

# Final Report: 1001 NWC Conference Interviews

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# Reflections on the 1001 Conference

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The *Pursued by Grace* 1001 New Worshiping Communities (NWC) conference, held in St. Pete's Beach, FL in August 2015, was an invigorating and inspiring experience for every participant with whom we spoke. Through our discussions with various worshiping community leaders, we learned that worshiping community leaders have strong denominational ties, but do not always emphasize the need for such strong ties among their community participants. We learned that this particular approach is geared toward being more inviting to the unchurched and dechurched, in an attempt to dispel stereotypes about "church people." We learned that for many of these worshiping communities, evangelism is a form of worship – there is not always a clear distinction between the two concepts. We learned that although worshiping community leaders share the same goal - to create a new church for our changing world – they do not share the same methods. And we learned that this diversity in approaches may be precisely the reason they succeed.

## *A New Church for a Changing World*

American culture is changing, and the Church needs to change with it. At least, this is the mantra we heard at the *Pursued by Grace* conference. Many attendees are interested in the 1001 movement in part because they feel the official Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is not changing fast enough to keep up with societal shifts in norms and values. The 1001 movement, on the other hand, addresses these changes very well. This is not, in and of itself, revelatory; if these individuals did not buy into the movement, they would not be at the conference. What is noteworthy, however, is the appreciation they expressed for hearing *others* outline these connections between the 1001 movement and changes in our cultural landscape. After all, knowing something is not the same as really *knowing* it. As one person put it, "I have been saying these same things for years! But it was only after that presentation ( Rodger Nishioka's) that it really clicked for me!"

## *Shifting Cultural Norms*

There was a general agreement within the conversations we had that Millennials respond to a different style of evangelism than did previous generations. Millennials, it is argued, do not feel guilt and shame the same way older generations do, because they were raised without corporal punishment and with more positive, rather than negative, reinforcement. As such, they do not respond to what one person referred to as "fire and brimstone scare tactics." Telling them that they are sinners and need to repent does not work. Millennials respond to evangelism that tells them the world is broke, and it is only through Jesus that it can be fixed. "Do you want to help Jesus fix the world?"

Another way in which this was expressed was the idea that Millennials, as a group, do not tend to feel like "sinners" in the same way other generations have. One such conversation about Millennials and morality interpreted this through the lens of the Calvinist concept of "total depravity," and how this concept is interpreted within our modern culture. They argued that total depravity is the idea that we are human, and thus sinners by nature. But what is sin? Sin is "missing the mark." It was surmised that perhaps this is the angle that would hook Millennials – humans, by nature, "miss the mark" when it comes to being perfect beings. It is through doing good works and following in the steps of Jesus that we can become better people.

One person thought that total depravity was a nice concept, because it meant we were all on the same playing field; regardless of social class or background, in God's eyes we are all the same. And the flip side is that we all have the possibility of being saved by God, of having the Holy Spirit work through us. Others shared their agreement that they have seen the Holy Spirit at work in many people, Christian and not; that God does not discriminate in that way. This point too, was raised as an understanding of religion and salvation that would be more agreeable to Millennials.

Discussions of modern culture did not always center around generational differences, but also around the "open source" era presented by Roger Nishioka. With a shift to a more horizontally-focused, instead of top-down, approach to knowledge also comes a lessening of trust in, and need for, hierarchical organizations where someone from "on high" tells you what to think and how to act. As such, our society focuses less on organizational affiliation, and cares more about individual preferences and diversification of options. In response to the presentation which noted that all Protestant denominations are losing membership, one person stated, "well it's not just religion; people are less likely to claim [that] they belong to a political party too. People just don't want to be confined to a box like that."

#### *Permeable institutional boundaries of modern life*

One of the things we wanted to know going into this conference was whether worshiping community leaders strongly identify as Presbyterian, and how strongly they communicate that denominational affiliation to their participants (we say participants, because most communities don't use the term "members").

Most of the leaders we spoke with do seem to identify strongly as Presbyterian. However, this was not always the case; in discussing the ways in which the Church does (or does not) meet the needs of modern society, one person said, "I'm in a place where I'm almost wanting to get out of the Church so I can actually help people in the world." This sentiment was expressed in lesser degrees among others, who felt that the denomination was failing the people, and their alignment to the 1001 movement was almost framed as exiting the denomination in favor of this new form of church, just as often as it was presented as a means of revitalizing the denomination.

There are worshiping community leaders who care deeply about their denomination, expressed in myriad ways—from efforts to put the Presbyterian seal on their own outreach endeavors as a way of promoting PC(USA) through their mission work, to a young adult tattooing the Presbyterian cross on their arm. Although there is disgruntlement with the perceived sluggish stubbornness of the denomination (and endless red tape), there is also great institutional pride and identity! These seemingly disparate reactions are not mutually exclusive; it is often those who have the greatest emotional investment in an organization who will be the most vocal about any perceived problems said organization has, only because they care so deeply.

We did find that most of the communities do not hide that they are Presbyterian; some of this we found through asking, but some we also found through following up and examining the public materials developed by the community (e.g., websites, Facebook pages). So, despite this perceived turn towards a society of non-joiners, these

worshiping communities are still publicly announcing their denominational affiliations, even if they are not emphasizing it.

Where the move towards our culture of non-joining shows up most is in how leaders approach “membership.” Many do not actively seek members; partly due to the missional nature of their community, and partly because because their target audience is either unchurched and dechurched people who are “church-shy;” or transient populations such as the homeless, people in RV parks, or college students-- or both. Most often, the stated goal of community leaders is not to become a church, or even to bring new people to the denomination. Instead, it is a much broader goal of helping their corner of the world (be that corner based on geography or demography) and in the process, hopefully bringing new people to Jesus. As such, while leaders tend to have a strong denominational identity, they do not require or even expect any similar denominational identification among participants.

### *Evangelism as Worship*

So how do worshiping community leaders adapt to this new era? We joined in on some conversations among worshiping community and church leaders, in which they shared what they are doing (or plan to do). Often, these discussions focused on evangelism methods, though they were rarely named as such. In fact, one key take-away point we got from listening to worshiping community leaders is that for them, evangelism is a form of worship. The goals of evangelism and worship in this case converge on inspiring and instilling the Holy Spirit in as many hearts as possible by (1) offering time and energy in service to improving God’s kingdom on Earth, (2) communing in fellowship with those who have not yet been brought to grace, and (3) showing appreciation for all God has provided. The methods were diverse, and included many of the common styles of evangelism, including: service and mission, door-to-door evangelism, hospitality, and friendship evangelism.

### *Service and mission as evangelism*

The people we spoke with primarily emphasize service and mission as their way to honor God by being God’s “hands and feet.” And, through modeling this behavior publicly and around non-Christians, they hope to bring more people to God in a subtle, less “fire and brimstone” manner. The idea is to “show the Gospel” rather than to “tell about it.” This reflects what we found in the 2014 survey of worshiping community leaders, where we found that building relationships was a top priority among worshiping communities, and many emphasize mission as *their* mission.

They also mention the importance of going out into the community and working side-by-side with non-Christians as well as other Christians. In this strategy, leaders often (but not always) emphasize the importance of *not* engaging in God-talk while doing service activities. Examples of such mission-centered communities include *The Lifeboat Project*, *Isaiah’s Table*, and *Hope Presbyterian Church at Lake Nona*.

*The Lifeboat Project*, which is a non-profit company assisting and advocating on behalf of survivors of human trafficking, just got approval for a seed grant to form a new worshiping community to minister side-by-side with those survivors. Additionally, they have developed an educational app to help prevent human trafficking and have secured

a large grant for research on human trafficking. In this case, the mission came first; the idea to form a worshiping community came out of gratitude for that work.

Service evangelism is not always separate from God-talk and traditional worship. One example of this exception is *Isaiah's Table*. They engage in a service evangelism in which they invite people to their table for a free meal, and these people may stay after for worship. Their target demographic is people without homes or who are precariously housed. Most stay for worship, and some come back. In this example, the God-talk and emphasis on the Christian nature of the community is very upfront and forthright. Once again, the service comes first; staying for the worship service is optional.

*Hope Presbyterian Church at Lake Nona*, a formal church plant engages in what they call “eight pavilions of service” in addition to regular worship. Their priorities are “God before all, Kingdom before congregation, people before property, love before doctrinal precision.” In this statement, Hope Nona has eloquently summed up what seem to be the main priorities of so many other new worshiping communities at the conference – an outward focus on mission and relationship-building out in the community rather than emphasizing worshiping and strengthening the church itself.

#### *Door-to-door evangelism*

That said, we were surprised to hear that at least two communities (*Refresh* and *The Fellowship Place*) still engage in door-to-door evangelism, which both communities describe as going out “two-by-two,” in reference to the Biblical example. This method seems to be successful for them; however, neither of these two communities relies solely on this form of reaching new people. The two communities also differ in the content of what they share door-to-door.

#### *Hospitality evangelism*

*The Fellowship Place* engages in a much more traditional form of evangelism in that it focuses on spreading the Gospel and inviting people to their worship service – a sort of hospitality evangelism that seems to be working very well for them. They are also one of the few communities we encountered that do not shy away from the term “evangelism,” but rather claim it as part of their purpose for existing. However, even here the focus is on creating a *mission-minded* community. Their mission initiatives include parking lot gatherings where they give away food and school supplies and volunteering at local schools. This outward focus, more than anything, is the common thread between new worshiping communities.

#### *Friendship or relationship evangelism*

*Refresh* is a relatively new worshiping community whose method of evangelism, like *The Fellowship Place*, includes going door-to-door, knocking, and talking to anyone who would listen, and inviting people to parties. Unlike *The Fellowship Place*, however, they do not engage in God-talk with newcomers. Their goal is to get people to come to their events regularly, and model what it means to be a Christian (again, to “show” more than to “tell”). What we find interesting about *Refresh* is how the leaders, though affiliated with a congregation (one is a pastor), work hard to create a worshiping community that provides the benefits of Christianity without the trappings of Church. Through their use of friendship evangelism, their targeted efforts to keep their worshiping community separate from their congregation, and their emphasis on being a worshiping community while minimizing God-talk and church structure, they aim to create a safe environment

for people who are seeking something spiritual, but are also wary of traditional “church.”

*Refresh* is hoping to foster fellowship that will break down negative stereotypes that keep some people from coming to Church. These stereotypes are often based in experiences, as the visitors sometimes share that they have had bad experiences with church in the past, and have thus lost interest or became hostile toward church in general.

Reaching out to these “dones” (i.e. “dechurched”) is another common goal among many worshiping community leaders, and the strategies for reaching this group often involve long-term planning. One example of this process is in Tamara John’s RV ministry *Hope for Life Chapel*. Tamara has found success through a blend of testimonial and interpersonal evangelism. Like *The Fellowship Place*, Tamara does not shy away from the term “evangelism,” and describes herself as an evangelist for the PC(USA). Tamara’s evangelism involves reaching out to others and building trust by first sharing her own story, and through this testimony showing how God’s love can transform and heal. It is only once the walls people build around themselves are down, that community can begin to build.

This form of friendship evangelism, or variations therein, was a technique commonly mentioned by community leaders. Whether hanging out in coffeeshops and striking up conversations with others, or organizing secular neighborhood barbeques, this method is described as slow (it took Tamara over a year to build sufficient trust to gain traction), but much more meaningful. Leaders believe this method is appropriate for reaching the unchurched and dechurched for three main reasons.

First, it is non-threatening. These groups often feel antagonistic toward church. They have very particular stereotypes about what “church people” are like, and want nothing to do with that. This model doesn’t scare them away; in fact, in some cases they don’t initially know that they are even talking to Christians.

Second, this method helps debunk these negative stereotypes about Christians. By forming relationships with the unchurched and dechurched, leaders are able to show, rather than tell, that they are “normal” people who will not judge or condemn.

Third, this method allows the leader to learn where the person is in relation to God – are they antagonistic? Curious? Open? Seeking? Have they had particularly bad experiences in the past, and if so, how can these be overcome?

### *An ideal worshiping community?*

There was no real consensus we could discern regarding what an ideal worshiping community or congregation might look like. In fact, many leaders were not able to clearly articulate their ideals or goals for their own communities. However, in light of one of the keynote presentations by Karl Vaters, author of *The Grasshopper Myth*, perhaps this is a good thing. Vaters promoted the notion that perhaps the best way to create a community’s mission statement and plan is to just start being together in community, and see what emerges as your group’s interests and strengths. He describes this using archery as a metaphor; instead of shooting arrows at a predetermined target, we can throw the arrows and then draw the targets around where they land. Start doing

things and then wait to see where the arrows start to clump. Here's a process for writing a mission statement, Vaters says: start with what your church does well, then do it on purpose. Write that into your mission statement.

One topic of discussion that did come up often, however, was the extent to which we should be promoting racial-ethnic or cultural integration within congregations and communities. Chris Brown, leader of *The Upper Room*, helpfully named this topic as the *homogenous unit principle* – the argument that communities would develop better/faster if they stayed culturally homogenous rather than make efforts to be more integrated. There was a continuum of views on this topic. Some argued that it would probably be easier to grow new worshiping communities if they were more homogenous.

However, there was also much discussion about how we could best maintain inter-community dialogue then, since everyone agreed that a high goal for being a good Christian is to have an empathetic awareness of people who come from very different backgrounds than you. Without this understanding, we cannot really love our neighbor, for it is harder to love what we do not know. And ignorance breeds misunderstanding and hate. Others were against the idea of homogenous communities, fearing this isolation would not breed good intercultural dialogue and understanding (i.e. “fellowship”).

This brought on a discussion of people's own community or congregation's homogeneity.

- An example of a congregation that tried to create diversity and is struggling with the aftermath: A Latino man described the church he was hired to pastor (a merger of three congregations that had been dying). The congregation was small, old, and White. They hired him to “brown up” the church. He did, but they complained. Racism is a big issue there, with people being openly racist but denying that they are racist.
- An example of a congregation that, instead of trying to bring diversity to its pews, is focusing on fostering relationships with congregations that are demographically dissimilar: A pastor of a predominantly White congregation described his own congregation's struggle with creating diversity and fostering dialogue with congregations of color. He cited a neighboring African American congregation he has reached out to in the past and spoke of the desire of having the elders get together for a meal, and then eventually the congregations. He feels this would increase fellowship and foster understanding.
- An example of a woman in a congregation that is culturally dissimilar to her own background, and has benefited from it: A Black pastor discussed her own culture shock going from an upper-class White background to a lower class White area. The racism was more in-your-face, but also (and perhaps more importantly to her) she had to face some of her own classism by dealing with the stereotypes she had of the people in her new surroundings. She learned to become more cognizant of her own biases, and grew as a Christian in facing them.

On the topic of trying to bring more heterogeneity to a homogenous church, a few people expressed frustration that most people who want to diversify their (White) congregation really want to get people of color to “join them in the pews during worship.” However, they were unwilling to make any changes and expected the newcomers from other cultural backgrounds to assimilate and worship in the style of the church as it existed before they arrived.

A better ideal, in this argument, was to maintain that cultural integrity, and learn to respect and honor the cultural preferences of others. The question presented was, can this happen in a single congregation? Or should there be a place where people can find their “home” and feel safe around others who are like them in some meaningful way? Or are we all alike in some meaningful way, and we really just need to come together as a group in order to learn our similarities? One person argued that she thought the homogeneity came after the group formed – that we became more similar (or perhaps realized we were similar all along) after having an intimate discussion.

For example, *The Upper Room* worshiping community takes the approach of targeted cultural integration, particularly in the case of religious ritual and expression. The leader, Chris Brown, describes this as “embracing the awkwardness.” *The Upper Room* is diverse in terms of worship style. Their service, as a result, will have a variety of music styles. Chris explains that allowing space for people to “worship in their heart language” means that it is quite possible that, at some point during each service, each community participant will feel uncomfortable. He argues that people should embrace the awkwardness, because allowing yourself to be uncomfortable can, in and of itself, be a ministry to others. In your time of discomfort, you are creating the space for someone different than you to be comfortable.

### *Struggles of new worshiping community leaders*

Some new worshiping community leaders worry about how to talk about money. One told us that coaching has helped tremendously with that; he had struggled with how to do it without offending people, yet it was so critical to the community’s viability. Another said that it was one of the most important things that they learned to do as a community, and that we shouldn’t fear it because it’s biblical: Jesus talked about money a lot! But she also pointed out that coaching was needed for her to understand this. She suggested that workshops about money and coaching about money will be critical to future success for many new worshiping communities.

Some leaders of new worshiping communities have personal financial struggles, too. They may get paid nothing or lead a community as a second job. One couple spoke of receiving paychecks that they could not cash, from his position as associate pastor at a new church development where they served previously. They would hang them on the refrigerator and imagine how they would spend the money if they could cash it. They fear moving forward in starting a new worshiping community because they don’t want their family to suffer like that again.

### *Non-Worshiping Community Leaders*

It was interesting to us how many attendees at the 1001 conference were *not* worshiping community leaders. So why were these individuals in attendance, if not to find support or learn to lead a new worshiping community? We found three reasons: (1) they are considering starting worshiping communities; (2) they are pastors (or invested



members) of a dying congregation, and they feel the principles espoused by the 1001 movement are exactly what they need to revitalize their congregation; or (3) they are presbytery staff or on a session, and hoping to learn to train or coach others in starting their own worshiping communities.

For the latter group, we think the takeaway message for next year is simple: be cognizant of this population of potential trainers/coaches when designing workshops. Perhaps they need information that is specific to their role as future mentor. Perhaps there could be workshops unique to the goals of promoting worshiping communities in one's presbytery: *How can I find potential leaders? How can I discover what populations are being overlooked within our presbytery, that a new worshiping community might reach?* Of course, the best way to know what workshops they might benefit from is to ask them.

For those who pastor dying congregations - this could be a byproduct of a larger problem, as presented by Karl Vaters. Namely, people don't perceive there to be sufficient support for pastors of small congregations, let alone pastors of small, declining congregations. Although our impression from listening to conference attendees is that Vaters overstates the extent to which this population is overlooked, this population does still seem to feel a bit neglected.

However, this isn't the only reason these individuals come to the 1001 conference. They also come because they are drawn to the freshness of the movement. As argued by Rhashell Hunter and Rodger Nishioka in their presentations, American culture is changing and churches need to change with it, and these are the folks who understand that.

## *List of New Worshiping Communities represented in this research:*

- *The Fellowship Place*, Rev. Dr. Michael A. Robinson (but we spoke mostly with Patricia), Charlotte, NC
- *Hope for Life Chapel RV Ministry*, CA, Tamara John
- *Hope Presbyterian Church at Lake Nona*, Orlando, FL Nancy Graham Ogne
- *Refresh*, (not yet an official NWC) in NJ, Jennifer and Sean Chow
- *The Lifeboat Project*, Apopka, FL Jill Bolander Cohen
- *Co-Op 513*, Chris Hansen
- *Isaiah's Table*, Syracuse, NY, Nancy Wind (lay led)
- *The Upper Room*, Chris Brown and Michael Gehrling
- *Transformation Multicultural Fellowship*, James Munyl
- Becki Wind and Pearl Fischer, young adult group
- Man from New Albany doing food ministry
- *Big Table*, Spokane, WA, Kevin Finch
- *Shalom International Ministry*, rev. Gad Mpoyo
- The Open Door, Pittsburgh, PA, BJ Woodworth

### *Others*

- Keith Reed, interim minister
- Sam Henderson, interim minister
- Pat Smith, interim minister, Frankfort, IN
- The folks at Ohio Valley Presbytery
- Jacqueline
- Carrie