

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 5/2/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

***ONE AT ONE*** – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, May 3 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for women in the world. Ask God to help us value women as equal contributors to society. Pray for an end to those systems that suppress women and seek those avenues that can elevate women in their desires and endeavors.*

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As congregations are resuming their more traditional ways of worshiping as we near the end of the pandemic, many (including St. Andrew) are seeing a significant decrease in worship attendance from pre-pandemic time. There are several reasons for this: some people are still uncomfortable returning as the pandemic continues, some have adopted the practice of on-line over in-person worship, while others have simply stopped coming. (There's a saying that the more you miss worship, the less you miss worship.)

But mainline churches were seeing a decline in worship before the pandemic, too. This can be explained by an overall shift that has happened since about the 1960's in America. Following the Revolutionary War, churches formed with an expectation of voluntary association. In rebellion to European culture where everyone was required to be part of the state church, in America we rejected that model and allowed each person to choose if and where and how they would worship. This might be called the Age of Association where people connected with organizations through voluntarily joining and serving.

In the 1960's, around the globe there has been a shift toward what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the Age of Authenticity. Increasingly, people are focused on finding what feels comfortable and true apart from affiliating or associating with specific organizations including the church. They want the freedom to do whatever they feel like whenever they feel like it. Without a commitment, people are free to move back and forth between institutions or to simply leave and go elsewhere when the wish. Current mainline churches like the ELCA (and many other volunteer-based organizations for that matter) simply were not designed for this shift. That means we need to make some changes. Among these are that churches need to let go of focusing on membership and look rather at discipleship: not how many people have signed up on our rolls, but how many people are being nurtured and developed as followers of Christ, even if they are not formally members

Another shift that has happened since the 1960's that also informs this decline in worship attendance is in what is perceived as the most significant "currency." Time is now more valuable than wealth, and people are making choices based on what they value at the moment, what they want to spend their time doing. The era where Sunday mornings were free for worship are gone as other activities have moved into this time slot, and people now have to make choices where they will give their time. Families with children may value sports or other recreational activities more than Sunday worship because of the immediate satisfaction they feel. Churches need to be doing all they can to ensure that what they offer on Sundays has both quality of presentation and value in what is offered. That's a hard thing to do when the presentation of the church on Sunday has tremendous value in the long-term but is often seen as of lesser value than the joy or gratification that is perceived in an activity today or this season. This is why churches who offer high-tech worship that entertains more than disciples are doing so well:

people find value in coming to a venue that engages their interest and yet allows them to leave without having to make much commitment.

Still, numerous people are seeking experiences that are genuine in their spirituality. Many people look for places that work to address issues of justice, provide real community, and offer hope. These are things which the church is profoundly prepared to offer to our communities. Yet making sure that others know about the value we find in our congregation and the powerful difference it is making in peoples' lives is a task that all of us must take on. We have to let others know that what Jesus provides to us—gifts and experiences of grace—are tremendously important now and not just whenever we get around to it.

In Christ's love,  
Pastor Jeffrey