

Does the Future Have a Church?

by

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When the 2014 Religious Landscape Survey of the Pew Forum released the statistics that approximately 56 million Americans are “religiously unaffiliated,” nearly 23% of the population,¹ many church leaders, scholars, and plenty of others began seriously discussing the decline of Christianity and religion in America. The debates is over the fast “rise of the nones,” that is, those when given a list of religious communities (various Christian and non-Christian communities) to select their membership, check off the box “none” or “none of the above.” It presented a bleak view of the future. Making the future look even worse was that it was reported that “millennials” (those born between 1990-2000) were even more likely to be unaffiliated. Christian communions were affected the greatest, with declines seen in most bodies. Particularly striking was the speed of the rise of the “nones” and concomitant decline of religious communities in just seven years.

The goal of this presentation is to look more closely at the phenomenon

¹ *Americans Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Forum, May 2015.

by considering the general social situation that religion in American finds itself in the second decade of the twenty-first century and to begin to wrestle with how these trends will affect the Church in the coming decades. This is a “meta-analysis,” taking a large view at various points to attempt to “connect the dots” so that we can look forward. To do so, we first shall consider trends that are negatively affecting religious groups in America, then move to trends that could positively affect them. The presentation will include data from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, as the case study of the community I know best. In total, the goal is to look ahead and ask if in the future there will be a Church?

Before moving on, it is useful to remember that we must enter the discussion with caution. As the old proverb — attributed to Yogi Berra, Mark Twain, and others — says, “It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future”!

The Negative Trends

There are seven negative trends or challenges facing the Church today: 1) individualism and narcissism; 2) The decline in engagement and volunteerism with Church life; 3) The political and ecclesial polarization in American life; 4) The growing levels of institutional distrust in American life; 5) the increased mobility of Americans; 6) the growing insignificance of geography; 7) the changing American household and family.

Individualism and Narcissism

Americans are a highly individualistic population. Individualism is in our social and religious DNA. The American sociologist Robert Bellah wrote, “religion is perceived as a matter of individual choice.”² Bellah’s most famous

² Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (1985), p. 225.

example is that of a woman who created her own religion, for herself, called “Shelaism.” As Sheila says, “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Shelaism. Just my own little voice... It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.”³

Individualism is also present in the lives of America’s young people, but it may have become “narcissism.” In *Generation Me*, Jean Twenge points to the millennial generation and notes how pervasive the and strong the rise of narcissism has become, a 30% increase in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, over the last thirty years. Twenge points to Jason, who says, “Do what’s best for Jason. I had to make me happy; I had to do what was best for myself in every situation.”⁴

This attitude translates into the lack of religious adherence among this generation. The Pew Forum reports that 36% of millennials born between 1990-1996 claim no religious affiliation, and 34% of those born between 1981-1989, which for this cohort is an increase of 10% in just seven years. In 2009, 25% of college freshmen reported that they did not attend church in the previous year, that is, while they were high school seniors.⁵

Decline in Engagement

Americans have been noted for their strong civic involvement. We are a society filled with clubs, organizations, advocacy groups, charities, and churches that have been created by citizens going back to the founding days of the American republic. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville

famously reported, “Americans group together to hold fetes, found seminaries, build inns, construct churches, distribute books, dispatch missionaries to the antipodes. They establish hospitals, prisons, schools by the same method. Finally, if they wish to highlight a truth or develop an opinion by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association.”⁶

Now, according to Robert Putnam, we are “bowling alone.” As he reported, while Americans are bowling as much as ever, bowling league membership has dropped significantly. But it is much greater than bowling leagues. We see voting rates and membership in civic organizations in decline. From the 1970s to the 1990s, attendance at a “club” meeting has declined nearly 60%. He reports we are more loosely tied to one another. As a wonderful example, in the two decades from 1970s to 1990s, the number of times people entertained at home has dropped from fifteen times to less than half of that.⁷

We see this decline in Church engagement as well. In a recent study of parishioners in the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston, 68% of respondents said that a “busy schedule” prevents them from attending church services.⁸ In the “Orthodox Church Today” study of 2008, 50% of respondents stated that finding volunteers for their parish is a challenge and only 27% reported that their parish does not have problems finding volunteers.⁹ Two years earlier, in a study of Orthodox clergy, 21% reported that the “apathy of parishioners” is a challenge to their ministry.¹⁰

³ Bellah, p. 221.

⁴ Jean Twenge, *Generation Me* (2014), pp. 63-64.

⁵ Robert Putnam, *American Grace* (2010), citing the American Freshman Survey.

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1840).

⁷ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (1995).

⁸ Metropolis of Boston, Emerging Leaders Survey 2014, unpublished.

⁹ Alexei Krindatch, “Orthodox Church Today” (2008), www.orthodoxreality.org.

¹⁰ Alexei Krindatch, *Envisioning Visions of the Orthodox Priesthood in America* (2006), www.orthodoxreality.org.

Political Polarization

One only has to spend a little time with the mass media to realize that the United States is becoming or already is politically polarized. Do you watch only Fox News or MSNBC? Do you listen to only NPR or Rush Limbaugh? But the situation is far more challenging. Not only is there polarization, the two main parties are becoming farther and farther apart in their views on policies to address national issues. And increasingly, holders of one view see the others as dangerous. In the study, Democrats increasingly see Republicans as a "threat to the nation's well being," and vice versa.¹¹

This polarization can also be seen among American religious communities, including Orthodox Christians. As Diana Butler Bass writes, "We live in a time of dangerous intrareligious warfare, between those with differing views of the same faith."¹² Spend a little time on social media in the various groups and one can witness first-hand the religious polarization occurring right before one's eyes.

This polarization can lead to people leaving religious communities to join one with similar political views. Rather than allow for one's religious community to inform their political views, it appears that people will search out a community that shares their political views when the religious and political views are in conflict. Putnam reports that "Liberal churchgoers and unchurched conservatives are more like to resolve the inconsistency between religious and political affiliations by changing their religion than by changing their politics."¹³

¹¹ Political Polarization in the American Public, Pew Forum, 2014.

¹² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 2012.

¹³ Robert Putnam, *American Grace*, p. 145.

Institutional distrust

Since the 1970s, Americans trust in institutions, including the Church and organized religion, has steadily declined. According to the Gallup Poll, only 44% of Americans have either a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Church in 2011, down from a high of 68% in 1975. A precipitous drop occurred in 2002, which corresponds with the Roman Catholic Church's crisis over child abuse and pedophilia among clergy. While attitudes recovered, it was only brief and the decline continues.

Challenging the future is that in the next generation, the situation becomes even more serious. Twenge reports the words of one millennial, "We only trust ourselves."¹⁴ But even without such strong sentiments, millennials are increasingly avoiding institutional attachments. Half are political independents; only 37% believe the media is doing a good job.

Geography

Americans are a people on the move. Increasingly transient, mainly for economic reasons, forming long-term relationships to a church community becomes difficult. Fifteen percent of the US population moves every five years. One-third of 18-35 year olds move outside of the county where they grew up.

Today, because of technology, a person does not need to be in geographic proximity to another to form relationships and have some experience of community. Social media and telecommunications technologies have made us more connected than ever before, but they have erased the need to be in physical proximity to form and maintain these relationships.

¹⁴ Jean Twenge, *Generation Me*, p. 190.

Family changes

As America's population ages, family structures have changed and parish ministry models have not kept up. Today just 21% of the American population is married with children. Twenty-nine percent are married with no children, either newlyweds or empty-nesters. There is an increasing number of single parents. And the fastest growing group is among those over sixty-five years of age and living alone.

Parish ministry models have traditionally been organized for families with children at home. As this demographic group shrinks, parishes have yet to develop ministry models that appeal to the larger audiences of the unmarried, those without children, the elderly, or the single parent. For these groups, parish involvement and activity has little appeal.

Positive Trends

There are six positive trends that could affect the future of the Church: 1) the locavore movement and the revival of American cities; 2) the increased use of technology; 3) the Church is still seen as a Gospel-oriented community; 4) the Church still serves the world's needs; 5) the Church as a place for learning civic involvement; 6) the change in work patterns among Americans.

The Locavore Movement, "Eat Locally"

Over the last twenty years, the United States has seen a large growth in the number of local farmers markets. People want to get their foods from organic or at least local farmers. We want to know what we are eating. But the farmers market also serves to keep people connected to their local communities. It points to the need to be in a place where we are known

and know one another. We want experiences of connection.

Related, we are witnessing a revival in urban life. After years of the flight to the suburbs, corporations are moving from exurbs or far suburbs to downtown or large cities. Cities are promoting their "walkability" and their "bike-friendliness" to attract people to them.

This points to an opportunity for city parishes, or close to city parishes, to reach out, to renew their missions to their local population.

Greater electronic connections

We are more connected than ever before in human history because of technology. This allows for personal involvement and participation of the faithful with the life of the Church and with matters of the Church. The participatory and highly democratic and individualistic nature of today's technology is particularly challenging for hierarchical and highly centralized church organizations. But, technology points to a church as a more complex network of relationships among people.

Prophetic Gospel-oriented community

We have seen in the last few years the positive response of people to a church that presents a positive gospel-oriented vision and message. We have seen the influence that Pope Francis has had on the Roman Catholic Church. His message of mercy and a Church where the shepherds live with the smell of the sheep" appears to be breathing life into a Church that was seen as out of touch. Among Orthodox circles, there is a growing sense that the Church must see every person as God see every person, as a child of God, worthy of love. When this message is preached, people increasingly appear to pay more attention to the Church.

People are still asking what the Church teaches about the issues of

the day, poverty and income inequality, the environment, human dignity, etc. His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's reputation and moniker "the Green Patriarch" because of his stance on environmental issues provides an example of what the Church can say and do on important matters.

Still serve the world's needs

"Can't the Church do something about that?" is a common enough question in parishes and diocese across America. Religious Americans are very generous, more likely to volunteer, and conscientious citizens.¹⁵ The Church is still very active philanthropically and with matters of social welfare and justice. The Church is an important actor locally and internationally on a wide range of issues. People seem to want to belong to a Church that is involved with the issues of the world, trying to address them. And these same church people are more likely to want to be involved with them.

Civic Lessons

Form many, especially newcomers to the United States, a local parish is still the first place where many go to get situated in a community. Within that environment, they acquire the skills and attitudes needed to survive and thrive in American life. Through a local parish network, someone might find that first job locally, for themselves or for a child. A parish that gets involved in the community also teaches its members how to effect change on important issues of the local community. A local parish can energize its members to get involved with an issue, from schools to local business matters, to issues of crime and safety. Through the church community, trust in

the local community can be built.

While this is the direct opposite of our growing disengagement, it points to a great strength and opportunity of the Church, and one for it to capitalize on.

Change in work patterns

A number of theorists have suggested that we are entering a "post-work" world.¹⁶ With an increasing number of retirees and a life span that will last decades, this generation will have the time to devote attention to their personal religious and spiritual needs and concerns and to involvement with the institutional church. As a recent article pointed out, they will also have the resources. Baby Boomers control 60% of the nation's wealth and account for 40% of its spending.¹⁷

Technological developments, especially those around robotics, will also change work patterns, freeing up many. The negative side of this is that many workers will be part-time and adjunct, or move from job to job, just to make ends meet. The positive side is that there could be an increase in leisure time. As a result, churches could become places for involvement, study, creating experiences for people instead of them merely spending time watching television or playing on-line.

Does the Future Have A Church?

Christians will always gather together in fellowship for worship and sacraments, in common service. The data suggests that there will be a need for "church" well into the future. However, the church of today may not be the church of tomorrow. The data suggests that the church will change.

¹⁵ Putnam, *American Grace*

¹⁶ "A World Without Work," *The Atlantic*, Summer 2015.

¹⁷ *The Boston Globe*, July 26, 2015.

First, the institutional church will probably get smaller. The decline in demographics has already necessitated that the institutional church, the central offices and its institutions downsize to be more realistic. Main-line Protestant central offices have cut their staffs and shed their large office buildings. Roman Catholics have seen their seminaries shrink, and significantly seen their parishes close or combine, especially in the Northeast and Upper Midwest. In these parts of the country not only is there a priest shortage, there is a parishioner shortage. While in the case of the Orthodox Churches we have yet to see institutional decline, there have been some parish closings, but importantly very few argue for larger central offices.

That being said, we see that the local Church, especially parishes and dioceses are more important. The local parish and diocese is more important, able to meet more needs. And we see new ways of living as a parish being born, from the combined parishes in Roman Catholic Church, to the shared pulpit ministries in some Protestant denominations, to the jurisdictional insignificance for many Orthodox, who seek a parish that meets individual needs and desires, rather than a jurisdictional affiliation.

Third, a rebalancing of worship and service needs to take place. As churches continually call upon its members to do more, in the parish, in the society, people could begin to “burn out” as they succumb to “compassion fatigue.” Restoring the parish as a liturgical community, with dynamic and life-giving worship will draw people. Worship needs a comeback, especially in Orthodox communities, but it probably needs to allow for new forms of expression in its life, rather than repeating or narrowly maintaining the forms from the Old World or the past. Innovative churches will recapture some of the best of the tradition and traditional churches will

need to blow off the accumulated dust of the past, keeping the best of what they have and developing new forms for today’s faithful.

Finally, these trends are moving targets and need to be watched continually and reflected upon for the church. As a result, the Church needs to allow space for some experimentation, knowing that some experiments fail and others succeed. But both will lead us forward. †