

Six important findings about new worshiping communities

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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My travels this month have been fascinating, because they have allowed me to look at new church movements from the view of a seminary, practitioners, and denominational leadership.

I spent a week at San Francisco Theological Seminary, for their launch of the [Center for Innovation in Ministry](#). Then, I helped to host [UNCO](#), where practitioners and pastors support one another in ministry. Finally, I went with the [Center for Progressive Renewal](#) to present a new [church study for ecumenical partners](#)--the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Canada, and the United Church of Christ.

I want to highlight a few things from the study. We know many of these things intuitively, but it's always good to have research that backs our instincts.

1) There are different types of new churches. They are traditional (including African American), immigrant and multi-ethnic, and alternative. ([Here](#) are some examples of alternative communities.)

2) There are varied ways that new churches start. New churches can be initiated by the denomination, a clergy person, or a group of lay people. Lay people tend to start traditional churches, and clergy often start alternative communities. Having a partner congregation can be extremely important for a new community.

3) Experience is not necessary. The ELCA has been working with seminaries to establish a path from theological education directly to planting new churches. The research suggests that *not* having a lot of senior pastor experience can be good for a new church. Also, women pastors tend to be better at attracting un-churched people.

4) New churches reach people that established churches do not. Our established churches are made up of members who are older and whiter than the general population. New churches, in comparison, are much more diverse and younger. In addition, they are reaching people who have never attended or have dropped out of church. For alternative communities, it's important for them to highlight that they are not conservative evangelicals.

5) Social media is an important outreach tool. For new churches, social media and the general ability to communicate publicly is an important tool for outreach. Furthermore, the researchers suggest that social media will probably become even more important in the future.

6) It takes 8-10 years before a church becomes viable. In past decades, it took 3-5 years for a community to grow. Now growth typically occurs between 8-10 years. This is often difficult for denominational bodies to understand, because we have funding structures that support a shorter amount of time.