

Why congregations need denominations

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Years ago a friend who had served very effectively in a United Methodist Church moved to another city to join the staff of a nondenominational megachurch. He is gifted in youth ministry and music and became a worship leader in the new setting. When I was there for a meeting later I joined them for worship on a Wednesday night. Over time we remained friends, even as I had questions about the megachurch as the only model for ministry (at that time this seemed to be a given in clergy gatherings).

A few years later I learned that my friend was no longer on the staff. The senior (and founding) pastor had met with him in the office and shared very simply that the church's vision was leading them into a new direction. My friend had no recourse to make his own case or to interpret his own ministry.

More recently, I learned that another friend who has served for a number of years in a non-denominational community church would be leaving. It seems that this church had begun two different worship services to complement its traditional offering; over time, the worship leaders of these two services simply took their communities (which constituted several hundred people) and began new congregations, using the same names the services had been given in the former church in new locations. The church will now enter into an interim season, seeking to pick up the fragments of what is left over, and the pastor will, over time, seek a new call.

I share these two experiences alongside a comment I came across years ago: *every church and every member of the clergy, over a span of time, needs to belong to a denomination.*

I serve as a district superintendent, and I am aware of the church's imperfections, and my own. I watch over 69 local churches and a few assorted institutions within our geographical boundaries, and we are at work on the development of a new church plant and the development of a missional church network. At any given time about 3-5 of these churches are in real crisis: they are in need of outside intervention, mediation, conflict resolution and spiritual guidance. A denomination, at its best, provides a framework for the protection of the clergy in a workplace and supervision of even the most powerful clergy leaders. In addition, a denomination works out the implications of a missional strategy in an area that is more nuanced than simply whatever the market can bear.

I share these experiences at a time when there is much rhetoric around moving energy, resources and attention to the local church. I love the local church. It is the basic context for the mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world. At the same time, the local church will, on occasion, be stronger as it accomplishes mission that is beyond its own capacity, and as it is accountable to a wisdom that is outside its own day to day movements. Here the analogy of Ronald Heifetz of the dance and the balcony is helpful. Faithful congregations and clergy are engaged in the dance, the daily and weekly movements that, added together, shape parish life: worship, spiritual formation, pastoral care, local and global outreach, evangelism. A balcony perspective, in times of health and in times of crisis, will help the local church to sustain this activity. The absence of such a balcony perspective, in particular circumstances, can lead to chaos and a constricting of the movement of energy. A denomination, at its best, provides that balcony perspective: a person in authority who can intervene in a season of conflict, or a compelling and needed mission that can lift the vision of a community beyond itself.

Yes,

in many instances, and in the best of times, we can function without

denominations. But we are not always at our best, taking into account our temptation to turn in upon ourselves (and the reformers defined sin in this way) and the complexity of creating and sustaining community. I am convinced that every church and every member of the clergy, over a span of time, needs to belong to a denomination.

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