CREATING COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING FOR AUTHENTIC YOUTH EVANGELISM

Daniel M. Duffis
Ph.D. Student, Andrews University

"How do I get past Jesus and go directly to God?" I was very intrigued by this question as I engaged in conversation with a 22-year-old young adult at my church in New York. Oddly enough, the question was directed to me by this young man during a Christmas party last year while we were celebrating the centrality of the work of Christ in our lives. I wanted to understand the assumption behind the question, so I inquired, "What is your perception of Jesus?" To which he responded, "I believe he was a good man, and I enjoy his teachings." We went on to have a more in-depth conversation in which he opened up to me about his hesitancy to accept the Bible as historical, seeing that our society is moving away from trusting written material. He confided in me, however, about his struggles in approaching God, which had led him to ask that particular question. Even though he might have a skewed idea about God, I was positively pleased that his new year's resolution was to understand what it takes to build a solid foundation for faith.

This young man, however, is not just a casual visitor at our church. He regularly assists in the audiovisual department and often sits in on our board meetings and attends our leadership training sessions. Like him, other young adults are attending our church, who belong to different Christian denominations, religious traditions, or who do not believe in Jesus. They participate regularly and help in various aspects of our services, including things like singing on the praise team, reading Scripture or offering a public prayer. There are some that have been given the opportunity to lead out Bible study and even preach for the main service. Though they are not adherents to the Adventist faith, if you were to ask them what church they belong to, they would not hesitate to say that they are members of the One Hope Church in Queens, New York, a church planting project where I have been pastoring for the past eight months.

I share my story with you to draw your attention to the fact that postmodern philosophy[1] has affected the concept of spiritual development, explicitly changing the way in which youth and young adults come to faith. The primary ideological shift that we have seen in recent years, especially amongst evangelical churches, is the movement away from the modern idea of "believing before belonging" towards the current notion of "belonging before believing."[2]

As Richardson points out, "Most people today do not 'decide' to believe. In community they 'discover' that they believe, and then decide to affirm that publicly and to follow Christ intentionally."[3] As the concept of community has regained value in the postmodern age, the modern idea in which spirituality was formed by an individualistic search for truth has now taken a back seat to the postmodern desire for a more communal form of spiritual exploration.

With this in mind, this ideological shift has brought to the forefront different questions regarding the idea of belonging to religious communities. How do individuals, specifically young people, belong? And to what do they belong to? In this paper, I want to propose that our concept of church is in need of a redefinition within the postmodern context. Therefore, I will explore the function of community within postmodernity and how it affects the idea of belonging. Second, I will look at different approaches to ecclesiology that have been proposed in response to the dilemmas of belongingness in connection with church membership. Finally, I will conclude by looking at the missiological implications for a redefinition of our ecclesiology for more effective evangelization within the postmodern context.

The Function of Community Within Postmodernity

There are varying postmodernist approaches to the idea of community that impact the role of religious bodies for individuals searching for spiritual experiences. There are three main influences that I believe have redefined the concept of community within the postmodern paradigm: the culture of authenticity, consumerism, and the fragmentation of culture.

The Culture of Authenticity

Postmodernity has also seen a rise in the sense of authenticity rooted in a search within to find one's true self. Charles Taylor points out that this culture of authenticity fosters a self-fulfilling approach to identity that has caused association to communities to be seen as merely instrumental for the purpose of receiving recognition from the group. Taylor demonstrates that identity was once thought to be formed by a dialogue between oneself and one's community.[4] Now, however, the forming of identity has become an individual project. A person is not defined by societal roles, tradition or any other outside influence, but by the discovery of the self within.[5] The community only serves to recognize what the individual establishes himself to be.

This self-fulfilling way of forming identity also threatens commitment to any particular community in the sense that allegiance to a group is only valid if a person can live out their authentic self within that nucleus. If the community does not recognize the person's authentic self as legitimate, then it ceases to serve its purpose, and leads to a disconnection with that individual.[6]

Consumerist Culture

Another agent within postmodernity that has affected religious institutional affiliation is consumerist culture. In the modern era that was characterized by the idea of production as an agent for building meaning; belonging to and participating (or producing) within a specific community of believers was once done out of a sense of sheer obligation to prove one's worth. However, with the rise of pluralism and the consumerization[7] of religions, membership to a particular body is now a matter of choice. Peter Berger describes it in this way:

The religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be marketed. It must be "sold" to a clientele that is no longer constrained to "buy." The pluralist situation is, above all, a market situation. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities.[8]

This has also led to the formation of syncretistic religious practices and even the idea that one can belong to different religions.[9] Other individuals value the ability to garner from the marketplace of religions available to them and create a personalized religious experience. Knebelkamp describes it in this way, "Religion has made the transition from the altar to the individual. In this transition everyone helps themselves to religious symbols and sews together his or her own religious blanket and biography."[10] Therefore, although one can participate in and appreciate the positive aspects of a specific religious body and value the ability to explore faith in community, total commitment to that denomination or system of beliefs is seen as rather limiting.

Consumerism destroys any idea of community and focuses the attention of religion on the self. However, if community plays any role, it is based on the idea that consumerism turns religion into another brand that one wears in order to feel accepted by one's peers.[11] Participation in a religious movement is done by following the latest spiritual trend in culture as a means for social validation. People would "wear" a particular religion just because it is the hottest thing on the market to try at the moment.

The Fragmentation of Western Society

It is also noticeable that one of the biggest threats to the formation of religious commitment has been the atomization of western society into subcultures that are categorized by things like political views, religious backgrounds, and different forms of lifestyle that offer multiple paths by which one can approach life. Bombarded with so many options, this fragmentation of culture causes postmoderns to become hesitant about the validity of each particular ideology as being the sole possessor of truth and leads to a greater distancing from institutions in general. When faced with societal dilemmas, in the postmodern mindset, society is too complex to be taken on individually, and thus, exploration of the outside world is submitted to be critiqued, evaluated and affirmed by individuals within one's inner circle who help in making sense of it all.

The community, thus, functions as a safe space against the fear of grappling with the complexity of the surrounding world. As Kinnaman points out, "Young adults also look to their peers to be their moral and spiritual compass. They tend to base their views of morality on what seems fair-minded, loyal, and acceptable to their friends."[12] In this condition, postmoderns are more willing to commit and are more faithful to their tribe or intimate circle of friends rather than an institution or system of beliefs. Therefore, they are more open to testing out a new religious movement only if they have seen it lived out by a person within their social network.

Redefining The Idea of Church

Although the ideas above about community may present different threats to religious institutions on the level of commitment, they also offer an opportunity to rethink evangelism. Postmodernity begs for a return to a form of evangelism where community and intimate relationships are central. Depersonalized evangelism, including public evangelism, flyers and other forms of literature evangelism, and other traditional methods will be less effective in reaching millennials and the younger generation. However, I do not think that changing our evangelistic approaches alone will be enough. I believe that our whole idea of ecclesiology needs to be evangelistic.

In his book, *Deep & Wide*, Andy Stanley explains that the church must answer two main questions in order to determine its ecclesiology: 1. "What is the church?" 2. "Who is it for?"[13] Our response to the first question changes the way we answer the second question. Stanley argues that the first-century idea of church, *ekklesia*, centered on a gathering of people in which witnesses of a significant event—the death and resurrection of Jesus—were able to share their experience. In this sense, church life centered around believers sharing the Gospel with unbelievers. He argues that it wasn't until the legalization of religion under the reign of Constantine in the 4th century that church became more centralized, focusing on events within the physical space of meeting and its liturgy. The church eventually lost its evangelistic flavor.

Center-Set Churches

Following Stanley's thought, Weyers and Saayman call for a "missionary ecclesiology"[14] based on Murray's idea of a center-set church model. In *Church After Christendom*, Murray distinguishes four models: "bounded-set", "fuzzy-set", "open-set" and "centre-set" churches.[15] He explains that bounded-set churches are clear in setting boundaries of belief and behavior that determines if one can belong within an organization, and those who miss the mark are excluded. However, this model seems to be seen as very oppressive. Fuzzy-set churches have some boundaries set in place, but these are not rigidly defined. It still focuses, however, on building the idea of belonging by adhering to the rules of the community. Furthermore, the lack of clear boundaries makes the model unstable because it lacks a clear anchor and center, making it susceptible to compromise. Open-set churches have no boundaries. As the name suggests, everyone can become part of the community without any adherence to rules or regulations. This lack of boundaries applied especially to state-churches where all parishioners were seen as members of the church. Their behavior or beliefs were not taken into consideration, thus making the model unfit for any Christian growth.

Center-set churches function differently. Drawing from Hiebert,[16] Murray explains that center-set churches shift their focus away from the boundaries and emphasize a clear and definite center that holds the community together. In the church's case, the center is the story upon which the church is built, the death and resurrection of Christ. There is no compromising of the story. However, those who belong are those who are moving towards the center, no matter how far or near they may be. This focus on orientation allows the church to be open to newcomers that are wanting to know more about Jesus and move closer towards Him, and yet it can be a bounded community in that it will not compromise its message. It can also be fuzzy because no clear boundary defines what a true "member" should look like from a behavioral standpoint. Yet, it still calls for the belonging to be based on the evidence of one's orientation towards the center.

Ayers, looking at the formation of groups and boundaries in the book of Acts, sees this concept of belonging before belief exemplified in Paul's mission in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19:1. Paul is said to have "found some disciples" on his missionary journey to that region. The story records that they had only heard of the baptism of John, and had no idea of the Holy Spirit. Paul explains to them the differences and then baptizes them again in the name of Jesus. Ayers notes,

In Acts, "disciples" is used to indicate valid members of the true faith community; the term is not used for members of other sects. Yet, at Ephesus, these "disciples" are not "believers," who are identified via faith in Jesus. Neither are they "brothers," who are identified through association. They are "disciples," a term that identifies them by one's status as a learner. This is appropriate to the story, for they are in the process of coming to full knowledge. However, even though these are in process, Paul treats them as fellows from the outset, and legitimate adherents who only need to walk through the lacking identifying centers of belief, filial association, and spiritual experience.[17]

What if the church came to the same terms to label its youth and young adult as disciples, not when they have come to believe in all our doctrinal beliefs entirely, but instead, by their heart orientation and willingness to know and explore more about faith as they journey along?

Missiological Implications for Youth Evangelism

Attitudes and dynamics within the church would need to change if we ought to adopt the center-set model to do evangelism amongst young adults. First, we must transform our concept of conversion. Instead of focusing on conversion as an event, we need to view it as both event and process. In his book *Reimagining Evangelism*, Rick Richardson proposes a different imagery of evangelism to be used, one where we see ourselves less as a salesmen pitching the gospel to others to close out a deal, and more like travel guides inviting friends on a journey towards faith.[18] This approach imagines both young believers and unbelievers walking side by side[19] as they explore faith within a community that invites doubt, is open to question their own doctrinal beliefs, and is less judgmental towards those who are on a different point on the path. Our evangelism amongst youth and young adults, therefore, will have to focus less on events that force a one-time grand decision. Instead, we need to build evangelistic approaches that involve community and discipleship where deep relationships over time will play a significant role in the conversion process.

Second, adopting a center-set model also requires youth ministers to establish other points in the conversion process to measure spiritual growth. There is a tendency, especially for parents, to focus singularly on baptism as evidence of the faith of a young person. Due to pressures from higher administrative bodies within the church, our evangelism has focused too much on baptism, and less on teaching younger generations how to build a relationship with God and live out their Christianity in their everyday lives. We need to learn to not only celebrate baptism but to identify and acknowledge other major points of decision in the faith journey of young adults. We have grown accustomed to determining someone's growth only through the public expressions of faith because we do not spend enough time building deeper relationships with our youth. In the center-set model, the youth worker is obliged to develop intimate relationships that help in discerning other steps along the journey of faith that may reflect a movement towards the center.

Lastly, youth workers must recognize the importance of church-planting for this current generation if evangelism to youth is to be effective. Within an established church body that has been accustomed to boundary-based evangelism for many years, it may be hard to establish the type of culture that center-set churches require to be effective. As different studies have shown, it requires a

lot of effort to change the DNA of a church that has been harvesting a particular approach over an extended period. I must be clear in saying that I am not advocating for youth churches; there is a strong need for intergenerational ministry to continue happening. However, I am advocating for new expressions of churches where individuals from both younger and older generations can come together understanding the need to create a culture where unchurched young adults from all walks of life may be able to belong and have an opportunity to explore their faith in a safe space.

Conclusion

Postmodernism brings with it new challenges, but throughout the ages the church has had to reinvent itself as culture continues to evolve. Therefore, these newer times necessitate newer forms of expression that are relevant to the context of today. If not taken into consideration, the effects of postmodern philosophy on the concept of community may become a barrier to reaching young adults if the church continues to hold on to the traditional forms of evangelism.

Therefore, postmodern criticism towards the religious movements and the ecclesiastical institution should not be wholly disregarded. It has caused the church to look inwardly and to see if it has indeed lived up to the purpose that Christ has for it. If we are honest with ourselves, the church will need to recognize that it has often been too judgmental, exclusivist, perfectionist, self-concerned and has lost its missional vigor. No ministry model is perfect, but the concept of a center-set church provides a glimpse of what the Christian community could be if its evangelistic focus were rediscovered. In essence, in order for effective and relevant evangelism amongst youth and young adults to take place today, our churches need to become communities of belonging, in which evangelism is seen as a process that leads eventually to believing and behaving.

Endnotes

1   Dennis M. Doyle, Timothy J. Furry, and Pascal D. Bazzell, *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times*, Kindle Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books) Kindle Locations 11–12. Postmodern philosophy "looks suspiciously upon dogmatism, close-mindedness, and the insistence of any culture or society, religious or not, that claims for itself the fullness of truth."

2   Kara Powell, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, Baker: 2016), 170. Powell notes "As young people are choosing a church, warm community is often a stronger draw than belief."

3   Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside The Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 100.

4   James W. Fowler, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges," *The International Journal For The Psychology Of Religion*, 7/3 (2001): 159–172. Fowler explains the dialogical process of forming identity: "There is the self, there are the primal and significant others in the selfs relational matrix, and there is the third center of relational engagement—the ultimate Other, or the center(s) of value and power in one's life structure."

5   Andrew Root "Toward Further Illusions of Youth Ministry–An Affirmation and Response to David White," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 7/1 (2008): 80–81.

6   Charles Taylor. *Ethics Of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 43–44.

7   For more on the consumerization of religion, read John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2000).

8   Peter Berger, "Sources of Secularization" in *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 244.

9   For more on the idea of multiple religious belonging, see H. L. Richard "New Paradigms for Religion, Multiple Religious Belonging, and Insider Movements," *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 43/3 (2015): 297–308

10   Ari Knebelkamp, "Believing Without Belonging? In Search Of New Paradigms Of Church And Mission In Secularized And Postmodern Contexts: Brazilian Insights And 'Outsights'," *International Review of Mission* 92/365 (2009): 193.

11   Barrie Gunter and Adrian Furnham, *Children as Consumers: A Psychological Analysis of the Young People's Market*, International Series in Social Psychology (New York: Routledge, 1998), 170.

12   David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church… and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 172.

13   Andy Stanley, Deep and Wide—Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend, Kindle Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), Kindle Locations 505–507.

14   Mario Weyers and Willem Saayman "'Belonging Before Believing": Some Missiological Implications of Membership and Belonging in a Christian Community," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/1 (2013): 7.

15   Stuart Murray, Church after Christendom (UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 13–15.

16   Paul Hiebert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," *Gospel in Context 11:4* (1978): 24–29.

17   Adam D. Ayers, Gallagher, Rogert L.; Hertig, Paul. *Contemporary Mission Theology: Engaging the Nations*, Kindle Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), Kindle Locations 3930–3934.

18   Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 15–30.

19   David J. Bosch. Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 391. According to Bosch, "The individual is not a monad, but part of an organism. We live in one world, in which the rescue of some at the expense of others is not possible. Only together is there salvation and survival."