

Re-forming church

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Over two decades ago, in *The Once and Future Church*, Loren Mead declared that the era of “Christendom” was over for mainline Protestants. Mead launched a discussion—which has only expanded since—about an emerging new paradigm of church life defined by local context and intentional, grassroots mission.

It was perhaps a vestige of late-modern thinking to imagine that something as coherent as a single paradigm would emerge. What has appeared instead is a host of ecclesial experiments drawing on a variety of reform movements within the church. These efforts are responding to the new ways in which people gather in community and attach themselves to institutions, as well as to the distinctive concerns and styles of baby boomers, Gen Xers, and the millennial generation.

Some church-growth consultants still tout the success of the megachurch model of outreach, insisting that congregations that want to reach the unchurched must ditch the hymnbook and liturgy in favor of polished rock bands and screen-projected

texts. Others say that model is fatally tied to the ethos of the baby boomers and has little appeal to millennials, who value participatory worship and tight-knit community. Some analysts argue that the key to renewal is finding a vocabulary that resonates with the burgeoning “spiritual but not religious” cohort who are suspicious of all religious language and church structure. Other parts of the mainline church are energized by refocusing on tradition—one thinks, for example, of the work of the Center for Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, the influence of the website textweek.com, and the widespread interest in ancient liturgy and monastic practice.

The various energies shaping new and renewed congregations are difficult to categorize, and they can be combined in countless local permutations. But there is little doubt that a new kind of church is in the making.

This issue of the *Century* introduces a new column by Carol Howard Merritt that focuses on the church in the making—on new church starts, on ways congregations are reinventing themselves, and on what these developments mean for leaders, congregations, and denominations (["Boomer denominations"](#)). Merritt, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), writes the widely read blog Tribal Church (hosted by the *Century*). The author of *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* and *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation*, she has a special interest in generational differences and a passion for helping all ages find their place in the church—and for keeping us all talking to one another.