

Why we need to support new churches for the long run

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

August 20, 2015

I was at a meeting recently where the pastor of a traditional church was complaining about having to support a new church development for more than three years.

So I asked him:

- What was your church's membership three years ago?
- What is your church's membership now?
- Have you had growth or decline?
- How many new members have joined your church in the past three years?
- If you had to pay your pastor's salary using only the pledges of the new members from the past three years, would their pledges cover the wages?
- Now, imagine if those new members had to pay for a salary, building, office supplies, advertising, worship supplies, and everything else that goes into a new church. Would that be possible?

For most churches, it probably wouldn't be possible. Unless a titing Rockefeller just joined their church. In fact, for most established churches, if you took away their building, savings, endowments, and foundations, they wouldn't be self-sustaining either.

I don't know that magical time when a pastor opened up a building and people flocked in because they were socially conditioned to go to a denominational church. I only know the one we live in, which is full of wonderful, diverse people who think it's pretty novel to go to church on Sunday morning. They might be spiritual but not religious. They might be part of the growing "nones." They usually can't imagine going to church because that's something they only did when they were visiting their grandmother. They definitely don't have the pledging habits of their grandparents.

But there seems to be an institutional memory that expects new churches to work the same way that they did in the 60s. Unfortunately, new churches don't work among societal expectations of 50 years ago any more than traditional congregations. [It takes 8 to 10 years for financial sustainability.](#)

Since things are not working in the same way, perhaps we need a different model.

What if we began to pay new church planters as if they were part of the denominational staff's governing body? They would need to raise the money for the rest of the budget after a couple of years, but they wouldn't have the overwhelming stress of trying to raise their own salary, as well as start a new community. Or we could think of them as missionaries or chaplains. Established congregations could support them. We have a lot of models for ministry that don't expect staff to raise their own salary while working at their job. Could we extend that support to our new church developers?