

New rituals for new realities

People achieve different milestones, in different orders. Can churches celebrate this?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [October 12, 2016](#) issue



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Kristen got a panicky feeling when she saw the older woman marching toward her. Gripping her coffee cup, Kristen glanced around the fellowship hall looking for an escape.

The woman pulled Kristen aside. “Sweetheart, when are you going to have a baby? You’d be such a good mother.” The older woman patted Kristen on the back. Kristen smiled and nodded, hoping that her agreeable expression would allow her to dodge

the question. Then, as soon as she could, she moved to the other side of the room.

She knew that the women meant well, but the comments made her anxious. She wanted to become a mother, but she had decided to go to graduate school and get into her career before she had children. Now she had a pile of debt and a low-paying first job—still not a good time to have a child. Kristen was wondering if she and her husband should have children at all; she couldn't pay off her debt and save for her child's college tuition at the same time.

Kristen wasn't alone in missing this familiar marker of adulthood. Many of her friends had put off marriage and were struggling with student loan debt. They weren't able to buy homes or set down roots in a community.

Most people understood. But people in her congregation still expected her to meet certain goals. In her mind, past generations had all followed a pattern: birth, education, marriage, employment, babies, and death. (And for many women, employment was optional.) When life didn't unfold in this sequence, people whispered at family reunions, wondering what had gone wrong. And they whispered in churches.

Pastors Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy and Nick Larson have been thinking about the rituals of the church and how they might mark the life passages of people who follow a different life sequence. They wonder how the church can celebrate neglected milestones and grieve suffering that was once private but is now public because of social media. These new events take on a communal significance, so Buchakjian-Tweedy and Larson write liturgies and create rituals for them.

"When we ritualize, we give the authority and blessing of church and God to new ways of being in the world," said Buchakjian-Tweedy. She points out that the church focuses on heterosexual and cisgender people and wonders, "How can we create new things for those who have not felt welcome?" She thinks about creating rituals related to infertility, pregnancy loss, and divorce, as well as liturgies for renewals of baptism that uplift names of transgender members and proclaim that God knew their names from the beginning. She imagines coming-out liturgies and rituals for those who have chosen singleness or childlessness.

"How do we stop looking at people as 'not yet married'?" asks Buchakjian-Tweedy. She suggests that we could give gifts for an apartment or house blessing in the same way that we would for a wedding. And she'd like to find a way to bless the

legacy of people who don't have children.

Serving an intergenerational church, Larson tries to recognize and celebrate life events for all ages in the congregation. For instance, the time when a couple needs to downsize can be a moment to give things to someone who is starting out in life. When a teen gains a digital device for the first time and takes on independence and responsibility, the church can bless the device for the kingdom of God and claim this important moment to talk about how to create healthy online community.

Along with the noting new transitions, Buchakjian-Tweedy and Larson wonder about the sorrowful things that we experience but have difficulty talking about at church. They long for rituals that create space for vulnerability. After Larson's wife suffered a miscarriage, for example, he realized that many others have experienced miscarriage. "We were thinking we were alone, and didn't know where to go for support," he said.

Buchakjian-Tweedy believes that what we pray for is an indicator of who is welcome in our pews and who is not. "We don't include [in our prayers] substance abuse or financial management. How can we understand our job and gospel if we can't talk about things that affect so many people?"

Kristen says that it would be a relief to know that the church blesses her way of being in the world. It would tell her that that her church and God do not think of her as failing at adulthood, but love her just as she is.

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