

Ensuing eagerness

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

March 18, 2013

“What do you think the church will look like in 20 years?”

People constantly ask me this question—in person, on Twitter, on Facebook. I am regularly invited to consult with companies and speak to denominational bodies about this question. I served as a chair of a national committee where we wrestled with this question. I host an open-space [Unconference](#) where we dream and make plans for the future (and you're all invited to come!). I love looking at generational trends, philosophical understandings and technological developments, while praying and imagining where God might lead us.

Yet, I know that there are many who are not so enamored with thinking about what might be. Several months ago, Thomas Long wrote about having [future fatigue](#). Rev. Long is tired of conferences trumpeting words like emergent, postmodern, or next. He pokes fun at a new generation of young, technologically savvy prophets who "paint apocalyptic scenarios of the coming wrath followed by visions of a wireless new Jerusalem rising from the ruins."

I realize that I resemble many of his remarks.

I'm sure there are many who resonate with Rev. Long's exhaustion. He lifts up three important cautions in his article: **there will be tremendous unknowns, we should be open to surprise, and we ought to be humble**. Then Long talks about the futility of a conference that took place in the 1970s, because nothing came out the way they predicted.

Though I sympathize with Long's weariness, I keep forging ahead. Why? Because the "future" is not far off, planning is vital, and I care about a new generation.

The future is now. The first congregation I served was sitting on a small pile of money that they saved "for a rainy day." I was called to the congregation, knowing that they could not sustain a pastor with their income, but they promised that they would spend their nest egg. We all worked hard, the church doubled in size, and

then when it came time to tap into the money, key members of the congregation buckled down and decided that they needed to protect the savings. Many frustrated people came to me saying, "They're waiting for a rainy day. Too bad they can't see the tsunami outside."

Likewise, denominational churches can no longer wait for a rainy day to imagine what we are going to do. The next 20 years will be crucial for Christianity in our country. Unless there is some sort of miracle (which I do not discount), when we look at the stats of my denomination, the PC(USA), we see that almost half of our congregations can no longer afford full-time clergy and half of our members are over the age of 61. When we look at the ministers in all denominations, we know that about 70 percent of the current clergy will be retiring in the next 10 to 15 years. It is not difficult to follow the current trends and imagine that about half of our congregations could be closing in the next 20 years. This is not some far-off, space-age prediction, and I don't bring it up so that we can all partake in needless hand-wringing or because I delight in imagining apocalyptic visions. This is simply a reality of what could happen during the course of my career--unless we are called to hope and begin planning for something different.

Also, when Rev. Long speaks of his exhaustion when he hears about post-modern Christians, these are not alien creatures that we might happen upon in some distant time in the future. They are not people we need to imagine with some sort of syballine powers. Postmodern Christians are among us and we're trying to explain why none of our friends are attending our congregations any longer. These conversations--no matter how exhausting--cannot wait. The future is now.

Second, planning is vital. While I agree that there are many unknowns ahead of us, we can also point to countless, crucial moments in our church where the prayer and discernment of a few people changed the course of history.

- Why did Paul and the apostles go to port cities in order to talk about their faith? Because they had a strategic plan to spread the news. They realized that in those port cities, they would be on trade routes where people would not only bring home the goods of a distant land, but they would also talk about the stories they heard.
- Why are there more UCC churches in the Northeast and more PC(USA) churches in the South? Because during the founding days of our country, the missionaries of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the PCUSA decided to

split up the work. To this day, the landscape of our denominations reflect that early decision.

- Why was there an amazing upsurge in Evangelicalism during the last fifty years? Because a group of people decided to plant churches, start schools, build think tanks, and groom politicians. Evangelical movements used amazing creativity to capture the imaginations of Baby Boomers.

All of these things took place because a few Christians were called to hope and began to plan beyond next week. Their strategies affected our entire religious landscape.

Third, we're called to love the next generation. I love the mainline church, but more than my affection for any sort of denomination, I have this torrent of love for a new generation. Each time I hold a baby in my arms, pour the waters of baptism upon her head, I recall those words from Acts 2: "This promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away." As the water rolls onto the sleeves of my preaching robe, I renew my promise to the next generation. So the question of what will happen in the next twenty years exhilarates me and gives me endless energy.

I have great respect for Thomas Long. He preached at my Baccalaureate. I have quoted him countless times. I have spent my entire career studying his sermons, traveling to hear him speak, and reading his books. But, I must say to Rev. Long and to all of those who are exhausted, it's okay that you are weary. You may want to sit out this discussion. That's fine. But please don't discount the energy and passion of a new generation. We have spent our careers listening to and learning from you. And now, we just might have something to say.

Tomorrow, I'll attempt to answer what I hope the church will look like in twenty years.