

Congregational redevelopment and leaving room

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One of the best pieces of advice I ever got came shortly after one of the first worship services I led as a pastor. One of the parish members came up to me after worship one week and said, "You didn't leave enough room."

"What do you mean?" I asked. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"During the prayers," she answered. "You always include a prayer for 'those we now name in our hearts', but you don't leave enough room for me to pray for all the people I want to name."

It was true. I did always include a time of silent prayer, but I never thought about how much silence people would need if they really took me seriously, if they were really praying for people during that time of silent prayer. I didn't leave enough room.

More recently, someone at the congregation where I serve now mentioned that they always have a prayer list in their purse or wallet. They take the list out and pray during the petitions at church. But the list is getting pretty long. It is possible that I am not leaving enough room.

I have been thinking about the term 'redevelopment' for awhile now. I can think of a lot of words to use to describe what congregational redevelopment means. Here are a few: transformation, overcoming fear, listening, creativity, being and becoming.

And here are a few words to describe what redevelopment is not: getting rid of everything from the past, cookie-cutter contemporary liturgy, ignoring your tradition.

I like [Matthew's version](#) of the passage about the new wine and new wineskins. Notice how it reads, "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, *and so both are preserved.*" I particularly like how Jesus seems

concerned about making room both for the new and the old wine, how Jesus wants to make sure that new wine is put into new wineskins where it can grow and expand, where it won't ruin those old wineskins with the precious old wine.

The more I think about it, this is one good way to think about redevelopment. It is like leaving enough room during the petitions for people to say their prayers, leaving room during worship for silence as well as song, leaving room in our lives for God to do a new thing or an old thing in a new way. To redevelop is to trust that God is at work in us, in our congregation, in the world. If we will just leave some room—some room to fail, some room to try new things, some room to listen—God will lead us. To make room is to trust that this is God's church, that we are still called to be bearers of hope and grace and faith in the world. To make room is to listen—to God, to one another, to strangers. To make room is to fail sometimes, and trust that God will use everything we do for God's purposes, to bring good news.

To redevelop a congregation is to leave room for silence, for the Word, for God to work in ways we did not expect and would not have predicted.

I am not claiming to know very much yet about redevelopment, at least not yet. I am on this journey along with everyone else, and I cannot see the ending either. I love the old wine, but I yearn for the new wine too, even though I don't know what it will taste like yet. All I know is that I am going to try to make room for God to work in my heart, in the silence, in the noisiness of our children, in the tears of strangers, in this congregation.

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