

In the book *The Missional Church and Denominations* edited by Craig Van Gelder, he discusses that while denominations are a fact of life in Christianity today, they are actually of rather recent origin, dating back to just the last 250 years. A wide variety of observations have been made about denominations during this time.

In the mid-1800s, writers like Robert Baird celebrated denominations for their ability to be entrepreneurial in reaching out and contextualizing church life for distinctly different groups of people. In the early decades of the 1900s, H. Richard Niebuhr critiqued denominations by saying they represented the ethical failure of Christianity. In the second half of the 1900s, Martin Marty observed denominations moving past their divisions and competitiveness towards unity. As mainline churches stopped growing in the 1960s and 1970s, Dean Kelly and Fink and Starke looked at denominations in a framework of a market economy and began describing the winners and losers.

Denominations are not going to go away; however, they are going to continue to morph within our ever-changing cultural context. The DNA of most denominations has been built on a core genetic code that places more emphasis on polity (how the church is organized and administered) than it does on ecclesiology (how the church's nature or essence is understood). During our shift to the corporate model from 1920-1970, denominations focused on bringing productivity and efficiency into their business organizations, and built command-and-control systems by establishing a hierarchical bureaucracy. As denominational loyalty began to erode, denominations became more regulatory in character, hoping that rules and procedures would ensure compliance. They did not. New interest was placed on the church renewal movement, the church growth movement, the church effectiveness movement, and then the church health movement. But, all of these movements were simply trying to improve "how we do church", focusing on technical answers rather than adaptive solutions, and did not shift the paradigm of how the church operates in an era of discontinuous change. They did not touch the core genetic code of the denomination, so nothing much changed.

What is new today is that the missional church conversation has reintroduced a discussion about the very nature of the church – its essence. This conversation no longer understands "being missionary" primarily in functional terms as something the church does. It understands "being missionary" primarily in terms of something the church *is*, as something related to its very nature. This shifts the conversation from what God is doing in the church to what God is doing in the world. The missional church perspective understands that congregations are created by the Spirit and that their existence is for the purpose of engaging the world in bringing God's redemptive work in Christ to bear on every dimension of life. Congregations cannot function as ends within themselves, as is the tendency of the established church. They cannot be satisfied with maintaining primarily a functional relationship with their contexts and communities, as is the tendency of denominational churches. The missional church has a different genetic code.

The book suggests that we avoid the two main temptations we face in the denominational church today: institutional idolatry and antinomianism. The temptation is to either love

it or leave it. People tend to either entrench themselves in the current denominational system or pack up their bags and evacuate. Neither approach is ultimately very helpful.

Those who love the denominational status quo tend to think that if they solidify a policy or procedure by vote, then their problems, issues, or struggles will be resolved. But, this is rarely the case, especially when it concerns deeply divisive issues. When we put our hope in a polity rather than in God, then we are in danger of practicing institutional idolatry. Conversely, those who pack their bags and evacuate, do not see that God's Holy Spirit continues to be at work within denominations, if certain votes go the "wrong way".

The challenges we face today are extremely important. They are vital to address not because denominations need saving, but because they provide us opportunities to participate in and anticipate God's mission. Sadly though, we proceed as if there were really only two polity options to consider – entrenchment or evacuation. The entrenchment option typically rings of nostalgia – trying to return to the golden days through legislated revitalization programs. The evacuation option is typically expressed in the certainty that God is not strong enough to counter unfortunate votes that have been taken or a slide into cultural capitulation. These people believe they will be contaminated if they stay in the church, but not if they continue to live in a fallen, sinful world. I believe that neither option will achieve its expressed outcome. What we need to do is to look, listen, and discern what God is up to in our denomination today. We need to participate and join with the Holy Spirit in what he is already doing, and work to inject a new missional DNA into the bloodstream of the church. It is the infusion of a new genetic code that will lead to the conversion of the church.

I believe we live in a time similar to Ezekiel 37, where the prophet is shown a valley of dry bones. Some people love the old dry bones, even though they are not working and performing their intended function anymore. Some people look at the dry bones and feel hopeless and want to walk away. I believe God surprises us when we ask the question "Can these bones live?" God's answer is yes. God says "I will put my spirit within you and you shall live." (Ezekiel 37:14). We should not make idols of our denominations. Nor should we give up hope and abandon them. I believe God will surprise us yet again. We can be a part of the Holy Spirit's work to breathe new life back into a set of tired, old, dry bones. We can infuse a new missional DNA into the church. We can be a part of God's work to bring about the conversion of the church. We may not see much of it this week at General Assembly. We may not see much of it in the coming year. But, slowly, over time, the Spirit will breathe God's new life into these bones, and when that happens, we want to be right in the middle of it.