

Mendicants and anchorites

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At first they sounded to me like the names of medieval cricket teams, but it turns out that *mendicants* and *anchorites* were actually two different types of ancient monastics. Mendicants were nomadic monks who never acquired property. They travelled around and lived by begging from strangers. Anchorites also took a vow of poverty, but they would settle in one place and live in solitude. An *Anchoress* was a female anchorite who would live secluded in a dwelling literally “anchored” to the local church where she dispensed wisdom and prayers through a small window in her room. It is said that Julian of Norwich was an anchoress.

Maybe churches today need these two types of people: the mendicants, who are more nomadic and view the ministry as something fluid that can follow the Spirit anywhere; and the anchorites, who are firmly rooted in a location and tradition, who “bloom where they are planted.”

In interviews with people who experienced profound change in their churches, I have met both kinds of Christians. The more nomadic members are able to experiment with major “adaptive change” and take risks with more ease. They have experience with transitions like divorce, re-settlement, or immigrating from another country. It’s easier for them to imagine, say, a new Sunday School format, a new style of worship or worshipping in a different location.

But the anchor people are important too. Sometimes we call them “pillars”. We need spiritual anchors who remember and are committed to the church’s mission, history and traditions. They help us stay connected to our core values and purpose.

I was in a church full of nomads once, and when things fell apart, no one seemed to know where we kept the glue. Nobody remembered why we had first been called together by God, and since our roots weren’t very deep, we were finally uprooted and cast to the four winds.

Another time, I served a church full of anchors. They had a firm hold on their own traditions, family ties and history. That’s a wonderful thing to a point; but when major change is required, anchors are not easily hoisted out of their ruts!

Churches need the frontier spirit of mendicants who know how to wander in the wilderness. But we also need our anchorites, those who have a grasp of the deep traditions that unite us. With the world around us changing so fast, we need to cling to those things that ground and connect us with God.

Are you a mendicant or an anchorite? How are your gifts helping your church follow Christ more faithfully? How are you holding things back?

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