

# Current Thoughts

*from Dwight's corner*

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It is an understatement to claim that the Church is in a challenging time. Challenging times frustrate and confound pastoral leaders. You are probably tired of hearing about the challenge of pastoral leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I really do sympathize with leadership fatigue. At the same time, please allow me to share with you some insights I gained in my reading of **The Postindustrial Promise** by Anthony Healy.

Healy shifts the focus from “post-modernism” to “post-industrialism.” His thesis is that in America, we have been in a post-industrial transformation for several decades. This is a move away from a manufacturing based economy. This transformation has disrupted American culture in profound ways. It has also impacted the Church. The irony is that the Church becomes even more important in this society (contrary to the arguments of secularism 40 years ago). “The central thesis of this book—that people are rerooting themselves religiously and socially in congregations after a disruptive economic transformation—is the reality that religion in the United States is more robust and congregations are more vital than popularly described.” (p. 102)

That does not mean that churches and their pastoral leaders can breathe a sigh of relief. Healy goes on to highlight four specific challenges: immigration and congregations, the age of aging, congregations and places, and postindustrial leadership.

**Immigration and Congregations.** Immigration and ethnic diversity are bringing unprecedented changes to American culture. No doubt, you have been apprised of the challenge/opportunity this poses for each congregation. America is truly becoming a mission field with an endless variety of languages, cultures, and ethnicities in even unexpected places. For the most part, congregations have been blind to those challenges/opportunities, or baffled about how to respond.

Beyond that, Healy offers an important perspective. The changes in ethnic/cultural diversity in America is not only a challenge/opportunity for churches, it is also impacting American Christianity! Nearly two-thirds of legal immigrants to America are **already Christian**. Often they bring a vitality of faith, a holistic understanding of piety/service and a profound sense of community that is often lacking in old line American churches. We need to be prepared to learn from them! We need to hear their witness. That may be the greater challenge for us.

**The Age of Aging.** Greater longevity and lower birthrates contribute to a nation with an age structure that is heavier on older people and lighter on young people. However, this aging phenomenon is not uniform across the country. There are places (typically urban and suburban) where there are higher proportions of young people. There are places (typically rural and small town) where there may be almost no school age children. In addition, the mobility which characterizes American culture today means that persons rarely go to school, get jobs,

raise families, and retire in the same place. The result of all this is that churches need to take a close look at their “service area” and structure their ministries accordingly—there are “life stage appropriate” ministries and programs. Churches must be prepared to attract persons at several points in their lives—as teens, as young marrieds with children, in middle age as empty nesters, and in later life during retirement.

This shift is particularly difficult for churches because we remember burgeoning children and youth programs from the 50’s and 60’s. I have even heard it said that a church without a youth program is a dead church (there may be places where that is true). What if your “service area” is dominated pre-retired persons? The 50+ crowd is the fastest growing unchurched segment in American culture.

More than that, the nature of ministry with a 60-year-old today is very different than it was 50 years ago. Generally, health is better, finances are better, and these are active, engaged persons. They want to do mission and ministry, not be the focus of care.

**Congregations and Places.** By and large, congregations are no longer linked to geography in the way they have been in the past. The idea of “neighborhood” is changing. Two forms of churches as related to place. One type is the more traditional understanding of the congregation with a geographically-defined parish. The other type is the “commuter” congregation. This is not tied to place. Persons may drive 45 minutes or even more to attend worship services—and they may pass a half-dozen other churches on the way to the church of their choice. This type of congregation is becoming more and more common.

The loss of “place” not only impacts the interactions of church members with one another, it impacts the way they view mission and ministry. Some churches “adopt” a place as their focus of ministry. This is the typical vision of community ministry. Healy calls these “Garden Plot” churches. Other churches find mission and ministry passion in causes that may take them far afield from the geography of the church. Healy calls these “Far Fields” churches.

**Postindustrial Leadership.** Whether we are aware of it or not, congregational organization and leadership styles have been deeply influenced by the management practices of a manufacturing society. Church leadership and organization needs to be critiqued from two directions. First, American business has changed the way it works, while churches still tend to operate like they did in 1955. Second, a church is not (and never has been) a business. While we can learn from the best of business practices, churches are more complex than any business because they are a complicated network of interrelationships which are connected to the Divine.

Pastoral leaders need to be flexible and response to their congregational setting—not indiscriminately imposing the leadership style and/or organization that “worked” at their last church. The “entrepreneurial style,” advocated by some church consultants, is not only dysfunctional, it can be deadly in some settings. The key to good leadership in the postindustrial congregation is through “careful deliberate process, careful listening, and intimate work with the congregation.”

In all this, I am reminded that Christ is the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end. The same Christ who owned, guided, and energized the Church in 1950 is able to own, guide, and energize the Church in 2050. God is not a slave to time in any of its cultural manifestations. While this is also a challenging time to be the Church, it is also an exciting time. I am eager to see what miracles may come in this generation.



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