

# Listening to the Spirit's Call

**“WHAT ARE THE GREATEST CHALLENGES facing you?”** Every pastor and lay leader hears this question in one form or another. For me, it came over dinner with a young couple. The man who asked is now a successful businessman. He came to Canada years ago as a child, part of the refugee work of The Alliance after the fall of Vietnam.

My answer was that *he* represented the greatest challenges facing the church in Canada and the United States today. He and his wife fell into several demographic areas where the life of the church is asking the most pressing questions.

First, how should the church speak to young adults who are now establishing themselves in careers and family? This group has been given a variety of names by demographers, but the point is this: they are different from baby boomers. Across the continent, a number of responses to this question are being tested. Some are modifications of the seeker churches developed by the boomers, with their powerful worship bands and strong preaching. Others are trying variations of intimate churches, once called house churches, in several formats, such as simple church and marketplace church. Yet others are experimenting with “third spaces”—holding services in coffee shops and book stores.

In light of these “outside-the-box” approaches, baby boomers must resist the temptation to recycle the criticism that they endured when they changed worship styles. We must remember that the format or location of a church is secondary. The important thing is that today’s young adults receive true communication of the Word of God. To do this, more—not less—experimentation is probably needed.

Second, my friend was not born in Canada and thus represents the group that already comprises the majority of the population of Toronto. How do we communicate to people—representing hundreds of language groups—who are coming to our country? In facing this challenge, The Alliance displays both strengths and weaknesses. Our strengths lie in the scores of people groups that we have ministered to around the world during the past century. Frequently, some of those Christians come to us, and some of them are pastors. Here in North America, over the past quarter century, we have with great success organized these folks into self-sustaining churches that have grown large ministries.

But what about the hundreds of people groups with which we do not have a ministry history? They arrive in our airports every day. How do we reach them, especially when they are

bringing their own religious leaders who quickly organize them into a community and build houses of worship? Here, too often I am afraid, we have ended up like the proverbial cow that stands for hours staring at a gate. We simply don’t know what to do.

This is a time for serious thinking about reaching immigrants. Outreach efforts such as teaching English, offering employment counseling, tutoring and other services are examples of ways that some local churches are responding. But more new ideas need to be developed quickly for this urgent situation.

Third, my friend, in his childhood, represented a growing challenge and opportunity. When The Alliance reached out to Vietnamese refugees in the second half of the 1970s, we put our boat into a pond that we had not visited for awhile, which was justice and compassion. Out of that effort has grown the wonderful work of CAMA and, at home, many local church efforts to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those in need.

All that we have done, we ought to have done. But much more is needed. We seem to have safely moved past the place where we see a split between the ministry of proclamation and ministries of justice and compassion. One task is to integrate proclamation properly, so that neither the ministry of the Word nor the ministry of the servant’s towel will be diminished in theory or practice and that their synergistic action will result in unparalleled church growth.

My nonboomer, foreign-born friend, whose family, in his words, “was fished out of a refugee camp by The Christian and Missionary Alliance,” represents our challenge and our hope. We must listen as the Spirit instructs us, so that the truth of Christ will be crystal clear to all to whom we speak.



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