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## Churches must remember context or else risk irrelevancy

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

When one of my daughters was in grade school, she participated in a summer program at a wonderful place called Missouri Town 1855.

In this living history museum, she spent part of each day for a week living in a 19th-century farming community. Her context there was radically different from the context of where she slept and ate at home. Sometimes it took a bit of time to reorient her at day's end.

I thought about that several times as I helped lead a task force at my congregation that just produced a long-range report designed to help our church understand our current context and make recommendations for how we might move into the future toward which God is calling us.

Context, it turns out, is all-important. And churches that lose a sense of their current context are likely to drift into irrelevancy.

That's why our task force spent so much time doing cultural exegesis -- looking at the culture within our congregation and outside our walls. If, for instance, we failed to understand that more than half the households within a mile or two of our church building are made up of single adults (11 percent of whom are elderly) we couldn't know how to speak to our neighbors about faith in ways that would make sense.

The world has changed in remarkable ways since the 1950s and '60s, when the membership of our congregation (now almost 150 years old) was above 2,000, compared with 650 now. The ways people communicate today, for instance, have almost nothing to do with how they did 50 or 60 years ago, before the Internet, smartphones, Facebook and email.

Today, the Gospel must be communicated using the tools the culture uses, or almost no one will hear it.

So we spent considerable time writing sections of our report we called "The Reality Now in our World" and "The Reality Now for Second (Presbyterian) Church."

We began the main "World" reality section this way:

- The U.S. population has more than doubled since 1950. Over that time, the population has become qualitatively different from what it was then. An increasing proportion of the population is over age 65, meaning the median age of the population is increasing as well. It's also more diverse both racially and ethnically. Whites now make up less than two-thirds of the U.S. population; Latinos, at more than 16 percent, have passed blacks at 12.6 percent. In four states today -- California, Texas, New Mexico and Hawaii -- whites make up less than 50 percent of the population.
- Since the 1960s, there has been a marked increase in the number of children living with a single parent in the U.S. There has been a similar increase in one-person households.

And in the main "Second Church" reality section, we noted that 50 years ago, the children in the neighborhoods around our church primarily attended public schools of the Kansas City School District, which had an enrollment of more than 70,000. Today, by contrast, almost no families with school-age children living within the neighborhoods near Second Church send their children to Kansas City's public schools, the total enrollment of which is now about 17,000 students in a district that lost state accreditation Jan. 1.

Why should any of this matter to other congregations, whether Protestant or Catholic? Because context is always crucial for ministry.

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The mission field in today's religiously pluralistic nation often is right outside the doors of the church building. And the people outside our building aren't -- at least in our case -- living in the 1855 farming community environment my daughter experienced one summer in the 1980s.

Jesus paid close attention to his context. That's why he used rural, agrarian images in his parables. If we, the body of Christ here and now, don't know our context, the Gospel could well go unheard.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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