

New churches a refuge for disaffected 'dones'

At nontraditional congregations popping up across the country, many people have stories of rocky relationships with church. But they felt something was missing when they left.

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [April 21, 2019](#) issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) On a woodsy parcel in New Hampshire, Church of the Woods gathers people outside for at least part of the service, no matter the weather, to reflect on a particular question or topic among the trees, streams, deer, and countless other creatures. Church founder Steve Blackmer, an Episcopal priest, aims to reconnect church with nature in a time of environmental crisis.

Blackmer expected the church might draw those who say they find God in nature. Early on he invited 40 friends, all of whom had spiritual practices of some type and an interest in conservation, but to no avail.

“Not a single one of my friends has joined Church of the Woods,” Blackmer said. “There’s too much Jesus. The liturgy is too formal. Communion freaks them out. And these are friends of mine.”

For the 60 people who do now attend, most travel substantial distances—in one case, five hours each way—to join like-minded people for worship. They don’t all come weekly or even monthly. They come from varied church backgrounds: Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Unitarian, and Quaker, among others.

When Blackmer rings a cowbell and a Tibetan yak bell, calling his flock back together after 20 minutes of wandering the grounds, they often tell of finding their way back to the fold after rocky relationships with churches.

“There was a latent demand that I didn’t know of,” Blackmer said. “I discovered after the fact: that’s who this can serve.”

Many people showing up at new churches popping up across the country are so-called dones—those who considered themselves finished with attending more-established churches. Few are new to religious services altogether.

The approach at nontraditional churches resonates with a younger generation in particular that wants to participate in church in a creative way, not just consume what a religious leader has packaged for their consumption, said Casper ter Kuile, a ministry innovation fellow at Harvard Divinity School. He is coauthor of *Something More*, a study of faith groups that claim ancient traditions in new ways.

By rekindling interest among the disaffected, nontraditional churches arguably cater to a growing market. As the number of people with no religious affiliation grows—it was nearly 23 percent in 2014, according to Pew Research Center—those who once embraced church life and want to try it in a fresh way may respond to new churches.

“Often who it appeals to is people who grew up with church, who have kind of moved away from it or rejected it,” ter Kuile said. “It’s not often extremely resonant with people who have never had any experience of church life.”

Bryan Stone, a professor of evangelism at Boston University School of Theology, is studying what he sees as a movement of nontraditional churches.

“It’s a big-enough wave . . . to sit up and say, ‘Look, this reminds us of other sorts of reformations in church history,’” he said. “The aim is to reach people in new ways that are present where people are, rather than asking people to convert first to a kind of a culture.”

For the United Methodist Church, nontraditional strategies didn’t exist as recently as a decade ago, according to Bener Agtarap, executive director of community engagement and church planting. The UMC aims to plant one church per day, Agtarap said, but establishing a traditional church in a dedicated rental space costs at least \$500,000 for the first three years.

“We don’t have that kind of money,” he said.

Today about 20 percent of new United Methodist churches are nontraditional, with people gathering in homes or even gathering to ride horses.

Of the 432 congregations started by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since 2013, more than two-thirds are nontraditional, according to Ruben Duran,

director for new congregational development. Among the new venues: Philadelphia's 30th Street Station, a major rail hub.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is committed to launching 1,001 new worshiping communities between 2012 and 2022. So far 42 percent of these new churches are meeting in unconventional places.

As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) works to start "1,000 new churches in 1,000 different ways," nontraditional will be increasingly common in years ahead, according to Terrell McTyer, minister of new church strategies.

"Eventually the idea of doing things nontraditionally will become the tradition," McTyer said.

In Worcester, Massachusetts, Methodists are starting a new congregation a thousand feet from a traditional United Methodist church. Here worship is the main event, but it's aimed at those who wouldn't attend an established church—at least not anymore.

Simple Church Worcester, as it's called, meets every Tuesday night at the Garden Fresh Courthouse Café. On a recent night, passersby paused to read and ponder the question on a sandwich board: "What if CHURCH was a dinner party?"

Inside, 15 participants happily answered the question, sharing potluck dinner at one long table positioned by the front window for maximum visibility. At the head of the table in a black clergy shirt, blue jeans, and boots sat the pastor, LyAnna Johnson.

Johnson doles out spiritual questions for diners to discuss in groups of three or four. When all have been fed, one worshiper breaks out a guitar. Having shared communion bread before the meal, they pass around a pitcher of grape juice.

"In every moment," Johnson tells them, "God offers a chance to choose a different way."

Simple Church Worcester follows a similar model to some other new churches: worship over a meal, let Bible-inspired conversation be the sermon, and engage in revenue-producing activities such as bread baking or event catering to cover costs associated with the church and to give away.

Many of those gathered at Simple Church attended established churches in their younger years and left hurt, disillusioned, or both. Simple Church, where authority to preach is dispersed around the table, has become a refuge for them.

Anna, who asked that her last name be omitted because she didn't want repercussions from her previous church, said her conservative evangelical upbringing had been a big part of her life. She left in part because "politics had sort of infected the evangelical church." She also felt she couldn't be her true self there.

"Here I can express my doubts," Anna said. "We're all allowed to disagree. . . . Often I'll go away with a new perspective on a Bible story or want to do more research. It really has given my faith a new lease on life."

Others share similar stories of being turned off by church but feeling something was missing when they left.

"I attended another church and it wasn't working out," said Ellen Kurtz. Simple Church "is less judgmental. No one here has batted an eyelash if I say 'I have a chronic illness so I can't show up some weeks' or 'I'm not straight.' No one has a problem with that. They just want me here."

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