

DIDACHE: “GENERATIONS”
Robin Smith and Joshua Smith

Question #1: What is your current role?

Robin Smith

I am an adjunct professor and teach a variety of Bible and Christian ministry courses. I also teach a weekly Bible Study at a local church. Teaching at the university and the local church has proven to be challenging, rewarding, and thought provoking.

Joshua Smith

I am currently serving as the pastor of Mountainside Communion—a church of the Nazarene located in Monrovia, Ca. I am also working to complete a Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary in Missional Leadership. My most important role right now is being the husband of Arianna and father of Caleb (6), Zachary (4), and Luke (2).

Question #2: Why did you choose this discipline?

Robin Smith

Ecclesiology is really the discipline that I have invested my life in. Although my job titles have most often included Christian Education, it is really the study of the life and ministry of the church that has been my focus. As a child and teenager I loved the Church. I loved being with the church family. Even so, it came as a surprise when God called me to ministry as a full time vocation because the tradition I grew up in did not allow for women to be in leadership, let alone be ordained. But God faithfully kept his word in showing me how I would indeed make church ministry my life work. As a pastor and educator my focus has been on equipping Christians for service and faithful obedience to the gospel. Of course the truth always is that I, the pastor and teacher, have been the one who has continually grown, changed, and been transformed in my thinking, service, and understanding of what it is to follow Christ.

Joshua Smith

Much like you, ecclesiology is the discipline I am giving my life to. Thus far the roles have been as pastor and student, but ecclesiology is what I study and practice. Like many pastors might testify, I am not completely sure whether or not I chose this discipline or it chose me. Dad and your commitment to raising us in the church provided a wonderful context of encouragement, support, and formation for me. I always really enjoyed being a part of what God was up to in our local body and was affirmed from an early age that leading a community of God’s people might be something I was gifted for. In pursuing this vocation for the last ten years I have grown to love and appreciate the role of a pastor and would certainly choose it as a discipline for myself, but I still feel like it might have chosen me more than I chose it.

Question #3: What key contributions does your discipline offer?

Joshua Smith

It strikes me that if we are going to talk about the contributions that ecclesiology or the church can offer, we need to acknowledge the culture that we are living in. Our world is experiencing

what missiologist Al Roxburgh describes as ‘discontinuous change’. This is not change that can be predicted or controlled, but is change that we do not quite know what to do with. It might be described as a transition or shift in the way things are. This transition is brought about by realities such as global immigration, technological advancements, accessibility of knowledge, a changing global economy, awareness of staggering need, and, of course, a loss of confidence in primary social structures. When speaking of key contributions that our churches can offer we must be thinking in terms of this changing environment that we are a part of.

Robin Smith

You are right but as you know, change has historically been difficult for the church. To make the adjustments necessary for a faithful witness in these times I think we have to intentionally return to the teachings of Jesus and take more seriously the way Jesus lived. Jesus said that the most important commandment is to first love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength; to secondly love our neighbors; and to thirdly remember that on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:39) His life embodied these commands. In spite of the cultural changes we face, and they are significant, these three truths still provide the foundation and primary compass for how we engage this new world we live in.

Joshua Smith

What I hear you saying is that following the Spirit and teachings of Christ gives us our identity and shape as the Church and that this is true no matter what time and place the church is living in. I really like that. I especially like the metaphor you use describing Jesus’ teaching as a compass that guides us. I suspect that one contribution that the church will make by embodying this message of Jesus will be in addressing the incredible loneliness that people feel these days. One of the great forces in Western culture is individualism, and while it was probably birthed out of a desire to honor people, it now breeds loneliness. I talk with more and more people who are lonely. I think that one of the great contributions that churches can offer is redemptive friendship and community. When transition happens, like the transition we are facing as a culture, there is the possibility for community that brings about a new reality. In some ways this seems to be what the social networking phenomenon is all about. Modes of communication like MySpace, Facebook, and now Twitter are new attempts at friendship and community. And while these social networks make some nice contributions of their own, they lack any sense of incarnation. Aspects of relationships like embodiment, relational sustainability, connection to a particular place or context are things that the local church can contribute that are extremely important for life-giving and redemptive relationships. Practices like hospitality, welcoming the stranger, table fellowship, and love of neighbor as you mentioned, are contributions that the church has to offer that seem very important right now. I think that one of the greatest ministries a church could implement is to move church potlucks into the neighborhoods. What contributions do you see the church offering?

Robin Smith

I agree with you that people are lonely and I think they are also frightened—frightened of change, frightened for their future, even frightened of other people. Life-giving and redemptive relationships describe well what Jesus offered and taught. Glen Stassen and David Gushee in their book *Kingdom Ethics*, remind us that, “Christianity is a nonsensical enterprise apart from Jesus, its central figure, its source, ground, authority and destiny. Here is the problem. Christian

churches across the theological and confessional spectrum, and Christian ethics as an academic discipline that serves the churches, are often guilty of evading Jesus, the cornerstone and center of the Christian faith.” In my teaching and interaction with the Christian community I am regularly surprised at how Jesus is interpreted and understood. The Sermon on the Mount as the central teaching that sums up Jesus’ message from the beginning of his ministry to his ascension, and yet it is often overlooked as a way of life for the church today. Jesus really meant what he said and he said the same things over and over again through direct teaching, parable, personal encounter and dialogue. He does not waiver.

Joshua Smith

Much of the missional conversation that I am a part of has to do with helping the church to understand herself better theologically and allowing mission and ministry to flow from that. In large part, the missional conversation is trying to move the theological discourse from colleges and seminaries to the local context where the story of God is to be embodied. I think that your thoughts on allowing the teachings and life of Jesus to shape us are in line with the missional conversation and are very important. Like you are saying, the best contribution that the church could make to the world that God loves is to follow Jesus. This sounds simplistic, but these are important ecclesiological issues.

Robin Smith

I think that the culture has informed the life of the church more than she realizes. No generation has ever been bereft of relying on the culture to identify and make sense of God, but it seems to me that the culture of prosperity has blurred the vision of the church. Jesus does not back away from his message to care about and give to the poor, to welcome the stranger, to love and pray for our enemies, and to be very careful about judging anyone or any group of people because we have logs in our eyes. These logs are often shaped by the national and local culture we live in. These logs have to be acknowledged and removed or we will not be able to live out the truth and grace of the gospel. I agree completely that we need to shape our life and ministry theologically and it needs to be after the person and ministry of Jesus. This is the primary contribution that the church can make to the world.

Question #4: *What is the future of your discipline?*

Joshua Smith

Much like the culture we are a part of, I think the church is going through some pretty intense changes as well and I am not quite sure if anyone knows what the future of the church will look like. My suspicion is that we are going to need to do a lot of listening and discernment in order to imagine the future that God is calling us to. One thing that seems important will be to continue to create opportunities like writing this article, where people of different generations and perspectives are invited to come together and listen to one another. Again, practices like table-fellowship will be important contributions the church can offer.

Robin Smith

What you are suggesting prompts me to remember again that Christ engaged the world he lived in. He really looked at people and cared about their circumstances. He enjoyed getting to know people, visiting in their homes, helping them when they had needs, and he regularly shared a

meal with all kinds of folks. Jesus had friends who worshipped God and friends who did not. He lived in the world confident of who he was and what his life was all about. I am concerned that my generation lost sight of Christ's down to earth, practical, and hospitable way of living. Jesus became human; he lived among people; wherever he was he was a prophetic voice and presence that was full of grace and truth. This kind of ministry cannot be programmed, it has to be experienced and modeled. How do you think we can lead people toward this vision of ministry?

Joshua Smith

When I think of pastoral leadership, I think of a definition given by Mark Lau-Branson and Al Roxburgh. They describe pastoral leadership as cultivating an environment within a congregation where she is able to discern the missional imagination that God is calling forth. I understand the pastoral role or contribution to be fairly poetic in that sense.

Robin Smith

I am intrigued by your choice of words. Your descriptions are so different than how we understood ministry thirty years ago. I was trained to see the church in terms of particular functions that had to be designed and carried out. There were absolutes like teaching, worship, advocacy, service and fellowship that not only had to be specifically planned for, but we would regularly evaluate these functions like goals that needed to be monitored. We did look at these functions as overlapping, but nonetheless, "cultivating an environment," "discerning missional imagination" and "poetic" are new ways of thinking about the life of the church.

Joshua Smith

That is interesting. When I hear your description of ministry and the pastoral role, I think of cultural heroes like CEOs and experts—people that have the "answers" or "know how" and tell everyone else what needs to be done or achieved. It reveals a conviction that we know what church is supposed to look like if she is being faithful in following Christ. I suppose I am pastoring out of the conviction God might be doing a new thing among us in the West and we need to lead out of a posture of discovery and discernment rather than certainty. It has to do with the transition we are in and an acknowledgment that we just do not know what the future holds.

Robin Smith

You are right in your sensing that our model for ministry required an "expert" or "top management" to oversee the ministry of the church. As I think about that, I realize how reflective of the culture that model was. Our generation understood and bought into the idea of having to have specific, measurable, and timely ways of doing ministry. Talk to me about what a discerning, poetic, and imaginative ministry would look like.

Joshua Smith

My hunch is that it involves leading a congregation into processes of listening. We need to listen to the stories of God's activity from the past found in scripture to our Wesleyan-Nazarene tradition, understanding it as a grace of God that propels us forward and not as something we need to replicate, and also to the other traditions that people in our congregations come from. Along with all of this, we need to listen to the personal stories of individuals in our churches and neighborhoods in order to get a sense of what the Spirit is up to there. I am finding that in communal listening like this, the Spirit of Christ is faithful to call forth vision and imagination

for the church. I would want to add that once this vision or imagination begins to take shape, strategies and measurable outcomes like you mentioned, can be used to help the church move towards the imagination that God has called forth through the listening process.

Robin Smith

Listening. That is a word and a spiritual discipline that is important for ministry yet too often ignored – especially in my generation. Speaking, directing, organizing, even controlling were the primary means of understanding and doing ministry. I think this becomes very apparent when I think about the metaphors we used for the church. In my lifetime, the American church understood herself and her mission through metaphors such as Army, Hospital, School, and Traditional Family.

Joshua Smith

Unpack those metaphors for me. How have they shaped the church?

Robin Smith

These metaphors were helpful and useful in creating a church that was organized, disciplined, evangelistic, committed to Christian Education, an advocate for the traditional family, and committed to keeping herself pure, safe, and secure. But these metaphors also contributed to behaviors and values that oppose the Kingdom of God. For example, like an Army, the church leaned toward control. We tended to understand our mission as being at war with the world, and we became hierarchical. As a hospital we made the church “a place” where sick people could come and be diagnosed, cared for, and rehabilitated. But in the process we became a bit like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day that were continually trying to keep themselves clean and sanitary, restricting who and what was allowed in, which ailments were worth treating, and relying totally on our knowledge rather than grace for healing and care. The classroom and organized curriculum became the primary means by which we disciplined, too often ignoring the truth and model that “living among them, full of grace and truth” is Christ’s way. And although we do and always will affirm the goodness and value of the traditional family, the church lost sight of the truth that in the Bible, God blesses and moves in the lives of all types of families. These metaphors really made sense to us but I realize now that although they seemed helpful and affirming of our faith, they also seduced us into an “Us and Them” and “Church vs. World” identity and way of ministry. These dualisms are not helpful and do not reflect the teachings and values of Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

Joshua Smith

It is really interesting to think about the different metaphors that we use to describe the church. Metaphors that many people of my generation are using are words like ‘exile’, ‘wilderness’, and ‘journey’. Obviously these metaphors are easily recognized in scripture, but they also reveal an acknowledged lack of certainty in terms of what God’s future for the church is. Once again, revealing the transition that we are in. I suppose this is why I think that skills in discernment and listening to the Spirit are so important. This lack of certainty may feel scary for some people, but as the scriptures remind us, this is not unfamiliar territory for God’s people. Like you said, people really are afraid of the future, so helping the church remember God’s faithfulness in times like this will be really important.

I also found it very interesting that you talked about the dualisms that we often use to define the church in relationship to the world. This is something that I have been thinking a lot about as I try and lead our congregation in mission and ministry. On one hand I want to think of God's people as distinct and particular because of our striving to follow God in the way of Christ, as you mentioned earlier. But on the other hand, I want to avoid the trap of taking on an identity described as "us and them" or "church vs. world.". Both of these descriptions seem problematic in terms of following a "boundary-crossing," "world-loving," and "people-welcoming" God. I guess I am most uncomfortable with the "versus" language. Some other ways of describing this relationship that I have heard and feel better about are "the church FOR THE SAKE OF the world," though that can become somewhat paternalistic. As David Bosch writes "the church WITH the world." These understandings of the relationship between the church and the world seem more faithful to God in Christ. How does that sound to you?

Robin Smith

It sounds more descriptive of God's relationship with the world and once again, Christ's way of seeing the world and living in the world. It also brings to mind your role as coach of Caleb and Zach's T-ball team. My generation would have viewed your coaching as something you did on your own time or "in addition to" your ministry at the church. But the relationships and connections that are made in that context—the conversations, laughter, and just being with the people—is ministry and it is life giving. I can only imagine all of the different ways that the church could minister to and impact the world for Christ just by being present in neighborhoods.

Joshua Smith

I think that you are really onto something when you talk about the church being present with people in neighborhoods. That description strikes me as very incarnational and faithful to Jesus' call to love our neighbors and to be stewards of creation. Many times I think we hear Jesus' call to love neighbors as pertaining to people "like us" or people that we like. I am sensing the church is being called to practice love of neighbor with the actual people that live in our particular neighborhoods. That is what is behind my commitment to coach the boys' T-ball team. This is also what is behind my family's commitment, and the commitment of other families in our church, to move into the local community and be involved. Whenever I think about this kind of thing I remember the annual Christmas Open House that you hosted for the people of our neighborhood every year. In a context of suburban sprawl where people would pull in and out of their automatic garage doors having very little conversation with each other, that commitment opened up new realities in our neighborhood in terms of relationships of grace, support, and hope. I suppose hosting that open house was cultivating an environment where God's kingdom might break in to our neighborhood. I think it was also a way for our family to be the "church WITH the world."

Question #5: What do you see proves a challenge to Wesleyan Higher Education?

Robin Smith

I suspect that higher education and other long-standing ecclesial institutions will face great challenges as they help the church adjust to the cultural realities and changes we have addressed. Our colleges, seminaries, and other denominational groups will be under a great deal of pressure to "keep things as they are" and in the minds of many "as they have always been". Living and

teaching the Kingdom of God is very challenging because like the people of Jesus' day, the church in the Western hemisphere does not easily recognize the kingdom. The kingdom of God was not a new concept for the people of Jesus' day. The problem was the kingdom of God that Jesus described, lived, and ushered in was radically different than what the people of God expected. Their expectations for the kingdom were national power, religious power, and legal authority. But as we all know, that is not what Jesus meant. There wasn't going to be "God's nation". There was not going to be a "temple"—that single place where God would reside. The Kingdom of God was not going to be about dictating laws, political strength, military might, or wealth and power. None of these things were, or are, evidence of the kingdom. Many who come to our [Nazarene] institutions to learn and who look to church leadership for direction and stability, find these truths and values foreign and troubling but our educational institutions must help the church identify the differences and distinctions of the culture and the Kingdom of God. I suspect that our educational and church leadership will face significant pressure as they continue to help us make these distinctions but I believe they will continue to stay faithful to the teachings of Jesus, and with grace and truth help the church have eyes to see and ears to hear.

I also think that the challenge of higher education will be to equip and empower men and women to take what is studied, discussed, and critiqued in the academic arena into the local church. This is similar to what you said the missional conversation is trying to do. In higher education we freely and enthusiastically consider and discuss biblical truth, culture, science, the arts, and ministry. But somehow these discussions get short-circuited and fail to connect at the local, congregational, and personal level. What do you think the challenges will be?

Joshua Smith

I think that the challenges you just named are primary for Christian higher education. In addition to these, I would like to see more emphasis placed on ecclesiology and communal spirituality in our academic institutions. This will be challenging, though in light of the individualism of our culture. A final challenge that I see is the need to train pastors to understand the importance of context for ministry when most students have to leave their context in order to go to school.

Question #6: *Where are you hopeful concerning Wesleyan Higher Education?*

Joshua Smith

In response to the challenges we just mentioned, Mark Lau-Branson, who is a professor of mine at Fuller, is experimenting with a few learning cohorts in an attempt to address these issues. The students do much of their course work and their internships in a cohort, within a particular tradition, and in a particular context. It is still very much in the experiment phase, but ideas like this excite me and bring me hope in terms of the challenges that we face.

Another aspect of Wesleyan Higher Education that brings me great hope is some of the work being done by Warren Brown, Joel Green, Sarah Marion, and Craig Keen. Within their different fields, each of them are working with the concept of embodiment and understanding human nature in holistic ways. I think that this has incredible implications for the mission of the church and I am very excited to see where this leads and how it moves into the curriculum of our academic institutions.

Robin Smith

I am very excited about the high level of scholarship and missional vision that is being nurtured in our Wesleyan institutions of higher education. I have been blessed to have been invited to several of these schools and I am continually impressed and energized by the critical thinking, engaging conversations, and wide range of literature that is being read and considered. The students are better prepared than ever and the various faculties are home to some of the most outstanding thinkers, researchers, and teachers anywhere. We also have incredibly bright and gifted young scholars who are joining these faculties. I think that Wesleyan higher education is well positioned to serve the church of Jesus Christ towards faithful ministry.

Question #7: Final words for future “generations?”

Joshua Smith

Mary Jo Leddy said it well in her book *Reweaving the Religious Life* in which she wrote, “We are living through one of those historical in-between times when a former model of religious life (either traditional or liberal) is fading away and a future model has not yet become clear. One could be tempted to flee from the dilemmas of this moment to some more secure past, to the surface present, or to some arbitrary resolution of the future. These are real temptations and they can be met only with the faith that this is our hour, our *kairos* [Greek for ‘season’ or ‘time’]. This is the only time and place we are called to become followers of Jesus Christ; there is no better time or place for us to live out the mysteries of creation, incarnation, and redemption. These are our times and, in the end, God’s time.”

Robin Smith

My final words are, do not be afraid. Do not minister from a place of fear. Do not try to be the “great defender” of God. God is our Savior and defender, not the other way around. There are changes occurring but heed the Apostle Paul’s advice: “Do not be conformed by the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to do the will of God; the good and perfect will of God.”