

Proper 28B'18
18 November 2018
Hebrews 10.11-14 (15-18) 19-25
St. Luke's Episcopal Church
North Little Rock, Arkansas
The Rev. Carey Stone

I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord. In the Name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. – From Psalm 122.1

Comedian and play write Woody Allen once said, "80% of life is showing up." And from the statistics it's easy to see that fewer and fewer are showing up at church across the board. According to surveys conducted by the Gallup organization the last two-three decades have brought drastic decline to the church in America.

Let's take a look at the statistics of those who identify as Catholics and Protestants. In 1980, we find that a full 61% identified as Protestant and 28% as Catholic. In 2000 the numbers had dropped to 52 % of Americans identified as Protestant and 25% identified as Catholic, in 2017 38% identified as Protestant and 21% as Catholic.

In 2000, 59% said religion was "Very Important" in their lives, compared to 2017 where that number had fallen to 51%. In 1992 when asked if religion was losing its influence on American life 63% agreed that it was. In 2017, 73% believed it was losing its influence.

When asked if they were a member of a church or synagogue in 1992, 70% answered yes compared to only 54% in 2017. When asked if they had attended a church or synagogue service in past seven days, 44 % said yes in 2000 with only 35% reporting yes in 2017.

When asked if they attended a religious service on a weekly basis, in 2000 35% said yes, in 2017 only 23% said yes. Those who indicated that they never attend a service was 10% in 2000 compared with 27% in 2017 – an increase in 17 % points over the last 17 years. In 2001 90% answered that they believed in God, in 2017, 79% said they believed in God. Those who seldom or never attend church were asked to report their reasons, here are the top nine: No 1. reason: 44% say they prefer to worship on their own. No. 2 reason: 36% reported not liking organized religion. No.3 reason: 33% said they are not very religious. No. 4 reason: 22% said they haven't been able to find a church or house of worship that they like. No. 5 reason: 19% said they don't have time. No.6 reason: 17% said they didn't know what religion was right for them. No.7 reason: 16% don't liked to be asked for money when they attend. No. 8 reason: 10% said poor health kept them from attending. No. 9 reason: 9% said they don't feel welcome when they attend.^[1] Closer to home our own bishop reported to the clergy that there was an overall decline in attendance in the Episcopal Church in the US with the only positive note was that our diocese had shrunk less than the others had.

The church back in the day used to be the social hub that a community revolved around. We enjoyed a favored status within the community and the church's calendar and schedule had to be considered by the public and private schools. Wednesdays and Sundays were considered by school administrators, teachers, and coaches to be off limits for sporting or extracurricular activities. Then it was Wednesday night that extracurricular activities began to pop up. Then when soccer came to Arkansas it had to be fitted into a schedule that was already crowded so Sunday afternoons was the slot they selected. Then finally Sunday mornings became an open time slot for competitions and tournaments. What a terrible choice to place parents, teachers, coaches, and students in where you have to choose between church or participating in sports.

There was a time not too long ago where there were only three television networks and no 24-hour news, now there are literally hundreds and hundreds of options through cable and streaming services. The world has changed around us and the church has been slow to adapt and change, particularly those of us in the mainline denominations. We operate much as we did three decades ago offering programs and services at times that no longer work for many families, particularly single parent families.

You should have received an invitation in the mail this week inviting you to attend a meeting during Advent called "Transformation: The Next Chapter" where we can process some recent events and look toward our future together in 2019. These meetings will open up a conversation about where we are, who we are and where we believe we are being called to go as a church in 2019. Please make every effort to attend.

In spite of all the statistics we still have God's promise that "wherever two or three are gathered together in Christ's name God will be in their midst."^[2] Only in community can we fully develop into the persons God intends for us to be and to become followers of Christ. I was talking with a parishioner the other day and we were talking about how easy it is to get out of the habit of regular church attendance and the longer you stay away the easier it is to stay away. Our memories are short and the couch is comfortable and without the encouragement and accountability of the Christian community our lives can drift off course.

Biblical teacher, John MacArthur tells the following story to illustrate the importance of regular church attendance:

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going.

After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.

Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination.

As the one lone ember's flame diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and "dead as a doornail."

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting.

Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, "*Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday.*"^[3]

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."^[4]

I hope to see you in church again real soon! Amen.

^[1]<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>

^[2]Matthew 18.20

^[3]<http://www.inspirationalarchive.com/3428/the-lonely-ember/#ixzz5XB69ONyi>

^[4]Hebrews 10. 19-25 NRSV