

Counting the faithful

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The [Pew Research data](#) showing a sharp decline in the nation's Christian population—from 78 percent to 70 percent in seven years—might be interpreted as one more sign of the collapse of Christendom. Occasional church attenders and nominal believers no longer feel obliged to tell pollsters that they are Methodist or Presbyterian. In that reading, the survey numbers don't directly touch the everyday realities of church life.

What does directly touch church life are Pew's numbers on generational change. Attachment to religion is declining across all age groups, but the rise of the nones is most pronounced among younger cohorts: the younger the age bracket, the less likely people are to belong to any Christian (or other religious) body. And of all Christian groups, mainline Protestants do the worst job at reaching and retaining younger generations.

One practical lesson of the Pew report, then, is on the crucial need for mainliners to focus on passing the faith on to the next generation. Mainliners may need to borrow some of the ethos of evangelical Protestants (who seem to do a better job at this) in equipping families to be primary incubators of faith and in forming identities that are distinct and (in some selective ways) more oppositional toward the culture than they have been.

Data on mainline decline invariably unleash a round of recrimination and defensiveness—assertions that if this or that vision of mission, or this or that theological or moral stance, had been embraced (or avoided) by the church, all would be well. After decades of such arguments, the claims are unconvincing. The fact that, in the Pew data, mainline Protestants and Catholics declined in parallel fashion indicates that a wider cultural phenomenon is taking place. Christian belief and churchgoing are and will be increasingly countercultural. Evangelical Protestants too face a stark challenge in reaching young people.

Jesus chose a fallible church to tell the truth about him, and he assured its members that they had everything they needed to do it. The truth about Jesus is that he is the one in whom all things were made, the one in whose name sins are forgiven, the one who will bring all people and nations to their fulfillment. Telling and showing that truth is what we are called to do whether or not it brings institutional growth.

Years ago, the Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill commented during a time of crisis in her church, when leaders were casting about for solutions to decline, that “God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God.” To which she added, with anxious church leaders in mind, that only those who are “soaked in prayer, sacrifice, and love can help us to apprehend God.”

This article was edited on June 22, 2015, to correct a name.