

One New Book for the Preacher

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Carol Howard Merritt, *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation* (Herdon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010).

Before I visit Jane, I take a deep breath and pray for patience and understanding. In her mid-nineties, Jane is still active in the community and one of the most religiously devout people I have ever met. Before arthritis made it too difficult, she not only would read through the Bible from cover to cover, but she would write it out. Each verse. By hand. (She's finished the entire Bible more than 70 times.) Jane's house is full of closets containing stacks of legal pads filled with hand-written scripture.

A pastoral visit with Jane leaves one in total awe of her scriptural knowledge, but it also requires a good deal of stamina. Like some in her generation, Jane looks back at her earlier years as the golden age. She tells detailed (and opinionated) stories of growing up and taking a horse and buggy into town for church services, back when worship was more formal and women stayed in the kitchen and out of the pulpit. When I visit Jane, every once in a while I'll get a word in about positive changes I see today, but most of the visit consists of my listening to her description of a contemporary church and society in turmoil. Jane would strongly dislike Carol Howard Merritt's *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation*.

In *Reframing Hope*, Carol Howard Merritt offers the church a primer in ministry for a new generation. Merritt's perspective on the contemporary mainline church is second to none. A pastor in Washington, D.C., with experience in a small rural parish as well, Merritt understands Twitter and community outreach via Facebook, but also the wealth of tradition and the pitfalls of our rapidly changing world. While some have tried to classify Merritt as part of the emergent church movement, such labeling misconstrues Merritt's work. Yes, Merritt is not scared to take on traditional structures or broken systems, but she is no apologist for the emergent church either, writing, "When we fail to recognize our history, we miss out on the great wisdom of previous generations. . . . When we ignore our traditions, we turn our backs on centuries of rich and wonderful thought." If one must label Merritt in the mainline/emergent church discussion, the term "loyal radical" probably describes her best. She delivers a careful, critical, and helpful look at vital ministry today.

In her first book, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation*, Merritt focuses her careful eye on the mainline church's ministry with young adults. *Reframing Hope* builds on this foundation, but expands the view towards a vital and relevant ministry with all. Throughout this more recent work, Merritt employs an encouraging and hopeful tone, a nice balance between a simplistic "how to" book and an overly theoretical work. *Reframing Hope* includes many stories of how congregations are meeting the challenges of ministry in our wired and weary world, but it does so leaving room for others to discover new approaches for their own context.

As opposed to my beloved parishioner Jane, Merritt writes, "I cannot remember a time when church was the hub of society and life. I was born in the 1970s, part of

Generation X. I never lived in a church-centered world.” But instead of despairing, Merritt sees hope. The Millennial Generation (those born between 1982 and 2001), she explains, is much more community focused than previous generations, and it is more institutionally minded and open to rituals. But hope isn’t simply reading generational data, but reframing the way we see the world. Reframing hope, she argues, takes understanding our current situation while also reimagining what the future can be. And so, Merritt’s seven chapters all begin with the prefix “re,” for she seeks to frame ministry today with a fresh perspective.

In “Redistributing Authority” Merritt traces recent shifts in culture from the civil rights movement to today’s culture of fear and bigger-is-always-better approach to life and church. Rather than bemoaning the changes that include a shift in the power of “denominational brands,” she writes that those congregations that respond to shifts in power will be the ones that remain vital in the future. Religious communities must acknowledge that the Internet era not only means a good website is important, but that power is redistributed—a post of YouTube goes viral, a pastor’s blog post makes a connection previously unimagined.

Such shifts in authority bring about shifts in community, as Merritt chronicles in “Re-forming Community.” For instance, while support for preachers themselves was once designed on the “expert model”—big steeple pastors mentoring less experienced ones with a how-to approach—young pastors today seek mutuality and interaction instead. Post-modernism has led to questioning of institutions, but also spawned new religious movements and fresh possibilities within denominational structures. Merritt does not suggest mainline churches should adopt the practice of some emergent churches and replace a traditional sermon with a “discussion time.” Instead, she argues that mainline churches can offer blog discussions, Podcast feeds, and other Internet discussion forums to augment traditional sermons.

As if to add credence to her thesis, while reading the chapter “Reexamining the Medium” about the possibilities and dangers of other forms of pastoral ministry than traditional face-to-face ministry, I received a text message from a parishioner announcing the birth of his baby girl (with a photo attached, of course). Merritt would not be surprised by the text message, but she would also emphasize the importance of my hospital visit that followed. She suggests how technology can support ministry, but Merritt does not shy away from its downsides. “Retelling the Message,” a chapter particularly interesting for preachers, examines how the Word can break through our complex world of mixed-messages in new and compelling ways—Facebook status updates and Twitter posts as testimony. Again, this is not an old church-goer complaining about new-fangled ideas, but a savvy pastor reframing the world in which preachers proclaim the good news.

“Reinventing Activism” explores how the reign of God can be seen and shared in new ways. And in “Renewing Creation” Merritt puts a hopeful spin on how congregations can act amidst our ecological crisis by being attentive to creation, embodying faith, and nurturing a grounded spirituality.

Finally, in “Retraditioning Spirituality” Merritt acknowledges that though dividing the secular and the sacred might make preachers’ jobs easier, the challenge for our time is connecting the varied pieces of our lives—digital presence and embodied presence, virtual reality and physical reality. To make these connections, Merritt advocates practices that respond to the challenges of today: “For wired women and

men, people who live constantly alert to incoming e-mail and flashing images, there is a hope for a bit of time when we might unplug.” Churches, then, can become places of contemplation and reordering of lives.

Merritt concludes arguing that hope is found, for contemporary ministry, not only in the “innovation and compassion of a new time,” but in realizing that “the longings of the current generation are the very things that we have been nurturing in our spiritual communities for hundreds of years.”

Reframing Hope, while a helpful and entertaining read, will not surprise those fully engaged in vital ministry today. In fact, readers may even find their own congregation, or congregations in the area, used as hopeful examples. *Reframing Hope* failed to alert me to many completely new ministry concepts—though admittedly, I am a fairly recent seminary graduate. What I did find, though, was a clear description of how ministry in the mainline church today can be approached seriously and truthfully, but also with hope.

As a preacher, with Merritt on my mind, I’m loathe to complain about life these days without also considering the hopefulness of our era, the new ways in which the Spirit is working. As I do so, I can look at the past and at tradition with a hopeful and honest perspective as well. If Jane could somehow bring herself to read this book—or if her pastor could help her read it—she would find, as all readers, a hopeful call to action for vital ministry today.