

Why the PC(USA) Is Like My Local Coffee Shop

Ethan Powell

Have you ever noticed how travel really promotes thinking? And not just simple thinking, mind you. Delays, layovers, and cheap airport food can often inspire deep philosophical thoughts.

I was having one of these deep thoughts on a recent trip to a General Assembly Council meeting when my Cleveland to Louisville flight was delayed.

It seems that the church is facing a grave crisis in membership. I was turning that thought over in my mind as I approached a coffee shop that shall remain nameless. I walked in and ordered up my usual global-domination fueling venti mocha. That's when it struck me. The membership issue in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is just like the people that frequent such coffee shops. I will endeavor to explain.

The thing about it is that plenty of young people are still going to PC(USA) churches across the nation. The primary difference between now and twenty years ago is that young people just aren't joining the churches. They come to church, get what they need or want, and then leave.

That's not to say that it's all about taking from the church. Young people are still giving back in many ways. College students are engaging in discussions, adult education, helping out with mission trips, and in some cases, even taking local church jobs for the school year. Other young people are also engaging in the work and spiritual life of the church. They may only come to a few events, or maybe only one. But they are coming.

The "problem" of membership, as I see it, really isn't a problem. It's a matter of perspective. As far as I can tell, our mindset as a church is still basically functioning as though it is still the year 1955. We still expect people to join in order to enjoy. The PC(USA) wants its churchgoers to sign their names on the pew pad, write their personal information in the church rolls, and get the family photo taken for the pictorial directory.

The basic fact is that society as a whole, and young people in particular, just doesn't work like that anymore. Increasingly, we are becoming a highly mobile, non-geographic collection of people. We are no longer tied to one spot. The Internet has made it possible to live in Maryland and work in Detroit. The business environment has changed from the weekday "9 to 5" to 24 hours/7 days a week/365 days a year. Get anything you want, anywhere you want, anytime you want, exactly how you want it.

It seems to me that the paradigm shift really lies with the individualism of our society. The church is still working with a "one size fits all" mentality, while young churchgoers are aligned with an "all about me and my way" attitude. The church wants joiners, but young churchgoers want an environment that allows them the ability to choose the path they make or take within the church.

The church's financial system is still built around constant membership, with as little fluctuation as possible. This helps to create a regular flow of monies for programs that the church wants to see move forward. This is not bad if seen from the perspective that consistency is usually a good thing where finances are concerned. In fact, there are very few ways to run a financial system otherwise.

However, the "new individualists" are facing a sluggish economy, with a debt load greater than ever before. This makes it hard to section off a portion of the money that's coming in and give it to the church. It's a tough reality, but a reality nonetheless. On the flip side of that coin however, when the "new individualists" do get some money that they can spend, it's not unusual to see them give generously, especially when they see causes that are important to them. For example, one might think of the influx of money for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance over the last year.

So how does all of this fit into my coffee shop analogy, you might ask?

Well, our church is held together by several essential tenets that should make our worship, theology, and basic understandings very similar at all locations, whether it's the local church on your own block or the one located in East Omaha, Nebraska (which is a nice one, I hear). In a similar way, the coffee shop is also held together by the same basic understanding of products and services.

As to my own "new individualism," well, the church offers that, too. I like my "debts" and "debtors" in the Lord's Prayer, but some other folks like "trespass" and "those who trespass against us." They both carry the same basic understanding, but they have different wording. It's the same deal at the coffee shop. I like my mocha with extra whip, but someone else may like it with no whip at all. It's still the same basic idea, but with a little personal adjustment. The PC(USA) is part of the Reformed tradition, and yet it allows for a good amount of individual understanding of what Jesus and God are up to and how it affects us.

"New individualists" are giving the church what it needs as well. Maybe not in the way the church would like, with constant doses like a regular customer, but when they can, as much as they can. It's basically like a customer who comes in and only orders a regular coffee most days, but on occasion they order the five-buck venti mocha. Whether they spend a lot of cash and order up, or just a few greenbacks here and there, you're still getting something.

The real drive behind my thoughts is not to actually propose a solution to the situation at hand. I merely seek to help my fellow church members understand the greater movements of younger people around the church. My analogy is far less than perfect. I hope you as readers will find the holes within and discuss among yourselves how best to proceed.

May God continue to guide and perfect our own little mochas as we decipher the greater good in the world.

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