

Cooking from scratch

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

May 22, 2013

You will do big things. That's not just some sort of pie-in-the-sky commencement lingo. You will be changing Christianity in our country. You know why? Because we've been serving up a lot of Costco lasagna in our churches.

Do you know what I'm talking about? The Costco or Sam's club lasagna—maybe it comes from Stouffers—anyways, it is a staple for a lot of churches. When I enter a fellowship hall, I can usually smell it before I can see it. And as soon as I spy that silver foil container, I know exactly what's in store. It's the salvation of the meager potluck. You can feed a multitude with the stuff.

That frozen lasagna is also a pretty good metaphor for how church has been working for many communities. When I graduated from seminary, there was an expectation that we'd been heating up that lasagna. Sticking it in the oven. Pastors could go into a ministry setting, they could take whatever the person before had cooked up right out of the freezer. We just had to get it to the right temperature and voila! Dinner was ready! It might have been slightly inadequate. It might have been dry. It might have been tired. But the frozen lasagna got the job done.

As new pastors, we were told, "Don't change anything! We've been reheating this dish for fifty years, and we're still hoping that it will taste as good as it did in 1963. You can try to dress it up a little bit, maybe add a little sauce. You can try to put some salad on the side, but don't do that until a least a year of ministry. You have to build up enough social capital before you can start spending it on stuff like fancy side dishes."

But guess what? You, *you* will be working from scratch!

You have heard the statistics of how church attendance is in decline. You have heard about how the fastest growing religious group is the "Spiritual but not religious." You have heard that the Millennials—one of our nation's largest generations—is the least religious, and when they fill out census forms asking their religious preference, more

and more people check the box for “None.”

We know that there are many churches that are concerned as they see shrinking attendance and as they look over their budgets. We see our pensions (if we have pensions) are not secure. We know all of it. And we also know that we can not keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results. We can't keep serving that same dish and expect that other people will start showing up for the potluck.

So you are also entering one of the most exciting times in the church, because when people show up, it's not because of some sort of societal expectation, it's because they're looking for something. And you will not be going to put that old lasagna back into the oven again. You're cooking from scratch and it will be up to you to find the best ingredients, to hold on to what is good, and to create anew.

In fact, it sometimes feels like the whole of Christianity is being spooned out right now. It's being emptied, and it will be your prophetic imagination, your dreams that will fill it back up. And in this moment, we can open ourselves up to what God would have us to be. We can imagine a church as a movement of justice and love and mercy--a beloved community where we share what we have and we look after the least of these. It can be a church that listens to those who have been silenced. It will be made up of dreaming people, who help the voiceless to sing, who learn how to share our resources, who learn how to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless with the little that they have. It can be a church that longs for liberation of the captives.