

Generation to generation

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [May 25, 2016](#) issue



A market in Barcelona, Spain, sells wineskins. [Some rights reserved](#) by [flydime](#).

I was having coffee with a clergy friend who serves a traditional congregation. “Our church is struggling,” he said, his brow darkening with concern. “Our members are all over 60, and I can’t remember the last baptism. We’re lucky if 50 people show up on a Sunday morning. Our biggest givers are dying. How can we start alternative ministries when we can’t fill our own pews? How can we throw money at something new when we can’t sustain what we already have? How can we justify new ministries?”

I nodded. The description fits most congregations in our denominations, and I hear the same questions everywhere.

When I began writing about church movements, I hoped that we could also revitalize our existing ministries. If traditional congregations became more focused and intentional about welcoming younger generations, I thought, then we’d have thriving denominations. I had served churches that had grown with younger generations. I knew the possibilities.

I can pinpoint the moment when my outlook changed. I was giving a keynote lecture at a denominational gathering. I began with a reminder of our mortality, hoping to motivate listeners to take action without pushing them into despair. “If you add 20 years to each person in your congregation,” I said, “you’ll understand the

importance of reaching out to the next generation.”

Afterward a denominational leader came to me. “We don’t have 20 years, Carol. We don’t even have ten.” My stomach lurched. I felt the very despair that I’d been trying to avoid. I did more research and found that churches were closing more quickly than I’d realized.

Most pastors can list the issues that cause generational tugs-of-war. Everyone wants young families in the sanctuary—until a young dad asks if he can remove the American flag from the sanctuary. Everyone wants children in worship—until an antsy boy distracts them from worship. The worship committee will change the order of worship—unless the changes aren’t “true to the denominational heritage.” The church board considers adding another worship service—but what if it disturbs the unity of the congregation?

Emerging generations have learned to live with student loan debts. They use different strategies than those who grew up with Depression-era parents. They don’t always understand a church that claims it doesn’t have money but then reports on a substantial endowment.

Changes in work and the workplace are also an issue. More younger women work, and 9-to-5 jobs are a rarity. Couples patch together incomes with freelancing, temporary work, and service industry jobs. They don’t have time to volunteer or sit through meetings. When worship attendance is more sporadic and women’s circles lose the social cohesion they once had, older members sometimes suggest that the changes are about misplaced priorities and a lack of commitment. Then younger members feel excluded. At the denominational level, meetings that benefit from lay leaders’ input are held at times when younger people work, so that retirees make the most important decisions.

I know I’m painting these skirmishes with broad brushstrokes. They don’t always come up, and they don’t always divide along generational lines. There are exceptions in many churches. But congregations often cater to those who show up and pay the bills. Even the most visionary leader will find it hard to make a case for people who have yet to arrive. Besides, the current mode of operation has worked well until now.

But as Jesus said, when we try to put new wine into old skins, the skins will burst. We need new wineskins. We need to support and celebrate the traditional churches that

can reach the next generation and start new worshipping communities.

As my friend and I drained our coffee cups, I realized how easy it was for us to imagine that a new church would be unwelcome competition, moving in and stealing members from a congregation that is already struggling. But for the most part, traditional churches and new communities are not rivals. They serve different people. Studies show that existing congregations are mostly white and over the age of 60, while new communities are younger and more diverse.

When individual congregations cannot change, it's up to our denominational structures to make sure that the work of spreading the good news continues. They must use existing resources to start new communities and repurpose traditions for future generations.

The church where I worship meets in a 100-year-old Methodist sanctuary. The original church closed years ago. The paint peels off the ceilings and we worry about the gutters. We light candles that were donated by a closed Presbyterian Church. The generosity of the generations before us allows us to worship. Each prayer that we utter and each chair that we use has a history that lives on and breathes in a new way for a new generation. We are grateful. We acknowledge that individual churches do not last forever. But if we can be open to the Spirit's movement, we can have new wineskins.