

The Reformed Institute is offering a series of essays over the summer months to consider the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Whither the PC(USA)?

Every spring my husband and I purchase a geranium or two for the deck or patio. Each fall, we bring those plants indoors and they spend the winter in a sunny south-facing window where they get lots of light. In the spring, I usually prune them back and my husband dislikes it when I do. He pleads for me to keep the stems intact, though they've become long and lanky (which, in my thinking, is not a good quality for a geranium). I prune the plants back, and they look awful. We move them out onto the deck when the weather warms, and they grow into beautiful, bushy flowering plants. Then we move them inside in the fall, and we go through the same routine.

Pruned plants don't look so good. They are bare and sometimes look a bit anemic. Still, they must be pruned – for lots of reasons. I'm not a master gardener, so I can't explain all the whys and wherefores. I just know it needs to be done, and that it works. Pruning usually works wonders. When they grow back, the plants are healthy and strong, bushy and productive.

I believe we're in a pruning time in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." *John 15:1,2*

Our denomination is losing members. Is that a bad thing?

In this pruning time, we're rediscovering, as a Church in the northern hemisphere, and as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), what it means to follow Jesus Christ as faithful disciples. We've taken such following rather lightly for the last several generations. We've equated 'being a good Christian' with 'being a good person.' High morals, kindness, a bit of generosity – these are the marks of a good person and they have been the marks of 'a good Christian.' Sociologist Nancy Ammerman writes about this as 'Golden Rule Christianity,'ⁱ in which the emphasis is on relationships and caring. For Golden Rule Christians, God is located in moments of transcendence and in the everyday virtues of doing good.

Why would someone who is a good person need to participate in the Body of Christ? They don't. So they fade away from our congregations. They have found other ways to fill their Sunday mornings.

Likewise, sociologist Christian Smith writes about Moralistic Therapeutic Deismⁱⁱ as the spiritual malaise that has taken up residence in our young people. But it's not just residing in our young people. It's residing in people of all ages in all kinds of churches. This malaise allows us

to set our sights on ourselves, and not on Jesus Christ. So our visions of life and what can be are small and self-serving.

The Christian gospel sets our sights on Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the one crucified (gave himself for the sake of the world) and risen. That is who we set our hopes on – the one who conquered death and sin, the one who established the Church for the world. We set our sights on the Kingdom of God. That’s our vision for how the world can and ought to be. When we get it right Christian discipleship means following a God who loves us enough to die for us and who calls us to love others just as deeply.ⁱⁱⁱ Christian discipleship is about giving our whole being in service to the Kingdom of God, whether we’re plumbers or pastors, teachers or technicians, economists or physicians. And that’s just not easy to do in North America. So we have been shy about expecting people to do it.

More and more the Christian gospel is at odds with American culture. It’s harder and harder to be a faithful Christian disciple in our context. We’re learning that we must be much more intentional about living the gospel of Jesus Christ if we are to live into it faithfully. The pull and allure of success, consumerism, narcissism and other aspects of our culture are very, very strong. It’s hard to resist. So we think the successful church is the big church: big membership numbers, big budgets, big mission initiatives, big buildings. And big might be faithful – but is it always? Not necessarily. This is why I wonder if losing members is such a bad thing. I don’t think it means that people are any less faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or that there are fewer disciples. I think it means that there are fewer people willing to be intentional about Christian faith in today’s world.

We are being pruned and it doesn’t feel very good. And a pruned Church looks very different from a full blooming Church. Right now we may think it doesn’t look very good. After all, by the world’s definition – we’re failing! Our market share is decreasing, revenues are down, participation is down, and restructuring is on the horizon – the near and far horizon. Still, do we measure ourselves by the world’s consumer driven standards? NO! We measure ourselves by God’s grace - which comes unbidden and unearned. We measure ourselves by faithfulness. The only question to continually ask: “Are we being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ – as we understand it biblically and from our forebears in faith?”

Phyllis Tickle, in her very helpful book *The Great Emergence*, talks about the 500-year rummage sale, an idea she picked up from the Right Reverend Mark Dyer, an Anglican bishop. “About every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity . . . become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”^{iv} History has shown that “every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity has been broken open, the faith has spread – and been spread – dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach

as a result of its time of unease and distress.”^v This is the same concept of a forest fire being necessary for new growth in the forest. Pine cones are created to burst forth with seeds after a fire and only with the heat from the fire. Without a regular ‘burn,’ the forest is not sustainable.

I’m very hopeful for the Christian Church and for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Because a pruned Church will grow into a fruitful Church. Right now the growth is in the global south. The Church is exploding with energy and vitality in South America and Africa. We bemoan the loss of members in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and we need to pay attention to how intentional we are about being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time, we can rejoice in the vitality and growth of the gospel in other parts of the world, remembering it’s not only about those of us in the global north, in our small corner of God’s realm.

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ⁱ Nancy Ammerman, “Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream” in *Lived Religion in America*, David D. Hall, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ptsem.edu/iym/lectures/2005/Smith-Moralistic.pdf> This summary is also found in *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenda Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press, 2010), page 192-193.

^{iv} Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008) pg 16

^v *Ibid*, pg. 17.