

A Little Yeast: Reflections on Culture Change in Our Regions and Denominations

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Imagine it's 2059. As we look across the landscape of the regions and denominations in which we serve, we find that the bulk of congregations could be described as flourishing intergenerational communities of faith. Our denominational leaders are supportive of this way of being the church and see it as "the norm." The resources being developed for use in the local church also reflect a commitment to intergenerational ministry. What can we do to help this become the reality one generation from now? While I can't offer a solution, strategy, or system, here is smattering of reflections, a constellation of considerations to which I'm convinced we must attend:

- **POSTURE and PROCESS: *Adaptation and Appreciation***

- **What sort of posture should we adopt? If we are to think realistically, what sort of processes can we expect to help bring about change?**
- This is a paradigm shift
- Within the North American modern experience, "birds of a feather flock together" has been elevated to a sacred principle; we've been told that, if you want to grow, reach people, "succeed," you must embrace and exploit this principle. It has come to shape our imagination, define our notions of success: how to get there, what's possible, what's best.
- The shift for which we're advocating is not something novel, but something ancient—perhaps something akin to Ezra and the rediscovery of the scrolls.
- Nonetheless, we can expect resistance—"That's not practical!" "That doesn't work!!"
- **Adaptation:** This sort of change constitutes "adaptive change"—versus "technical change"—in these cases, the answers we seek are not provided by the existing order; we are challenged to learn our way into a new way of being—new values, attitudes and behaviours.
- We are keenly aware that we can't change the whole system all at once; we desire to see change in hearts, not just in form—not for intergenerational to be the next flavour of the month, the latest thing in a long lineup of church fads. Instead, we desire to see deeply embedded, lasting change.
- "A little yeast works its way through the whole dough"—this principle applies to how we can approach adaptive change (Everett Rogers—Diffusion of Innovation Curve); some people in our regions and denominations were ready 18 months ago; others will have to have a chance to observe and decide that the alternative future this innovation presents is more desirable in some way than the status quo to which they are acquainted. This takes time. We must be committed to the "long game."
- **Appreciation:** Appreciative Inquiry—an approach to strategic planning that emphasizes those positive, lifegiving experiences, stories, etc. embedded in the life of an organization that can fuel energy and inform vision

- Fuller Youth Institute—Churches of 300 and smaller have a distinct advantage in fostering cross-generational connection; this is extraordinary coming from same institution that was the intellectual engine room for the Church Growth Movement, the chief champions of the notion that “birds of a feather flock together.”
 - Those who have suffered an inferiority complex according to the prevailing paradigm may actually be models and champions of intergenerational life—“The last shall be first!”
 - We should be quick to point out, affirm, and celebrate these examples; we should share their stories and hold them up for others to see.
- **PERSUADING and PROVOKING: Artefacts and Anecdotes**
 - **What resources do we have at our disposal to persuade and provoke others to embrace this change?**
 - We are talking about changing culture; I’ve been helped by the perspective articulated by Andy Crouch in *Culture Making*: He describes culture as “what we make of the world.” He adds that we change culture by making more of it.
 - **Artefacts**: Crouch talks about “artefacts”: tangible, observable cultural products, expressions of underlying values. Every artefact carries certain notions about the way things are and the way things should be. The ways we’ve structured church life are “artefacts” that reflect certain cultural assumptions and values.
 - If we take Crouch’s perspective to heart, we need to continue developing “artefacts” that express our commitment to intergenerational ministry; these can include practical resources, ministry models, curricula, etc. We also should be gathering information about “artefacts” being created by others. This is not to equate intergenerationality with specific models or programs, but because these tangible reference points will help people others see what we mean. Many will need to be invited to observe, to explore, to learn from existing examples, to have their imagination stirred and their hearts moved.
 - **Anecdotes**: In Steve Saccone’s book on “Relationally Intelligent Leadership,” he talks about the importance of leaders being good story collectors; this is an essential leadership function if we’re going to encourage adoptive change. I believe in the old adage that “Conversation creates culture.” The sharing of stories is one powerful resource that we have at our disposal in engaging others in conversation—the pull of compelling accounts
 - We will need to pay attention to our own stories, our congregations’ stories, stories from other settings, other denominations, etc.
 - **PATTERNS and PRIORITIES: Aims and Analytics**
 - **How do we articulate patterns and priorities so that others can understand what we’re talking about? This is important if we zoom out from specific examples (artefacts and anecdotes) to focus upon our larger, overarching vision.**
 - Gospel and Our Culture Network (2002)—“What does it look like?” The fact that many people who were attracted to the theory of the missional conversation were posing this question resulted in an articulation of “Patterns of Missional Faithfulness”—not a model or program, but *patterns*. This is important because patterns can be cut out of different cloth—applicable in different contexts.

- **Aims:** What are the patterns of intergenerational faithfulness? In other words, what are the distinctives of intergenerational life? We need to be able to talk clearly about this.
- **Analytics:** “We measure what we treasure.”
- What do the prevailing paradigms in our denominations assume are reasons for intervention, criteria for who we identify as the “winners” and “losers,” or what we celebrate?
- In recent decades, our churches have known what metrics matter.
- Reggie McNeal—We need to change the “ministry scorecard.” We even need to change the pastoral performance scorecard. A change in paradigm necessitates this. We should be able to speak about this with courage and clarity.
- **PARTNERS and PROMOTERS: *Allies and Advocates***
 - **Finally, who are the partners and promoters who will join us in this work? In other words, who will be our colleagues and co-conspirators?**
 - Andy Crouch: Jesus had the 3, the 12 and the 120; if we are going to change culture, we certainly can’t do this alone.
 - **Allies:** Who else is on this team? Perhaps those who are living it, people who are curious, investigating, experiencing a stirring in their hearts.
 - We need to be like good community organizers and continue enlarging the circle of those who are connected to this change.
 - **Advocates:** This is a special brand of allies—those with credibility, clout, and relational capital that they can expend strategically. They can validate—“this isn’t crazy or heresy;” they also can open doors of opportunity—“he or she should be at the table;” they can provide speaking opportunities; they are shaping the agenda, advancing the conversation, establishing the learning priorities of our denominations.

We must think in a 40-year time frame. The change we’re setting out to make is “generational change.” We must exercise the virtue of patient endurance. As Eugene Peterson once wrote, if we’re going to learn holiness in the stuff of history, we need to develop a sense of “deep time” and think in generations.