

Igniting a Spiritual Blaze for All Our Generations

Mark Ramsey

The Ministry Collaborative, Charlottesville, Virginia

In June 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Russian writer and activist, was invited to give the commencement address at Harvard. He had been expelled from the Soviet Union four years earlier, after long imprisonment in its murderous gulag labor camps followed by internal exile. He was always vigorous in his outspoken dissent to the injustices he experienced in the communist system. Moving to the West, however, did not temper Solzhenitsyn's critical eye and urgent attention to what the world most needed. In that Harvard speech, he said,

If the world has not approached its end, it has reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where our physical nature will not be cursed as in the Middle Ages, but even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern Era.¹

Solzhenitsyn's words that day immediately drew an energetic and mixed reaction. Older generations whose adulthood was defined by the Cold War were deeply disappointed that he had not chosen to blast the Soviet Union. (This was still 11 years before the fall of the Berlin Wall.) Some younger people, however, who were already rebelling against the "Me Generation" of the 1970's, found the speech compelling. *The West is spiritually sick*, Solzhenitsyn was saying to them. *Our excesses and our materialism are doing us in*. And then, as rapidly as the speech gained our culture's attention, it was just as quickly forgotten by most.

In the early 2000's, I had lunch with a retired pastor who had been a distinguished leader of three thriving churches in his ministry career. As these conversations often go, we found ourselves comparing notes on the challenges and complexities of our two different generations of service to the church. His accounts of leading majority-white congregations through the civil rights movement in the 1960's and 1970's in the southern United States were inspiring and revelatory. Keeping those congregations together in those times offered a glimpse into his awareness of the challenges of pastoral ministry to individuals in a moment where there was high need for social justice action and preaching. I remember asking him "How did you know if you were getting through? Who did you listen to in the congregation to achieve the balance (of pastoral and prophetic) that you were striving for?" Eventually, our conversation turned to church communication in general. As I mentioned the various communication channels pastors today must be attentive to (phone, text, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, social media in all its components), he put up his hands in mock surrender, saying "I'd never have made it through our steep climb if all that was in play."

Every era of ministry is challenging. Decidedly, this is not a competition for who had it hardest. But, as every pastor today could testify, my question to the retired pastor, "How do you know if you were getting through?" has never been more complex.

Preaching among multiple generations offers a myriad of obstacles and challenges. What is the opportunity for reaching multiple generations today?

There are realities—and good surprises—that we should consider as we emerge from our experiences of the pandemic. We need to take care that churches and preachers are not so driven by generational parsing that we forget the central message entrusted to us to convey. This is an urgent time. Emerging from the pandemic, every generation is voicing need for care, community, connection, depth, and focus on equity. What we learn from generational needs and trends should be in service of our larger mission, but we should not let chasing these trends become our mission. Let's begin with one of the trends that has accelerated most in these pandemic months.

As many church observers have said, “The digital genie is totally out of the bottle.”² A recent survey from Barna³ reveals one notable generational divide. When asked how they wanted to experience church—especially worship—71% of Boomers say they want an in-person experience, while only 41% of Gen-Z prefer primary physical gatherings. In that 30% gap, there is a generational and communication challenge and a potential homiletical train wreck. One thing we have learned in the past two years as more congregations have—given their particular resources—offered online worship, is that just as early TV shows discovered they had to do more than film a radio show or stage play, so too online worship must be more than a camera pointed at sanctuary worship. Preaching in person, where you can see the faces (well, often the masked faces, but still) and hear the quiet or restlessness of the room, is very different from communicating through a camera with no real-time feedback.

We also need to be very careful not to stereotype generational preferences for communication methods or make (inaccurate) guesses about what will feed someone's soul based on their birth year. One colleague who leads a 900-member mainline protestant church reports that providing an online experience for worship in her congregation proved to be almost the opposite experience from what she thought it would be. She said,

Intimacy is the unexpected gift of online preaching. When I am preaching to just my phone, there is nothing between me and those listening to me. There is no place to hide. It has generated an amazing response among our members of all ages. The youngest in our congregation know us so much better because we have literally been in their homes (via streaming) and, in the days when we weren't in the church for recording, they have been in—or at least seen—our living rooms or kitchens. And for the oldest members, they can see us up close. They can hear us well. It is personal, intimate communication that has made me a more effective preacher.

If you give people choice, they will take it. This doesn't mean that a preacher needs to offer a smorgasbord of options in every sermon or worship service. However, it's good to remember that some people are fed more through the Psalms, others through Gospel accounts, and still others through the prophets or epistles. Keeping the offerings—of text, sermon, and worship—diverse and grounded will help a congregation understand the challenge and nurture of a community that is both diverse and grounded. “One size doesn't fit all” is not an opponent of community; it is a booster rocket.

Understand the difference between a communication vehicle and communication content. Often, we confuse these. As Seth Godin has written,

Random House isn't in the bookstore business; they're in the business of publishing ideas that matter. Audi isn't in the gasoline business. They sell personal transportation. When the world changes, it's tempting to fight hard to maintain the status quo that feels safe. And so, utility companies lobby to ease emission standards, when they would be just fine if the standards were tightened. And so, tech companies fight against new formats and new forms of exchange instead of leading with them. And of course, powerful cultural forces fight to preserve their hierarchies instead of figuring out how to thrive with new ones. What we want and how we believe we get it are often two different things.⁴

I know of no one in church that would say getting screens in the sanctuary—or keeping them out—is the reason a church exists. The “why” of a faith community is not about which version of the Bible, which type of prayers, how communion is served, or what style of music we use. The “why” of any faith community can never be assumed and must always be renewed for every generation.

We can't assume we know what will connect with people seeking spiritual nurture without listening to them. Every preacher is well-acquainted with those in the congregation who provide helpful (or sometimes less than helpful) feedback on sermons. But what about those who are not yet present? What about those who only inhabit the sanctuary for the shortest possible time—arriving after the first hymn, sitting on the side near the back, and leaving before the service is over? Their doubts, their wounds, their institutional suspicions are such that they dare not get any closer. That is challenge enough for them. And then what does a preacher really know about the needs of folks who are using online worship as an even safer venue from which to assess a church's ministry, worship, and preaching? One of the greatest challenges of ministry is to plan for, give attention and resources to, or preach to a constituency not yet present—or, if present, whose deepest needs are not yet known to us. The following set of questions might help pastors and churches (and especially church boards) address this difficulty:

- Who is your next participant? (Describe her outlook, her hopes, dreams and needs.)
- What is the story she told herself before she met you (about the world, her perceptions) ?
- How do you encounter her in a way that she trusts what you have to offer?
- What change are you trying to make in her life or her story?⁵

Preachers would do well to spend some time exploring these questions and trying to engage in conversations with people who are now dwelling on the real or virtual fringes of their faith community.

To be relevant to all generations, we should not chase culture, but we do need to become savvy cultural interpreters. Culture “eats strategy for breakfast,” as legendary

management consultant Peter Drucker was fond of saying—and culture is also busy gobbling up large portions of what churches used to do. Consider “Civic Saturday” as just one vivid example of culture taking “church things” and making them its own. Civic Saturday is a terrific citizen-focused movement that uses music, poetry, reflection, and discussion in a weekend gathering. Its website says, “Civic Saturday gathers friends and strangers together to nurture a spirit of shared purpose. At each gathering, we connect around the values and practices of being an active citizen, reckon with and reflect on our nation’s creed, and build relationships that create new civic traditions that are joyful and communal.” Sound familiar?

Meanwhile, as culture moves in on church, churches are trying to cozy up to culture, figuratively and literally. One congregation recently promoted a post-Christmas worship of “Jammie church” and invited us “to get cozy and worship in your PJ’s.” I was reminded of the comment from Flannery O’Connor: “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.”⁶

The Apostle Paul might better guide our approach to culture. After his conversion, Paul went throughout the largely Jewish world, preaching and teaching in synagogues. In Acts 17, Paul arrived in Athens, a city with a vastly different culture than Jerusalem and environs. He still went to the synagogue first, as was his custom, but then to the marketplace. In that setting, he did not decry the idols that were arrayed there, but rather used an idol to “an unknown god” to preach the same message—Christ crucified and risen—in context. As preachers in this cultural moment, we need all the support and modeling we can get to be relevant to those seeking deeper meaning without chasing the very culture the gospel seeks to transform. My earliest mentor in preaching said to me often, “Never condescend to the congregation to which you are preaching. Their needs may be obscured or even buried by parts of their life, but every person—whether they can name it or not—is hungry for an unexpected word from an unexpected angle which will save their life.”⁷

Even with savvy cultural interpretation, we dare not underestimate the institutional suspicion that is affecting every generation of our culture. Most of us who inhabit churches (and pulpits) have been marinating in institutional suspicion for decades, so much so that we are often not even aware of how much it has seeped into our worldview. Not to channel a Billy Joel song, but think of the scope of events in American culture and politics that have built our institutional suspicion: the Bay of Pigs, JFK’s assassination (and immediate conspiracy theories), LBJ and Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers, Kent State, Nixon and Watergate, horrific experiences dealt to African-Americans and other peoples through revelations like the Tuskegee experiments, red-lining, all-White juries in the South turning a blind eye to violence, systemic injustice, Iran-Contra, 9/11 (and immediate conspiracy theories), as well as corruption and greed among churches and TV evangelists, and the painful revelations of the abuse of minors by priests and church workers. Think about how all these experiences have formed the imagination of every generation of women and men who participate in churches—conspiracy theories, disappointment in institutions that have failed to tell the truth or seek the welfare of the people, and the particular failure of churches to be a reliable and trustworthy source of spiritual growth and values—all these have led to great skepticism from the pew and the public that what we say as preachers is reliable.

This skepticism has been joined with a specific historic, cultural development. Recently, Dwight Zscheile of Luther Seminary published an article, “From the Age of Association to Authenticity,”⁸ that clearly and compellingly charts the shift away from association to personal journey as the vehicle for meaning in life. “The vast majority of congregations in America were birthed in and designed for the Age of Association,” he writes. “They are sustained by voluntary membership, giving, and participation, all of which make less and less sense in the Age of Authenticity, especially to emerging generations... People feel less and less of a need to affiliate with an organization to find meaning, community, and purpose; that is understood instead as a highly personalized journey.”⁹

The question of how, in our ministry and in our preaching, to join travelers on this highly personalized journey—and to do so in a way that supports them, offers them the gospel, and reorients them to authentic community—is a high challenge of this moment. We live in a world that centers on and prizes the individual.¹⁰ The Bible by contrast assumes community. Think about that carefully for a moment. So often we read a scripture text or hear a prayer, and our reaction is to see how it fits our personal situation. This kind of personal devotional orientation is natural; it comes from a lifetime of being oriented to the individual. The Bible is not acquainted with that kind of world. The Bible assumes that the great arc of God’s intention, love, and grace was given, and acted out, in the community of God’s people. Jesus was not speaking to a series of individuals in the Sermon on the Mount; he spoke to the multitude. Jesus addressed several individuals during his ministry, but almost always in the context of the community. And often, Jesus’ instructions to “go and do” involved engaging the larger community.

Every generation has a need to feel that they belong. Preaching is one of the pathways to that belonging. To do so in this spiritually hungry, institutionally suspicious, and radically individualized culture means that our preaching must give acknowledgement to the skepticism that is “in the room.” “Because the church says so...or the pastor said so,” or even “Jesus told us so” lacks traction in most of today’s multi-generational congregations. Rare is the listener who will break in mid-sermon and yell out “You need to prove that’s true, preacher!” Still, it is of growing importance that the preacher herself represent the skeptic within the sermon. In a sermon on grace, what are the obstacles to experiencing that grace in our lives? In a sermon on justice, scripture has a lot to answer for in the days of Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, George Floyd, David McAtee, Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor, and countless others. In a sermon on love, the opponents of love on this earth need to be addressed directly. If it were easy to live in peace, we would all live in peace. What prevents that in our world? If it were easy to be hopeful, we would all be hopeful. What blocks our path to hope?

Preachers who have been fortunate to have lived their whole lives within the nurture of the church have a special challenge here. What is it like not to trust the gospel? What does it feel like to have lived a life that has never known a reliable institution, a faithful promise, or a relationship of deep and abiding love? If recent surveys on loneliness, trust, and commitment are any guide, this describes many potential listeners to our sermons.

The question I discussed with that retired pastor years ago still resonates: *How do we know that we are getting through with our gospel message?* All these challenges are pressing in on today’s preacher: rampant individualism, persistent institutional

suspicion, the digital genie totally out of the bottle. All lead to greater need to offer choices of communication and presentation, the wisdom to know the tools we use from the content we proclaim, and ways to address and listen carefully to a constituency not yet present. In each congregation, the preacher may find some of these trends more prominent than others and surely will see these traits represented in some generations more than others. However, far more effectively than mining the “differences by generation” that populate our culture, minding these pressing concerns that exist across generations will nurture a preacher who can care and proclaim and interpret, and most of all, point to truth amid a culture that thinks all truth is negotiable.

At some point, all of us who preach need to understand generational differences so we can be more effective in our preaching and teaching. Studies detailing those differences are widely available and important. But here is what we can’t miss: the need of every person, in every generation, to understand the urgency of this moment for faith and the need to put aside the things that weigh down churches so we can run toward this world’s pain with the hope and power of the gospel.

There were an estimated 20,000 people who gathered at Harvard on June 8, 1978, to hear the commencement address from the renowned Soviet dissident—and there were at least five generations present. There were college graduates in the audience, to be sure, but also younger siblings, parents, grandparents, and faculty, who all heard the “measure of bitter truth,” as he described it, included in Solzhenitsyn’s words: “It will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision... (so that) our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern Era.” Every generation needed then to heed his warning, and more than four decades later, our generations need it all the more. The urgency is the same for every age: we need to be ignited by a “spiritual blaze” and lifted by a high vision of God’s promises, power, and intention for the world God so loves. That is the most essential task of the preacher in any generation, and never more so than right now in this urgent time of opportunity and challenge for the church.

Notes

1 Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Commencement Address at Harvard University, June 8, 1978, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/alexandersolzhenitsynharvard.htm>.

2 <https://careynieuwhof.com/3-statistics-that-show-how-quickly-radically-and-permanently-church-is-changing-in-2020/>, accessed on December 10, 2021.

3 <https://www.barna.com/digitalchurch-v3/>, accessed January 2, 2022.

4 <https://seths.blog/2020/07/defending-the-status-quo/>.

5 This has been adapted from a Seth Godin blog post from 2009 or 2010 (<https://seths.blog>).

6 Flannery O'Connor, Sally Fitzgerald, editor (*The Habit of Being*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988), 231.

7 Every time I think of the wisdom H. Louis Patrick (1921–2006) offered me for more than two decades, I am filled with gratitude.

8 <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/from-the-age-of-association-to-authenticity/>.

9 Dwight Zscheile, “From the Age of Association to Authenticity” August 2021, Faith + Lead.

10 One church website I saw recently includes in its welcome, “We exist to celebrate individualism...” That would be a surprise to most Biblical characters, theologians, and the martyrs of church history.