



The ‘new normal’ threat

In the battle for the future of the church, so-called traditionalists and innovators may be unlikely allies.

When I visited Louisville’s Calvin Presbyterian Church a few Sundays ago, it looked traditional enough: redbrick exterior, a wall of framed photos of former pastors, hallways of classrooms, a sprawling suburban parking lot, and a small membership book of smiling older faces. But a life-size stuffed sheep sitting, legs crossed, in a chair in the foyer quickly corrected that impression.

I was there for a new worship service organized by Sweaty Sheep and its community of cyclists and displaced Christians. I walked past a room of contorted bodies on yoga mats and into the church’s recently remodeled sanctuary, where I was met with cushioned chairs, round tables, multiple large projection screens, and a band warming up—no pews, no pulpit. We gathered around the tables, listened to a testimonial, played a game, broke into small groups, and were asked serious, thoughtful questions by a young pastor with a shock of red hair and wearing cycling shorts. We were invited to a concert, a running ministry with people living with addiction, and a variety of service opportunities.

In total, four communities worshiped at Calvin that day—a Korean church, a Taiwanese church, Calvin Presbyterian, and Sweaty Sheep.

My experience at Calvin (see the interview on page 14) was just one example of the sea change sweeping the church—from technology and diversity to new economic realities and a “post-Christian” culture. Dubbed the “new normal” in the wake of the financial crisis beginning in 2007, this cultural shift has some Presbyterians hunkering down, hoping to weather the storm and avoid change at all cost. Others, like Sweaty Sheep, are adopting entirely new approaches, often bearing little resemblance to the Presbyterian worship (and perhaps theology) we grew up with. There are also some who debunk this so-called new normal as being more of the “old normal,” pointing in particular to the persistence of racial and gender injustice (yes, there’s a black man in the White House, but we’ve also put one in three in prison).

Though there may be a preponderance of one generation or another in these camps, this battle is not generational. And it is by no means new: tension between existing and rising norms is a common motif

in Scripture. When the Israelites faced the new normal of exile, some said they should adapt to their new cultures; others insisted on singing the songs sung by their parents’ parents. When they returned from exile, some grieved and others rejoiced at the rebuilding of the temple that looked so different from the old. The fact is that it’s often unclear whether a new normal is the kind that emerged when Cain killed his brother or the kind when fishermen left their nets to follow a rabbi.

More often than not, it is a mixture of both.

Information technology, for instance, brings the world to our fingertips, making it easier than ever to proclaim the gospel and make connections. But it also cultivates an impatient desire for immediate gratification that runs counter to the painstaking work of serving God on earth.

Likewise, we now live in a country where, according to the Pew Forum, one in four young adults affiliates with no religion and the proportion of Protestants (51 percent) is shrinking. Let’s face it: whatever the emerging norm may be, we aren’t it.

This has wrought drastically diminished budgets, membership numbers, and cultural influence. It has inspired fear and infighting while threatening the dilution of strong faith commitments. But it has also freed us of the burden of empire, of the contradiction of being a preeminently countercultural religion in a culture we created. Pockets of Acts-like communities are popping up, worshiping together in simplicity—tiny resistance cells working for justice, love, and the gospel. The new normal, as much as it has hurt us, has also reminded us (some of us at least) that we are the ones who are supposed to risk being put on crosses, not the ones who build them.

Many congregations are discovering that they don’t need to forsake their history to embrace the future. Calvin Presbyterian Church, in all of its tradition, and Sweaty Sheep, in all of its innovation, may seem like unlikely partners, but that’s exactly what they’ve become, sharing memory, vision, and support. They are learning that the way forward will require, in the words of Ryan Althaus, founder of Sweaty Sheep, “colaborers” like Paul and Apollos (1 Cor. 3:4–10), a shared table of diverse leaders for the *both-and* church of the 21st century.