

The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Growing Up Postmodern: Imitating Christ in the Age of "Whatever"

Introduction

Descartes is history. That's the conclusion of postmodernity. Foundational truth is out, relativity is in. Trace it to Hiroshima, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Challenger explosion. Technology is not the panacea we thought it would be. Trace it to Watergate, liposuction, spin doctors. Truth is not an objective reality anymore. Trace it to institutional differentiation, Baskin Robbins, cable TV. Choice can paralyze as well as liberate.

Nobody knows this better than the young people whose coming of age coincides with the turn of the millennium. They live in a world where microchips are obsolete every eighteen months, information is instantaneous, and parents change on weekends. The one constant in the postmodern adolescent's experience is upheaval. Truth changes daily. The signature quality of adolescence is no longer lawlessness, but awelessness. Go ahead, youth say to the church. Impress me. When everything is true, nothing is true. Whatever.

It's true that we live in a world that considers truth too relative to specify. The comics brought us mutant "X-Men" and now "X-Women"; consumer thinking brought us X-brands and X-spouses; pop culture brought us X-Files and Generation X. The letter "X" is having a banner decade, labeling "whatever" we don't have the time or the inclination to explain.

Maybe the word "whatever" found its way into the contemporary adolescent vocabulary because "X" describes precisely the Truth they seek. In the early church, the Greek letter "X" (chi) referred to Jesus Christ. This generation of young people is neither the first nor the last in search of "X." Paul recognized this quest in the Athenians, who went as far as to erect an altar to "an unknown god":

What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. . . The One who is Lord of heaven and earth. . . made all nations. . . so that they would search for God. . . . God will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed, and of this we are assured because God raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:23-31)

We all seek "X," God's Truth beyond relativity. We are here because we are called to imitate and obey and proclaim this Truth to all who worship unknown gods. The Truth is out there, for young people and for us.

May you find grace to peruse the "X-Files" of your own life in the days ahead, as we grope for "X" together. Though, indeed, he is not far from each of us.

Godspeed,
Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

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Communities of Faith for Citizens of a Postmodern World

Nancy T. Ammerman

Issues of cultural change from tradition to modernity to postmodernity can seem rather remote to those of us who are just trying to live our everyday lives. While we may see signs and evidence of those large trends, they often seem to be “out there.” What do these trends mean for local congregations?

First, culture is not just something “out there.” It is also the very fabric of the everyday lives in which children, youth, and adults are immersed and which they bring with them into the congregation. It is in the language they speak, the schools they go to, the music they hear, and the expectations they have about who does what. It is the primary material out of which a congregation’s culture is built. Changes large and small in the culture “out there” inevitably find their way inside the life of the congregation.

Indeed, if we are to understand the realities faced by congregations, there are two cultural facts — products of the modern world and unlikely to change significantly in the postmodern era — that we must put on the table. Those twin facts are mobility and choice. People don’t stay in one place for a lifetime, and they think of religion as something to be chosen. Those facts are sometimes so taken for granted that we forget the degree to which they are new in human history. Most people, in most places and times, have had few choices either about where they lived or what religion they claimed. Religion was “ascribed” and lifelong. One might be more or less enthusiastic, more or less observant, but one simply belonged, by virtue of birth.

The United States is the world’s foremost experiment in doing things differently. From very early on, European settlers here began to experiment with voluntary religion. By the 1830s, the last of the established churches disappeared, and today even Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and other immigrant groups have taken on

the voluntary, congregational forms of American Protestantism.¹ Some point to this voluntarism as the key to understanding religion's current woes. Organized religion suffers, these commentators lament, because too many people are doing too much choosing, moving in and out of religious affiliation and from one group to another, seemingly willy-nilly.² One person described this as serial promiscuous membership. On the opposite side of the fence, others argue that it is precisely this ability to choose that has kept religious organizations so remarkably healthy in this country, especially as compared to similar bodies in Europe. It has made them responsive to the demands of consumers, created space for innovation, and weeded out the organizational deadwood.³

Whichever side of that debate we choose, the fact of voluntarism is here to stay. What is striking, however, is the degree to which many American congregations, especially mainline Protestant ones, act as if that were not the case — as if they can baptize infants and expect them to grow up to be the elders of the church, as if they can enjoy a privileged place in the community that is simply a given, as if it is “tacky” to advertise one’s congregation in any way (after all, the elect will find their way without help), as if everyone in the pews knows each other. The facts of mobility and choice change congregational life in some fundamental ways that cannot be ignored.

First, the children we baptize and educate today will take that blessing to a dozen different communities before they are buried. We can assume nothing about the ability of any of those communities to give them the stories of faith or the principles by which to live their lives. If we don’t do it today, we can’t count on the chance to do it later.

Second, when new people come to our communities, we can’t assume that they will come to us either on the basis of proximity or of denominational loyalty. We can’t define ourselves by location or denomination and expect that to be enough. They will never know about us if we do not intentionally tell them, and they will want to know why they should join our churches rather than the fifteen others they pass between there and home. Telling people who we are is not crass marketing; it is a fact of life in a mobile society that cannot rely on informal, “natural” means of communication.

Third, congregations that are filled with mobile people have to be constantly reconstructed. All the relationships in them have to be intentionally cultivated rather than built out of the other connections people may have in family and community. When people aren’t cousins or neighbors or coworkers, they have to be introduced to each other and to work at creating connections. The growth of small groups as a form of faith community illustrates the degree to which people are willing to invest in such relationship-building. Intimate, face-to-face relationships are not

impossible in a mobile society, but they do have to be intentional.⁴

Fourth, mobility and choice also mean that the communities surrounding congregations are constantly changing. The reality of urban life has always been that neighborhoods constantly evolve from one identity to another with a succession of ethnic groups and land uses. We are finally realizing that this shifting urban ecology means that the ideal of the self-contained, geographical parish is increasingly an anachronism.⁵

Mobility and choice are facts of cultural life that shape everything congregations do, facts that many “established” community churches have sought to ignore for too long. Congregations cannot count on stable communities, stable people, or denominational loyalties to keep their flocks in place. They must recognize their place as constantly reconstructed gatherings. As the lives of their members change, they will change as well. As their immediate communities change, they will adapt or die. In the postmodern world, every congregation must become a “sectarian” gathering, at least insofar as it must be constructed from the intentional decisions of its adult members.

The Contributions Congregations Make

In the work I’ve done on congregations, I have become increasingly convinced of the essential role they play, and as I think about what postmodernity means, that conviction grows. When we looked at highly stressed, changing communities, yes, we found many congregations in distress as well. But we also found new congregations being born and old congregations expending considerable energy to reorganize or relocate. With the onset of postmodernism, the overall ecology of congregational institutions shifted, often dramatically, but Americans seem not to have given up on gathering into worshiping communities. That is a very good thing. We may be individualists, but our individualism is demonstrated as much in joining up with something as in launching out on our own — something youth ministers surely know from their experience with teens who are constructing new identities.

How and why will congregations survive in a postmodern world, then?⁶ First, congregations will survive by recognizing their role as generators of social capital and creators of civic skills. In a time when other forms of social organization may have fallen on hard times, the need to gather is no less critical. People still need points of identification and belonging. In the face of bewildering pluralism, real, locally based affiliations are essential. Community has not disappeared in our postmodern world; it now exists alongside other types of relationships, more anonymous and limited ones. Community now can (indeed, must) be constructed by the persons involved. Voluntary organizations — from choirs to PTAs to ethnic heritage

societies to congregations — continue to be among the places where relationships of trust are formed, where a sense of identity is nurtured.⁷ These relationships of trust are what we mean by social capital, and it is this locally generated social capital that makes the larger public conversation (“on the wall” to use Brueggemann’s image) possible.

The importance of maintaining points of real belonging in our society suggests that congregations need to pay attention to the ways in which they build community. They need help in nurturing deep interpersonal ties, as well as in celebrating the more superficial — but nonetheless real — rites of group identification. We may snicker at the arcane rituals of the Elks or the Shriners, but those hats and handshakes and songs helped people to know who they were. Congregations may not want to adopt funny hats, but they do need to think about how people know that they are members. Conservative churches often engage in rather intentional efforts to set members apart through distinctive beliefs and practices and by keeping them at arm’s length from “the world,” but belonging does not require forsaking all others. It does require attention to the activities, rituals, markers, and relationships that enhance a sense of fellowship and communion with one another. The more deeply people belong, the greater the store of social capital that is generated.

In addition to the basic social capital generated in congregations and other voluntary organizations, such groups bear the special responsibility of being the places where otherwise voiceless people have a voice, where those denied leadership in other social arenas learn to lead. So long as inequality persists, there will be a need for congregations that are the special home for people who may have few other safe places of refuge.⁸

Among the many things accomplished within such places is the creation and enhancement of civic skills. If social capital is the basic stuff of organization and connection, civic capital is the repertoire of skills and connections necessary for public life. Beyond association and trust, civic skills involve especially the arts of communication, planning, and decision-making. These are skills often learned in school and on the job, but they are also skills that can be learned through participation in voluntary organizations.⁹ Every club that plans a special event, every society that needs officers, and every congregation that asks its members to teach classes and chair committees provides opportunities for the development and exercise of civic skills.

Recent research done by political scientist Sydney Verba and his colleagues confirms that anyone who joins an organization gains in civic skills. People who are relatively disadvantaged in background and job characteristics gain proportionately more. Because people of all economic and educational levels belong nearly equally to congregations (whereas other voluntary organizations are disproportionately middle and upper class), congregations are the single most widespread and egalitar-

ian providers of civic opportunity in the U.S.¹⁰

Some congregations have a keen sense of their “meeting house” role, hosting community gatherings and political debates. But the research on civic skills suggests that even when congregations are at their most seemingly “private” and “sectarian,” they may be facilitating the political process. The same person who learns to write letters to missionaries and to collect money for new hymnals can use those skills to participate in local and national political life. Just ask Pat Robertson. If we wish to strengthen the civic life of our country, we can encourage local congregations, especially those inhabited by disadvantaged people, to offer multiple opportunities for leadership to their members, to be intentional about training them to make presentations and to write letters.

Congregations, then, generate the basic social capital of association, along with the civic capital of communication and organizational skills. They do this especially well for those least advantaged in other sectors of the society. They provide the relationships of trust and the currency of belonging that can then be spent in a variety of larger social and civic arenas.

Beyond these basic indirect contributions, congregations also contribute directly to the well-being of their communities. In a time when we are rethinking the relationship between large, centralized forms of social service delivery, congregations are emerging as vital partners in that task, thereby also creating channels for volunteer energy. Not only do congregations and other voluntary organizations provide human resources for the work of sustaining modern social life, they also provide material resources to those efforts. They provide meeting space and transportation, bulletin boards and public address systems, copying machines and paper. The material resources of congregations and other voluntary organizations provide an infrastructure for doing the work of the community, an infrastructure often made most visible in times of crisis.¹¹ The material infrastructure of gymnasiums, kitchens, telephones, and vans is a critical part of the social capital contributed to the rest of society by voluntary organizations, especially by congregations.

Voluntary organizations often contribute quite directly to the well-being of society by channeling resources and volunteer energies toward arenas of need. Nearly all congregations report providing some sort of human service activities. In many cases this is support given through coalitions rather than directly provided, but the extent to which congregations are involved in the provision of social services is broad indeed.¹² From affordable housing to shelters for abused women, from food pantries to refugee resettlement, congregations are often the organizational vehicles for the ameliorative work that needs to be done in a community. Our culture sees helping the needy as a religious virtue and expects religious organizations to be engaged in service activities.¹³

That cultural expectation also makes congregations likely vehicles for the volunteer energies of those who want to help.¹⁴ Even people who are not members may join in a congregation's tutoring program or help out at the shelter once a week. Even youth who are not sure they believe what their parents want them to believe may still find the congregation's charitable activities worth investing in. Congregations are able to expend social capital in service to the community because they are recognized as legitimate places for investment by people with social capital of their own to spend.

In these sorts of charitable activities, congregations can work in concrete ways at that balance between nurturing their own ties of trust and identity — the way of faith to which they feel called — and risking that way of faith in encounters with others. We have always known that congregations needed to be about a “journey inward” and a “journey outward.” In the postmodern situation, neither of those journeys can be taken for granted; both must be intentionally constructed. In a world of mobility and choice, choosing to invest in a congregation is an opportunity both to be formed by that body of faithful people and to participate with them in mobilizing the energies of faith in behalf of the world.

Building up social capital, teaching civic skills, delivering social services, and providing an arena for voluntarism are critical to a postmodern world of fragmentation and mobility, and could be said to be a part of most any voluntary organization. But they are not at the center of what congregations do best. What congregations do best is to provide a space in which the moral and the spiritual are celebrated as essential to human life. In the modern situation, we have relegated such nonrational pursuits to the private (and therefore irrelevant) sphere. In a postmodern world, the moral and the spiritual are leaving their private ghetto. They have come out of the closet and have made their way onto our television screens and into our public debates. If churches do not provide moral insight and spiritual experience, many other purveyors are eager to step into the gap.

More than any other organizations, however, congregations are still expected to represent the community's moral order, to hold up the best human values, while condemning human fault. This is especially evident in their role in the upbringing of children. The tie between congregational membership and family formation is still very strong in U.S. culture.¹⁵ Many adults see religious training for their children as part of their obligation to the world. They would not be doing good or making the world a better place if their children were denied the training provided by the church. While other institutions may participate in the moral upbringing of children, none of them takes on this task quite so explicitly as do religious bodies.

That means that attention to real content in the moral and religious education of children is essential for healthy congregations. It is important that churches

provide a space where kids are expected to be good. But lasting moral education will necessitate more than that. Children do need to practice the virtues, but they also need to learn the stories and rules that underlie those virtues. We need to indulge their mythic and literal impulses, trusting that more metaphoric and relational ways of being faithful will emerge as they mature, but knowing, as well, that the twenty-first century will surely be more friendly to those very myths than was the twentieth.

The concern for inculcating moral standards does not end with children, of course. Congregations also need to encourage their adult members to live by the principles of the faith. In the twenty-three congregations we studied, many of the adults we interviewed talked about the difficulty in sorting out what they ought to be doing. Especially in Bible studies, mission groups, support groups, and the like, we often saw members wrestling with real moral dilemmas.¹⁶ The creation of such small-group, face-to-face settings is essential for the task of moral education, and it is the ideal form of gathering for mobile, choosing postmoderns.

In addition to the intimacy of a small-group setting, the people we interviewed also valued worship each week as a time for reflection and priority setting. Almost no matter what the preacher may have said, the set-aside time, the sacred space of the church, perhaps the inspiration of the music reminded them of what should be most important in their lives. Congregations need to be reminded that it is OK to preach moral prescriptions and to invoke God's presence. Individuals may still adapt those moral prescriptions to their own situations, but if they have no moral guidance and no divine accountability, they are missing much of what they come to church for.

Indeed, one of the reasons for the importance of congregations in this process of moral formation must surely be the linking, in congregations, of moral virtue with sacred presence. Congregations are not just places to be reminded of what one ought to do. They are spaces where "ought" is put in cosmic perspective. While people may encounter transcendent realities in all sorts of places, the spaces and rituals of congregational life invite transcendence. We expect to meet God — at least on occasion — when we go to church. When Don Miller describes what he calls "new paradigm" churches, their most salient feature is that they effectively mediate God's presence.¹⁷ People go there to experience God's healing, comforting, transforming power.

This linking of moral instruction with transcendent presence is often powerfully conservative, convincing people that the world is as it should be. In that sense, congregations are often seen as bastions of status-quo conservatism. Yet such is not always the case. This same sense of transcendence can reveal the world to be "merely" human, susceptible to human intervention.¹⁸ The perspective experienced

in worship and ritual is a perspective that makes critique and action possible. Whether candlelight vigils in East Germany or the strains of "We shall overcome" or the sight of a sinner repenting at the altar, it is clear that the gestures, sights, and sounds of religious ritual are experienced as powerful by the participants. What happens in congregations is different from what happens in other social gatherings because they are religious, transcendent experiences, and ideas about God are central to the values congregations protect and disseminate among their members.

Congregations that are strong, then, will nurture this sense of transcendence. They will be intentional about invoking God's presence and envisioning a world that looks more like God's reign than this one now does. They will reclaim eschatology and hope as vital parts of a living theology. Vital congregations will be more than efficient organizations, more even than strong contributors to the civic order. They will be places where this world is placed in moral and spiritual perspective and where the spiritual energy for change is generated.

As the doors of the postmodern world crack open to allow faith and everyday life into conversation with each other, we must find ways to nurture those exchanges. And as the doors of the postmodern world swing back and forth between strong local communities and open arenas in which the common good is sought, we need churches that are neither afraid of their own particularity nor afraid to engage the other. In a postmodern world where everyone must choose a way of being religious, the tasks of building and nurturing those particular, local communities of faith can never be taken for granted. Growing up postmodern means that our children will be ever more dependent on the willingness of mobile adults to choose to create communities in which the stories of the faith can be told, the mysteries of God's presence celebrated, and the love of God made real. ❁

NOTES

1. R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James Wind and James Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 54-99.

2. Penny Long Marler and David A. Roozen, "From Church Tradition to Consumer Choice: The Gallup Surveys of the Unchurched American," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), pp. 253-277.

3. This argument is probably most clearly articulated in Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (March 1994): pp. 1180-1211. Mark Chaves and David E. Cann, "Regulation, Pluralism, and Religious Market Structure: Explaining Religion's Vitality," *Rationality and Society* 4, no. 3 (July 1992): pp. 272-290, offer an important clarification.

4. On small groups, see Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* (New York: Free Press, 1994). On the nature of community in mobile, urban settings, see Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978) and Claude S. Fischer, *To Dwell among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

5. Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).
6. The following section draws on Nancy T. Ammerman, "Bowling Together: Congregations and the American Civic Order," The Arizona State University Lecture in Religion (February 1996)
7. See, for example, Christopher G. Ellison and Linda K. George, "Religious Involvement, Social Ties, and Social Support in a Southeastern Community," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 no. 1 (1994): pp. 46-61.
8. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26: pp. 56-80. This is not to ignore the fact that such counterpublics can silence their own dissenters as easily as they themselves are silenced by the larger society.
9. Henry E. Brady, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation," *American Political Science Review* 89 no. 2 (June 1995): pp. 271-294.
10. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
11. John B. Orr, Donald E. Miller, Wade Clark Roof, and J. Gordon Melton, *Politics of the Spirit: Religion and Multiethnicity in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1994): p. 16.
12. Virginia A. Hodgkinson and Murray S. Weitzman, *From Belief to Commitment: The Community Service Activities and Finances of Religious Congregations in the United States: 1993 Edition* (Washington: Independent Sector, 1993) pp. 19-20.
13. Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 242-243.
15. Nancy T. Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof, eds. *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
16. These themes of everyday faith are explored in Nancy T. Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 196-216.
17. Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
18. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1969) pp. 95-96.