

I want to do something different for my sermon this morning. I want to read to you an article that John Glass sent me that was in yesterday's front page state newspaper written by Sarah Ellis. She writes:

South Carolina churches are shedding thousands of members a year, even as the state's population grows by tens of thousands.

In the place we call the Bible Belt, where generations have hung their hats on their church-going nature and faithful traditions, an increasing trend of shrinking church attendance — and increasing church closings — signal a fundamental culture shift in South Carolina.

At least 97 Protestant churches across South Carolina have closed since 2011, according to data from the Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Methodist and Southern Baptist denominations. An untold number of other closings, certainly, are not captured by these statistics.

Many churches are dying slow deaths, stuck in stagnation if not decline. And if they don't do something, in the near future, they'll share the fate of Cedar Creek United Methodist, a 274-year-old Richland County congregation that dissolved last year; Resurrection Lutheran, a church near downtown Columbia that will hold its last service on Sept. 2; and the dozens of churches that sit shuttered and empty around the state.

At the same time, some churches are growing, and some growing quickly. But they might not look much like the churches your grandparents (and their grandparents) were raised in. From meeting in unconventional places to tweaking their traditions, many churches are adapting, offering something different that many people thought the church couldn't do for them.

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“Live as Christ Loved”

What they’re doing reflects the results of an ongoing conversation among churches: How can we stay alive?

The biggest problem for Mary Anna Spangler, a member of Whaley Street United Methodist for 30 years says, is how do we get (people) in the door and then keep them?”

Sarah Ellis goes on to report that the South is slowly catching up to national and European trends shifting toward what many call a “post-Christian” culture — that is, a society with characteristics no longer dominantly rooted in Christianity. Studies and surveys have documented the decline of self-identified Christians and the rise of “nones,” or the religiously unaffiliated, across the United States for years.

The Pew Research Center describes the United States as in the midst of “significant religious change.” The share of Americans who identify with Christianity is declining, while those who say they have no religion is growing rapidly.”

In the South, more than three-quarters of adults identify as Christians, and more than 8 in 10 people consider religion to be somewhat or very important in their lives, more than in any other region of the country, according to Pew.

But, as in the rest of the country, a shrinking proportion of Southern adults say they regularly attend religious services — 74 percent in 2014, down 3 percent from seven years earlier. And surveys tend to inflate how often people actually attend religious services.

South Carolina is in step with those trends, and it shows in church statistics, particularly among Protestant denominations.

A church, particularly a Southern church, used to be a community center. It was where you made friends and kept up with friends, where you ate supper on Wednesday nights, played on a softball team, sent the kids after school, fulfilled your community service duties, made business connections, got your musical fix in the choir and maybe joined a reading or knitting club. And being a part of a church once was, essentially, a status symbol for many people in the South. “Where do you go to church?” was a regular get-to-know-you question; the answer said something about who you were. Today, though, a church isn’t a line you need on your social resume. “If you just want to be a “good” person, there are a gazillion opportunities for you to feed hungry people, clothe cold people, do service projects, build a house,” said David Turner, the minister of music and worship at Ebenezer Lutheran Church in downtown Columbia. The oldest Lutheran church in Columbia, Ebenezer once boasted a large, multi generational congregation of families who lived in nearby neighborhoods. The city used to close streets for its annual vacation Bible school. Now, Turner said, the church’s attendance numbers are lower than ever. “1950 was great, but it’s not 1950 anymore,” Turner said. A key issue for the future, Turner says, is whether church leaders will have the knowledge and skill to guide churches toward a new future or be stuck in a past when Sunday mornings were sacred. Many of the churches that are failing have not kept up with the pace of change in their communities, and they stopped making a difference outside the walls of the church. When a church becomes more concerned with looking inward at itself rather than reaching outward to the people around it, it’s lost its core function, said Hardwick, the Southern Baptist church planter.

Fewer than 1,000 feet from the door of Whaley Street United Methodist, upwards of 300 people gather in Columbia’s 701 Whaley event hall on Sunday mornings. They comprise “Downtown Church”, a 7-year-old Presbyterian church born, in part, out of a feeling that other

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churches were “answering questions I wasn’t asking and not answering questions I was,” said the Rev. Amos Disasa, co-pastor. The founders of the church saw people looking for an experience that a so-called traditional church didn’t provide.

### **‘EXPERIENCE THE EXPECTED’**

As much change as the church is undergoing, church tradition isn’t dead — no more than Brookland Baptist Church in West Columbia is at 8 a.m. on a Sunday.

In many ways, Brookland represents the way church has been for generations.

Families sit together in long pews. They wear dresses and suits and ties and hats. A big, swaying choir fills the stage, and paper bulletins double as fans (though, an usher will hand you a real paper fan if they see you sweating). Golden offering plates are passed.

A robed pastor’s booming, lyrical voice preaches a message that lifts you out of your seat, and when he calls you to the altar, it is no suggestion; you come.

But Brookland is also reaching people — 3,500 of them or so on an average Sunday morning — in ways the church never did before. Big screens flank the pulpit, alternating live video feeds with scrolling lyrics to old-school hymns being played by a full band with, yes, drums and electric guitars.

You can pass the offering plate right along and give your tithe via text message or on the church’s website.

If you didn’t come to church on Sunday morning, you might come for lunch during the week at the massive conference center, which is used for all kinds of events, church- and

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nonchurchrelated. Or your kids might play basketball in the wellness center or catch a quick word from the Rev. Charles Jackson, the pastor, on Twitter.

That’s all part of an evolving strategy to reach the people who are and will become the next generation of Christians, the church says.

“First of all, you’ve got to think about who that next generation is,” said Marnie Robinson, a member and church spokesperson. “The church may be trying to force them to be the church of yesteryear, and they’re not those people. ... We need to talk to the millennials as if they are important and teach them the message of Christ; teach them and show them.”

But still, “church is church,” Robinson said, and many people are looking to “experience the expected.”

“When you do church, when you go to church, you expect to hear a good word,” Robinson said. “You expect to experience good music, and you expect a good prayer. Music, prayer and the word — you’ve got worship right there. All the other good stuff that happens is extra.”

Brookland will keep adapting, but it’s not going anywhere, Robinson said. And neither is the greater church, she feels sure.

“The church is one of the oldest institutions in the world, so I don’t think it’s going anywhere,” Robinson said. “How we do church may change, may be changing. But church is not going anywhere, and I take solace in that.”

**THE END?**

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Consistency and tradition were beloved among the rural Cedar Creek United Methodist congregation in Blythewood, and consistency and tradition sustained the church for 274 years, until it closed in 2017.

“I think that most churchgoers like things to be the way they’ve always been,” said the Rev.

Alice Deal, who retired this summer as pastor of Cedar Creek’s remaining sister churches on the Fairfield Circuit, Bethel UMC and Monticello UMC. About 40 church members, mostly seniors, remain between the two of them.

A command to change, though, comes from the one they worship, Deal said. “The holy one of Israel speaks through the prophet Isaiah and says, ‘I am about to do a new thing. Do you not see it springs forth?’ I think newness is what we’re called to be open to and to embrace, but that’s not always easy to do,” she said.

Some won’t change, held back by fear or stubbornness or practicality or something else.

But some will reach a point where “the pain of staying the same outweighs the pain of change,” Hardwick said.

“They realize, man, if we stay the same, we will put the death knell, perhaps, of gospel ministry in this community,” he said. “Then we’re going to be willing to make the hard decision that it’s going to require of us, kind of a whatever-it-takes mindset.”

But for some churches, the most faithful choice they can make is to close and invest their resources elsewhere, Hardwick said.

The futures of Monticello and Bethel are looming.

“I don’t know what the future holds,” Deal said, “but I know who holds the future. In God’s perfect will and God’s perfect time, what God intends for these churches will happen.”

I agree with everything here. However, we must be active in the community. We must be centripetal and centrifugal. We must pray and trust in God who holds this church’s future in God’s hands. Yes! But, we must also go out (centrifugal) to bring people in (centripetal). This must be an ongoing conversation. How do we do this? What does this look like? My challenge for you this week is to think of how we can do this lovingly and faithfully.

The United Methodist’s Book of Discipline defines the local church as, “...the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. It is a community of true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church exists for maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, “the local church is the venue in which we worship together each week, study the scriptures, and share in the Lord’s Supper. It is often United Methodist’s primary context for experiencing church with neighbors “near and far.”<sup>2</sup> It is, “in its many embodiments – of various sizes, architectural styles, and range of facilities – most often the location where we encounter or prepare for the reign of God.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the definition of the local church can be understood

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Discipline*, ¶201. 147

<sup>2</sup> Warner, Lacey. *The Method of Our Mission: United Methodist Polity & Organization*. 109

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 109

better as a verb in which it is something we do in community, rather than a noun in which it is something or somewhere we go to in the community.

Therefore, because it is best understood as a verb, The United Methodist Book of Discipline defines the local church’s functionality as, “The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world. It is primarily at the level of the charge consisting of one or more local churches that the church encounters the world. The local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society. The function of the local church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is to help people to accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to live their daily lives in light of their relationship with God. Therefore, the local church is to minister to persons in the community where the church is located, to provide appropriate training and nurture to all, to cooperate in ministry with other local churches, to defend God’s creation and live as an ecologically responsible community, and to participate in the worldwide mission of the church, as minimal expectations of an authentic church.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the definition and the function of the local church work together in explaining its intent, which is heavily grounded in its mission to the world.

Therefore, the church is not dead. As long as we are in sync with the Holy Spirit’s movement in mission to the world we are not in trouble. In other words, live as Christ loved. And love as Christ lived. And have courage and hope in the fact that if God is for us who can be against us?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.