

Seven traits of thriving congregations: Relevant practices

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Timeless or timely—which would you rather be?

It was the mid 1990s, and my friend was in her first semester of seminary. She went to the library to find a book. She looked around expecting to find a computer to help her perform a search, but didn't find one.

"Where are the computers?" she asked. "I need to find some books for a paper I'm writing."

"Oh, we don't use computers here. You'll have to use the card catalog."

Incredulous, my friend asked a very predictable question, "Why not?"

"Because computers are just a passing fad," answered the librarian with disdain.

For years, every time I saw my friend, I'd think of that story and laugh, but then I started consulting with churches, and now it's not quite as funny.

Faith handed down

Many ministers work in church buildings that are among the oldest buildings in our communities. In my last congregation, I was the pastor of a church whose sanctuary was built on top of a foundation that included the ballast stones of 18th and 19th century transatlantic sailing ships.

And it's not just our buildings. Some of us sing songs on Sunday written

before Abraham Lincoln was president. And even if you're at a brand-new church plant or lead worship with songs written last year, every single one of us reads and teaches from a book written thousands of years ago.

There is an inescapably timeless quality to what we do in the church, and despite the snarky, antediluvian tendencies of some theological librarians, I think that's a good thing. There is nothing wrong and much right about the living faith that continues to be passed down through time from generation to generation.

A new thing

On the other hand, it also is good for churches occasionally to be on the leading edge. Every Sunday, I walked past those ballast stones on my way to a worship service where the musicians used modern instruments and the latest technology to lead a portion of our congregation in worship.

A few months ago, I watched as an 80-year-old woman worshipped with her congregation as they livestreamed worship for the first time. Before the service began, she typed into the Facebook Live chat feature that it was the first time in two years she'd been able to worship on Sunday morning with her congregation. She was so happy, she was crying.

History and cultural relevance are less than opposite ends of a spectrum than they are two interrelated and mutually dependent aspects of the church's mission.

Where a congregation lands on the spectrum of valuing history to valuing cultural relevance tends to make slight difference in whether a congregation is thriving. Instead, thriving churches tend to have robust mechanisms for teaching and communicating timeless truths in timely ways. In other words, thriving churches find ways to make timeless practices relevant.

Intentional about worship

Some churches mindlessly renovate their practices, always seeking to stay ahead of the latest trend. Other congregations mindlessly maintain existing methods. Thriving congregations do not seem to get as caught up in these ways of thinking, nor do they always fall in the middle of the spectrum.

Take worship for example. For decades, American congregations fought the worship wars over questions of style. Many congregations were convinced changing their worship style would help them grow. For some it did work, and quite well.

But now the trend is old enough for us to recognize many congregations who changed worship style never grew, especially the congregations who weren't among the early adopters. The difference is a question of intentionality.

If intentionality leads a congregation to ask the "why" question leading to innovation, it stands to reason they'll apply that same intentionality to the "how" questions. But if mindlessly following a trend is what leads a congregation to innovate, then there's a good chance the congregation will be just as mindless when it comes to capitalizing on the ways those changes might impact the congregation's ability to carry out its mission.

Bible study approaches

Bible study is another example. Some progressive congregations have sought ways to bring newer approaches to biblical scholarship to bear on Bible study and faith formation, with special attention being given to a more inclusive array of scholars. Given recent trends, one might expect this would be a welcome trend for outreach to a younger generation.

According to [a 2018 Pew Research study](#), Millennials and Gen Z are among

the most progressive generations in American history at this point in their development. Yet, in Barna's [2020 State of the Church survey](#), it was revealed the single largest reason people below age 40 do not attend church is because they see it as irrelevant to their daily lives.

Is it possible the problem isn't with the content of biblical scholarship but with the delivery system? In other words, can progressive congregations not only bring good scholarship to bear but find ways to relate that content to the lived experience of a younger generation?

The right question

The most important question for congregations trying to thrive in a 21st century context will be connected only tangentially to issues of either trends or traditions, and it will have little to nothing to do with questions of style or methodological preference.

The question thriving congregations will ask is, "How can we practice the forms of worship and faith development particular to your congregation in such a way that they meaningfully equip people to engage their faith across the breadth of their own day-to-day experience?"

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To learn more about how the Center for Healthy Churches is helping churches thrive, visit them as www.chchurches.org or contact Matt at mattc@chchurches.org.