

Stretching Out and **HOLDING ON**

This month I'm going to a conference in Fort Collins, Colorado. The conference is called "The Future of the Church." I'm going mostly because the keynote speaker is a sociologist I respect named Josh Packard. Packard is one of the many scholars who have examined the changing face of the church in America, but unlike most of them, Packard is hopeful. Whereas most who write on the subject seem to be mourning the loss of the influential church of the 1950s and 60s, Packard is from a younger generation. He never experienced that time, so he doesn't miss it. Instead, he is interested in what the church is poised to do and become next.

At the same conference, though, I note there will be a session on "The Future of Worship," which I also look forward to. Things are changing in that world as well. Most who study worship today agree that the so-called "Contemporary Worship" (rock bands singing repetitive choruses with the words projected behind them by Power Point) is not the future of worship. Rather, it seems to be a fad that had a brief heyday and now mostly feels ridiculous – the bell-bottom pants of the liturgical world.

Another session is called "Organizational Culture for Healthy Churches." While this one doesn't sound as fun to me, I want to hear what they say. One of the most common reasons for leaving given by former church members is their sense that the church is too top-heavy with bureaucracy, too focused on maintaining the institution to focus on anything else. I want to hear about other ways to do church.

So this month, I'll be stretching. Again. Because this isn't the first such conference I've gone to. Two years ago I spent a week on Washington Island listening to a speaker and author named Brian McLaren talk about many of the same things. You got a sermon series or two out of that one, too.

But here's what I remember most from the McLaren conference. During a question and answer time, a pastor asked, "If the church is going to change as much as you say in the next generation, what about us? What about those of us who are serving traditional old school churches? What should we do?" McLaren replied, "Hold on. Yes, the church going to do a lot of new things in the years to come, but when they've finished experimenting, they're going to realize that they need the stability of an institution to keep going. They're going to need you. Hold on."

I like that. Like McLaren and Packard and many others, I believe that the Church is on the cusp of some fairly dramatic change in America. I don't know exactly what it will look like (nor does anyone else), but I do believe we need to prepare ourselves, keep our eyes open for new ideas, be ready to experiment. Stretch out.

But at the same time, I have no desire to throw out all that is good in the church now. In our own congregation, we see children being taught, ministry being done in the community, people growing in faith, lives being touched, young people becoming leaders. And all this is taking place in the context of an institution. Hold on.