

Reflecting on the past, looking toward the future

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When any life journey comes to a fork in the road, it is time to assess the past and contemplate the future. As I count down to retirement in weeks, no longer months or years, this seems like a good time to evaluate the current state of the 1001 initiative.

1001 was launched by action of the General Assembly in July 2012 as a 10-year initiative designed to launch 1,001 new communities of faith intentionally reaching un-churched and de-churched people for Christ, while simultaneously participating in the renewal of the whole church — an ambitious goal, to say the least. In fact, it would be impossibly audacious if not for the fact that God was already out there doing some amazing things that we, the PC(USA), did not have language for. The term “new worshiping community” was coined to provide common language for a myriad of new expressions of church that did not look like the church of the past. Coffee shops that served lattes and the Lord’s Supper, workout spaces that built bodies and spirits, refugee communities seeking safe space to belong, worship services at skateboard parks or homeless centers — what was God up to? This Holy Spirit-led movement provided the launching pad for the 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative.

More than 540 new worshiping communities have started since the launch of the 1001 NWCs initiative, 432 of which are currently active. The ones on the inactive list do not necessarily represent failure. Some are still going strong but have discerned that they are not new worshiping communities; a handful have disassociated with the PC(USA); some have been great experiments that served a purpose for a term but did not last. All have something to teach the wider church.

In the currently active communities, 46 percent of the participants are people of color, as contrasted to 9 percent in the PC(USA) as a whole. Twenty-nine percent of the communities offer worship in a language other than English. The communities themselves are much more racially and culturally diverse than the denomination. Twenty-two percent of NWCs are racially diverse as compared to less than 5 percent of PC(USA) congregations. New worshiping communities engage a much younger demographic than PC(USA) congregations with 49 percent of the participants under the age of 40 (compared to less than 30 percent of the PC(USA)).

A full third of the participants describe themselves as previously “un-churched” (no faith community connection ever) or “de-churched” (no church connection in at least five years). Only 20 percent formerly attended a PC(USA) congregation.

For those who are interested in more statistics, this movement has been carefully documented through a [longitudinal research project](#) in cooperation with Research Services. Here’s a link to the [leaders’ survey report](#).

By any measure, the 1001 initiative has met or exceeded all its expectations. It has been the most exciting, energizing, inspiring, humbling and challenging ministry I could ever have imagined. It brings hope and inspiration to the whole of the church.

While a part of me mourns the fact that I will not be able to cross the finish line with the 1,001st new worshiping community, I am convinced that this is a great time to pass the baton. After being significantly understaffed for several years, we now have an excellent staff in place. Thanks to the generosity of saints of the past, a significant amount of money has been designated for the support of new worshiping communities, allowing us to provide support resources in the form of assessments, apprenticeships and residencies, coaching, training and grants. I pray that my successor will experience the same joy I have felt to be part of something brand new that God is up to in our midst. The harvest is plentiful! Thanks be to God.