

Guest editorial: Watching the future emerge together

May 11, 2017

I am fascinated by the things that turn out to have retro appeal.

People warn you not to get rid of your old clothes—the classic case being bell-bottom jeans—“because they’re sure to come back in style again.”

The whole business model for the cable channel *Nick at Night* was based on assumptions about the retro appeal of old cartoons and sitcoms to a new generation of children. Technologies developed for Baby Boomers turn out to fascinate Gen Xers and Millennials.

In [*The Postmodern Parish*](#), I wrote about the first time I saw someone with a new Polaroid camera. Although I couldn’t have imagined it at the time, Polaroids are now experiencing a comeback. The cameras and film are being manufactured again, and young adults flock around this “old school” technology in the same way some younger music lovers now prefer vinyl over digital downloads.

Emerging image

I remember how exciting it was to watch the image emerge on that first Polaroid picture. As soon as the picture was taken, a completely blank piece of photographic paper shot out of the bottom of the camera. As you watched, the yellow part of the image appeared on the paper, then the red part. Finally, the blue portion emerged, and you could make out the whole image clearly.

We are in a “Polaroid” era in the life of the church. We all sense the Holy Spirit is revealing new ways for churches to be faithful in our rapidly

shifting American cultural landscape—showing us new “images” of what a post-Christendom congregation looks like.

Our problem is we can't yet see the Spirit's images clearly. We are like the blind man to whom Jesus gives sight in Mark 8. Jesus puts saliva on the man's eyes, lays hands on him, and asks, “Can you see anything?” He replies, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”

It takes an extra laying on of Jesus' hands—a double portion of the Spirit, if you will—before he is able to see clearly and make his way forward into the new world being revealed to him.

Occasional glimpses

Each of us catches occasional glimpses of that new thing God already is doing in the American church. We get hints and intimations from the Spirit about forms of church life that will be vitally faithful in the future. We experience bits of that new church in the lives of our congregations. But none of us can see the whole picture yet.

Here's the other part of our problem: We don't have the luxury of waiting until we can see clearly before we need to start trying things. What, then, can we do?

One of the most important things we can do is get with people who look expectantly for God's future and talk about what we're seeing. When we look together and talk with one another about what we see—the particular nudge of the Spirit we have felt, the intuition that seems especially right about the church's future—then we have a much better chance of seeing more clearly the image that is emerging for us all.

Importance of peers

This is why I believe so deeply in the importance of peer groups of every

kind—support groups, reading groups, prayer groups, first-call groups. There is no expert, no seminary professor, no guru, no—dare I say it?—consultant who has an easy answer to the question, “What kind of church should we be developing for the future?”

That discernment can be fruitfully carried out only by groups of colleagues who talk about what they are seeing and sensing under the guidance of the Spirit. It is especially important that any such group—no matter what its stated reason for gathering—spend time praying together—praying the Spirit will show them just a bit more of that emerging future, a little bit more of the blue, a dab of red.

If you’re not already part of such a group, then go out and form one of your own. Find some people who—like you—are eager to discover that future God already has in mind for the church and get together regularly to share your insights. As insights begin to bubble up from below from many such groups all around the country and in every denomination and tradition, then we may begin to see what God has been trying to show us all along.

Jim Kitchens is coordinator of the [Center for Healthy Churches-West](#).