

American Lifestyles and Benchmark Ministry Areas

Kenneth E. Crow

Introduction

Churches are located in particular social as well as geographical settings. The geographical location might be a Minneapolis suburb and the social location a community of empty nesters of Scandinavian descent. The physical location might be a Denver neighborhood and the cultural location a community of young families who are recent immigrants. Or, the geographical location might be a San Diego suburb and the social location a community of young urban professional families. The church has wonderful opportunities for ministry in each of these settings. However, the nature of the ministry opportunities may be influenced both by the physical and the social nature of the setting.

When the church is located in southern Africa among Zulu people, we understand the importance of culture. We expect missionaries to study and adapt to the culture as they obey God's call there. In fact, we would question a missionary who failed to learn the language and other aspects of the culture in order to faithfully communicate the gospel. Faithful service by missionaries even where there is little or no response is praiseworthy. However, we might and probably should question a missionary who experienced little or no response because they refused to learn and appreciate the language and culture of the people to which they were called. If failure to bring people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ is the result of their indecision or rejection of the gospel, that is one thing. But, if the failure is a result of a missionary demanding that they must become American in order to become Christian, then that is a real problem.

The importance of the social location of the church is somewhat more difficult to understand when the culture is more similar to our own. If the people look like us, dress about like we do, speak more or less the same language as ours, and work at similar jobs, we may see little need to learn and appreciate the differences between their social realities and ours. Since our perceptions of culture and ministry are generally sub-conscious and unexamined, we may not recognize significant barriers to ministry. Some of us would criticize a missionary if his ethnocentrism was an obstacle to faithful communication of the gospel. But, we find it difficult to understand that attempting to impose middle class methods and styles on working class churches also presents obstacles to the gospel.

There is, of course, the important issue of whether and how much the church should adapt to any culture. Christians are citizens of the kingdom of God and therefore always foreigners in any earthly culture. Hauerwas and Willimon have argued well that the church must be faithful to its own nature regardless of the host culture. While the church is not isolated from the local culture, it must never compromise the faith by adapting to culture. Indeed, believers might be encouraged to think of their churches as colonies of Christians located in a hostile culture. (Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989)

The Christian culture is always at odds with its host culture in very significant ways. There are some things about ministry that must not be adapted to any culture – ever. The cross was a stumbling block in the Apostle Paul's New Testament times and it still is. Some things are not negotiable.

However, even when we consider the church to be a colony of believers in a hostile culture, we must recognize that the colony is located in a particular culture. The culture, however hostile it may be for believers, influences such things as the language we use, the music that lifts us to God, our rituals, and the way we organize ourselves. Indeed, many aspects of the church and ministry that we accept without question grew out of our home culture rather than out of the Bible or the first century Christian culture. If there is a Biblical form or style that should be reclaimed, we must, of course, faithfully seek to do that. On other hand, many of the practices comfortable within our background and social group might be adjusted without any compromise of the essentials of our faith in order to more faithfully serve other social groups.

The Apostle Paul did not compromise the faith by conforming to the cultures in which he served. However, he did adapt to the different social settings for the sake of the gospel. He wrote, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." (1 Corinthians 9:19-22)

Indeed, when Jesus became flesh and lived among us, it was in a particular social and cultural setting. It might have been easier to understand if God incarnate had rejected all existing cultures and somehow created a dramatically new and different culture. But, he didn't. His life in a Jewish family was unique and special, and yet seems to have been amazingly normal. His kingdom was not of this world, but in many ways he seems to have adapted his life and ministry to the culture into which he came.

However, if we adjust ministry to fit their social group, we raise questions of whether and how much ministry adjustment is appropriate. Tex Sample has some helpful answers to these questions. (1) The gospel always begins with people where they are. It does not stop there, with anyone. (2) The Apostle Paul said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). (3) "The task of the church is to search out the presence and the work of the Spirit of Christ in the midst of the [culture]... . One can be confident that Christ is already there." "The challenge ... [is] to discover where the Spirit of Christ is at work; that is, find where the liberating and saving currents are and join in" (*U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990: 42-43).

Lifestyle Groups in the United States

The cultural mosaic of the United States is complex. This complexity discourages careful consideration of our wonderful diversity. There are so many variations in social settings and groups that it is probably impossible to know and appreciate all of them. Therefore, we are inclined to seek some manageable model to help us think about the effects of diversity on ministry.

One popular model used to make sense of the American culture is based on age cohorts. On some level we understand that reality is too complex to be summarized in a few generational categories. However, many church leaders have adjusted ministry to fit popular conceptions of the nature of Builder, Boomer, and Buster (Xer) cohorts. Generation X, as an age group, obviously includes a great deal of diversity of socioeconomic status, ethnic identification, and geographical location. A prayerful strategy for ministry to this age group would surely require a thorough understanding of the particular Xers who might be served by a congregation. Still, the broad generalizations about the differences between Xers and Boomers have helped many of us think about the relationship between culture and ministry.

Other models might be used. Using census and other data, Claritus corporation developed a model with distinct American clusters. Their model based on the 1980 census had 40 clusters and 62 based on the 1990 census. The large number of clusters is probably a more realistic representation of American cultural diversity than three or four generational groups. However, it may be too complex, at least as a beginning point for thinking about differences in social location and their implications for ministry.

In his book, *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.), Tex Sample used a more manageable model. It helps us think about significant differences in the American society. It is inadequate as a description of our rich diversity. However it may be adequate as a starting place for considering some ministry implications of the particular social groups served by a pastor and congregation. Sample draws on the work of Arnold Mitchell (*The Nine American Lifestyles: Who We Are and Where We Are Going*, New York: Warner Books, 1983). He says the 180 million adults in the United States are distributed in three distinct groups: (1) Cultural Left, (2) Cultural Right, and (3) Cultural Middle.

The Cultural Left includes about 33 million of the 180 million American adults. People in the cultural left tend to be inner directed in contrast to the outer direction of older generations of Americans. They are generally not motivated by traditional 'oughts' and 'shoulds'. They are not likely to accept any norm of conformity to jobs from which they are alienated, to spouses they do not love, to arbitrary community standards, or to churches which are not compelling in their belief and action. They have not committed themselves to the obligations of community, business, family, country, or faith. This is probably the group on the other side of the "culture war". These people hold a self-fulfillment ethic (Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, 1981). People in this group are often children of affluent families. They tend to be well educated and to have incomes higher than the national average. They have a deep and abiding commitment to personal freedom. They give, and expect, tolerance. "Doing one's own thing" is important to them.

Sample labels one of the subgroups on the cultural left the "I am mes". It seems likely that this is the group that most inspired the term "Generation X". No doubt there are some near universal characteristics of American birth cohorts. Some life experiences are shared across all socioeconomic groups. However, Marc Spiegler, writing in *American Demographics*, noted that when Gen X label began to be applied, "the president of the well-respected market research firm where I worked asked me to look into the phenomenon, using our extensive attitudinal database. I dutifully ran the numbers, and came to a fairly clear conclusion: The only cohort significantly different from its predecessors were white and well-educated. In other words, the children of Time editors and their buddies" (*American Demographics*, December 1996: 27).

The Cultural Right includes about 77 million of the 180 million American adults. According to Sample, people in the cultural right are committed to traditional values in the areas of family, community, faith, and country. They tend to have low educational levels.

The largest sub-group in the cultural right are what Sample calls the "Respectables". There are about sixty million adults in this group. They are lower middle class, blue collar, and upper lower class. Respectability is the way these people demonstrate the success of their families and their lives. They are very family oriented. These people tend to hold a self-denial ethic. It seems likely that many, perhaps most, Nazarene congregations minister to people on the cultural right. Our approaches to ministry are probably most suited to the preferences of this group.

A second group on the cultural right is given the label "Hard Living" by Sample. People in this group are tough, may be heavy drinking, have considerable marital instability, are oriented to the present, and prize independence and self-reliance. They tend to be angry, distrustful, rebellious, anxious people who often feel left out of things. Their jobs are unsatisfying and often unskilled or semiskilled. They tend to have large families. It seems likely that, for example, a congregation serving primarily "Respectables" would approach the discipleship benchmark area differently than would a congregation serving primarily "Hard Livers".

The Cultural Middle includes about seventy million adults. People in this group emphasize career in contrast to the self-fulfillment emphasis of the cultural left and the traditional local norms and values of the cultural right. Cultural middle people are the most successful, or most driven by striving for success, of any group. They desire high social status and seek it through their careers. They tend to be future oriented, delaying gratification to achieve career goals. Women in this group are inclined to set aside their own aspirations in favor of their husbands' careers. People in this group are the most satisfied with their work, standard of living, and future. However, problems with their careers create considerable stress. Individualism is very important in this group. They emphasize the value of education.

Conclusion

The church has the challenge of ministering in a variety of geographical and social settings. Regardless of setting, every congregation must faithfully provide ministry. The Benchmark Project identified eleven areas that are particularly important for churches like the ones served by the Nazarene pastors in these focus groups.

The eleven benchmark areas identified by these pastors seemed to include some areas that were unique to their particular social location. However, the following eight areas seem vital for congregations in any social setting:

- Effectual, Fervent Prayer
- Healthy Pastoral Leadership
- Kingdom Community Relationships
- Inspiring Worship Events
- Discipleship – Committed, Widespread Stewardship & Mobilized Lay Leadership
- Need Oriented Ministry
- Christlike, Missional Mindset
- Effective Preaching

Our goal is to consider these eight benchmark areas from the viewpoint of different social groups. We will use Tex Sample's model to think about differences in application of these ministry areas. For example, all authentically Christian, healthy congregations no doubt have an effectual, fervent prayer ministry. However, specific nature of that prayer ministry may be different in structure and approach. For example, the benchmarks committee observed that in larger, suburban congregations one prayer ministry benchmark strength may be a specified means for communicating answers to prayer. In smaller churches on the cultural right the same benchmark area may be informal communication of prayer answers. Effectual, fervent prayer will be essential regardless of the social situation. However, healthy prayer ministry will vary depending on the nature of the church and the people to whom the church is called.

Kenneth E. Crow
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