

Leading with bold imagination

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Most people who serve as church leaders realize what an important time it is in our religious landscape. Because of demographic, generational, technological, and economic shifts, we realize that many churches are coming to the end of their seasons. In this important moment, we will need leaders who can experiment, create, test, and plant. In this spirit, Montreat's Institute for Church Leadership is holding a [Leading with Bold Imagination Conference](#). Because I'm the conference preacher, they asked me a few questions. Here are a couple of them. I'll post more later this week...

Montreat: What makes your ministry “imaginative”?

Carol: An amazing network.

When I began in the ministry, I was a nervous twenty-something pastor, serving a small congregation. My father eased my concerns when he said, “Carol, you don’t have to know everything. You just have to know whom to ask.”

Throughout my ministry, whether my work has to do with reading an ancient text, handling a complicated administrative matter, understanding a social justice issue, or dreaming about the future, I relied on the wisdom and knowledge of others in order to navigate leadership. I learned from colleagues, as we sipped strong coffee in our lectionary groups. I gleaned from denominational resources, as ruling and teaching elders gathered for meetings on cold folding chairs in fellowship halls. And I received wisdom of women who blazed the trail before me, as my questions peppered our picked-over lunch salads.

Now that physical network has been enhanced with social media. This digital age allows me to rely on colleagues more readily, and my on-line networks often spark my imagination and inspire me to dream.

Montreat: As an innovator and a “possibility thinker” within the church, what are your greatest challenges?

Carol: Bridging the quick passion of the Internet culture and the long-term devotion of the denominational culture.

Clay Shirky wrote a book entitled [*Here Comes Everybody*](#) in which he writes about the Internet's unique power of organizing without an organization. Shirky points out how, with great fervor, movements swell along our social networks. We've certainly seen how things like the Occupy movement sprang up in urban parks and their message spread through Twitter and Facebook. They called out for economic justice in a society where the gap between the rich and the poor increases every year.

This is much different from the world in which most of us move. Denominational bodies have great organization. We work with strong structures, bureaucracies and committees, but we can lack the nimble vigor of the Internet culture. Church leaders often meet in order to discuss how we will be doing everything next year exactly the same way we did it last year.

In my work, I often straddle these two worlds: 1) the fast-paced and passionate world fueled by the Internet and 2) the wise and steady world of organizations and committees. I understand the strengths and weaknesses of both, and I wonder if there is any way to marry the two.

Can people with organized structures (and—let's be frank—often they are the people with money) begin to listen to the ardor of those who change their Twitter avatar in the hope that their voice might be heard? Can established organizations learn from social media how to spread the message of what they accomplish among a new generation?

And, can those with strong social networks realize that substantial change takes time? Can we learn how to build trust and apply pressure over the long run? Can the quick fervor of Internet culture use some of the wisdom that comes from prolonged organization?

We have much to learn from one another.