

The reinvented church: Styles and strategies: New paradigms and renewed churches

by [Donald E. Miller](#) in the [December 22, 1999](#) issue

My personal religious pilgrimage is not exceptional. I grew up in a community church in southern California that had evangelical leanings. It was a strong and caring group of people, even though the leadership of the church circumscribed the Christian faith with a relatively strong dose of moral legalism. In college I joined the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and discovered that some people actually think about their faith and write rather sophisticated arguments defending their beliefs. Then I read Marx, Freud, Weber and Durkheim and decided that Christianity is a social construction that sometimes operates as a crutch, is sometimes politically repressive, and in its finer moments is a source of moral challenge and social cohesion.

When my wife and I moved to Pasadena, California, we joined a group of well-educated couples who were meeting in a local Baptist church on Sunday mornings for a freewheeling discussion of life, social issues and various cultural challenges to the Christian faith. This was the early 1970s, and the countercultural revolutions launched in the '60s were in full bloom.

One Sunday morning while the 40 of us were in heated discussion, a deacon delivered an ultimatum: conclude your Sunday school class in time to attend the 11 o'clock worship service, or meet on other premises. We started shopping for a new meeting place. At All Saints Episcopal Church, Rector George Regas issued our group the same invitation that he did every Sunday morning as he stood before the eucharistic table: "Wherever you are on the journey of faith, you are welcome." We could use a room free of charge and come to worship services if we wanted.

The first few times that I went to church at All Saints, I didn't know when to stand or sit. I fumbled my way through the Book of Common Prayer. The music was too

sophisticated for my taste. But the preaching was riveting. The Vietnam war was raging and Regas was birthing the Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race.

Furthermore, I grew to love the liturgy. Unable to accept the creed literally, I nevertheless recited it as a statement of my heritage and found myself deeply moved—often to tears—in a way that I had never experienced in evangelical churches. Clearly, something rather mystical and self-transcending was occurring. A few years later I was on the vestry, and learned about organizational management from a dedicated cadre of men and women. At a Sunday Rector's Forum, I listened to thoughtful people speak about the most pressing social issues of our time. In the early 1980s I wrote *The Case for Liberal Christianity* and dedicated it to the people of All Saints Church. In this community I had come to a new commitment and understanding of the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, through conversations with my undergraduate students, I became intrigued with a movement of churches that had roots in southern California and was spreading across the country—churches that appealed especially to unchurched baby boomers and baby busters. With the assistance of a grant, I visited dozens of rapidly growing churches associated with the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Calvary Chapel and Hope Chapel and interviewed several hundred clergy and lay leaders.

On the basis of my research, I wrote *Reinventing American Protestantism* (1997), which argued that a reformation is transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium. Unlike the one led by Martin Luther, this reformation is challenging not doctrine but the very medium through which the message of Christianity is articulated. Like upstart religious groups of the past, these "new paradigm" churches have discarded many of the attributes of establishment religion. They are appropriating contemporary cultural forms and creating a new genre of worship music. They are restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion and democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers. They are harbingers of postdenominational Christianity.

In the typical new paradigm church, most members are relatively young. The church meets in a building that has no stained glass, steeple or pews. In fact, most of these worship spaces are either converted warehouses, theaters or rented school auditoriums. People (including the pastors) come dressed as if on their way to a picnic. The music is what one might hear on a pop radio station, except the lyrics are

Christian. The sermon is informal and focused on exposition of a passage of scripture. The pastors are not required to have a seminary education. Typically they are individuals whose lives have been radically transformed by God and who wish to share the good news of their Christian convictions. They view God as capable of supernatural intervention in our lives; hence, they have no difficulty affirming the miracles described in the Bible and they hold to a fairly literal view of scripture.

But the worship environment is not legalistic or rigid. Sunday morning is a time of celebration. The focus is not on theological doctrines but on finding analogues in one's life to the biblical narratives. During the week, members meet in small groups where they worship, study the Bible and care for each other. For many, this small group is the extended family that they never had. These churches also offer a myriad of programs that deal with everything from divorce recovery to child rearing, money management, social outreach ministeries to prisoners and unwed mothers, and food distribution. Far from being fundamentalistic, new paradigm churches tend to be tolerant of different personal styles, even while members hold to rather strict moral standards for themselves.

This type of church is culturally hip. Lay members are given tremendous freedom to develop programs. The pastor is a teacher, visionary and trainer, but the people do the basic work of ministry. Many of these churches are independent, and if they do have a denominational affiliation they are part of a movement, not of a church bound by rules and policies. Many of these churches grow too large to manage, but they constantly give away members and young clergy to start new churches on the outskirts of their city and throughout the world. This makes room for more people and new leadership.

These churches have few committee meetings. Instead, when someone has an idea, he or she is empowered to try it out. These churches do not wait months and years for official clearance while an idea passes through some bureaucratic labyrinth. Instead, an individual will step forward and get it rolling, often drawing on the resources of his or her home fellowship group.

Most important of all, their pastors and lay leaders believe that God is calling them to ministry, that God speaks to them—sometimes in rather direct ways—and that where God leads, God will provide. Hence, there is little hand-wringing over fund raising. Instead, people seem to respond to vision, and, as faithful readers of the scriptures, they know that they have an obligation to support God's work in the

world.

When I shared my findings with friends and colleagues from mainline churches, they would often roll their eyes and tell me that I had gone off the deep end. Didn't I know that these groups were part of a right-wing conspiracy and culturally retrograde? How could I find anything of value in such unsophisticated theology? When I told them about healing meetings that I had attended, or that I had witnessed what was reported by members to be the deliverance from demons, they would politely change the subject. They didn't want to hear about these things.

Some of the things that I was witnessing struck me as strange too. Yet I found these groups extremely intriguing. I appreciated the warmth of these churches. In fact, I was blown away by the affection that individuals expressed for each other. Men embraced men. People touched each other when they prayed. The small fellowship groups were like extended families of yesteryear in which people cared for one another and simultaneously held one another accountable for their behavior.

When I wandered through the nursery and primary-age Sunday school classes, I saw men teaching. When I interviewed women, they told me how much more responsible their husbands were as fathers since they had met Jesus. These women didn't seem bothered by Pauline notions of men as the head of the house. Apparently there were trade-offs in terms of changed behavior that made the patriarchal bargain worthwhile. I also found myself intrigued by the reality of God in these people's lives. God was not some abstract concept. They expected God to communicate with them, to direct their lives, their homes, their businesses. And they invited God to show up at their worship services.

I found that these new paradigm congregations exist throughout the U.S. and the world. Currently, Ted Yamamori, of Food for the Hungry, and I are studying churches throughout the developing world that 1) are large and fast growing and 2) have well-defined social and community outreach ministries. During the first year of this four-year project, we were in Manila, Bangkok, Nairobi, Kampala, Buenos Aires, Santiago and São Paulo. The churches that are fast growing and have active social ministries are by and large charismatic or Pentecostal. Furthermore, almost everywhere we went we were told that mainline churches were in decline, although one can obviously always find the notable exception if one searches for it. And, surprising to us, old-line Pentecostal groups--those started through missionary activity in the first half of this century—are often not as vital as charismatically inclined churches that

were started in the past two decades.

Because our sample of churches includes some that are socially active, I hesitate to make any sweeping generalizations about all rapidly growing Pentecostal churches. What I can conclude is that being charismatic does not negate the possibility of highly creative engagement with social issues. In West Africa I was humbled by the way various churches were engaging the AIDS crisis through education as well as basic intervention in the lives of people who were dying and children who were left as survivors. In Manila I was deeply impressed by the vitality of churches in some of the slums and the upward mobility of people who were transformed by their relationship with God. In São Paulo I visited a magnificent health clinic for low-income people that was sponsored by a Pentecostal church, and I visited another congregation that sends out 12 buses every night filled with members who offer soup and blankets to people living on the streets. In addition, members and pastors of these churches cast out demons, heal the sick and believe that God is doing in their cities what God was doing in the first century—namely, some pretty miraculous stuff!

Many of the things that I observed in U.S. churches are multiplied in these developing countries. First, these movements are led by people with immodest vision. They are not limiting themselves to doing what seems humanly possible given their resources and capacity. If they have a church of 2,000, they expect it to grow to 10,000 within a few years. If they are currently doing AIDS education in 60 churches, their plan is to blanket the entire country within five years. If they had 1.5 million people at their "March for Jesus" last year—which occurred in São Paulo—then they expect 2 million this year.

Second, these visions are typically not the result of megalomania, although the human element can never be fully removed. Rather, these dreams have come, quite literally, during periods of extended prayer and fasting. People have seen visions of what God is going to do in their city. Sometimes God even speaks audibly to them. In short, the very visitations that are described in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament seem still to be happening.

Third, the ministry is being done by the people, not the pastor. Most of these churches are radically decentralized, with small fellowship groups meeting in homes. Common people are studying the Bible for themselves, praying together and taking care of each other's needs on a highly informal level. And fourth, when they gather

to worship, you can't keep people from dancing in the aisles, raising their hands in praise, embracing each other and having an exuberant good time. Do they speak in tongues? Are people healed? Yes. But unlike the typical media-take on such churches, this is not the focus of their life together. It is a byproduct of what they believe to be the Holy Spirit's presence in their community.

These new paradigm churches are, I believe, cultural pioneers of sorts. They are attempting to reintegrate bodily experience into religious life. Worship is not simply a matter of the head, affirming various creeds or acknowledging normative beliefs. Beliefs are important, especially when anchored in the retelling of biblical stories--but beliefs in themselves are sterile. Religion is a full-bodied experience that includes all the receptors—all the senses—with the rational mind being only one locus of information about reality.

Is there any way to reconcile the insights manifest in new churches, as well as the changes occurring in postmodern society, with mainline traditions such as that of my own Episcopal Church? To answer, I would first of all suggest that there are inherent strengths of the Episcopal tradition that will continue to be significant because they are strengths that the new paradigm churches lack.

For example, some members of new paradigm churches will probably grow tired of the radical contemporaneity of their worship. While these churches are effective in attracting a nonchurchgoing population, the worship experience may begin to seem shallow after a while. Hence, spiritual seekers may shop for something that has more depth and complexity to it. The Episcopal Church will be a prime alternative.

Second, while many people may desire a religious option that offers concrete answers to life's problems, there will be a minority of well-educated people who will find new-paradigm Christianity to be simplistic in its affirmation of Jesus as the exclusive path to truth.

Third, many members of evangelical churches are tired of the narrow-minded, legalistic, anti-intellectualism that they encounter there. I know dozens of people who have become Episcopalians rather than drop out of church altogether—I am one of those individuals.

One of the wonderful things about the Episcopal Church and other mainline traditions is their affirmation of reason and their willingness to see both sides of an argument and be open to ambiguity. The growth of evangelical churches will create

a market for open-minded churches that are ready to wrestle with complex issues.

At the same time, mainline churches can learn from new paradigm churches. They can learn, first of all, the importance of religious experience. We need to bring the magic back into our worship and back into our personal lives. We need to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit reflects the feeling and experiential dimension of the religious life. We should reach deep within our tradition and rediscover those practices that connect us to God in direct ways.

In the 21st century, people will be seeking spiritual pathways to balance the flat secularism of the Enlightenment metaphysic. They will seek for something beyond the physical world and beyond the bottom line of financial accounting. It should not surprise us that young people are more inclined to believe in angels than are their grandparents. Nor should it shock us that hard-nosed rationalism and empiricism are empty methodologies for many young people. One commentator on the worldwide explosion of Pentecostalism states that there is an "ecstasy deficit" in our culture. I would add that there is also a "hope deficit." The challenge to the church is to tap its tradition for those practices that will enable people to move beyond the utilitarian ethic of our individualistic, materialistically oriented world.

We need, then, to put enormous energy into worship. Our success in moral and societal transformation will correlate directly with our commitment to worship. We need to maintain our claim to reason and simultaneously produce worship encounters with the holy that are beautiful, aesthetically rich, emotionally complex and personally transformative. We should not be quick to trade in our Gothic stone churches for utilitarian warehouse space.

On the other hand, I think that we are going to continue to lose our teenagers unless we can create ways to incorporate their music and their innovative styles of participative worship into our aesthetically rich structures. Hence, we should be doing everything possible to experiment with alternative worship, partnering with youth in planning and leading these services. At the same time, we should expand the number of monasteries and retreat centers, or else encourage our parishioners to take advantage of this rich tradition within Catholicism.

Second, we need to acknowledge that innovation occurs at the local and grass-roots level. The current downsizing of denominational offices—forced by financial exigency—may not be altogether a bad thing. The centers of energy and creativity

lie at the local, not the national, level. The really innovative ideas for reshaping the church will come from people who are addressing the needs of people in their churches and communities, not from denominational officials.

Third, mainline churches should reconsider how they develop leaders. I was struck by the fact that new clergy within new paradigm churches are almost always first identified within the ranks of active laypeople within the congregation. These individuals are then mentored and trained within the context of the local church.

Finally, I think that we should eliminate 80 percent of church committees and trust people to do the work of ministry. The committee meeting is a very inefficient mechanism and a poor structure for experiencing human community. The fastest growing and largest churches in the world are cell-based, with all of the church ministry flowing out of small groupings of people who meet weekly, worshiping together, studying together, praying together and often engaging in highly imaginative service to people in their neighborhoods.