

WHY ARE YOU HERE?



Romans 13:11 "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep."

Let me start with a simple question: "Why are we here today?" Well, I get paid to be here, so why are you here? What brings you to church? In their new book, "The Great Dechurching," the authors estimate that about 40 million Americans who used to attend church, don't go now. Thus, the fastest growing group within our culture are the "nones," those who choose 'none of the above' when asked about their religion. This bloc has grown from about 5 percent of Americans in the early 1990s to nearly 30 percent today. Yet most "nones" aren't atheists. They are what researchers call "nothing in particulars," people who aren't quite sure what they believe or

where they belong. And the majority of these "nones" once identified themselves as Christians.

I recently read an Opinion piece in the Washington Post by the columnist Perry Bacon, whose was surprised to find himself, a "none." His father had been an assistant pastor at the small charismatic church where he grew up, a church that his uncle still runs. His family was at church every Sunday and he enjoyed it growing up. But once he went to college, while he attended church more than his peers, he also enjoyed the freedom of not going to services every week. He also attended a variety of different churches, but he was never totally sure what he really believed anymore. Nonetheless belonging to a congregation seemed essential to him. He thought religion, not just Christianity but also other faiths such as Judaism and Islam, encourage people toward better values. Most of the people he admired – from the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. to his parents – were religious. And so, he figured he might as well stick with Christianity, the creed he was raised in, despite his doubts and skepticism.

The various churches he attended usually avoided politics. Still women served as pastors; there wasn't any overt opposition to, say, gay rights or abortion. Whereas his childhood church in Louisville was overwhelmingly Black and conservative; the churches he attended now as an adult were more diverse and progressive.

Still Perry says that he didn't leave church for any particular reason. He just started to notice there were plenty of people who were deeply committed to equality and justice but who were not religious. And he couldn't ignore how the word "Christian" was becoming a synonym for meanness, intolerance, and bad behavior.

So, between early 2017 and early 2020, in three years time, Perry went from someone who clearly defined himself as a Christian and attended the same church most Sundays to someone who wasn't so sure about Christianity, but was still kind of shopping for a new religious home, and going to a different service every few weeks. It was more of a fading away from religion rather than a dramatic break.

On this front, the pandemic was kind of a relief for him. Churches were mostly closed. Perry couldn't continue his halfhearted search for a new one. He watched an Easter service online in April 2020, during the early stages of the pandemic. But over the next two years, he had been to church only a handful of times – even skipping Easter services. His sense is that the people who want what church provides are going to the existing Christian churches, even if they are skeptical of some of the beliefs. And those who aren't at church are fine spending their Sunday mornings eating brunch, doing yoga or playing golf.

Perry even noted that there's even an organization called Sunday Assembly, founded in Britain in 2013, which has tried to launch nonreligious congregations around the world, including in the United States, but has struggled to gain much traction here. America today is still a nation of believers, believers who simply don't regularly attend religious services (as about 70 percent of us say we have some religious faith, but only 30 percent go to services at least once a month). Perry was the reverse of this, though: a person without clear beliefs about God, who wants to go to something like church, frequently, anyway.

The Saturday farmers' market in his neighborhood and a weekly happy hour of local journalists provided some of what church once did for him: consistent gatherings of people with some shared values and interests. He has made new friends through both. And there are plenty of other groups and clubs he could join. But none of those gatherings provided the singing, the sermons, and the solidarity, that he wanted, all at once.

Thus, his upbringing made him particularly inclined to see a church-size hole in American life. And as a middle-aged American in the middle of the country, he doesn't think that hole is just in his imagination. Kids need places to learn values such as forgiveness, he wrote, while schools focus on math and reading. Young adults need places to meet others and a

future spouse. Adults with children need places to meet with other parents and some free babysitting on weekends. Retirees need places to build new relationships, as their friends and spouses pass away.

Our society needs places that integrate people across class and racial lines, he wrote. There are lots of organizations trying to address those various needs, but strong churches could address them all. That isn't some fantasy or nostalgia. Many Americans, including Perry, were once part of churches that were essential in their lives. It's strange to him that America is abandoning this institution, as opposed to reinventing it to align with our 2023 values. So, the question for me is still why are you here? What is it that attracts or keeps you coming to church?

In the past, I have preached about the five essential activities of a healthy congregation. For example, one of the principal activities of the Church has always been Christian education. The parish was the place to go to hear those ancient and powerful stories long held sacred by so many peoples for so many centuries, for millennia even. A place where those sacred stories could be explained and explored and studied. We bring our children to church to learn those beloved stories that we learned as a child, stories and history that are so deeply embedded in our culture.

A second intrinsic part of the Church, I have argued, is Christian Fellowship, our basic human need to be a part of a something larger than ourselves, being in a group that learns from one another, that comforts one another, encourages one another, challenges us, and a group that specifically reaches out to the lonely, to the widows and orphans, a group that attends to the needs of the strangers in our community, and welcomes in foreigners and refugees, who are not always welcomed elsewhere.

A third essential part of Church life, I have argued, is Social Outreach; caring for the needs of those less fortunate than us, the poor, the hungry, the needy and oppressed. The Church historically was the group that first organized everyday institutions that care for the larger common good, institutions that we now take for granted. The Church pioneered the first prisons, and hospitals, and orphanages, and more recently, hospice care, they also rallied the community against injustices in the community, fought against slavery or prejudice, as we all struggle to bring the dream of equity in our lives to reality.

A fourth area of vital Church life, I have suggested, is Personal Spiritual Growth, organizing activities that teach prayer, meditation, holds retreats, a place that provides counseling and programs for personal maturity, that struggles to meet that inherent longing in our lives to acknowledge that,

that there is some force, some power, something greater than ourselves, that holds the world together, that gives our lives meaning, and makes sense of death, a quiet place to light a candle for a friend, or find time to be inspired or to hope or to be challenged. For many, church may be the only quiet sanctuary of self-reflection that we have in our busy lives, a tranquil moment in the chaos of the world outside, a time and place simply to be still, to feel the closeness of God, to be at peace with the world.

That leaves only my final essential aspect of church, Public Worship, a community activity that acknowledges in ritual the transitions in our lives: from birth, to adolescence, to marriage, that acknowledges the passing of the seasons, and the reality of sickness and death, and the belief in a power greater than ourselves, and supports our sense of awe and wonder and gratitude in life, and community, a space for quiet reflection, a sense of the holy, a place of ritual and prayer.

These five aspects of a healthy congregation, I have also argued, are essential aspects of a healthy life, and where else can we find a place that attends to all of these vitals needs? We can find it here, in places like the Church. And I hope you do. I hope that's why you are here today. AMEN.