

The next 40 years

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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A commissioner to the General Assembly (our denomination's national meeting that happens every two years), came back to report on what he did. He was a bit disappointed that he was on the church growth committee. The first day they sat down and talked about how if the church continues to decline at the same rate, then there will be no members left in forty years. The second day, they studied Matthew 25. The third day, they studied Matthew 25. They went on a couple of field trips, and they studied Matthew 25 some more.

The people hearing the report were shocked. That was it? I mean Matthew 25 is super, but... that's it?

Perhaps there was more to it than that, and that's just what the commissioner reported, but wow. Why not come up with a strategic plan for growth? I realize that there is no denominational master plan that we can follow. We tend to be much more grassroots. But we had the best and the brightest minds of our denomination gathered in one place, why not dream a bit about what we could do? We have a lot of money, a lot of property, and some of the most gifted pastors... what could we do? Here's what I would love to see happen:

1) Become determined to keep our recent grads.

If anyone has met anyone who has recently graduated from seminary, you will know that we have a glut of qualified candidates, and no place for them to go. Actually. Let me rephrase that. We have some of the most brilliant people in our church who are unemployed. I have seen the most incredibly gifted minds walking around, wanting to be ordained, and we have no place for them. Some of them are finding jobs as interns, or working in seminaries, or non-profits, but they can't get ordained without a traditional call. Can we begin to open up our idea of what a

validated ministry is? Can we make sure that we track these graduates? Could Presbyteries support them and encourage them while they look for positions? Can we offer internships and educational opportunities for them? (I know you guys need jobs, not more education, but until then....) We're going to need them soon, and we don't want to lose them.

2) Quit giving incentives to ministers who are past retirement to stay employed.

I'm not sure what other denominations are doing, but in the Presbyterian Church (USA), pastors get incentives to stay in their jobs beyond the age of 65. This is going to take action from the General Assembly to change. I've [written on this](#) before, and here's a [comment](#) from a Pension representative to explain exactly what they're doing. With grads not able to get jobs, this seems like a bad idea.

3) Help churches to die well. There are many things that we do, as pastors, when we stand beside the bed of someone who is dying, and there are many things that we don't do. It's the same with our churches. We don't tell churches that they are failures because they are dying. We don't shame them for not living a few years longer. We celebrate their lives. And with churches, we can help them to imagine how they can use their resources and assets to plant new churches.

4) Support people who want to plant churches. While going to Bible School, I was told there was one way to "make disciples" and that was to plant churches. In our denomination, only a couple of New Church Developments were started nationally in the last couple of years, but I know at least twelve people who would start a church tomorrow, if they could. Many of them have been approved by the denomination. They are raring to go, but there's no place for them to go. They have been told to just plant the church, and then look for denominational support. But they have children. They need insurance. They need some support.

I'm a part of a group of pastors who are starting to fundraise for NCDs outside of the denominational systems. They are DOC, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Post-evangelicals.

There will be some NCD failures, just like a percentage of new businesses fail. We can plan for those. And we can let the pastors decide what makes sense in their context—a traditional church, an emerging church, a monastic community, a coffeehouse church, a nesting church, or whatever.... There are a million ways to do it now.

Generation X is an entrepreneurial, innovative generation. We start businesses. We create new technology. And we are itching to start new churches. (The DOC is doing a great job of this.) And the Millennials are a very large generation. Can we begin to imagine congregations that make sense in their context?

Will we support our innovators? Will we allow people to retire? Will we give dignity to churches who are dying? Can we have a better vision for the next forty years? What would you like to see happen?

Originally posted at [Tribal Church](#).