

UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH WE MINISTER: NEW ENGLAND CULTURE AND MINISTRY DYNAMICS

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To be sure, we are all products of our time and place in history. Much has been written in recent years about the differences in perception and values among the generations that make up the people of this land. Writers, like Gary McIntosh (*Three Generations*), have shown the significant impact that the events of a generational lifetime have upon all its members. On the other hand, relatively few writers have attempted to demonstrate the same kind of significant impact that the geography of a people have upon their values. In this paper we shall attempt to do just that.

New England (defined as the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut), with claims to being the oldest “region” in the country (with apologies to Virginia), carries significant nuances in its cultural schema that demand contextualization of the Gospel. For decades the leader and pace-setter for Americans in economic, political and social issues, New England in the last fifty years has settled into an on-going tension between its love for the past and its claims to the future. At the center of the Industrial Revolution that moved America to world prominence, it has hesitated over movement into the technological era. To be sure, Boston, and most notably the universities and institutes of the metropolitan area, have attempted to continue to lead the way. Most of New England, though, has followed at a much more random pace, allowing the Pacific Rim arguably to leave them in the dust. Many urban New Englanders have misgivings about the hesitancy that has so dramatically reduced the region in some regards to an also-ran. “If only we could try again, we would do things differently”...is their slogan.

Religion, though, is different. The leader in bringing religious movements to America, New England has also produced most of the significant revival and awakenings in this country's short history. Thus, while other parts of this land are experimenting with new forms for Christianity, and new religions in general, New Englanders live in the paradox of its history---old forms are good forms while no form leads to new forms. In other words, most New Englanders live with a post-Christian mindset (also called post-modern), so new spiritual forms are found to satisfy a growing spiritual hunger throughout the region. On the other hand, for New England Christians, the new paradigms that are transforming Christianity across America have made little impact here. For many the old forms are good enough, and always will be.

So what is it that makes New England unique, different from all other parts of the United States, in its values and norms? And how do these things contribute to the way the church goes about being the church here?

At least five sets of values can be found in New England, divisible based upon their impact upon the people of the area. The historical values deals with the rich and storied past found in this region, and significantly color all other beliefs held today. The geographical values were among the first assessed and assimilated in this land by our forefathers here. The cultural values developed over time, particularly among those who helped shape the New England experience for so many. The economic values were born out of the crucible of human experience here among the settlers, and passed down to their descendants. The religious values derive from the Puritan influence and its strong teachings on discipline in lifestyle (most often interpreted today as "public" lifestyle).

THE KEY HISTORICAL VALUES (Years)

History is defined as the significant accumulated impact of events over time. The last two words, "over time", suggest the import of history on a region that now dates its history to almost 380 years. Consequently, the people of this area value what is old more than what is new. Why? Often it is because what is old is tried and true; because it has withstood the test of time. The past as well becomes a barometer for present activity and future plans. This is not only because New England has so much of it (the past, that is),

but also because the past has been so glorious and revered, not just here but throughout America. The current American scenario cannot be said to look to New England to take the lead in national affairs, as it did in previous days. European (Old World) influence is predominant in this region, too, far more than that of Central America, Asia, Africa or the Caribbean. A quick check of immigration numbers will demonstrate the continuing impact that the values and mindset of Europe have on many who live here.

Two notable values yet unmentioned but among the most significant, not just historically but *in toto*, are intellectualism and tradition. The highly educated populous of New England (higher than that of any other region), coupled with the fact that there are more schools of higher education here than anywhere else, suggests that the region has come to exalt the intellect, often to the exclusion of other forms of expression. For example, the emotionalism of some religious expressions or ethnic peoples are disparaged as the acts of “ignorant rednecks”. Add to this value the rich history of starting the storied Ivy League schools (and their equivalents) in the centuries gone by, and intellectualism becomes almost a religion to some people.

Tradition, on the other hand, is born out of experience, and as such, New Englanders again have more than any other Americans. It has been defined as the tried and true “chains of habit” forged over time. Pioneers advanced these early customs and as they successfully accomplished their purposes and the people grew familiar with them, the customs became tradition. Tradition by its very nature speaks of experience and history bound together in a “working” fashion. So strong is this value in New England life that virtually every new and/or different idea is measured by what has been done before. Many discount the effectiveness of any such change before it even has been heard. At the very least New Englanders are reluctant to embrace anything that challenges tradition unless it can be shown to (a) enhance their economic welfare, or (b) improve their quality of life. Even then, they are reluctant to part from the ways of the past. To some, especially in the older generations, it is akin to cultural treason.

Summary: New England values what is old, what is past, what is European (Old World), what is intellectual, and what has been bathed in tradition.

Implications for Ministry: Ministers and churches must be careful not to throw out “the baby with the bath water”. While many in America are discarding the trappings of tradition, New England ministers would do well to build upon it and enhance it wherever possible. New ministries should be introduced as chances to establish new traditions.

Second, recognize that for many people in the area, “new” does not necessarily mean better. Be able to explain why something new is needed, if it is, or learn to value what may be old, instead.

Third, a more cognitive, intellectual approach in witnessing and in worship will be more successful to many native New Englanders. While younger generations value personal experience and emotion more, even they will rarely defy their mental roots. However, when experiential or emotional elements are introduced to the congregation, a good way to get their acceptance is to announce it as a “trial” or “experiment”.

Finally, understand the European cultural elements in your community. While New England is more monolithic in culture than most, the varying European influences and values will help any minister to better understand his community and to unlock doors of ministry to its people.

THE KEY GEOGRAPHICAL VALUES (Area)

For the early settlers who had no conception of America as a future nation stretching from ocean to ocean, few would have thought that the region of New England that had come to be their home would be so small. But compared to the other regions in our country it is decidedly smaller. Natural barriers (like rivers and mountains) accounted for much of this originally. Rather quickly though, New Englanders embraced the petite size of their region. So much so, in fact, that “small town living” became the standard characterization for the villages of this northeastern area. Short distances in travel, condensed communities dotting the landscape, and a place where everybody seemed to (at least they thought) know everybody, created a level of intimacy among the natives that was highly valued. It also made New Englanders suspicious of “outside” (beyond New England) influences that suggested bigger was inevitably better. The intimacy within the

environment fostered a sense of community that was, and still is, to be prized by townspeople throughout the region. With town fairs and annual celebrations, the spirit of community is perennially rekindled among the people. With it comes a jealous pride for the region itself that ties New Englanders closer to one another than the people in other parts of this land. Many families in fact would never even consider leaving this region of the country. It is home to them in more ways than one.

An interesting addition to these geographical values is the observation that New England in many ways has a closer kinship with England (Great Britain) than with the rest of the United States. Some British immigrants have even suggested that the region reminds them more of the place of their birth than where they now live in this country (Stuart and Jill Briscoe would be included in this group). Perhaps it is because New England existed as a part of England for one hundred and fifty years before the United States was born. Since America is only two hundred and twenty plus years old, it is easy to see how England could impact it so significantly.

Summary: New England values what is small (like itself), a sense of community more intimate than most, and takes strong jealous pride in its region and its English roots.

Implications for Ministry: There are some significant insights for ministers here. First, since the largest non-Catholic church in New England is only 2,000 people (very small by national standards) think about how you can grow your church and still maximize the value of being small. Satellite locations and multiple services are two possible ways this can be done. Be careful not to emphasize that something is better just because it is bigger.

Second, enhance fellowship and the intimacy it can bring. Carry it into all areas of church life, from worship to polity to outreach—not just over a cup of coffee or a meal. It could become one of your church’s greatest strengths.

Finally, keep an ear to our Christian ministers across the sea in Great Britain and learn from them, not just from American models and ministers. British ministers are constantly reminding New Englanders that they have been where we now are (about a generation ago, they say), and that things are improving in Britain in recent years. They can tell you why and how to share that reality in a humanist, post-modern world.

THE KEY CULTURAL VALUES (Influence)

The impact of New England upon the culture of the United States is felt in many ways. The following three values are among the most significant ways in which New England is constantly influencing the nation.

The emphasis upon quality over quantity is almost a natural corollary to the value of smallness mentioned above. In defiance of other regions that promote “more” as the measure of success (California, Texas, et al.), New England has responded with “better is best”. This is very evident in the continual tension that exists between New York City and Boston. Each representative of their respective regions, they stand poles apart on this issue. To New Englanders, New York City represents the worst case scenario in valuing numbers above all else. Higher crowds, higher crime, higher complexity as New Englanders see it, do not equal a better life. On the contrary, while New York City retorts that it has everything at its disposal as “a city that never sleeps”, Boston suggests that it has everything that’s worth having, and wastes its time on nothing else. For example, the quality schools and quality hospitals in their area are virtually unparalleled in the world.

A second cultural value New Englanders have bequeathed to America is its rugged individualism. Born in the wild of the colonial days, it continues to be fueled by its town meetings where every voice is worth hearing. The fierce independent spirit that helped give birth to a nation still resides in the heart of most New Englanders. That emphasis on individualism has led to a “my way is always okay” mentality among many in the current generation that doesn’t want to be told what to do or be.

The third cultural value that has significantly impacted the nation is tolerance. Paralleling the value of individualism, this value suggests that while my way may be best for me, you have the right to choose your own way, and it can be just as “right”—for you, that is. This value has germinated in the movement toward “political correctness”, which had its some of its seeds on the academic campuses in the region. Tolerance has become a value of which most residents in New England now boast significantly as the result of an “enlightened” people, in contradistinction to what they perceive in other regions of the country, especially in the South.

Summary: Culturally, New Englanders have embraced and espoused the values of quality, individualism and tolerance in strong and forceful ways to the rest of the country.

Implications for Ministry: Quality becomes a benchmark for most New Englanders in ministry, especially visitors to your church. Be sure to have the best your church has to offer in worship and ministry. Nowhere is this more significant than in the worship hour and with children's ministries. Remember also not to maximize quantity above quality in ministry. While both are important, to most New Englanders quality always comes first.

Tolerance is going to be one of the greatest challenges for the evangelical church of the twenty-first century in New England. The charge of elitism must be overcome in action. The exclusive claims of the Gospel should not be compromised; rather they must be paralleled by the inclusive love of Christ.

Individualism gives ministers a great chance to equip believers according to their spiritual gifts, their passions in ministry and their skill and maturity levels. Congregational polity that highlights this value will be seen as more indigenous to the region, as well.

THE KEY ECONOMIC VALUES (Material Impact)

From the Pilgrims in the early years forward to the end of the twentieth century, the region of New England has not been an easy one to tame. The harsh winters and the difficulties in establishing "cash crops" here led to the development of a differing mentality in regards to the economy. What has transpired since has only heightened the emphasis placed upon it. As a farming people in the early years the value of perseverance was quickly acknowledged. This was particularly recognized as important due to the rocky soil and the long winter months. Learning how to wait and how to succeed through endurance became habits sewn into the very fabric of the people of this region.

In addition, the limited resources quickly at their disposal taught New Englanders the value of being frugal. Coupled with the Puritan ethic that we shall discuss shortly, the natives of the area (for the most part) learned to resist opulence and luxury, and long for the plain and simple life. While "pockets" of extravagance can surely be found, they

would be the exception to the rule in this part of the country. New Englanders would be more likely to “do without” and hold on to their possessions and money for “a rainy day”.

New Englanders also over time have come to value what is indigenous and “home-grown” as opposed to the imported goods and services received, even from other regions of the country. Perhaps this is because they understand the toil and endurance of their fellow New Englanders; perhaps it is because they truly feel that no one else apart from the region can appreciate their tastes and needs as well as they themselves can. Regard-less, it is a chronicled “fact” that businesses that survive in New England either are indigenous to the area or are willing to take major losses in the early years to get established in the region. Franchise stores and restaurants are one good example of where this value can be clearly seen.

Summary: The people of this region have learned the values of perseverance and frugality. They prefer what is indigenous to New England over almost anything “imported” from beyond its borders.

Implications for Ministry: Churches would do best to find ministers from within New England itself. That being said, ministers that come to New England from other regions should acclimate themselves to the region as quickly and comprehensively as possible. In addition, they should make a commitment to be in the work of ministry here “for the long haul”. Change will not happen fast in two-hundred year old churches, and new churches will not flourish quickly. It takes an enduring, persevering mindset. For those from outside the area looking for new places to start work, the best indicator of receptivity will be found in towns and cities that are open to outside influences, such as franchise stores and restaurants. There, at least, governing officials are open to the influence and impact of life beyond New England.

Frugality will be an issue in budgeting and financing the work of any church. The suggestion here is to get permission as early as you can through good reasoning and communication. Tight-fisted financial officers make adding ministries harder at inopportune moments. Teach the congregation what God expects and model good stewardship yourself.

THE KEY RELIGIOUS VALUES (Puritan)

The lifestyle of New Englanders has been significantly influenced by their forefathers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritans (sometimes referred to as “America’s Pharisees”). These reform theologians took a very serious view of life and its practices, and declared extremely tight boundaries in how one was to live. While most of the theological values of the Puritans were discarded decades ago, the pervasive influence of their decrees is widely and strongly felt even to this day among the people of the region. Among the ways they impact the life of the region are the following six things.

The “culture of discomfort” is a phrase coined by *Yankee Magazine* to express the expectation of formality experienced in many New England circles to this day. While high collars and shoe length dresses may not be the fashion of the day, a sense of discomfort in the way one dresses and feels is the assumed norm in these parts of the country. There are probably many reasons for it, from respect for those who have gone before to the inclimate weather. Still New Englanders boast in their ability (and choice) to live through the discomforts.

Many in the region couple this with an austerity and sternness that gives one the feeling that all of life is to be met with seriousness. The Puritans in all likelihood drove this home in their generation by emphasizing the significance of reverence and respect. The lack of amusement and fun experienced then often makes it hard for their descendants to feel that it is acceptable to enjoy “light” moments and warm, affectionate responses.

Guilt was a natural consequence for most who lived in an era that condemned so much as “of the devil”. The severity of the punishments and the frequency of the claims did much to heighten the sense of guilt for many who lived here during that day. Some no doubt even felt guilty when they had done nothing wrong, but simply because they knew they were being watched (a kind of seventeenth century “Big Brother”), and thought that out of their ignorance they might be charged with misbehavior of some sort. These feelings were transferred to children and grandchildren until today, when many New Englanders still avoid the church and its influence simply because of the guilt they

feel. (Some of this keeps people away in all parts of the world, to be sure; here we are talking about an exaggerated guilt that may or may not be founded in sin.)

The above suggests a progression in attitude that might lead the inhabitants to be pessimistic about the affairs and course of life. Factor in the harsh conditions of climate and economy, and pessimism becomes the norm for New Englanders. The open unhappiness, even cynicism, with the “way things are” is standard fare in the newspapers of the region, as writers decry the factors and conditions (specifically politicians and athletic teams) that make their lives so miserable. Little hope is ever held out that the future will be any different than the past.

New Englanders have also learned, probably from their Puritan ancestors, to be frank and direct in their words and actions. They rarely use “flowery” words or “beat around the bush”. Such embellishment or subtlety is seen as pretense or dishonest, and an attempt to hide the truth. In contrast, within the South a politeness that often masks the truth for the sake of not taking offense or embarrassing someone, especially with those who don’t know you closely, is assumed and expected in public. In New England, such a politeness would be considered “lying” and one’s motives would come under subsequent attack.

As a result of the five characteristics listed above, New Englanders seem outwardly prudish about lifestyle issues, especially of sexuality. While inwardly tolerant and politically liberal for the most part, their public behavior exhibits strong signs of a conservative bent. They are rarely unruly or blatant about their vices. In fact, they of all the regions in the country still “hide” pornography behind the counters of convenience stores, and fight publicly to oppose the influence of “adult” businesses in their communities. Their argument: it violates community standards, something to be considered when one studies the culture of any people.

Summary: New Englanders carry much of the baggage of their Puritan ancestors that affects their behavior, making them value discomfort, austerity, directness, and an outwardly conservative community lifestyle. It also makes a sense of guilt and pessimism about life the norm among its people.

Implications for Ministry: There are many implications for ministry in this section. For example, giving people permission to be casual in dress or merry in attitude may be offered, but without the ability to release them from the power of the guilt they will feel about even this, it will not happen for many. Teaching them a proper perspective on guilt is crucial for these values and norms to be rectified. Add to that the reality that optimism and joy are more caught than taught and one will sense the importance that example can make. Make sure that your optimism is well-grounded, and is not confused with naiveté. Otherwise, many will “write you off” before you are seen or heard.

Finally, learn to appreciate the frank, direct approach. Don’t take it personally. (For many Southerners this may be hard.) Learn to appreciate the value of knowing where your people are “at” as they speak their minds, instead of holding thoughts to themselves. Ministry bottlenecks that are relational in nature are often streamlined or eliminated in this way.

OTHER RELIGIOUS NORMS

While the Puritan mindset and religion would dominate the behavioral aspects (ethics) of the people in New England, the outward forms of religion have changed over the years. Three norms have become notable within the region.

First, within the religious community there has been a rigid grip on Christian orthodoxy. Variants have historically been treated severely and culturally such parishioners have been ostracized. From within, doctrinal “purity” was to be maintained at all costs. Add to this belief the emphases already noted on tradition and indigeneity, and one begins to understand why religious fringe groups or cults rarely prosper in this area. Those that do are usually both emphasize intellectualism and indigeneity, as with Christian Science or Unitarian-Universalists, and are persevering in their ministry, overcoming obstacles through time and determination.

Second, Roman Catholicism has become the “rule”, not the exception, in religious practice within New England. This is a significant historical and cultural phenomenon, since Catholics were banned in the early days and did not appear “in masse” until just

over a hundred years ago (around 1880). This mostly has to do with the import of European immigration to this country, especially from Ireland and Italy, before and after the turn of the last century. Regardless, its influence is pervasive and must be acknowledged.

Outside the traditional religious community in the region, the wide majority of inhabitants would be secularists, living in a post-modern world. The norm would be a form of humanism that emphasized the value and goodness of humanity, the supremacy of science and the intellect, and decries (not out loud, you understand) religion as a form of manipulation, playing on the fears of the people. These people would see religion in general, and Christianity in particular, as yesterday's news and irrelevant, from a paternalistic, intolerant era with its unwanted claims upon one's life. The primary response to the pleas of Christ would be apathy and indifference, if not downright hostility.

Summary: New Englanders have come to see the religious landscape in the region change over the years until the non-religious secular humanists predominate. Within the religious community Roman Catholics are a wide majority. Anything unorthodox in religious belief or practice will have great difficulty surviving here, unless it is born from within the culture itself.

Implications Application: Most of what the church confronts here will be secular humanists in a post-modern mindset. Learn what you can about it. (An excellent resource is *SoulTsunami* by Leonard Sweet.) Don't downplay their sources of authority, like reason or science. Challenge their underpinings and assumptions, instead. Take apologetic approaches to the Scripture seriously and learn to use them. Be determined to make every sermon and Bible study emphasize the practical relevance the Word of God has to life.

Don't spend as much time with traditional cult awareness as in other areas of the country. Do understand the mind cults of the area and the New Age (it combines with the secular humanism mentioned above). Do everything you can to understand and "appreciate" what Roman Catholicism is all about in this part of the country (to many it is more cultural than religious).

FINAL NORMS

By nature most New Englanders are suspicious of outsiders (from beyond the region). Their history and experience has taught them that outsiders bring different values and agendas to the area, often without the permission or understanding of those who have lived here their whole lives. This suspicion causes New Englanders to question authority (the obvious exception is within the universities, where almost everyone is an outsider), and to be slower to commit to a departure from what they have known in the past.

The indigenous residents also tend to carry a high amount of pent-up anger and dysfunctionality in their dealings with circumstances and relationships in life. For example, the cases of abuse and crimes of passion are extremely high in the area, as are the number of alcoholics and individuals involved in support groups of one sort or another. One can only guess as to the reasons why: more generational “baggage” than other areas, the harshness of the weather and the terrain, the busyness of life in a high-pressure society (not all of it has to do with the place they reside). Still, these things obviously impact the attitudes and behavior of the people as they interact.

Summary: New Englanders are suspicious of outsiders, and have higher degrees of anger and dysfunctional symptoms that are more visible within New England community life than those of most other Americans.

Implications for Ministry: Think about using support groups in your church to minister to the many around you with vice, anger and functionality problems.

If you are an outsider to the region, try to understand the suspicions New Englanders may have. Earn their trust through time and integrity. Surround yourself with indigenous leadership as well and as fast as you can. Give the ministry away to them. It will thrive better in their hands.

This paper has been an attempt to focus attention on some of the specific values and norms of significance in the region of New England. In particular, it has been an attempt to contrast it with other parts of the United States. Better clarification for

ministry has been its goal as we seek to bring the Gospel message to the people of the region. A more extensive chart, showing these values and norms, and including others, as well, may be found on the following page.

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