

2nd Opinion: Churches manage myriad changes

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Church as faith community is steadily replacing church as bricks and mortar.

More and more congregations imagine a future that doesn't revolve around maintaining an inherited facility. They don't see such imagining as a defeat, but rather see the positive value of being a faith community that is flexible and nimble, responsive to changes and hurts and needs in the marketplace, and not buried in facilities and overhead costs.

Even congregations that remain committed to their facilities are looking beyond them. They envision a growth trajectory that doesn't inexorably lead to facilities expansion.

New leadership is emerging. It won't be painless, but congregations are seeing the need to wrest control from the "active elderly" who tend to run many Protestant congregations. Partly it's needing new skills and methods, like the corporate information technology department that needs web designers and social media experts and doesn't need skills acquired just a decade ago.

Partly it's about needing fresh vision. The active elderly are cursed with remembering how churches worked in the 1960s—the era when things began to fall apart and certainly not an era that can be replicated today.

Partly it's about needing nimbleness. Reality comes at churches faster. Fear of change can't be rewarded. "Test and measure" is today's mantra. Fear of failure can't be rewarded.

Leadership cadres need to forget how things were done yesterday and need to be asking, “What’s the next new thing we can do?” This will seem counterintuitive and trivial to older leaders, but it is the only way forward. After 45 years of relentless decline, business as usual is over. We need fresh eyes, hands and ideas.

We also need radical diversity, not tokenism or stale politics. This, too, will be painful. In many congregations, the pendulum swung from male-dominated to female-dominated, and neither extreme works. Balance will be the goal going forward. New ways of thinking about power and authority will emerge—neither “patriarchy” nor “matriarchy,” but something new that is truly gender-neutral.

Racial and ethnic diversity will be required, which means white-oriented Sunday worship will need to change, new musical and worship expressions—more radical than the occasional contemporary hymn—will need space to grow. Cultural gaps between Hispanics and African-Americans will need attention. Especially in cities, congregations will lose any resemblance to what older constituents remember.

All-together-in-one-place will cease to be the norm. Congregations have been subdividing for years. The movement toward small groups, house churches, neighborhood gatherings, decentralized learning and mission will accelerate. Many—soon a majority—of those subgroups won’t ever attend Sunday worship.

Faith formation, too, will undergo a thorough overhaul, as yet undefined. Christian educators have been perplexed by when they can offer their programs, since Sunday morning no longer works in many venues. The new perplexity is what they offer. What actually leads to faith, as opposed to acculturation into denomination or parish? Ideas like interactive learning, experiential learning, extended-family learning and cross-denominational learning are on the table. A certain comfort with trial and error will be

required.

Marketing is getting more sophisticated. Forget bulletin boards, outdoor signs, websites and Facebook pages—they’re all passive tools that have minimal impact. As commerce is finding, marketing takes work and constant attention to methodology. Key staff hires will include marketing pros.

It’s an exciting time, a stressful time, a time of growth and new life, and a time of conflict.

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