

Drifting into the flow, without a brain hack

Our culture will continue to replace traditional religion with other services that attempt to provide the same thing.

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

September 22, 2017



Yesterday, as I was scrolling through the newspaper's abundance of information, I learned that you can ["hack your brain" for \\$5,000](#). Here's the bottom line: we are so inundated with information that we have forgotten how to get into a flow—that steady, productive stream, where we forget to track our time. It is that place where

minutes and hours lose their shape and become elongated or shortened like a pair of fickle pantyhose.

The [picture](#) looked cult-like creepy, but it also sounded interesting, until I got to this line:

The new generation of flowsters are excited, perhaps, that using the advances of neuroscience, they might not have to meditate every day for 10 years to gain access to these layers of their brains.

Then I realized that this is another place where our larger culture is attempting to tend to the soul of our country. Because, of course, we learn to meditate at church. In fact, meditating for ten years is not a big deal. It's a regular spiritual practice. But people are rejecting church (or the church is rejecting people, depending on your context), so we have to figure out other ways to unearth these layers of our brain.

This will keep happening—the replacement of traditional religion with other services that attempt to provide the same thing. Hospice will expand. Hiking clubs will increase. Pious devotion to fitness programs will continue. Because we have a longing, an urge, and a feeling of absolute dependence that doesn't go away, even if we have rejected religion. We need a beloved community, a reminder of mystery, and people who will help us think about the meaning of our lives, and give comfort in our deaths.

Anyone who is watching church movements on a macro level knows that a boom occurred after World War II, and since then religion in our country has been steadily declining. At first, we thought the charismatic and conservative evangelical megachurches were sheep stealing. But now, evangelicals are also showing signs of shrinkage, especially with younger generations, where more people do not claim any religious tradition.

Boomers make up about 70% of the clergy population in our ecumenical churches (the number ranges from 56 to 75%, depending on the denomination) and will be retiring soon. A lot of our churches are small and rural, so it's difficult for them to support a pastor who has student loans, and needs a pension and health insurance. So, they typically meander for a few years with lay leadership, then close.

Some people look at all the churches closing and think that we are going to keep decreasing at the same rate until we are gone. I don't think so. There are still really active, healthy congregations in urban areas. They will have challenges because older generations typically give the majority of the income. But they're vital and will probably continue to be.

Others say that church is going back to a baseline, like it was before the Greatest Generation took their Baby Boomer kids to church and we suddenly needed giant education wings and programs for every day of the week.

I used to have a dream that denominational churches could take the lead of younger generations, plant new communities, and slowly reform into something different. We would innovate, but we would do it with theological depth and an awareness that \$5k and neurological hocus pocus could not replace the beauty of community.

But, our denominations are not supporting new initiatives at the level that they need (they typically need funding for 8 to 10 years). In fact, sometimes denominational bodies act like new communities are the enemy, because they are "taking all the money." On the floor of our presbytery, I watched as a new church planter was likened to Judas by another pastor. Evidently, in his mind, a church planter who goes to work every day spreading the good news is actually stealing from the common pouch and giving Jesus the kiss of death.

People nodded their heads at his pronouncement while my heart broke. Not only for the church planter. Not only for the fledgling community (whose young members were gathered in the meeting, excited about starting something new and startled by the hateful characterization of their pastor). My heart broke for that body. We had driven the nail into our coffin. If contempt for new ministries was that strong in our presbytery, if we had such hatred against Jesus' last command to make disciples, then the Spirit would certainly find someplace else where she could move.

So, what's going to happen? Of course, not every denominational body is like ours. I still hope that we will be able to plant congregations and make disciples, and love them even if they are not sixty-two-year-old, economically comfortable white people with graduate degrees and leather-seat Buicks. But I worry. The soul of our country is in dire straits, and I don't think the flowsters are going to be able to pick up the slack.