

“Church Math”

The Book of Acts in the New Testament tells the story of the first years of the Church. As the gospel of Jesus began to spread into new territories, the church grew in numbers.

For instance, after Peter preached a sermon on the day of Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit descended on the huge crowd gathered there, it says, “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day *about three thousand persons were added*” (Acts 2:41). Later in the chapter it says, “And day by day the Lord *added to their number* those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Later, in Acts 4:4 it says, “Many of those who heard the word believed, and *they numbered about five thousand.*” Five thousand more people added to the Church!

In Acts 5:14, as the apostles preached and performed signs and wonders in Jesus’ name, it tells us: “More than ever *believers were added* to the Lord, *great numbers* of both men and women.” Growth in the church continues! “The word of God continued to spread; the *number of the disciples increased greatly* in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). Persecution of Christians increased, and believers spread out to other areas. In spite of the persecution, it says this: “The hand of the Lord was with them, and *a great number became believers* and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). A few verses later it says, “A great many people were brought to the Lord” (Acts 11:24).

You get the picture here, don’t you! *People coming to faith in Christ was the norm! New converts becoming part of the Church, the Body of Christ, was the norm! Church growth was the norm!*

Let’s compare that to today. There is widespread decline in church membership and attendance in the U.S. today. The decline has been most pronounced *in mainline Protestant denominations*. In a period of just 30 years – 1990 to 2020, the United Church of Christ declined by 52%, the Presbyterian Church USA declined by 58%, Evangelical Lutherans by 41%, the Episcopal Church had a 36% decline, American Baptists by 23%. In that 30-year period the United Methodist Church declined by 31% (that was before the recent exit of about a fourth of our churches from the denomination).

The decline in membership and attendance has picked up speed. From 1987 to 2004 these churches were losing 265,000 members per year. From 2004 to 2020 they lost an average of 378,000 members per year. During that same period the *U.S. population has grown* considerably. So, rather than keeping up with the population grown, the churches have less people! In 1987 the 6 denominations mentioned earlier represented 9.4% of the population in the U.S. Today, those 6 major denominations represent only 4.3% of our population.

We see today many more very small congregations. I have seen a number of churches in our conference that were once thriving and growing now struggling, much reduced in membership and attendance.

The bottom line is that attendance *by all denominations and traditions* show the lowest attendance rates *ever* in the United States. Also, from 1999 to 2021, (a mere 22 years)

Catholic baptisms declined by nearly 34%.

Some of the causes for this are fairly easy to recognize. *The secularization of our culture.* Moving away from our Judeo-Christian roots. The move away from traditional values, which include going to church. Sunday is just another day, there are so many other activities. *Covid-19.* When all the effects of Covid have settled down, church attendance across the board is down an average of 15%.

This can easily be depressing, but there are some positive signs, too. Non-denominational churches have generally fared better than mainline denominations. There is a slight growth in some non-denominational churches. Then you have the megachurches – like LCBC – that keep packing people in, expanding to more locations. Let's not forget that the decline we're talking about is in the U.S. There are places in the world where Christianity is flourishing, and churches are growing rapidly. I've mentioned that the church we are connected to in Kenya, where we're paying the salaries of 3 pastors, have birthed (I think) 9 other congregations! Praise God for the growth taking place in His Church throughout the world!

What about the situation here at Community Church? We didn't get to this point of averaging about 25 people in worship overnight! It took a while, and there are many factors that produced this. Those of you who have been here a long time can point to some. In my time here you have informed me some of the things that contributed to our decline. Pastoral appointments that didn't work out very well. People leaving when a female pastor was assigned here. Squabbles within the congregation that caused some to leave. Add to this the general move away from church attendance in our country.

I have already shared my own sense of failure for not being able to help this church grow numerically. And I will take responsibility for my part. But I don't think all the blame goes on a pastor when a church has declined. As it's often said of sports teams: "We win as a team, we lose as a team." One factor, too, is that by the time I got here the church was already in rather steep decline. And, the further you are on the descent part of the life cycle of an organization, the harder it is to stop the decline.

But as I think of not just our church, but so many churches struggling, I can't help but think that *the biggest factor behind a church declining is this: The church has forgotten evangelism.* We have forgotten our reason for being: To make disciples! To reach the lost!

Every one of the 4 gospels spells this out. Think about the last words of Jesus before He left His disciples and went back to the Father in heaven.

Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Mark 16:15-16: "And (Jesus) said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.'" Luke 24:46-48: "(Jesus) said to

them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” John 20:21: Jesus appears to the disciples in an upper room after His resurrection, and He says to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Our primary mission is to share the love and redeeming power of Jesus with our families, friends and neighbors. It’s so easy to drift away from that central mission of the church. To do good things...have Bible studies, classes, seminars...enjoy one another’s company at church events ...be blessed by our worship services. And in the process become *ingrown, focused on ourselves*. Many good Christians, regular worship attenders, *never even think* about inviting an unchurched neighbor, coworker, friend, family member to church.

Let me be honest and share a disappointment with you. As you know, I offer each week a brief online meditation. I spend a lot of time on this. I’ve encouraged those of you on Facebook to share this with your Facebook Friends. It’s a simple way to get the Word of God out. You never know how God may use it to touch somebody’s life. A couple of you share it. Just a few. So, if it’s not worth sharing, let me know. If there are ways to make it better let me know.

There is a ministry called “Church Answers”. Its leader, Thom Rainer, and his son have their pulse on what’s happening in the Church and what’s happening in our culture. Thom has made the point that one of the main reasons that churches decline and die is that they forget evangelism.

In the Scriptures we looked at in the beginning of this sermon we saw that *growth was the normal mode for the first century Church*. The church grew in its first days because believers shared the good news about Jesus with others, calling people to repentance and faith. It’s as simple as that!

One more brief, but very important point, about church growth: *If you want to grow, you have to be willing to change*. You don’t change the message. You don’t change the gospel and God’s Truth. But you have to change the way you present it – how you package the product!

Jesus made that point: “No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins” (Mark 2:22). New wine ferments, and gives off gases. Old wineskins are brittle. So, if you pour new, fermenting wine into these old hardened wineskins, the expanding gases will break the skins, and you’ll lose both the wine and the wineskins. The new wine is the gospel. The wineskins represent how we carry that message to each generation.

One of the reasons why some churches are growing is that they’re willing to change - to do church in new ways in order to better connect with people as they are. Perhaps the easiest way to see this is in the worship services and music. Take LCBC. Their worship services are casual, the

music is loud and edgy, in the satellite locations the preacher isn't present, but is seen on a screen. The criticisms I hear about LCBC is that it's a show, a performance. Maybe in some cases. That's the risk. But loud, upbeat music, large screens and computer graphics, jeans and flip flops, are where a lot of people are at – at least younger people. And as long as Christ is lifted up and there is sound doctrine, why not?

You want a worship service with printed liturgy, hymns from a hymnal, organ music, fine. But you're not going to get young people and younger adults. Sure, there are exceptions. But you can book it – stick to traditional worship services and the people you will attract will be people like....us!

Now, having contemporary music is good – but it doesn't guarantee growth. We found that out with Elizabeth Zito. We could hardly have anyone more gifted as a singer than her. But we didn't grow. It's no guarantee. But continue to do worship like it was done in 1950 (or even 1990), and you pretty much assure yourself that you will get few, if any, youth or younger adults.

We want to grow? We have to be willing to change! In our meetings with our consultant, and our District Superintendent, we agreed on a vision of birthing a new congregation *within this existing congregation*. But this new congregation will have to look *different!* (If we continue to do what we've been doing, we're going to get the same results!)

I don't think God is done with Community UMC yet! God is here, and where God is present, there is hope. And especially there is hope when churches zero in on our main mission – to make disciples – and where church people are willing to change – not the message – but how we share the message with people today.

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