
The Postmodern Conversion Process

by Jimmy Long from **Generating Hope**

I have identified six steps in the postmodern conversion process. These steps are not sequential, nor does everyone go through all of them. The purpose of identifying these steps is to help guide both the Christian and the one seeking Christ along the journey to faith. The six steps are 1) discontentment with life, 2) confusion over meaning, 3) contact with Christians, 4) conversion to community, 5) commitment to Christ and 6) a calling to God's heavenly vision.

Discontentment with life. People who are content with their lives are usually not open to the gospel. A sense of discontent with life can be a good thing if it leads to people's finding Christ. The postmodern outlook on life is pessimistic. Many boomers, on the other hand, are content with life and thus are not open to the gospel. But the postmodern generation's lack of contentment can lead it to seek new meaning in life.

Confusion over meaning. Since there are no absolutes in the postmodern era, meaning is an elusive pursuit. Meaninglessness runs rampant in a postmodern world. Even TV commercials discourage the search for meaning. "Why ask why?" and "Just do it" are two favorite commercial lines that discourage any search for ultimate meaning in life. Some people have given up the search for meaning in life because they have been frustrated in their past pursuits of meaning. The search for meaning has led others in many different directions, from rock stars to the New Age and from self-help groups to environmental causes. However, many searchers are dissatisfied with the answers they have found. There is much fluidity from tribal group to tribal group. This fluidity bodes well for the gospel.

Contact with Christians. This stage is critical. Unfortunately, many seekers do not have a very high opinion of Christians. They may have had negative encounters with Christians in the past or they may have political disagreements with the Christian Right. They may have stereotypes about how Christians act or what Christians believe. On the other hand, many Christians, even those who are young enough to be part of the postmodern generation, do not understand or desire to understand this postmodern generation. They yearn for the relative certainty of the Enlightenment era.

The training that Christian groups receive before they go overseas might be applicable to this cross-paradigm

relationship between the Enlightenment era and postmodernism. The adherents of each paradigm need to develop trust with the adherents of the other. Eventually destructive stereotypes will break down.

Once the stereotypes are corrected, this stage function like evangelistic friendships of the past, with three differences. First, the issues that need to be worked through are more likely to be issues of the heart than of the mind. Second, the length of time before the seeker is ready to become a Christian is longer because the postmodern generation requires a lot of time to make any commitment in life - vocational, relational or religious. Third the evangelistic friendship needs to move into a community friendship.

Conversion to community. People living in the postmodern world will view life from a communal, or tribal, perspective, not from the Enlightenment perspective of the autonomous self. Becoming a Christian means leaving one community for a new community. Therefore it is imperative that individuals become involved in the Christian community as part of their decision-making process. Entry into the Christian community may occur through a small group, a seeker service, a regular worship service or a social outing of the small group.

Whereas boomers prefer anonymity as they make their initial forays into the Christian community, Xers will probably like to participate as much as possible. Many boomers arrive at a rational, carefully thought through decision after gathering all the evidence. Xers make their decision more spontaneously, from the heart and based on their experience within the community. Therefore, it is important to allow this postmodern generation plenty of time to experience the community and to get to know as many people in the community as possible. The evangelistic process becomes a community affair more than a one-to-one encounter. If the community is narrowly defined, such as a formal or informal small group, the seeker can get to know people in some depth.

Many people with a postmodern mindset experience a two-stage conversion. First, the person becomes converted to the community, which may be a small group or a larger community. Over a period of time, the seeker begins to identify with the community and feels a sense of belonging. At this point the seeker may be a member of

the community without having made a commitment to Christ.

Commitment to Christ. The seeker identifies with the community but may not be aware of the need to make a commitment to Christ. That commitment may form over a period of time or may take place at a specific moment. Past evangelistic efforts centered primarily on a “point-in-time” conversion experience. In the postmodern world more people commit to Christ over a period of time. However, that commitment to Christ needs to happen. In the Enlightenment era, many people made intellectual decisions regarding Christ, but never committed their lives to him. In the postmodern era we need to take deliberate steps, or many will be converted to the community but not to Christ, the King of the community.

Calling to God’s heavenly vision. This postmodern generation lacks meaning and perspective and thus comes to a commitment to Christ without much understanding of meaning or without much purpose in life. We need to give them meaning by helping them to make sure they not only understand their story but understand God’s story, from creation to Christ’s second coming. This understanding will give them meaning they have lacked in the past.

This postmodern generation also needs a perspective into which it can place all the joys, sorrows and pain it will continue to experience in this life. That perspective is one whereby life is lived from the future (Christ’s second coming) in the present (pain and suffering) while being anchored to the past (Christ’s death and resurrection.)

Strategies. As we minister among Generation X and this emerging postmodern culture, we need to emphasize different truths of Scripture. We need to listen to the people we minister among to hear from them the issues that are putting spiritual roadblocks in their spiritual journey.

Relational issues are crucial to Xers, who come from dysfunctional families and are moving away from an autonomous self to a community orientation. A critical issue for them is acceptance by others and themselves. The major roadblock is a sense of shame. The church needs to make sure this emerging generation feels welcome as it enters our communities. We must go out of our way to make them feel comfortable and wanted. In addition to helping Xers feel accepted within the church, we need to emphasize God’s love for us and

acceptance of us in our worship services and small groups. The doctrine of adoption is of special importance in ministering to this generation.

We need to take careful stock of our evangelistic strategies to make sure we are being faithful to God and working effectively in this postmodern context. . . . Students are more interested in discussing the story of Jesus than debating the authority of Scripture. The gospel story is a key element in evangelism within this postmodern generation.

The key question for Xers today is “Is it real?” not “Is it true?” Their lives are more likely to be changed through the heart than through the mind. They need to see the incarnation of the gospel in people’s lives more than hear the proclamation of the gospel through our words. Do we have places where seekers can seek the gospel in action? Do we invite them into our community? They need to experience the love of Jesus more than they need to be informed that Jesus is love.

As well as inviting seekers into our communities, we need to enter their communities. People in the postmodern world are increasingly separated into tribal groups. We need to think about the different tribal groups in our community or on our campus. Which ones do members of our church or fellowship already have contact with? We need to begin our efforts with these groups. The message we take to them is the message of hope.

God is calling us to be a people of hope who offer this gospel of hope to a generation without hope. We begin by caring for this postmodern generation as real people with real hurts. We need to meet Xers where they are and listen to their stories. Next we must be praying that God will give us wisdom to know how to demonstrate God’s love by word and deed and that God will draw this generation to himself. Finally we must be sharing ourselves and the hope of the gospel with them so they will begin to understand that God loves them and desires to give them a home they never had, a place to belong. They also need to understand that it is only God who can provide this hope for discovering life’s meaning, purpose and direction.



Jimmy Long has been in campus ministry for twenty years. This selection is from his book: [Generating Hope: A Strategy for reaching the Postmodern Generation](#) pp. 206-210; 112-113

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Calling to God's heavenly vision. Lacking meaning and perspective and coming to a commitment to Christ without much understanding of meaning or without much purpose in life, we need to give them the meaning they have lacked in the past making sure they understand God's story, from creation to Christ's second coming. They also need a perspective into which they can place all the joys, sorrows and pain they will continue to experience in this life. That perspective is one whereby **life is lived from the future** (Christ's second coming) **in the present** (pain and suffering) **while being anchored to the past** (Christ's death and resurrection.)



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Nurture is still very important. More interest in **discussing the story of Jesus** than debating the authority of Scripture. The gospel story is a key element in evangelism for the postmodern generation.

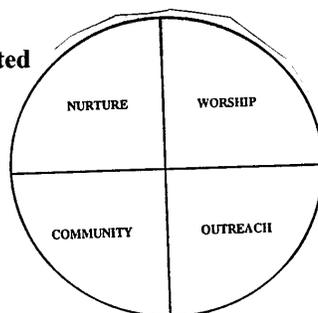
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Small Groups Models --- Two Perspectives:

1960’s - 1980’s

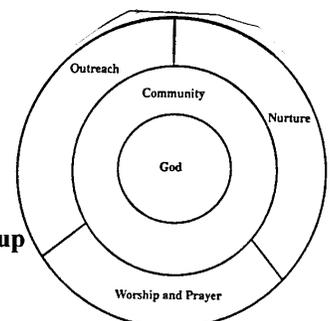
Primarily Bible studies
Intellectual understanding:
Mind
Linear (inductive) study
Individual “Self” orientated
Program ministries
Teaching and
Prayer groups
Short duration: 9 weeks
Just “thrown together”
Authoritarian leaders



1960 Small Group Component Chart¹⁵

1990’s -- on

For Comfort, healing, direction
Relational concerns:
Heart
Interactive, freeflowing
An intimate “Community”
Relational ministries:
a place for sharing
intimacy and worship
Long duration: 2-3 years
A “common basis” for group
Participatory, mentors



1995 Small Group Component Chart¹⁴