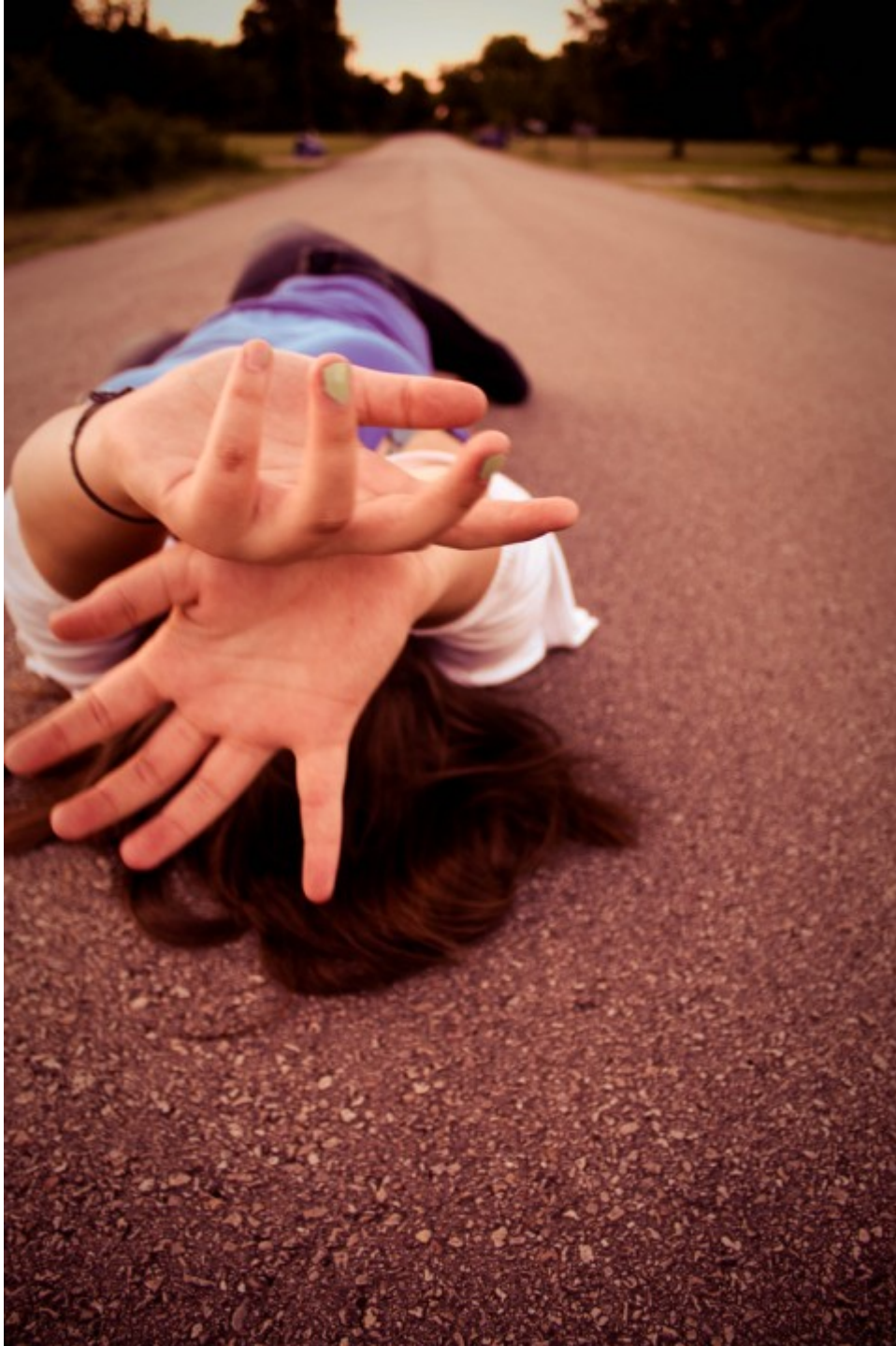


# Generational roadblocks

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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A [Hartford study](#) came out and the news is not pretty.

- From 2000 to 2005 the average percentage of participants over 60 years old increased.
- Over the same time period the average percentage of participants 18-34 decreased.
- From 2008 to 2010 the average percentage of participants over 65 increased slightly.
- From 2008 to 2010 the average percentage of 18-34 year olds continued to decline.
- A third or more of the membership in over half (52.7%) of Oldline Protestant congregations consists of seniors (65 years old or older).
- Seventy-five percent of Oldline Protestant congregations said that less than 10% of their regular participants were young adults (18-34 years old).

First

of all, I could not be more annoyed with the term “Oldline.” While people are working hard to create intergenerational denominations, Hartford has practically put a sign over our door saying, “you can’t enter without your AARP ID card and your discounted senior coffee from McDonald’s.” I agree that Mainline isn’t a good term, but surely we can do better than “Oldline.”

Aside from that neon sign roadblock, what else do we do to signal to a new generation that they're not welcome in our churches? Usually congregations don’t mean to create these obstacles, but that doesn't keep younger generations from seeing them. What are the signals?

**The leadership is from one generation.** This is a difficult issue, but it's the most important one. We have a great deal of democratic representation in our churches, so committees meet to make decisions and get things done. When women didn't maintain careers outside of the home, this could work well as an intergenerational model. Now a person might need to be retired in order to be an active part of the church leadership. Even if there's a younger pastor, his or her opinion is easily drowned out by the majority of people around the table. When crucial decisions need to be made about mission, programming, worship style, stewardship, evangelism, we rarely hear what younger generations want or need.

When we nominate people, do we look for men and women from every generation? Do we pay attention to the average age of our leadership? Do we take into account that many young adults have to change jobs every 2.7 years? Do we assure them that we would understand if they can't serve their entire term or is it assumed that every commitment is a life-sentence? Do we nominate people early (or do they have to be a church member for three years before they can be considered)? Do we use technology wisely so that committee members can SKYPE or conference call into meetings?

**The leadership lacks diversity.** The churches that grow the fastest and innovate the most are often made up of underrepresented racial ethnic communities. And even with tremendous success, when we open up a conference brochure or look at our seminary faculties, we rarely see people of color in teaching positions and leadership. In my daughter's generation, whites will be a minority. Many of us have families that are made up of all different skin colors. In this day and age, it feels creepy when I see educational events that are only led by and geared toward white people.

What can we do to encourage diversity? Do we notice the pay disparity between our white pastors and our pastors from underrepresented racial ethnic communities? What are we doing to close the pay gap? Do we open our doors to immigrant congregations that could share our buildings and spaces? Are we learning from each other how to spread the good news and start new churches? Are we paying attention to second-generation immigrant issues and needs?

**Our congregation disregards technology.** We don't need Power Point presentations during the sermon. But too often I come across eye-rolling disdain when technology is even mentioned. Yet, social media is vital for a new generation. We have to realize that a new generation uses their smart phones and computers to gather information and communicate.

If you see a person tapping away on their phone during the service, what do you do? Do you assume that they are being disrespectful, or do you assume that they are taking notes? Does your church have an Internet strategy? Does your church have an interactive website with up-to-date information and fresh content? Do you spend most of your advertising budget on your Internet presence (you should—it's cheaper and more effective for a new generation)? Do you do pastoral care on Facebook?

**The church ignores its physical spaces.** Church members can be hoarders. We're

concerned about the environment and money, so we end up keeping and stashing away everything until our public spaces begin to look like somebody's attic. Our nurseries become an island of misfit toys, made up of twenty-year-old castaways. The cribs and highchairs may be beautiful antiques, but no one wants to place their child in those deathtraps.

What is our physical space saying? Is there fresh paint? Do the floral arrangements look vibrant? Is the storage out of sight? Is it clear of lead paint and other child-safety issues? Are there cracked windows? Is it accessible for people with disabilities? How does it smell? Is the art on the walls dated? If your church was a home, what age would you imagine the homeowners were?

**The congregation focuses its ministries on traditional families.** When I say "families," that often mean a grandparent and a grandchild. We regularly ignore the parents in the equation. We have long relied on our adult sons and daughters to come back to church so that their child might be baptized. But now people are getting married later, if they marry at all.

Are people expected to walk into our congregations two-by-two? Do we have ministries for and with people who are not married or who are in same-gender relationships? Are

there single people in our leadership?

What would you add? What roadblocks have you seen in your ministries?