

Orienting attitudes for the decades to come

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Yesterday, I wrote about how people often ask about what the church might look like in 20 years. We, of course, can't predict the future; my crystal ball is in the shop at the moment. But we can look at the interesting things that are happening now and we can dream about where God might be calling us. When imagining what might be coming, there are a few approaches or attitudes that can orient us.

•**Retraditioning.** I have always served traditional congregations, and I love ministry that's intergenerational. It's not always possible for churches to make the generational shift, but it's a beautiful thing when it can.

Many churches are able to identify the historic traditions of their congregations and learn how to practice them even when the culture has changed. (Diana Butler Bass writes about this, and calls it "[retraditioning](#).") For instance, if a church has a lot of people in their twenties and thirties who work retail and cannot get Sunday morning off, instead of blaming their younger members for a lack of commitment, they might have a service at a different time. That way, they are taking the tradition of worship and learning to be fluid about the customs of date and time.

Some traditional churches will continue to thrive, but because of geographic and generational shifts, some will close. At that point we will have buildings and other assets, so I hope that we will learn to put those resources back into planting new churches, supporting immigrant communities and creating imaginative ministries.

•**Innovation.** Stauss and Howe characterize [Generation X as an entrepreneurial generation](#). And it's a good thing, because the church will need to focus on starting new communities, imagining different models and recreating some of our historic models. (I have written about some of these models [here](#).)

Though I point out Gen X, I know that innovation is not just concentrated in one age group. And, certainly, there will be no chance for anyone to innovate if the dominant culture of our mainline churches don't celebrate or sustain creativity. If we fight

innovation, then the creative elements will leave our denominations—not because they are bad people but because the calling to start something new is that strong. But if we can be open to failure, accept risk, and allow for longer support, this can be an exciting time in the life of the church.

•**Friendship.** We have a stunning history of sending out pastors into the middle of nowhere, without support or friendship. A woman might have to drive 25 miles before she can have lunch with another clergywoman. New pastors go from a close community of seminary students, debating theology, sharing meals, and babysitting for one another to isolation. They quickly become burnt out.

Meanwhile, many churches cannot afford a seminary-trained pastor (Jan Edmiston has a [great discussion about the problems and a possible solution](#)), so they turn to dedicated, hard-working lay people. Many of these servants are unbelievable treasures. Sadly, in the PC(USA), a few commissioned lay pastors (or CREs) have led our congregations right out of the denomination. Either way, in most mainline churches, when we put together our ecclesiology, we didn't imagine that a good half of our congregations would be led by lay people, while our seminary-trained pastors would not be able to find a call. So what can we do?

What if we sent people out in teams of three or four to serve six churches in rural areas or areas where they can no longer afford to call an ordained clergy? The pastors could work with their strengths and passions, and have some support along the way. Why should only our largest churches have the benefit of mutual ministry? This would allow ordained clergy to have a place to serve. This would probably be the best way to start new congregations as well. (This is an idea that came from a recent UU panel I was a part of.)

•**Mutuality.** In connectional denominations, when a congregation closes, then the property and money goes to the larger good of the denomination. As we look at our churches, we know that we will need to be much more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity and age. We'll need to use the resources for new church developments and new immigrant fellowships.

I have seen immigrant pastors who get paid far less than the minimum salary required in that area. Sometimes, a new church development pastor working in a white community is paid substantially more as the denominational body supports their salary, but an immigrant pastor is paid a fraction of the amount without any

insurance. Will we be able to overcome our prejudices as we work in the future?

Also, I have watched as many emerging communities have been closed after three or four years because they are not sustainable. Take a good look at this graph from the [Washington Post](#). If we want to minister to younger generations, we need to come to understand the income inequities in our society and be willing to work for social justice in our communities as well as among our congregations.

Even without the income inequities, how many of our churches would be sustainable without the buildings, gifts and resources of previous generations? If we put our average congregation out on a lonely street without a building or without any savings, how many of them would survive? Not many. So, why would we pull the plug on communities that are actually growing? Why would we say that we won't support an immigrant community? Can we begin to understand the importance of mutuality and shared resources at this moment? Can we understand that we are living off of the generosity of generations before us, and learn to share with the emerging generation coming after us?