Is There More to Contemporary Church?

Jonathan Stanfield 12 August 2015



Is there more to today's contemporary church than lights, cameras, electric guitars, skinny jeans, tattoos, cool... and trendy brands of coffee?

The change of pace in Western churches over the last generation has been breathtaking. In many towns and cities, communities that once gathered in buildings which often felt more like museums to a faith of a bygone era, have now in many instances either been renewed or replaced by vibrant congregations in a context that feels much more relevant in our media-savvy 21st Century culture.

> Are we at times simply confusing new wineskins with new wine, which is actually what we desperately need?

But amidst many great examples of new churches that are significantly advancing the Kingdom in their contexts, I still find myself at times wondering if anything of substance really has changed in other instances, including my own. Sure, there's "lights, cameras, electric guitars, skinny jeans, tattoos, cool ... and trendy brands of coffee", but scratch the surface for those who have embraced such external change and is there really any difference to the stained glass

windows, organ, robes, hymnals, tradition… and tea served in blue cups and saucers during a time of “fellowship” (which many have felt necessary to abandon in order to be authentic Christians – sorry, Christ followers on a journey)?

Are we at times simply confusing new wineskins with new wine, which is actually what we desperately need? Let’s be honest, the two cultures described above are all about us, not Jesus. There’s nothing better or worse in either. God has no preference when it comes to styles of music or types of coffee, and if the New Testament is indeed our blueprint, then none of the above are actually timeless when building healthy, life-giving churches.

True worshippers are those who worship in Spirit and in Truth. Those two things are indeed timeless.

5 Contemporary Church Changes that Aren’t Superficial Cultural Adaptations

As I reflect, here are 5 of my top indicators that contemporary changes are more than a superficial cultural adaptation.

1. **Weekend gatherings are the overflow of life shared together** as the local church in community throughout the week, not a once a week flagship event to attend as part of a crowd.
2. Increasing numbers of the **saints no longer simply spectate, but actively participate** in all gatherings, rather than the usual few (professionals) with more formal roles, such as leading worship (often on a stage) around whom the entire room’s focus has been built, in most instances.
3. **Programmes support the Holy Spirit** at work, as the saints ‘devote themselves’ (Acts 2) to the things of God from within rather than structures seeking to create an external momentum and whose existence is an end in itself.
4. **The ‘Presence’ is not dumbed down or reduced** to a 4-5 song contemporary playlist, within the accuracy of a Swiss watch time frame, before the big preach, or for special times outside of public gatherings, for fear that the very people who desperately need to encounter the Holy Spirit might be spooked by the supernatural.
5. The contemporary cultural shift is **enabling the unchurched at all levels of society to encounter Jesus** through the lives of the saints 7 days a week, rather than acting as a hoover among the dissatisfied churched in neighbouring congregations who know what don’t like about their current churches but aren’t at all sure what they do want to wholeheartedly give themselves to, but are prepared to become part of the crowd at the contemporary

church on a Sunday.

P.S. As someone who leads a church that some might say has “lights, cameras, electric guitars, skinny jeans, tattoos, cool…” but sadly without any particularly trendy brand of coffee at present (although we do have a rather overactive smoke machine for lighting purposes (currently under review)), it would be interesting to read your comments or observations about how you would determine from a New Testament perspective that the church isn’t just successful at being contemporary but, more importantly, fulfilling Christ’s call in its generation.

‘…and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power’ (1 Corinthians 2:4, ESV)

‘And my speech and my message were not captured in a breathtaking, punchy media presentation by former Pixar staff with a soundtrack by a chart-topping Christian band to rival any secular musicians, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”. (with a lot of my emphasis added ;))