

Thinking again....Roxburgh's "Liminality"
By Bob Young
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According to Alan Roxburgh, the church in North America is firmly in liminal space, meaning there is little that is firm or solid in this post-modern era. In truth, the North American church has been on the cultural and societal margins for some time now, but it had become a comfortable arrangement. Only in recent years has the church become aware that it is on the margins--the cultural disconnect finally got the attention of many church leaders. Many churches, church leaders and faithful Christian disciples are trying to gain their footing in this new de-centered reality. They are surveying the aftermath of modernity, recognizing that they are on the margins. They are not alone. The question of how to re-imagine and rebuild the church overwhelms the most thoughtful among us.

North American churches have lost their point of reference. Like a tsunami that wipes away entire villages leaving nothing standing, post-modernity has swept away many of the monuments of modernity. What is left is a territory with no recognizable landmarks. No wonder so many feel disoriented and at a loss. The traditional street signs no longer exist--we need a compass, a remnant of a map. Truth be told, we need a fresh awareness of and honoring of the direction of the Spirit. Alert and thoughtful leaders are trying to chart a new course, but with a very vague map and a dizzied sense of direction. How can we find our way in this kind of liminal space? Who knows the terrain now that the church has been pressed to the margins of our culture and society?

There is a hint of direction in Roxburgh's book—find your way by looking to the margins. He suggests that resources for navigating liminal space for the church will include reengaging Scripture and "...listening to the voices of those Christian groups that have long lived outside the center of culture." He believes that the future direction of the church will be discovered as we engage with 'dissenting churches' and 'ethnic groups.' "They understand the position of the underling and the outsider. Liminality requires us to listen attentively to their ecclesiologies." This is one of the most valuable insights gleaned from a reading of Roxburgh's treatment of liminality. There are leaders who are capable of leading us and who know the terrain because they have been operating on the margins for years. Around the world, many denominations are struggling to survive. As regular church attendance wanes, leaders look for strategies to bring people back into the fold. Roxburgh says that many of the renewal strategies and church growth seminars are attempts to return to the heyday of modernity. That is not going to happen.

Churches wonder what to do. Let me tell you what we do not need to do. We do not need a new coach (minister) to help us to start new programs (the preferred modern methodology), but we do need a genuine conversion and recommitment—to Christ, to conversation, to suggestions, to walk together through this disorienting time.