

Tips for the budding writer, activist or public theologian

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As a writer, being a part of denomination has incredible benefits and difficulties. Here are some things I learned about the relationship between the two.

Don't tie yourself to your denominational brand.

My denomination has the best seal ever. Ask just about any Presbyterian, and we will puff with pride at the theological depth of it. It defines us—simple, yet packed with meaning the more you study it. I'm pretty sure I could preach a year of sermons on the logo. Like most denominations, we have a sophisticated architecture of thought—our theology, polity, and historic stances on particular issues have wisdom that I'm usually pleased to claim. Yet, the seal sometimes stops me.

I benefit from a diverse group of thinkers, but if an article is written specifically for a Methodist publication, I don't click on it. If a book elucidates a string of Episcopal hierarchies, I put it down. And nothing makes me more impatient than getting into the political weeds of Presbyterians. Aside from the "Aha! I know that person," denominational news can be tiresome.

If I (a die-hard denominational devotee) feel that way, then what about the average person? If you write, then don't call your blog, "Periodic Press from a Presbyterian Pen." You'll lose most of your audience.

Don't feed the internal creatures

I worry about having a ministry and funding eco-system that feeds off itself. We have organizations whose sole purpose is to have an influence within the denominational structure. Not the community, not the world. Just the denomination. We want to make sure that a vote goes a certain way at a national meeting, so we flood endless energy into making sure that it does. When the vote is over, we think about the next vote.

If you have a certain issue that makes you passionate, then that's fantastic. But don't get too caught up in denominational tangles if they have no effect on the local church or your community. You can quickly tie all of your energy into someone else's battles. The national body can make a statement that no one cares about, and you find that you just got caught up in a vain whirlwind of dust and fury but you have nothing to show from it.

Always work to connect your denominational activism to community organization or mainstream media. It's important how your denomination votes on certain issues, but it's more important that we get our message out to the larger world.

Don't let people stifle your voice

If you find you're being ignored because you're younger, a person of color, a woman, or not at a "prestigious" church, or whatever the case may be, organize outside the current power networks. Our structures are exceedingly parochial. Nominating committees are often chaired by the same person for decades (because "she knows everybody"). Often the only way to get a voice is to grab a bullhorn and start shouting from the outside.

Cross-pollinate with other organizations

Lately, I find myself drawn to groups that work across denominations. The network I help to organize (UNCO) is constantly trying to broaden its appeal. I write for Christian Century (historically DOC), publish with Alban (strong Episcopal ties), coach with Center for Progressive Renewal (start-up funds came from UCC), and cavort with Red Letter Christians (mostly Evangelical). Less than half of my speaking is for Presbyterian audiences. In fact, it took a while before my voice found much of a hearing inside my own denomination.

With the Internet, we're able to share wisdom across denominations and social justice movements. I am terribly thankful—because, trust me, you don't want to learn how to design an awesome website from the average Presbyterian. If you want to learn about empowerment of women, you can look to us, but it's good to find strength in various places in our body.

Don't get too proud

There are many who find great joy and satisfaction in denominational structures. And (let's be honest), there is a certain amount of power that can be gained inside our denominational pools that we might never have outside of them. It's really nice to be a big fish—especially when we forget how small our pond is.

But working outside of that tiny reality keeps us “right sized.” Most of us know that tedious person who has an incredible amount of power within our denomination, and has no perspective on his limited influence outside his small circle. Don't be that guy.