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From Death to life

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Church attendance is declining. In this episode, Kevin reads from his recent article for WORLD Opinions where he argues for including additional data for analysis and offers a word of hope.

Transcript

(music) Greetings and salutations. This is Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung.

Today I'm reading my latest from World Opinions entitled From Death to Life. Is there any way to reverse the church's declining membership? What prompted this? I saw a tweet which I'll reference here. I'll come up on Twitter with some dire statistics about the leading Protestant traditions, the largest ones and how they're all facing this precipitous decline.

And there is lots of bad news to go around, but I looked more carefully at it and thought maybe that wasn't the entire story. And so I wrote this piece on Death to Life. Is there any way to reverse the church's declining membership? I don't think people fully grasp how much of Protestant Christianity is going to die off in the next three decades.

That's an exact quotation. That was the first line of Ryan Burgess' tweet showing the age distribution of various Protestant traditions in America. Burgess, a Baptist pastor who teaches at Eastern Illinois University, often posts interesting and useful graphs about religion in America.

This particular graph shows the age distribution for 26 Protestant traditions, from Lutherans to Congregationalists to Methodists to Presbyterians to Baptists to Pentecostals to non-denominational churches. Brightly colored and easy to read, the graph demonstrates at a glance that Protestant churches are considerably greater than the population at large. Hence, Burgess concluding line, "There's no major denomination where a majority are under 45 years old exclamation point." No doubt, church

attendance in America is in decline.

The rise of the nuns in ONES has been well documented and younger generations are less interested in church than their parents and grandparents were, and less interested than their parents and grandparents were at the same age. When it comes to the churching of America, there is plenty of bad news to go around and plenty of challenges ahead. And yet, Burgess' helpful graph does not support Burgess' exclamatory conclusion.

His conclusion, that quote, "There's no major denomination where a majority are under 45 years old, may be correct, but it is not demonstrated from the evidence he provides." Burgess' data, taken from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study, only provides information, and this is key, for adults 18 years and older. The graph says nothing about the percentage of children in the various Protestant denominations. Even if one does not consider children as members of the church, as Presbyterians do, it is still misleading, not intentionally so, I'm sure.

To make a comparative statement about those 45 and over versus those under 45, when the under 45 half of the pie doesn't include anyone under 18 years old. The more accurate conclusion from the graph would be, "There's no major denomination where the number of 18 to 44 year olds is greater than the number of those over 45." Why am I belaboring this technical point? Because I believe the percentages, though probably not great for any denomination, would look more encouraging for conservative denominations if the data included children. For example, let's compare the United Methodist Church, UMC, with my denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, PCA.

In Burgess' graph, the two denominations have an almost identical percentage of those 65 and over, 41% and 40% respectively. One might conclude then that both denominations are about to die out, but this would be to ignore the presence of children. Both denominations indicate non-communing members, that is, baptized children, in their membership statistics, giving us a rough indication of how many children are in each denomination.

The number is imperfect because many children go through a communicants class and become full members before turning 18, but the numbers can at least give us an order of magnitude. So here we go. In 2020, the United Methodist Church had 6,268,310 professing members and 449,660 baptized members.

By comparison, the PCA had 299,891 professing members in 2020 and 78,330 baptized members. I know it's easy to get lost in all those numbers, especially if you're listening to them here. The point is this.

Obviously, the PCA is a much smaller denomination, but still helpful if we compare

percentages. While baptized members were only 7% of the total membership in the Methodist Church, baptized members were 20% of the PCA's membership, or about 3 times as many by way of percentage. This is not far off the percentage of 0-18 year olds in the nation at large, 22%.

Undoubtedly, then, the PCA is in a much healthier position than the United Methodist Church. I've noted before that the mainline churches are literally dying. They have been in steep decline for almost 6 straight decades, so that year after year, mainline denominations are consistently getting older, wider, and smaller.

Many conservative denominations aren't doing great either, but they are at least doing less poorly. So what should our takeaway from yet another largely discouraging, though less so if you include children, report on the state of church membership in America? Well, three things. First, changing to fit the mood of the culture is not the answer.

Reimagined Christianity, where core doctrines are abandoned and ethical standards are thrown out the window, may appeal to the deconstructing and to cultural elites, but it is no way to win the lost. Socially acceptable liberal theology does not keep young people in the church either. According to Burgess Graf, only six Protestant traditions have at least 25% of their adult population in the 18-35 year old bracket.

All six are evangelical, as opposed to mainline. Second, if you don't want your version of Protestant Christianity to die off, the strategy is pretty simple. Have more kids, and keep them in the church.

It has always been the case that most people in the church get in the church because they were born and raised in the church. Third, when all hope seems lost, why not try God's way of reaching the lost? Preach faithfully, pray fervently, and be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you. Ultimately, it's up to God to save sinners.

Jesus will build his church however he sees fit, but we can do our part by getting the gospel right and getting the gospel out. Those are the ingredients God still uses to bring people, churches, and denominations from death to life. Once again, my latest article in World Opinions, and a few weeks after these articles come out, you can find them on clearlyreform.org. That's where they're archived, and visit clearlyreformed.org for all of my podcast, articles, and various other resources.

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