



NOVEMBER 18, 2021

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## MINISTRIES

PUBLISHED  
ARTICLE

## INNOVATION VS. INSTITUTION

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# INNOVATION VS. INSTITUTION

Matt Brown

From government and education to law enforcement and religion, institutions are under attack as a younger generation questions whether the previously reliable bulwarks of society can be trusted. As you can imagine, denominations have not escaped this trend.

According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, data published on February 27, 2021, show there are more than 200 Christian denominations in the U.S. and a staggering 45,000 globally. Jeffrey M. Jones writes in a Gallup News March 29, 2021, article that Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade tracking of the stats.

In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999. This change is primarily due to the rise in Americans with no religious preference.

Those like me who feel called to leadership in denominational settings are facing an unsettling and uncertain future. We are challenged by the reality of statistics, the burden of change, the greying of the church's core supportive base and the shifting of theological and behavior practices.

**The rigidity of traditional denominationalism is too slow of a boat to navigate the undercurrents of social upheavals**, racial reckoning, critical race theory discussions, vaccination determinations and mask mandates.

Today's denominational thought leaders and strategists may believe that denominations maintain a valued, historic and critical place in the conversation of rediscovering the church. However, if they are to maintain affinity with their membership (which has been declining over the past decades), they must rethink their methodologies.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Despite challenges, I believe there is yet hope for denominations as an effective structure for pursuing God's global mission. My denomination, the Church of God in Christ, Inc. (COGIC) is a Christian organization in the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition. It is one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in the United States.

The membership is predominantly African American with millions of adherents and congregations in 112 countries around the world. Today's COGIC is embracing the glorious struggle of doing denominationalism right.

As a local pastor for 25 years, serving churches in both the Northeastern and Southeastern United States, a fourth-generation member of the Church of God in Christ, and recent consecrated Bishop in the Church, I am excited about our powerful possibility to equalize wholesome traditional institutionalism with creative intergenerational relevance.

However, there are challenges which accompany change.

- If we are to thrive denominationally, we must wholeheartedly be prepared to be provocative and transparent.
- We should ask the emerging generation for constructive reflection about their experiences, and then engage them as partners of generational and institutional change.
- Let's address their conceptual disappointment of denominations intoxicated with the wine of denominational pride, greed and self-aggrandizement.
- We must confront the issue of ethnocentrism, thinking of denominations as an ethnic group and unwantedly creating an "us" and "them" perception globally.
- We must deal with denominational mission creep, lest the mission of the institution become the heart of our work instead of God's mission to win the world.

The challenge of contemporary denominationalism is its default to managing the organization rather than inspiring its members to seize the mission. This misguided notion has stalled growth, diminished intrigue, stifled innovation, derailed interest, siloed involvement and depleted investment from its core constituency. If we are not careful, we will participate in the dismantling of historic, credible, and necessary denominations for the sake of our comfort.

## MY STORY

Bishop Tommy Reid, former pastor of the Tabernacle of Orchard Park, New York, challenged me upon my arrival to Marietta, Georgia, "not to pastor the church I was in, but to pastor the church that is within me." That fatherly advice and sagacious wisdom led me to deeply question my commitment to the culture of my denomination versus the mission of Jesus Christ.

I had found that the culture of church was killing the richness of Christ within me. **So, I (metaphorically) blew up what I knew would be comfortable and limited and chose to jump the guardrail and intentionally trust the heart of God for the ministry that reflected the vibrant, loving, relational, ecumenical, sanctified, multi-generational and ethnically diverse church that was in me.**

I understood quickly that my expression of Christ in culture, liturgy, history and praxis would be challenged and scrutinized by denominational peers. The local church is the unique expression and ministry signature of that community of believers attracted to that local church's encounter with God and not its attraction to its denomination.

In this model, the experience is more valuable to the member than the denominational banner it flies. This is when people say, "Is this a [fill-in-the-blank denomination] church?" This is the moment when the denomination is appreciated as the convener of like-minded, like-faith and like-practicing believers around the world with unique graces to translate the kingdom of God into tangible expressions of humanity.

**The local church should reflect the community in which it serves, not the denomination with which it is affiliated. - Matt Brown #TheARTofLEADERSHIP**

## **NEO-COGIC**

This was the moment Neo-COGIC became real to me. What is Neo-COGIC? It is my coined phrase to explain to a new generation that denominationalism is cool. It is my integration of wholesome traditional institutionalism with creative intergenerational relevance. It is not changing the historical mission of the Church of God in Christ; it's just keeping it relevant in today's culture.

I can fully express the theological tenets of our denomination, its orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a deeply engaged experience of worship and relational theology. I don't hide my denominational tag, but I am one of the many new and fresh faces and prophetic voices who dare to explore the limitless possibilities of God-given purpose, on the other side of the guardrail.

Neo-COGIC is constructing genuine encounters with God as the main attraction as opposed to setting denominational culture as the attraction. Neo-COGIC is not a term adopted or authorized by the Church of God in Christ, it is simply my liberated expression which keeps me passionately connected and moving progressively forward in the vision cast by our denomination's founder, Bishop Charles Harrison Mason.

Neo-COGIC is the creation of ministries of distinction on local levels which attract people of faith not those tied to denomination, by being upfront about the mission and its benefit of fellowship. It promotes the best qualities of our denomination, giving a sense of homeland and culture to African Americans without dismissing the plurality of other ethnicities. It allows us to tell our story of the Church of God in Christ when our children ask, "How did we get here?"

Neo-COGIC may not always color within the lines of traditional institutionalism. Instead, it is a local church expression of its regional influence and global impact promulgating the best of our denomination in fellowship, worship and relevance. It is, in the words of my dear friend, Bishop Robert Stearns of Eagles' Wings, "glocal"—a local ministry thinking globally, serving the masses and those in the margins asking the question, "Where do I fit?"

My congregation, Greater Community Church of God in Christ in Marietta, Georgia, is one example of a church helping its denomination to do denominations right. We are bringing Kingdom to community by being the real, relevant and relational face of Jesus in the world today!

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