

Being Different for the Sake of Not Being Traditional?

Dr. Marcia Riggs
J. Erskine Love Professor of Christian Ethics

I grew up and was ordained in a historic black denominational church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.¹ When I think about that church, I think of my family for four generations attending and providing leadership as Sunday School teachers, preachers, general officers, and bishops. I remember particular physical spaces: the red brick of St. James A.M.E. Zion Church (the place of my baptism and my childhood in the church), the white wooden frame of Christian Plains A.M.E. Zion Church (the congregation where I accepted the invitation to Christian discipleship at 12), and the huge domed sanctuary of Thompkin Chapel A.M. E. Zion Church (the home church in which I answered my call to ordained ministry). I also remember a feeling of belonging to a people as well as being at home theologically, both because of what I heard preached and how I experienced God.

As I read Steve Hayner's essay on these emerging religious communities, I am both saddened and excited. I am saddened by a description that speaks of the failure of both the culture and the traditional church to be contexts in which a generation of young men and women are empowered in their quests for meaning. I know that the roots of my Christian identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ and minister of the Gospel were nurtured in the soil of African Methodism's historical tradition of religious radicalism. The Black church was for my generation a place where we could grow into being Christian witnesses and activists for justice. We were taught about forebears and saw contemporary people of faith who defied sociocultural norms for Black people that

defined our place in society as on the margins (at best) and outside of the moral community (at worst). So, I am saddened that traditional churches have failed to be such places of social and moral nurture for these young people.

Traditional churches today seem to exist at the poles of a continuum of feasible responses to culture: they tend to be either isolationists from or transformers of culture.² As isolationists, the aim is to set up defenses against the culture in an attempt to protect, or at least insulate, the churches from its corrupting influences, such as the acceptance of homosexual unions as marriages. As transformers of culture, the aim is to accept culture and to convert such by the grace of God working through the churches, such as the conversion of marketing impulses into growth strategies for the churches. Standing at the poles of the continuum, traditional churches seem to have forgotten that they are themselves cultural forces as much as they are subject to cultural forces at work within the society. As traditional churches fail to engage fully the culture as **both** responders to and creators of culture, their capacity for moral imagination is diminished and this has contributed to their inability to be a context for moral meaning-making for young people.

Thus, I am excited that there is a constructive response by this generation to the traditional churches' failure of moral imagination. Steve Hayner's description of these "recent experiments in 'being church' [as] innovative, bold, diverse, sometimes irreverent, definitely non-traditional, culturally and technologically savvy" is exciting. It is exciting because there is a sense in which these communities of people of faith do seem to signify one way in which the Spirit of God is being poured out upon all flesh in our time. As Dr. Hayner suggests, there is a prophetic quality to these groups in that their presence stands as critique of the traditional church's inability to reconceptualize "church" as well as

hope for an enlivened Christian witness in the midst of sociocultural fragmentation.

Whether or not this generation's response has deep roots in the souls of a generation's yearning for meaning and community or has roots in more shallow reactionary soil will only be disclosed over time.

I do not make this last point because I wish to challenge the veracity of these groups. Rather, I simply want to voice a word of caution to those who comprise these new ways of being church: the disaffection and/or alienation from the traditional church that is one impetus for their existence can become self-defeating. Whereas the traditional church is often caught up in self-preservation as an institution rather than listening and responding to God's call within the church and into the world, these new "experiments in 'church'" could become entrapped in being different **primarily** for the sake of not being traditional church. In other words, the word of caution is this: remember that there is a thin line between a reactionary posture that debunks in order to dismiss the traditional churches and a creative posture that unmask failure for the sake of making space for something authentically new to emerge.

When I teach my course on the church as community of moral discourse, I invite the students to begin with a metaphor for the church. I begin this way because I want students to re-imagine the church through their twenty-first century cultural lens and to use that lens to reread the tradition or traditions (biblical and theological) that ground their understanding of church as we dialogue about social, psychological, and theological barriers to community. As I read this essay, there is a way in which these "new ecclesial experiments" are precisely the kinds of re-imagining of church through twenty-first century cultural lens that I am encouraging from my students, and the names they have

chosen are indeed provocative metaphors. Thus, a final reason that I get excited about this movement is the way in which their ways of being and doing church nurture moral imagination that emerges from an engagement with culture in the spaces between isolation from and transformation of culture. My concern, however, is that these communities of faith will not suspend their moral imaginations when they are reading biblical texts. As twenty-first century readers of the Bible, they must not forget to respect the cultural worldview embodied in the texts. In other words, the authority of the Bible is only strengthened by our ability to read scripture guided by the Spirit of God as an encounter between us and texts cross-culturally; such an encounter will surely yield a “new” engagement with a living Word of God.

I conclude with these two final questions:

1. It seems important for these groups to ask on-goingly: Are we forging our identities and practices mostly or solely as a reaction to what we do not like about the traditional church, or are we still listening for and responding to God’s call to be and do church in a new way?
2. Likewise, it seems critical that traditional churches ask on-goingly: How is God speaking to us through these “new churches”?

¹ The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was founded in 1796 by James Varick in response to racism in the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City.

² This continuum of responses may helpfully thought about with reference to the five types that H. Richard Niebuhr proposes in the classic text, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951): (1) Christ against culture; (2) the Christ of culture; (3) Christ above culture; (4) Christ and culture in paradox; and (5) Christ the transformer of culture.