

The reality of the tide

By [Susan M. Reisert](#)

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A few years ago, during a vacation on the Outer Banks of North Carolina (a place where my family and I go every couple of years), my children were playing with their cousins on the beach. I was taking photos as they frolicked in the gentle surf along the wide expanse of seemingly endless ocean. There were sea and beach creatures, along with colorful shells, that also caught my photo snapping attention.

Somewhere in the midst of my attempts at capturing as many “Kodak moments” as I could, I lost my footing and fell. The surf was not much of anything that day, but as I let my body fall into the sand, in the hope of keeping my camera out of the water, I couldn’t help but sense the pull of the tide. I didn’t get pulled far at all, but I could still feel the tide. Its gentle force was unmistakable.

There’s a similar force to the human condition, a sort of tidalness in how we gather, paying attention to certain things at one time and then not at all, but something else instead. The tide comes in. The tide goes out.

For Christians, there’s a tide, too, and we seem increasingly to be on the wrong side of it.

The Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life has published [more bad news](#) for those of us not only within the Christian tradition, but especially those of us who practice it by going to church. In [the released study](#), “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” the subheading really says it all, “Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow.”

Major findings of this extensive study:

1. The “percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years.”
2. The “unaffiliated” jumped six points.

3. “While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages.”

The tide has turned. And, when it comes to the tide, there’s a force to it and a life of its own.

In the area where I live and serve a church, the turning of the tide is clear as day. Old South is not the only church struggling with numbers, and trying to understand why there are fewer people attending worship. Old South is not the only church looking around and trying hard not to admit that our average age is probably in the seventies. Old South is not the only church to gather on Sunday morning and realize that most of the rest of the community is doing something else. These are common concerns among churches in central Maine.

The Pew Research Center really isn’t telling us anything we don’t already know. Yet, it’s still hard to absorb the science of it all—that changes to how we do things may very well not work to increase weekly attendance or lower our average age.

That’s how tides work. We can try to fight the tide or ignore it. But the tide is what it is. The tide has a force, and a life, of its own.

So what to do? It seems to me that this is where we need to be especially attentive to doing what we do and staying focused on the love of God. And, not fretting about what’s going to happen to us. Faithfulness to the Gospel. Sharing the love of Christ. That’s what’s key.

It may not turn the tide, but that’s really not our job.

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