

Flexibility and strength, at the gym and church

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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Evidently being able to bend over and touch the palms to the floor isn't all it's cracked up to be. And here I thought I had received high marks for my excellent flexibility. Why did I not learn this until I was 50? To make a long story short, here is my learning: flexibility is great, as long as it is matched by strength. The opposite is true, too—strength is great as long as it is matched by flexibility. So my chiropractor tells me I'm not allowed to stretch anymore, not until I've built up some strength.

I think this might be true for church, too. I read a lot of blog posts and articles about the 21st-century church—that we need to go beyond our walls; that we need to be authentic to reach the millennials; that there is nothing we in the church can do about the nones and the dones; that we must hold on to worship as the expression of our core identity; that we must be about outreach/mission/social justice. That the bigger church is better. That the smaller church is better. That the full-time pastor is optimal. That the tent-making pastor can best handle the paradigm shift we're in. That we're not in a paradigm shift at all.

You get the point. Really, with regards to church work or anything, you can always find someone who's written something to support your position.

With two colleagues, I pastor a great congregation in the Pacific Northwest, an area that has experienced the nones for a while now. We have around 700 members on the roles, maybe 350–400 truly active members. It's big enough to have critical mass and small enough that we pastors can know almost everyone. Every year our membership gain is greater than our loss, but not by much, a dozen or so. So we're not bursting at the seams.

We're comfortable. Our finances are good. Our programs are good. The members of the congregation are not mean to each other or to the staff; in fact, they are rather lovely. The annual meeting of the congregation was filled with laughter and applause. We're good, and we can continue to do this for a while.

My spouse/co-pastor and I have been talking for the last year or so about our need to change some stuff, to try some new stuff, to let go of some old stuff (which, in and of itself is nothing new). We've talked and preached and written about how the 21st-century church is different, that if we don't start doing some new things, if we don't try some ministry or mission that stretches us and get us out of our comfort zones, then 50 years from now there won't be a congregation at the corner of 16th and Hancock.

Recently, one of our members said, "What do you mean by that? You keep telling us that, but I don't know what you mean by it." And here's the truth: I don't know. Today, all I know is what I learned at the gym: we have to be flexible enough to stretch ourselves for the future, and strong enough to hold onto those things that are authentic and central to us in this place.

If asked what flexibility + strength looks like, I would answer "a ballerina." Their bodies are marvels of muscles and stretch, and when they move we don't necessarily see those things. What we see is grace. Maybe there's a word in that for the church, too.

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