growing and learning from each other, as is characteristic in the development of a true friendship (Frost and Hirsch 2003:99).

We are called by God to have authentic, real relationships with others (Frost and Hirsch 2003:99). God uses different relationships to speak to us in amazing ways. Thwaites (1999:74) states it like this:

*The sight and experience of God did not stop with the physical creation; it reached right into the day-to-day relationships God made for humanity in the beginning. The Word of God calls us to discover the person and presence of God in each other. To feel and know the friendship of God in the fellowship of a brother or sister. To enjoy the romance and love of God in the embrace of a wife or a husband. To sense the tenderness of God in holding a child close.*

We are called to true, authentic relationships with others and with God. This will be vital in our missional approach to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### ***4.9. Create methods of experience for the community during times of corporate worship***

As a result of the modern era, the church has been set up in order to pass knowledge from the leader to the community (Burke and Pepper 2003:53). This, however, will not be effective in this new generation because the postmodernist lives off of cravings to experience the things of life, including God. Therefore experiences must be created for each individual as the community worships together in one place. The leaders must generate an atmosphere in which each person can have a personal experience with the Almighty God (Sweet 1999:211). Altrock (2004:12) gives four ways in which one can deal with the experiential expectation of the postmodern generation.

First, we must preach in such a way, making use of both narration and induction, that the listener is guided to a place where he or she can authentically experience the Gospel message (Altrock 2004:132-133). This means that the leader or communicator speaks in a way that he takes the listener from the particular situation to the general conclusion of truth, rather than from a general statement to the particular. An example of this would be to use experience, testimonies, and personal stories to explain and build up to a general biblical truth (Altrock 2004:132-133). This inductive way of speaking will be more appealing to the postmodern individual because of the fact that they are indeed sceptical and uncertain about truth, as well as they desire real-life stories (Altrock 2004:134).

Secondly, Altrock (2004:12) suggests making use of testimonies in order to allow the individual to take part in how others have experienced life and God's hand at work in various situations. This is attractive to the new generation because it gives authenticity and personal experience to the truth of the Gospel. Logic and rationality are virtually unimportant in this culture, so it is necessary to use the experiences of our lives to communicate the message of the gospel.

When experience proves something to be true, then it bears much more integrity than reasoning alone (Altrock 2004:135).

The third way in which we can deal with the experiential craving of postmodernism is to develop patterns or experiences of worship which use not just one but all of the senses to participate (Altrock 2004:12). Rituals and worship styles that can incorporate more than one or all of the sense will lead to a much more effective way of communicating and worshipping (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:22). One must keep in mind the power that image plays in our culture. Hearing a word can be minimally effective, but when you engage the senses, especially that of seeing, then it dramatically increases the effect and experience that the audience will have (Long 2004:180). Davies (2007:170) conjectures that it would be highly beneficial for the church to stimulate the senses, especially that of sight. Without this stimulation the task of listening to an individual who speaks for a prolonged period of time can be somewhat cumbersome.

Finally we must allow the community to see the gospel lived out in the lives of the community not only during times of corporate worship but also outside this periodic “together-time” (Altrock 2004:12). The listener must be exposed to ways in which they can take their experience of God during the corporate time of worship, to their personal, daily lives outside of this setting. They must know how to experience God not only on Sunday, or whatever day is deemed to be the time of public worship, but also how to experience Him when they return to their normal lives on Monday (Altrock 2004:62).

#### ***4.10. Concluding Comments***

There are no one-size-fits-all approaches to becoming a postmodern missional church. As a result, these ways of adapting as a church will not provide ABC’s to making any church postmodern. They are simply the lines drawn that will act as a guide. It is up to each individual what the colours and pictures will be within the lines. Each individual missional church needs to be creative and



sensitive to the Holy Spirit's guidance in order to paint the most relevant cultural approach to the mission field that it is called to.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Much information has been presented in this thesis, all of which takes time to contemplate and think about. It is important for us to remember that we are not the first ones who have had to immerse ourselves in a foreign worldview and adapt in order to be effective. Christ is a primary example to whom we can look at when we are facing missional challenges (Frost and Hirsch 2003:112). He demonstrated a perfect model for integrating ourselves into a culture in order to be effective and relevant (Frost and Hirsch 2003:112). As we are faced with challenges in this new mission field that is looking at us, we can be assured that if we look to the example of Jesus Christ, we will find answers and ways in which we can model Him to make a difference in this changing society.

As the culture and the worldview around us changes, we also must continue to study the things concerning the most present generation so that we can be prepared to address and strategize effectively to reach the lost for the kingdom of God. Just as in this thesis we laid out the contours of the postmodern generation, we must do the same in every different missional context that we face. As we identify a target group, we must study them and observe their behaviour and ways of thinking in order to characterize them so that we can develop an effective strategy to reaching them in a way that is relevant for them (Frost and Hirsch 2003:153).

As the contours of the postmodern generation have been identified, we need to look at the adaptations that were mentioned in this thesis, as well as being open to new ideas that we develop or that the Lord illuminates as are sensitive and responsive to His leading (Frost and Hirsch 2003:6). This will help us not to get stuck in our old ways and methods of doing things, but will cause us to thrive and push forward in this time of change.

Today, as the church sees the up rise of a new generation, it is left with two choices. The church is standing at a fork in the road, so to speak. It can either continue on the course that it is already travelling – a road marked by irrelevance and ineffectiveness. This will eventually lead to a near extinction of

the church as we know it. Or, on the other hand, the church can rise to the challenge, abandoning the modernistic traditions that it is comfortable with, and brave out into unknown territory. It is a frightening thing, to say the least. Taking up this challenge requires creativity, surrender, and sensitivity to the voice of God. Creativity in that one must study the culture in which it is immersed and find the characteristics and qualities of that culture. As it begins to pinpoint these things, it must be creative in developing ways that it can effectively meet the needs of the people within the context of each missional area. Also, the church must be in surrender. There are many traditions and many things that individuals have done in church or in association with the church of our Lord Jesus. These have become a way of life, especially if the person has grown up in the church or been a part of it for many years. We must lay these things down – all of our expectations of how church should be done. We should cast aside all of the irrelevant or ineffective patterns within the church to develop a more culturally relevant approach (Frost and Hirsch 2003:153). And finally, the church must be sensitive to the voice of God. Being our example in cross-cultural missions, He can guide and lead us wherever He wants us to be, and He can give us the ideas and techniques for reaching the people. We must just be prepared and sensitive to hear His voice as He leads and guides us in effective strategies for reaching the postmodern generation.

One must be aware in the midst of this cultural shift that we don't withdraw completely from society (Long 2004:28). Sometimes we look at the changes that are taking place as opportunities for great things. But many times it is easier to see these changes as negative or toxic to our existence and to the existence of those we love. It is then that we want to recoil back into a safe place and put up walls of protection around us and our families. We must remember that we have a great opportunity to make a difference in the midst of an ever-changing society (Long 2004:28).

Whatever our opinion of the situations that the world is now facing, we must take the words of Mordecai to heart, as he spoke to Queen Esther. That God has called each one of us, in whatever circumstance or culture we find

ourselves, for “such a time as this” to bring His Good News to the lives of those who are desperately seeking for that which brings life (Esther 4:14).

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\*All references made to the Bible will be taken from the *Amplified Version* unless otherwise stated in the text.