

Why I refuse to use "mainline" any longer

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

September 18, 2013

In [The Christian Century and the Rise of Mainline Protestantism](#), Elesa Coffman outlines the origins of term "Mainline." The label commonly refers to the Episcopal Church, The Presbyterian Church (USA), northern Baptist churches, the Congregational church (now UCC), the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Disciples of Christ. Sometimes that list is longer and other times it's shorter.

Coffman writes:

In America, *mainline* has referred colloquially to the railroad leading to the elite northwestern suburbs of Philadelphia. Sociologist E. Digby Baltzell described this Main Line in his 1958 study, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class...* By the 1950s, according to Baltzell, the term "Mainliner ha[d] become synonymous with 'upper crust,' 'old family,' or 'socialite.'

It was not a term that denominational leaders came up with, but we have embraced it for many years. Now, it's a good time to discard it. Why?

**It white-washes our influences.** If you asked what prominent theologians and thinkers have formed the American progressive movement, I daresay that many of us would point to W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter Rauschenbusch, Dorothy Day, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Gustavo Gutierrez, Elizabeth Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and James Cone. The list goes on, but there is something important about the names. Even though we often look to the male European Reformers for much of our theology, even though a quick browse through the theology departments of most seminaries will reveal an overwhelming number of older, white men, we also know our thought for more than hundred years has been challenged by those working in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, with the civil rights movement, from subjugated women, and in the midst of immigrants' struggles.

Liberal Black congregations and denominations have transformed our ecclesiology in profound ways. Yet, when we used the term "Mainline," then we white-wash our

history and excise our great reformers. Our influences have come from those who listened to the oppressed, understood suffering, and made us hungry for liberation. If these voices have taught us to look beyond our individualistic spirituality, greedy capitalism, and work for the world as it ought to be, then why would we align ourselves with the elite and upper crust?

**Also, our labels not only define who we have been, but they call forth who we want to become.** This is an important moment for our church. Things are shifting radically. In the PC(USA), immigrant churches and churches with underrepresented racial ethnic minorities are growing while many white congregations dwindle. These pockets of growth reflect our larger society. My generation is not as well-off as my parents. In my daughter's generation, European whites will be the minority.

It's an exciting time, and it is an important moment for us to name who we want to be. And I, for one, am tired of pretending that we want to hang out at the Country Club and eat cucumber sandwiches in fancy hats. We are not some sort of upper-crust elite society. Now, it's time to discard that tired label that ties us too closely with a particular race and class. It's time to call forth another name.