



II. What Can the Presbyterian Church Do to Turn Around Its Long Decline?

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As Beau Weston points out in “Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment,” the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been declining in membership for the last forty years. Ministers and members often speculate why there has been a decrease, and we hear reasons ranging from our theological viewpoints, to the way that we educate our pastors, to the encouragement of women’s ordination, to the fact that we talk about the possibility of ordaining people who are in same-gender relationships. There are those who believe that we have lost members because we have been unable to deconstruct our institutional church quickly enough.

In the midst of these voices, Weston has given us another perspective on the matter. He states, “If the Presbyterian Church is to end its endemic crisis and turn around its long decline, it will need to rebuild the Presbyterian Establishment,” defining an establishment as “an integrated body of authoritative leaders.”

I would like to look a bit more at the question that lies at the heart of Weston’s paper. It is the query that many of us are passionate about answering: What can the Presbyterian Church do to end its endemic crisis and turn around its long decline?

I do not agree with Weston’s conclusion that rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment is going to turn around our decline. As I mine the pages of Weston’s paper, I do see that there are things that we can change, governing

bodies that we can restructure, and this is where I concur with some of what Weston outlines.

For instance, our synods have gone from robust mission-oriented bodies with great concern and resources for our seminaries, to bodies with wonderful leadership and dwindling budgets. Unfortunately, in many circumstances they have become an extra layer of beauracracy, and yet we keep them running even when we do not see much need for them. Of course, dismantling the synods is not going to be the answer to turning around the Presbyterian Church's decline.

So, if the key to our membership decline as a denomination is not in rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment or restructuring our middle governing bodies, then what is it? Clearly, we need to do something. What can we do to turn around this long pattern of dismal decreases?

We can do what growing churches do: we can love our neighbors, care for our communities, and tell people about the good news of Jesus Christ. In our particular denomination, the most crucial thing for us to do is to envision a church that ministers from generation to generation.

Ministering from Generation to Generation

If we look around our congregations and add twenty years to the people in the pews, many of us realize that our churches may not last another generation. When we calculate the estimated life span of most of our members, there is a crisis looming that is far more treacherous than what has occurred in the last forty years. Clearly, we will need to respond with great haste, not only to the attrition that occurred in the last few decades, but also to the great loss that will be coming soon.

Our decreasing membership rolls not only represent a critical moment for our denomination, but they also mirror a perilous time for a generation of young adults in our society at large. Robert Wuthnow, who teaches Sociology of Religion at Princeton University, estimates that six million men and women under the age of forty-five are missing from our churches.¹ They do not attend the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or any other mainline denomination, and they are increasingly walking away from our country's evangelical churches.

So as we ask what we can do to reverse our diminishing membership, there is a clear answer: if we hope to have a vital denomination in the next twenty years, we can begin to reach out to an emerging generation, a group of men and women who are longing to be a part of spiritual traditions and social justice movements. Our evangelism, ministries, and new churches can be geared toward young adults, men and women in their twenties and thirties.

As a pastor, I realize that it is difficult to focus attention on attracting and ministering to young adults, especially with increasingly aging congregations. Our structures encourage the leadership skills of older members who may be out of touch with the needs and hopes of the young. So, as we visit hospitals and nursing homes, neglecting ministry with a new generation becomes easy as we go about our day-to-day work. Yet, as we imagine a vital, growing denomination, reaching out, addressing the needs, and encouraging the beliefs of young adults will be crucial.

Why would we focus on young adults above other generations? Most obviously, men and women in their twenties and thirties are not as established in their routines or religious preferences. Denominational loyalty is a thing of the past and—writing as a woman who grew up a conservative Baptist and converted to Presbyterianism—that is a wonderful thing.² As we begin reaching out to young adults, we realize that they are much more fluid in their denominational preferences; so, we are more likely not

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only to attract men and women who were baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church, but also people who walked away from other mainline churches, evangelical congregations, or those with no faith tradition at all. In other words, we can move beyond relying on a strategy of propagation to populate our congregations, and begin looking at our larger communities.

In addition, demographically, the men and women who are coming of age in our country make up the largest generation in American history; furthermore, they are highly educated, spiritually hungry, and

socially concerned. In other words, this massive number of men and women are wandering, and they are often looking for the things that we have been nurturing in our Presbyterian churches for hundreds of years: a connection with God, the world, and a community. Not only do they have tremendous gifts to offer our denomination, but as Presbyterians, because of our commitment to social justice and spiritual traditions, we are uniquely positioned to reach out to them.

Of course, it will take a great deal of intention, but the coming years could be an extremely fruitful time for Presbyterians. However, it will mean that we, as a denomination, will need to begin an extensive effort to shift our focus, take the following steps, and begin to imagine other measures.

- (1) We can shift from relying on a new generation to drift back into our sanctuaries when they get married and need to have their children baptized. Instead, we can reach out to them where they are, as men and women who may not have any faith tradition, a stable career, or a nuclear family.
- (2) We can begin to rethink our advertising, and move from investing thousands of dollars for an announcement on flat newsprint, to making sure that our church websites are well designed and interactive. We can reach out with new media and engage in social networking.
- (3) We can move from mourning our dying churches, to seeing a church closing as an opportunity for new life. We can begin reinvesting our resources—not in the stock market, but directly into planting innovative spiritual communities. Planting churches is the single best way to grow a denomination. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we have hundreds of pastors who would like to start congregations. What if we made it our goal to support them in their dreams and visions?
- (4) We can broaden our focus, from not only welcoming those who “know what it means to be Presbyterian,” but also to inviting and accepting men and women from a variety of backgrounds. Learning to talk to people outside of our church walls, about faith and everything else, we can become beacons of hope and restoration. And, in this particular time, we can especially minister to those who are leaving politically conservative evangelical megachurches.

- (5) We can begin to stop allowing our young gifted pastors to flounder, without positions or without adequate salaries to cover their educational debt. We can encourage the placement of our recent seminary graduates, creating new jobs for them, and taking care that they are paid according to the cost of living in the area in which they serve.
- (6) We can take measures to reduce our dependence on the leadership of our retired elders and ministers to make inherited structures continue. Instead, we can begin to imagine new ways to encourage a new generation and share leadership with a wider diversity of ethnicities.

Sharing Leadership with a New Generation

Out of all the things that we can do, sharing leadership and giving real power to a new generation may be the most important. Certainly, the wisdom that comes from years of experience and service should always be valued. But in our denomination, we clearly hear the voices of those with experience; we do not always tune our ears or give significant authority to men and women who may not have a thick resume, but do have vision, innovation, and a long-term future stake in our denomination.

According to Weston, we need to focus our attentions on rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment. He argues that in the Sixties, we dismantled our authoritative structures when we required that decision-making bodies be made up of women and diverse ethnicities and we encouraged youth leadership. In Weston's opinion, men and women should be chosen to lead our church, based on an equal representation of elders and ministers, and on their ability to lead. The fact that men or women are successful in their

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professional lives usually indicates their leadership ability, and if pastors are the heads of tall-steeple churches, then that also points to their skills as administrators.

On the other hand, when we began to think of our leaders in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender, Weston argues, we are less likely to choose those with the most authority, power, and influence in our

society. Over the last four decades, after structuring ourselves to the whims of the sixties, we have been losing our authority in the culture, and our members in the local church.

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To begin, as a pastor, I strive to make sure that the very best leaders are part of our decision-making bodies. Yet pastors and nominating committees often find it more practical to stretch, to look for leadership within and beyond those our culture sees as successful, because it help us to understand and attract a wider variety of people.

We learn to consider people who may not be a part of our intimate circle of friends, men who may not be members of the dominant ethnic group, or women who might make less money than they do. Often, we can see leadership as something that the church can help a person develop, so we might choose someone who has not had much experience yet. Overall, maintaining the Committee on Representation's guidelines encourages a greater discipline and rigor in finding the best leadership possible.

Would nominating committees ordinarily choose men and women, and people from diverse ethnicities, if they did not have to? Perhaps they would. But Weston goes even farther in ensuring a much smaller, much less diverse pool of candidates when he suggests that our tall-steeple pastors should be the natural leaders in our denomination. Even though women make up half (or more) of our seminary enrollment, they only make up three percent of those who are at large churches.

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Abiding by the Committee on Representation's requirements—engaging in this stretching exercise and taking a disciplined look at the full pool of membership for the best possible candidates—can have immeasurable, lasting effects on an organization. If the leaders of an organization know the particular needs of certain groups, they can also be more adept in attracting people who are like them.

As a woman and member of Generation X, having leadership that is made up of men and women from a variety of ethnicities and ages is absolutely

crucial when I decide to become a part of an organization or a church. If the leadership is made up of a diverse representation of gender, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic class, then that is a primary indication of a healthy organization. If the appropriate diversity is not sitting around the leadership table, I will choose not to become a part of the body, or if I do become a part of it, then helping to transform the leadership becomes a primary goal. If there are people my age or younger involved in the leadership, then I know that the organization will have a slightly different perspective. This shift toward inclusion will become even more important as we reach out to adults under the age of twenty-five, because they make up the most ethnically diverse generation that our country has ever seen.

What Is God Calling the Church to Be?

Finally, as a pastor, I must dig a bit deeper at this point. It is my vocation to not only look at what would be administratively practical and prudent, but to also consider the ways in which we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this context, our most poignant ministry as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has not and will not come from being the most powerful authority in our country. It is not how many Presbyterian politicians sit in Congress, or how many of our elected leaders are chief executive officers, or even how many of our General Assembly representatives come from tall-steeple churches. As we minister in the name of our crucified Savior, Jesus Christ, we know that our most profound message is one that proclaims healing in our own brokenness, hope in the midst of death, and abundant life to the hurting world in which we serve. We have a gospel that often calls us to speak truth to the ruling powers, incites us to dream of the reign of God, and stimulates our merciful imaginations.

Focusing our energy on rebuilding the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a center of power and authority in our culture may distract us from doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. It may divert us from hearing the voices of those who have long been silenced, and keep us from laying down our own lives for “the least of these.”

In this moment in our history, the world does not need another religious institution bent on amassing power. The world needs us to be the church, the Body of Christ, imitators of the one who gathered young men and women

of lowly estate, transformed their lives, and turned the world upside down. The good news and work of Jesus Christ is not found in efforts of establishing an institution of rich and powerful members; rather, it is maintained by the proclamation of a God who suffers and

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taught us to see the suffering of others.

Notes



1. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 52–53.
2. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>, accessed on May 5, 2009. Forty-four percent of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.