

## Ministry myths

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In a recent interview, someone asked me, “What did you write in *Tribal Church* that you regret? Is there anything that you would change?” The question reminded me of the fact that we’re always predicting and observing things that may not prove to be true a few years later. Here are three myths that I often hear about ministry that I question.

**People hate labels.** It has been said that the generation in which we live, people don’t want to be labeled. If that’s true, why do people refer to their Meyers-Briggs make-up so often? I’m more likely to know my friend is an extrovert than I am to know what sort of job she has.

I don’t know anything about the Enneagram, but I know all the people who proclaim that they’re eights.

And we’re all gorging ourselves on BuzzFeed’s quizzes. Which Harry Potter Character are you? What kind of dog are you? Which Stephen King book are you? If we didn’t care about labels, then why would we care if our personality aligned with Hermione or Hagrid?

**People hate to join things.** We say this when we talk about church membership. And a lot of people wonder what we’re going to do about membership in general. It’s an important question and I believe pastors when they tell me that membership is different now. But I haven’t experienced it in the ministries I’ve been a part of.

Yes, it’s true that things like the Bowling League, Garden Club, Rotary and Shriner’s don’t have the same appeal that they might have had in past generations. But I’ve served five churches where people are incredibly excited about joining. It’s not a given. It’s not a societal expectation. But it’s a commitment that people take seriously and they’re so happy to do it.

Membership is on the rise. We’re members of our grocery store, drug store, music station, book store, airline, and Y. Often we get discounts or access for our loyalty.

But why do stores set up elite clubs? Because they know that people want to be a part of things. They want to be members.

**Millennials are institutionally minded.** This was a prediction that William Strauss and Neil Howe made (this is a [fascinating article](#), and I recommend it even with its faulty forecasting). I would often quote Strauss and Howe in the hopes that churches would concentrate on engaging them, instead of writing them off (sometimes it feels like local churches didn't try much with my Generation).

But as the years went on, I watched Millennials occupy Wall Street, move off the grid, become more disenfranchised with the political process, stage slut walks—all of these things seemed to be moving away from the civic norms that had been predicted for them.

When I was struggling with this in a conference a couple of years ago, I asked a few people in their twenties to explain what was actually going on. They said that there is a playful subversion in their civic engagement. They will take words, labels, or names that were once derisive and wear them proudly (i.e., slut or queer).

I know that many people (like me) talk a lot. We are all trying to understand cultural shifts, in the hopes of ministering effectively in the midst of them. But we should always be aware our common understandings don't always match up with what we observe, and be ready to cede when we are wrong about something.