

The Church Relevant

“What Happens to Society When the Church Stops Being Intentional?” (Second in the Series)

March 24, 2019

8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.

*“So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”
I Corinthians 10:12*

If you missed the first sermon I preached in this series, then you may want to know what the series is about. There are three more sermons that ask some serious questions about why the church is apparently losing its relevance in society. Most of you present, if not everyone, are already Christians. But looking around the room we can see plenty of empty places for others if people wanted to be here.

Week by week we look around us to see if there are any prospective church members. Yet, we have forgotten, as we learned from the study on the parables, that Jesus came to seek and to save those who were lost. He wasn't looking for church transfers. “Lost” in his language referred to those who had wandered from the spirit of the Old Testament law of Moses.

This week I want to ask the question “What happens to the church when it stops being intentional?” Look, as Jesus said to his disciples, the fields are white unto harvest.” How can we “go and teach all the people of the world” when we can't even get our next-door neighbors to church today? That's the reason I want to have this conversation with you about the symptomology of the church's irrelevancy when it should be a time of growth.

I can tell you what I think has happened. Back in the day when mainline churches were thriving in the latter half of the twentieth century, you might have a hard time finding a place to sit when you attended a worship service. That wasn't true for every church, but if you look across the landscape you can see literally hundreds of churches, mainline and other kinds, that built accommodating buildings for their growth. One of the nostalgic stories I often hear is about the time in St. Andrew's when the space needs became great enough that this sanctuary was built to hold the weekly attenders. People say that chairs had to be set up in the aisles so everyone could have a seat. Regardless of how many separate reasons we can offer for the decline they all seem to be more about hunches than statistical analysis of any kind. In the larger picture, a look across the nation demonstrates that whatever you want to apply to your rational, society is turning away from organized congregations as places needed for spiritual comfort and faith development.¹

Gregg Stier, writing for *The Christian Post* (2016) laments the comparison of facts he quotes between congregations and *Starbucks*. “Right now, there are over 300,000 Protestant churches in America. Just do the division (300,000 divided by 50 states) and that's an average of 6,000 churches per state. Wow! That's a lot of churches! Think about it this way: There are 12,000(ish) Starbucks and well over 300,000 churches! So Starbucks can saturate the United

¹ (The good news for St. Andrew's is that now that we have an accurate, active membership role, we know that we have more average monthly attendees than we have on the rolls. That's great news, but not address the overall downturn from St. Andrew's glory days.”)

States with caffeinated drinks, but almost 30 times more churches can't saturate the United States with the Living Water. Seriously???"²

Seriously, what's going on? When I did my research on evangelism in urban environments for my project, I learned that churches that were growing churches are intentional churches. They knew and could articulate their identities. They knew their market share. They focused human and financial resources on growth. They knew what church growth was. They emphasized discipleship and leadership training. But, the signs of a lack of intentionality were already slipping into the everyday ways of doing things in churches. Some churches focused heavily on international missions, but bold mission thrusts became bold mission busts. It was also during that time that the nation began to observe the rise of the megachurches. These were churches whose number of members were considered to be beyond 2000 members. Then mainline churches, which by the way, some of which are counted among those churches, began to compare their plights to the success of the mega churches. Mega churches were and are intentional, at least those who were actually mega-churches. Some that had those many members were really sharing their members on roll instead of their actual active memberships.³ You can study these tabulated results from the source I have provided in my online sermon.

By lack of intentionality I mean a type of malaise that has set in on churches. To say the least, it is a massive, complex matter that cannot be easily put into a few sentences. However, with as many observations as we can handle mentally, an apparent, if not actual decline is happening among mainline structures. We believe that we are losing as many as 1% of our churches per year. Some researchers are saying as few as 3000, others saying as many as 4000. Yet, the number of new congregations that are affiliated with no denomination (the "nons") is growing, particularly among independents and new-comers to our nation. And, the nones? Those who do not practice any organized religious faith?

"So, while much noise has been made of the rise of the religiously unaffiliated ("nones"), their rise has not correlated with an equal rate of congregations closing. "We shouldn't expect to see a one-to-one correspondence between declining affiliation and church attendance," Brauer told CT. "But assuming the growth we have seen is partially made up of people dropping out of religion altogether, we should see some eventual consequence to congregation counts."⁴ So, what is happening we are seeing two phenomenon at once: the rise of some segments of the church population and at the same time, the fall of other segments, principally the mainline churches.

But the answer we want to know what happens to society when mainline churches fail to be intentional? The answer may not seem clear at first, but on reflections there are some obvious outcomes. Churches that are not intentional are not only losing the market share, and thus, society is going elsewhere to find spiritual comfort and a resource for faith development.

² Gregg Steir, "Over 300,000 Churches in America; Do We Really Need More Church Plants?", <https://www.christianpost.com/news/church-planting-growth-pastors-evangelicals-ministry-america-157730/> (accessed March 23, 2019). (Stier's number 300,000 is less than other research that suggests far more churches. The problem has to do with congregations that can be members of two different denominations, or mega churches that have multiple church campuses, and other reasons such as carefully guarded confidentiality about church members and numbers.)

³ *Wikipedia*, "List of Megachurches in the United States," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_megachurches_in_the_United_States (accessed March 23, 2019).

⁴ Rebecca Randall, citing Simon Brauer, "How Many Churches Does America Have? More Than Expected," <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/how-many-churches-in-america-us-nones-nondenominational.html> (accessed March 23, 2019).

If you have your cell phones with you, I want you take them out for a second and look at how far we have come from the old wireless satchels we once carried around until these amazing computers. They are handy to hold, easy to communicate with, keep up with all our records and banking. We need them, don't we? If you are holding an Apple get ready for the change that society will soon experience. The headline from yesterday, March 23:

"Apple gets ready for life after the iPhone with services push"

On Monday, Apple will do something it has never done when making a product announcement – focus largely on other companies, not itself. Apple is expected to launch two services on March 25, including its rumored video streaming service, at an event in Cupertino, Calif. that will be attended by Hollywood celebrities such as JJ Abrams and Jennifer Aniston. This is in stark contrast to past events, which have largely featured tech journalists, Wall Street and industry analysts. As part of the video streaming service, Apple is expected to place a heavy emphasis on selling others' services for them, . . . Apple is also likely to unveil some of its own content, some of which stars Aniston as well as Reese Witherspoon, Steve Carrell and others." CEO Tim Cook, who has become increasingly active in touting the company's business outside of its iPhone, has previously said the company would double its service revenue by 2020 from 2016 levels. Revenue attributed to its Services-related business totaled \$10.9 billion in its most recent quarter, up 19 percent year-over-year."⁵

This is an example of a business that is intentional. It is not waiting until its doors are closed and millions drop their iPhones off at Goodwill. Apple is "doing something it has never done before," "increasingly active in touting the company's business outside its iPhone." My first thought was that most of the phones you have in your hand will soon need to be replaced to accommodate the new streaming capacity of the Apple network. Now it's not about the iPhone, it's about how iPhone serves its customer base in other more felt-need services than just in communication. Mind boggling?

By comparison the nation's mainline churches are stuck in unwieldy denominationalism that is a little like hanging on to the old phone satchels model of the past. We, the church, are not going to be relevant in society if we just keep making fresher models of old satchel phones. Society is not looking for new reproductions for doing church. It is looking for new ways the church can adapt to the changing needs of the society in which we live. The answer to the sermon question needs to be clarified. We need to know which church? The church that still into satchel phones, or the one that intentionally reforms it's core faith by the word of God to be what God demands of God's place in the world today? We must do something that has never been done before and increase our active business outside the walls of this institution. Recall the words of Paul the Apostle to the church at Corinth, "*So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.*"

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⁵ "Apple gets ready for life after the iPhone with services push," <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/apple-gets-ready-for-life-after-the-iphone-with-services-push> (accessed March).