

Boomer denominations

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [March 5, 2014](#) issue



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“There was some flexibility at first, but then it seemed like the denomination wanted us to become a typical church,” said Jonathan, a member of a new church that his denomination had disbanded. “It was almost like they didn’t understand how the flexibility could result in anything other than a normal church plant.”

Jonathan was highlighting the tensions between the culture of denominations and that of new worshiping communities. The perception that denominations want new church members to look and think like established ones causes some church planters to refer to the denomination as “widget factories.”

“Denominations often want something different,” said Bruce Reyes-Chow, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) pastor who founded Mission Bay Community Church in San Francisco. But when resources for the new church begin to dwindle, or when the denomination wants to see a certain number of members on the rolls before it will allow the church to officially organize, the relationship gets tense. “Then we as denominations gravitate back to what we know. We prefer the 500-member traditional church that worships in the sanctuary.”

I thought about this conversation as I left Rivermont Presbyterian—the traditional church I serve in Chattanooga—crossed a bridge, entered a public library, and met the other congregation with which I worship, Mercy Junction. This community, which was started by my husband, Brian Merritt, is also part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Its members had gathered in a large, uncarpeted room with echoing, bare

walls to listen to Will Potter, who wrote *Green Is the New Red*.

Potter is a journalist who has written about the erosion of civil liberties for activists who work on environmental issues, animal rights, and farmworker rights. (The new restrictions are known as the ag-gag laws.) Mercy Junction's social justice work involves lots of protesting, feeding, and advocating, so regulations for activists affect this community directly.

As I looked around at the gathered crowd I was stunned by the contrast. Though Rivermont and Mercy Junction both yearn to do justice and love mercy, they go about their work in distinct ways and the congregations differ greatly in age and socioeconomic makeup. The denominational body, which acts as the bridge to both cultures, has the difficult and exciting task of holding the communities together.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor who planted House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, talks about the "cultural commute" her friends undertake when they go to a traditional church. Indeed, for some, walking into a sanctuary can feel like entering a different era. The architecture of the worship space might be a hundred years old, and the Christian education wing might have been constructed in the late 1960s to house the baby boom. Traditional congregations host programs in the daytime, when retirees can roll up their sleeves but when younger generations are at work.

Often the cultural commute is very rewarding, and in a world where our entertainment, magazines, and books are marketed according to generational demographics, it's vital that Christians cross boundaries and worship in different settings. Being church together makes us aware of our differing opinions, needs, and viewpoints.

The problem arises when we don't understand that the dominant culture reflects a particular generation. We confuse prevalence with sacredness. The distinctions become acute when we start new churches, because the new communities tend to be unfettered by older norms.

Since new church plants succeed only about half the time, denominational bodies that support them are not likely to take a "build it and they will come" approach. They rarely invest in brick and mortar until a new church shows signs of long-term viability. So new communities have to go searching for spaces to worship. Having temporary walls makes them visible to their neighbors, allows for work alongside the larger community, and breaks down denominational distinctions.

“New churches have to think a lot about the cultural context,” noted Reyes-Chow. “They might go through the parts of a service and say, ‘This call to worship doesn’t make sense to us; what are some other ways we can gather together?’”

But what happens when the culture of the fledgling community is so different that the denomination feels like its identity is being lost? “The new community and the denomination have to keep talking about what defines a church,” said Reyes-Chow. “The new church needs to keep interpreting what it means to gather.”

In the years to come, as denominations close churches and plant new ones, we should remember that the churches being planted today also reflect a particular culture of their own. The key will be to celebrate and support differences and interpret them to one another.