

The Challenge of Consumerism

In the book *The Missional Church in Context* edited by Craig Van Gelder, there is a discussion about the changing world we are ministering in. In the heyday of denominationalism, we would look at a growing community, and ask whether we had one of our congregations there. If we didn't, we would designate the location a "domestic mission field", and we would start up a congregation there and encourage it to grow. Where to place a congregation was decided by asking questions such as Are there people of our denomination living there? Do Roman Catholics have a parish there? How about the Methodists and the Episcopalians? Finding a space for a localized franchise of the denomination's brand was deemed a relatively easy task. Even easier to answer was the question of what kind of ministry the new congregation would offer.

The answer to that question was quite simple: everything. Anything and everything that a Christian congregation ever would or could offer was to be the ministry program of that new congregation. What would make it different from other congregations would be its denominational branding. So, all congregations would offer the same ministries of worship, education for children, youth ministry, and fellowship and service opportunities for adults. The differences between them would be those that reside within the confessional traditions of the congregations. This was the main pattern until the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Over the last several decades, however, something has changed in the ecclesiastical landscape of the United States. Although the decline of denominationalism is part of the change, the change is much broader than that. Various thinkers have suggested that the change is characterized by a "flight from authority" to "small group renaissance" to conservative, nondenominational communions. While these descriptions of the direction churches have taken may be accurate to a point, the major change over the past three decades may be summed up in one word: CONSUMERISM. Religion in the United States went from something into which one was born to something that one chose. Religious faith and belief went from being a family and communal heirloom into a product that was treated like any other product in the market place. Religion became a consumer product. And when it did, the ecclesiastical landscape changed.

For the missional congregation, the change has brought about significant opportunities as well as significant challenges. One opportunity is that there is a new freedom in no longer being constrained by tradition. But the corresponding challenge that comes with this is that the very things tradition brought with it, now must be asserted, defined, and discerned. This includes determining everything else that goes along with choosing a product rather than accepting a given heritage, including how those on the margins of the community fare. The missional congregation undoubtedly must now work harder to maintain where it is than any congregation did before the advent of consumerism.

It is more difficult to minister within a congregation today than it used to be. It is no longer enough to provide worship for our own people in the ways the tradition has come

down to us. Now we must view worship as the means by which people can receive enough value to retain their loyalty to our congregation. It is no longer enough to provide care and concern for people who are members. Now we must make care and concern available to all people, regardless of their status in the community. It is no longer enough to push the latest denominational program or ministry. Now we must provide programs and ministries that connect to people and their lives. This has led to a great change in the ecclesiastical landscape across all contexts and communities in North America. Ministry becomes more challenging with each passing year.