Essentials for Our Millennium (1)

(by Carl McMurray)

**In trying to figure out the most tactful way to approach people with the gospel it helps if we understand the culture.** For example, although it is different now, when we first went to Russia in the early ‘90s, the handing out of tracts was discouraged because that was the method used by Communists to hand out propaganda. It was quite a culture difference from what we were used to. The same thing is true in reaching into our own communities. We need to understand our own culture. Unfortunately, unless we put forth some effort, most of us don’t. We think we do, but actually we tend to live in our own “comfort zone.” We gravitate toward “our” music, talk “our” language (sometimes “church” language), & we tend to think that the way we do things is the best way, although “our” way may be a couple of decades old. Every once in a while we need to examine the culture we live in, *rather than* dwelling on the one we grew up in. I would like to draw your attention to entering the new millennium with the gospel, while answering the question, ***“what kind of world do we live in today?”***

First of all, we live in a “niche” world. Everyone is looking for and targeting a niche, a segment of the population or special group of people. Soft drink commercials are aimed at age groups. Some supermarkets in large cities have advertised “singles night.” Music in the store and specials on single-serving frozen dinners highlight the event. Car commercials, television programming, and insurance policies are all aimed at specific target groups. People are losing their excitement about large shopping malls while small boutique shops with personal service are increasing. You can go to a shop that manicures, a store for balloons, a coffee shop, or a kitchen utensil store. These are individual entrepreneurs who have isolated a need and addressed it with quality and service.

Such an approach is not unbiblical. Some have voiced the opinion that the gospel ought always to be presented in generic fashion for all ages at all times in all situations. That makes it easy on them when people don’t respond. *“It’s the listener’s fault,”* they say, *“I preached the truth!”* Such reasoning is simplistic, unreasonable. Paul said he became ***“all things to all men that he might by all means win some.”*** When he spoke to Jews in the synagogues he quoted scriptures & appealed to Jesus as the Messiah. When he was in Athens speaking to Gentiles he quoted contemporary literature & appealed to logic, justice, & evidence of Jesus as the one living God. He targeted his audience. He, by the Holy Spirit, spoke directly to the people who were listening. If we are going to learn from that Scriptural method, what group(s) should *we* target? Where is our niche? The truth is that Jesus has something for everyone, so where is the need today?

In our culture the family is definitely under fire. Homes are struggling, marriages are dissolving, kids are floundering. Academia, homosexuals, social activists and other special interest groups have just about removed any reinforcement from spiritual training and appropriate discipline. Perhaps publicly announced and well-prepared studies on parenting, teens, family relationships, or marriage building might not be out of line. These are needs which the gospel addresses. There are probably other options that could be considered.

A multitude of problems in the home can be addressed by teaching people to trust Jesus and His directions on how to govern ourselves. This can be done during real biblical counseling sessions. Counseling is an area that churches of Christ in many areas have steered clear of, but true biblical counseling is a cure for a bushel of sinful ills and can be an advertised “niche” to reach into a community. Because of our culture, more congregations are gathering in more divorced, widowed, unmarried, and otherwise single people. As this group grows, their special needs can and should be addressed. Not in the fashion of a “date night” as many denominations have done, but in giving real hope and direction from God’s word.

As our population ages, the “senior” group of healthy, active retirees grows. How are we encouraging them to serve and be active for the Lord? Just because one retires from his chosen career does not mean that one retires from the Lord’s service. Roles may change so that we don’t do what we did when we were thirty, but many in this group still have talents and time to use for the Master.

Special classes, specific studies, clearly identified work efforts, & great appreciation are all part of identifying and targeting various segments of our community for contact with the gospel. Instead of requiring our community to be like us, isn’t it time that we stopped long enough to see what they are really like, to speak to their concerns, and address the problems they are facing on a daily basis. We live in a “niche” world. It is time to stop being so generic that we look like a spiritual Wal-Mart trying to reach everyone with everything & not really doing a good job of it. We need to start identifying goals, patterns, and targets to put the gospel in contact with those who are interested.

Essentials for Our Millennium (2)

(by Carl McMurray)

In part one of this series we began examining the culture we live in today so that we might better understand how to reach into it and touch the “seekers” near to us as we go into the new millennium faced with education, technology, and attitudes in society that our nation has never had to face in its history. Part one dealt with the fact that we live in a “niche” world that demands focus and targeting to get people’s attention. In this installment, please consider that we also live in a **“computerized”** world.

We live in an age where almost every part of our life is being related to computers somehow. The days of complaining about them are really past. One might as well complain about those “noisy, horseless carriages” that spook the horses, or that “scratchy phonograph” that really serves no purpose anyway. Even the folks that try to complain are wearing computerized watches, driving computerized cars, complaining to each other over digital phone lines, and listening to each other with computer manufactured hearing aids.

As a spiritual army with a mission of the utmost importance, it behooves us to master this medium and turn it over to our Lord for service. A few years ago churches of Christ (members and congregations) had the largest representation on the world-wide web of any religious group. I’ve no idea what those numbers might be presently, as different faiths and beliefs have flooded the internet, but that was a great lesson in what CAN be done if we’re willing to go to work. The amount and quality of material that continues to be available on the web is staggering, but is this dissemination of material where we must stop?

60% of homes have computers and 35% have email. Those were the figures being quoted in 1999! To understand that over one-third of American homes are using email is to receive definite encouragement to become versed and practiced in reaching out this way. Some of the things that are being done with computers and the Internet to assist in the work of outreach would be…

Email Bible studies and online correspondence courses, web-sites (note: surveys show that a web-site will only be visited 3 times maximum if it is not updated and changed), asking for visitor’s email addresses on visitor’s cards (to send thankyou notes and distribute announcements), daily messages, and listing folks who “hit” our web page and sending notes of thanks. Of course these are in addition to the specific things that can be done within a web page with giving directions, providing information, advertising upcoming meetings, and storing material for reading and study.

Here at Anderson we are experimenting with a number of things from the list above, but I suspect that more uses for this communication tool are going to become available. It’s past time to get used to it and begin thinking how best to use it. For those especially experienced in this area, that responsibility is falling your way. It’s where we live. What will we do with the “talents” our Lord has put into our hands?