

## ESSENTIALS FOR OUR MILLENNIUM - Part 1 By Carl McMurray

In trying to figure out the most tactful way to approach people with the gospel it helps if we understand the culture a bit. For example, although it is different now, when we first went to Russia in the early '90s, the handing out of tracts was discouraged because that was the method used by the Communists to hand out propaganda. It was quite a culture difference from what we were used to. The same thing is true in reaching into our own communities. We need to understand our own culture and unfortunately unless we put forth some effort, most of us don't. We think we do, but actually we tend to live in our own "comfort zone." We gravitate toward "our" music, we talk "our" language (sometimes "church" language), and we tend to think that the way we do things is the best way, although "our" way may be a couple of decades old.

Every once in awhile we need to examine the culture we live in, *rather than* dwelling on the one we grew up in. I would like to draw your attention to entering the new millennium with the gospel, while answering the question, "what kind of world do we live in today?"

First of all, we live in a "niche" world. Everyone is looking for and targeting a niche, a segment of the population or special group of people. Soft drink commercials are aimed at age groups. Some supermarkets in large cities have advertised "singles night." Music in the store and specials on single-serving frozen dinners highlight the event. Car commercials, television programming, and insurance policies are all aimed at specific target groups. People are losing their excitement about large shopping malls while small boutique shops with personal service are increasing. You can go to a shop that manicures, a store for balloons, a coffee shop, or a kitchen utensil store. These are individual entrepreneurs who have isolated a need and addressed it with quality and service.

Such an approach is not unbiblical. Some have voiced the opinion that the gospel ought always to be presented in generic fashion for all ages at all times in all situations. That makes it easy on them when people don't respond. "It's the listener's fault," they say, "I preached the truth!" Such reasoning is simplistic and unreasonable. Paul said he became "all things to all men that he might by all means win some." When he spoke to Jews in the synagogues he quoted scriptures and appealed to Jesus as the Messiah. When he was in Athens speaking to Gentiles he quoted contemporary literature and appealed to logic, justice, and evidence of Jesus as the one living God. He targeted his audience. He, by the Holy Spirit, spoke directly to the people who were listening.

If we are going to learn from that scriptural method, what group(s) should *we* target? Where is our niche? The truth is that Jesus has something for everyone, so where is the need today?

In our culture the family is definitely under fire. Homes are struggling, marriages are dissolving, kids are floundering. Academia, homosexuals, social activists and other special interest groups have just about removed any reinforcement from spiritual training and appropriate discipline. Perhaps publicly announced and well-prepared studies on parenting, teens, family relationships, or marriage building might not be out of line. These are needs which the gospel addresses. There are probably other options that could be considered.

A multitude of problems in the home can be addressed by teaching people to trust Jesus and His directions on how to govern ourselves. This can be done during real biblical counseling sessions. Counseling is an area that churches of Christ in many areas have steered clear of, but true biblical counseling is a cure for a bushel of sinful ills and can be an advertised "niche" to reach into a community.

Because of our culture, more congregations are gathering in more divorced, widowed, unmarried, and otherwise single people. As this group grows, their special needs can and should be addressed. Not in the fashion of a "date night" as many denominations have done, but in giving real hope and direction from God's word.

As our population ages, the "senior" group of healthy, active retirees grows. How are we encouraging them to serve and be active for the Lord? Just because one retires from his chosen career does not mean that one retires from the Lord's service. Roles may change so that we don't do what we did when we were thirty, but many in this group still have talents and time to use for the Master.

Special classes, specific studies, clearly identified work efforts, and great appreciation are all part of identifying and targeting various segments of our community for contact with the gospel. Instead of requiring our community to be like us, isn't it time that we stopped long enough to see what they are really like, to speak to their concerns, and address the problems they are facing on a daily basis. We live in a "niche" world. It is time to stop being so generic that we look like a spiritual Wal-Mart trying to reach everyone with everything and not really doing a good job of it. We need to start identifying goals, patterns, and targets to put the gospel in contact with those who are interested.