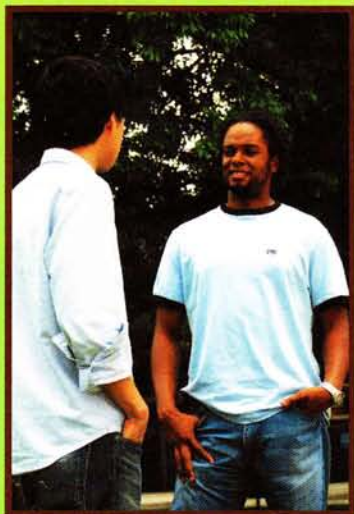


# Vibrant Christian Communities in a Changing World

Philip Clayton



Claremont Ph.D. student Rev. Chris Carter  
with Korean translator on a mission trip.



Claremont Ph.D. student Rev. Chris Carter  
and friend on campus.

It's only in the last few months that I got it. I used to think that people in the 18-35 year old category see the world pretty much the same as those of us who, well, have been around a bit longer. I was wrong.

Last year we were doing a series of conferences around the country called "Big Tent Christianity" ([www.BigTentChristianity.org](http://www.BigTentChristianity.org)). For the Phoenix event, we decided to partner with an established progressive Christian organization. Most of the "big tent" folks were under 35, and most of the progressive Christians were over 50. None of us was prepared for how differently the two groups think! The one group was comfortable with institutional Christianity, the other uncomfortable. The one liked hymns and more traditional worship, the other liked rock music. The one thought in terms of "us" versus "them"—the good guys and the bad guys—whereas the other resisted drawing such distinctions. The one was more ideological, the other much more pragmatic. Can you guess which group was which?

Suddenly I realized what an incredible cultural divide the church faces today. It's not just racial or cultural, for obviously there are whites and people of color in both groups. The church today is, simply put, two worlds — two radically different ways of thinking. Sometimes I despair: "How can you meet the needs of both of these 'worlds' in a single congregation?" This is a generational gap as hefty as anything we've seen since the '60s.

Then it struck me: as Dean of a Christian seminary, I face just as radical a challenge as any pastor does. *This new generation of Christians needs some radically new forms of training for ministry.* And by and large, they're not getting it—not from the major evangelical seminaries, and not from the mainline ones either.

Since then I've been a man on a mission. We launched a radical revision of our approach to theological education at Claremont School of Theology—so big that we're calling it "the new CST." Future pastors and ministers in the church of Jesus Christ still need to know Bible, theology, and history. They still need to know the "arts of ministry": preaching, counseling, administration, and community leadership. Just as much, though, they need to learn about the emerging new forms of Christian community. For it's clear: we're going to need new styles of leadership if we're going to be effective with younger half of the American population today.

Here's what the new generation of Christian leaders is asking for:

- *Online and "hybrid" classes.* Lectures, readings, and even discussion forums happen online. They can also be combined with face-to-face discussions.
- *Bold, interdisciplinary connections.* Students today want us to link sociology, Bible study, and preaching; to connect Arts of Ministry classes with new media strategies; to use case studies, not just lectures on theory; to focus on contexts of application; and above all to *blend theory with practice.*
- *Satellite locations.* You can't serve the church where it's happening and locate all your classes in the suburbs. "Why not hold some classes in L.A.?" they asked. Thus Claremont School of Theology has approached Holman United Methodist Church in South L.A., asking whether we can offer a satellite course in their beautiful facilities—*this spring!*
- *Experienced practitioners in the classroom.* During Barack Obama's campaign a new word began to surface: "pragmatic idealists." Today's Christian leaders are all about making a difference, getting it done, *being* the change. They want great scholars, but they also want instructors in the classroom who really know how to make things work. The "new CST" is hiring adjuncts with proven track records of being "change agents" in the church and in society.

Yesterday the dream became reality: the faculty of Claremont School of Theology unanimously voted to endorse the new CST. Hallelujah!

VIBRANT CHRISTIAN—Continued on page 18

**VIBRANT CHRISTIAN**—Continued from page 15

We're now on a rapid course to *become* the change that we've just endorsed. Check us out on our new website ([www.cst.edu](http://www.cst.edu)) and watch for a batch of new classes, certificates, and lay ministry classes.



Claremont M.Div. student Vera Bagneris has won awards for her sermons.

Teaching and training the next generation of Christian leaders is a big task. Sometimes *everything* seems different: social media, slang, what they read (online), the way they learn, even the ways they preach and worship God. I want to close with just one example.

Studies are showing that the way the next generation approaches questions of race and ethnicity is different than their elders. Sure, there will still be conflicts between different racial/ethnic groups; racism will not just disappear. But the next generation does not carve up the world into "conservative" and "liberal" approaches, the way the old "segregation vs. integration" battles did. Above all, the studies show, they aren't drawn to the idea of racial, cultural, or ethnic "silos." They tend to move more smoothly and naturally across the old dividing lines. (To which I say: if that's for real, thank God!)

We've taken this data to heart at CST. We're doing practical theology and new ministry skills. But we're not building separate programs for Afro-, Asian-, and Hispanic-American students. We want racial and cultural realities to be a part of *every* class and program. Too often "ethnic studies" is synonymous with "people of color," when in fact it's the white folks who need to learn how and why, as Dr. Cornell West writes, "race matters." Face it: we're a multi-racial, multi-ethnic nation, and the Church of Jesus Christ is a blend of every race and color. You can no longer be called to serve God's church and not know how to deal with the complexities of different groups learning to get along. If your car includes gas and electric motors, we call it a hybrid. So now the motto for church growth is "hybrid congregations, hybrid communities."

"Behold, I make all things new," says the Scriptures (Rev 21:5). To believe in the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit means that we need not fear change. We need more theology schools that are forward-looking, not backward-looking. There's a bold new seminary in Claremont that has taken the plunge, now with satellite programs in South L.A. as well. We look forward to partnering with you in "equipping the saints."

■