

In praise of institutions

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I am a part of some very old institutions. I am a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I write for the Christian Century (the “Century” refers to the 1900s). My next book is on HarperOne. I subscribe to the *New York Times*. I belong to a political party. I consult, coach, and speak across the ecumenical church. I talk about new church developments and other ministry innovations that will further our institutions.

Many people in my line of work are anti-institutional. I am not. Even though my mission in life is not to save the institutional church (it is to love God and people, first and foremost), I believe in institutions.

Why? It grew out of my personal story. When I was a child, we had a pedophile pastor. There were no checks and balances in place, so even though our nondenominational church leadership knew what happened, they encouraged the parents and children to forgive him, and the pedophile kept pastoring. There was nothing to stop him.

I never wanted to go to a church where a pastor had that sort of unchecked power. Nor did I want to be a pastor of a church where I would not be held accountable for my actions. So, that was one of many reasons I became a part of a denominational church. It’s tricky, because historic denominations have been around for a long time, so they have more atrocities under their belts. The non-denominational church may not claim our historic baggage in the same way. But in the best situations, denominations have also learned from horrors and developed orders of discipline. The system can be unfair, it can be gamed, and it can still protect the old boys. But it exists and it often works.

So I serve within institutions. I get frustrated because I think they spend their money on the wrong things. I get irritated that they are too worried about maintaining the past and not interested enough in the future. I become impatient with bureaucracies that cannot turn on a dime. And yet, I have never wavered from that commitment.

Right now, we're watching our country go through the rejection of its political and religious institutions. With our last election, many people were tired of watching the endless gridlock between liberals and conservatives, so they wanted someone who would shake things up. They are thrilled that Trump is putting people in the government who don't know much about their jobs. They applaud as Dream Acts, health care, environmental agreements, intergovernmental organizations, and historic alliances get dismantled. I do not.

I received a lot of correspondence after the election, as people hope for the best and prepare for the worst. One thing that kept coming up as people strategized resistance to the possible worst, was to support our institutions. It's easy for us to cry that we want a revolution, but do we really want to upend our democracy? We saw how the tenants of journalism were overturned with fake news and propaganda. We have seen Freedom of Speech come under attack as Trump has threatened libel suits, not because he can win them, but because he knows he can make teetering news organizations go under with pressure.

[This article](#) points out Yascha Mounk's symptoms of a weak democracy:

- 1) decrease of people who think it's essential to live in a democracy,
- 2) greater openness to nondemocratic forms of government (such as military rule), and
- 3) gaining support for anti-system parties and movements.

In this moment, when some of our basic liberties—freedom of speech, freedom from torture, freedom of religion, and bodily integrity—are questioned implicitly and explicitly, our institutions are important. And, I would argue that our denominations, which have been a part of the historic struggle for social justice and human rights, are integral to our democratic endeavors.