Alert: 1970 Was (Almost) 50 Years Ago

My blog post for today contains a little math. This math does not a contain a revelatory or revolutionary idea, but when applied to worship music, church design, communicating to different demographics in our churches, and reaching out to the world of the 21st century – it matters.



photo courtesy of mattfrise.com

Here is the simple math for every communicator, pastor, worship leader, songwriter, and missional Christian. Just because it's simple, doesn't mean it's not important. I have seen many churches struggle with this over the last 20 years in my work.

It is approximate math, giving or taking a few years – but it is close enough for what we are measuring.

Let's round the year to 2020. Just for fun. We're only a few years away, and time flies.

- **1970 was almost 50 years ago (1/2 century)**
- **1980 was almost 40 years ago**
- **1990 was almost 30 years ago (1/4 century)**
- **2000 was almost 20 years ago.**

A lot changes over time. In a day where rapid cultural change is happening at an alarming historical rate, these general estimates matter even more.

The Question

How much do

- music styles,
- sound experiences,
- design styles,
- cultural metaphors,
- optimal times for teaching retention, and more…

…change over approximately *half a century*?

Significantly.

Every communicator, worship leader, pastor, artist, and spiritual leader who desires to culturally connect, in a culturally *current* way, with the various age groups that are out there, must be alert to this reality. We aren't compromising when we say we want to connect (nor are we just being "seeker sensitive") – we are thinking like the Bridge-building Jesus of the parables, the stories, and the metaphors.

And just because we "love, love, love" a certain style of music, or atmosphere, or design, doesn't mean we aren't *way* out of sync, or maybe *way* in sync, with demographics we desire to serve. It may not be a problem, but we need to be aware that things change, and peoples' eyes, brains, and emotions are not seeing, processing, and feeling in the same ways.

Some elements of our worship and church life are timeless. Here are just a few.

- The Eucharist/Communion
- Singing together
- Silence
- Hearing the Word together
- Reading the Word
- Praying for one another
- Fellowship
- Reaching out to our communities, and
- Daily, weekly, and yearly Worship Year calendar rhythms.

But the *forms* in which we express them can, and should change. We are not being inauthentic when they do. We are being accessible, missional, bridge-builders. We are thinking hard, and making hard changes, for a greater cause than our preferences.

Just because my guitar player learned all their riffs in the 80s doesn't mean they are done learning, any more than I as a songwriter listening to the music textures of today and applying them to my writing. We don't need to go overboard, but we need to be aware of our defaults and make an effort.

The Experiment

In my work over the years, both in the church and outside of it in media and communications, I've come to embrace something. Everything, absolutely everything, messages. In other words, everything from our website style, to our church catch phrases, to the architecture of our buildings sends a message. That message suggests who we are, how we approach faith, our concern for the community, our primary age demographic, our target group, and who we believe the church is to be in society.

In my last church, we spent a chunk of money designing and building a very cool cafe, complete with a vibey stage and great sound system for young people. We spent more on that little cafe, in our old elementary school building, than we did on the rest of the church spaces that year. We wanted to communicate to our pre-teens and teens that they have greatness in them. We did that because architecture and space is messaging (noun) – and that room filled up with young people playing games, having concerts, and connecting with faithful people. The message was reinforced at every turn. "You have greatness in you; and we've created a place to call it out." I'm convinced that room was used by God to save a few lives over those years.

Also note that one of my family's favorite things to do is to go to Saint Bartholomew's Episcopal church in Nashville, with its bright, sun-washed interior, to sing, receive the bread and cup, and pass the peace with others. Being "current" doesn't always change everything. But when the priests speak, it connects.

So here's an experiment. Note that, for you to be authentic to your calling as a church, not all will apply. But it's still worth asking the questions.

Here are 10 ideas to try:

1. **Think hard about your worship and fellowship spaces**; what do they message? Ask different age groups who won't just agree with you,
2. **Embody older songs in 2014 sonic arrangements** (not 2000 or 1990 or 1980 or 1970),
3. **Speak for 15 minutes, as opposed to 45 minutes** (some studies show retention and application is much higher in our stimulus overload, TED talk generation – this one is tough on me),
4. **Get younger leaders giving significant input** on worship spaces and environments,
5. **Get younger, professional designers** to create visual messaging (websites, foyer signs, titles, logos, flyers)
6. **Work as a band to create sonic textures** that are less reflective of your past and more reflective of your wider community's present,
7. **Use ancient forms** of worship in a non-dated way,
8. **Use ancient forms** in a dated way (because that can be beautiful, too),
9. **Be thankful for the riches of your story** – without getting stuck in the past.
10. **If you're an "older" leader, find a group of younger leaders** (unless your calling is primarily to your general age group), in a church environment you don't hate, and serve them in any way you can. You may discover a fresh, unique call that's as sweet as the glory days of your past leadership.

The fact is, we may have some heavy-lifting in the homework part of what we do so we don't miss God's highest and best plans for us to reach out to folks who aren't like us.

Having said all of that, most things that are old are rich, and a new generation needs to encounter them.

But if they can't *access* them, because we're unwilling to reconsider our delivery, we must consider if we are locked into nostalgia. If we don't at least ask the question, we're just running on our defaults, wanting everyone to come our way.

Churches are museums all over Europe because of this (and other factors).

This takes discernment in our planning. And some very teachable leaders. We all know that gets harder as we age, so we should practice early.

What The Math Means

This math doesn't always mean we should or shouldn't change. It just means we need to be aware of why we do what we do, and how it affects (or doesn't affect) people so we're not surprised.

Everyone is not the same. And things change, very much so, over these kinds of time increments.

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Question: How does the change of time affect you as a leader of people? How does this idea, that 1970 was almost 50 years ago, help you think about the way you currently do elements of church life – from music, to visuals, to discipleship, to design, to reaching out to a 21st century world?

Resource: The Essentials In Worship History Video Course addresses this head on, and seeks to draw from the riches of our worship past to empower our worship present. Hymns, cathedrals, sacraments, visuals, environments and more are discussed.

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