

2. How Does Postmodernism Affect Us?

Postmodernism affects us in different ways - although it's often most obvious in younger (Gen-X) people. But it affects us in ways like these - which often overlap one another.

1. Since the 60s, **there's been a growing trend towards individualism (which can sometimes be very altruistic) and waning support for the church** - illustrated in the huge exodus from the mainline churches in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Some who left the mainline churches went to other churches, but far more left the church altogether, never to return - like the friend's story above.

But those who left didn't necessarily turn their backs on "religion" itself. They just believed they no longer needed the church to sustain their faith or even to be good Christians. So the first mark of postmodernism is the increasing distinction people make between their own interest in spiritual things, spirituality, and the organised religion they associate with the church.

2. Since the 60s, **people have been moving away from supporting public institutions, to a more private view of life**. So whereas the church once had quite a dominant and unifying role in society, it's now become just one of many unconnected institutions which each have their own beliefs and values. As a result people tend to keep their own personal views about faith and life to themselves - removing religion from the public arena. When I started ministry in the 60s, non-attenders felt obliged to support the church because they owed it to the church; now people only support the church if it helps them in their private lives. In today's society people live their lives less in public and more in private.

3. Since the 60s, **society has been moving away from one general world view to many different world views** - as people from all over the world move into our towns and cities, changing some beyond recognition. So when I started ministry we lived in communities where most people had similar beliefs and values even though people went to different churches. When we moved to our present home 16 years ago, all the people around us were European Pakeha like us; and the community of several thousand was itself like us, with most people sharing similar values. Today we're surrounded by people from other parts of the world who speak different languages, have different views about God, follow different customs and live by different values. Our once uniform community, where communication was easy, has become a collection of micro communities where we may not even be able to communicate with one another at all.

4. Since the 60s, and especially recently, **people have been searching for some kind of common ground that will enable us all to live together in harmony** - despite our different cultures, lifestyles and beliefs, and different ideas about truth and falsehood and right and wrong. In this new situation there are problems when one group claims that it is right and others are wrong. So tolerance becomes the glue that holds the different groups together, and in this new society many Christians have to rethink how to share their faith in such a diverse world. The old approach of saying, "The Bible says," no longer works with many people.

5. Since the 60s, **people have been moving away from commitment to churches - and from clubs and other**

once highly-valued institutions of society. As we've noted, this showed up first in the tumbling church attendances of the 60s and 70s. But the trend hit other institutions, and the waning support for service clubs and volunteer groups has become more noticeable in recent years. We still need institutions in society; but increasingly we feel that those institutions should serve us rather than us serving the institutions. We see this at the church level as denominations move away more and more from centralised authority structures to structures that help churches "do" mission in their communities.

3. Evangelism - Harder Now, Or Easier?

But how have these massive changes in society affected our mission to unchurched New Zealanders - is it harder now, easier, or what? Well, our task has certainly changed; but in many ways it has actually become easier - and again, the different trends overlap one another.

1. Since the 60s, **people have become more and more interested in "spirituality" so that it has now become one of the catchwords of our time**. In this new environment we can talk quite openly about life and faith in our newspapers, books and magazines, on radio and TV, in advertising, and in workplace training and conversation. Once, if we wanted to talk about these things, we had to pick our way through a minefield of modernist hostility; now we can talk about them quite easily because of the new openness to spiritual things.

2. However, **being interested in spiritual things is not the same as being a traditionally "religious" person**. Before the 60s and 70s, people's interest in spiritual things was worked out through the local church; today their interest may not have any connection with the church at all. But because people are on a journey of discovery they may be very open to exploring the next stage of their journey in a small group or church service where these things are talked about. Again, the equation has changed since the 60s and 70s.

3. **The new interest in spiritual things is more subjective than objective - more about people's inner world than accepted standards of right or wrong**. So people are now more prepared to try out a range of different answers for personal problems - be they problems with their health, work, physical fitness, and so on. This new openness to solutions means we can also invite people to pray about their life concerns and turn them towards God as the creator, redeemer and sustainer of their lives. It's the line Paul took in Ac 17.27b, when he said that God is "not far from each one of us" (which is just what many people are waiting to hear!). But it's a very different approach from Peter's with the devout Jews of Acts 2.

4. **People's interest in spiritual things now tends to have more to do with their feelings than any interest they may have in great spiritual ideas** (although, as we'll see later, many others are still interested in the great questions modernity has raised for generations). So people may be very interested in exploring the things that trouble them in the inner world of the heart, but they may not be so interested in developing beliefs for their mind. This again impacts on the way we do mission. In the new, more postmodern environment, sharing our own experience of God may be more effective than trying to convince people they ought to believe in God, Jesus or the Bible.