

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 4/14/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

I had a conversation recently with a 40-something-year-old man who attends a different Lutheran church. He said to me that if churches want to start getting families with younger children to come, they need to get younger pastors. Apart from that being ageist (discrimination based on a person's age), I praised him for his concern over declining church numbers and for thinking about solutions. Then I began to ask some questions. Why did churches fifty-to-seventy years ago thrive even when they had older pastors? Why are all churches declining today even when they have younger pastors? How will younger families know that a church has a younger pastor unless they are actively looking for a church?

He confessed that he couldn't answer those questions. We began to talk about other reasons for the decline in church membership today and how it might be addressed. I shared that back until about seventy years ago, churches grew and thrived as people who moved out into new communities looked for a church to include in their life. Some things have occurred since then that have significantly impacted church involvement.

One of those changes happened as boomers (people born during the baby boom from 1945-1960) became parents themselves. A cultural shift of greater freedom and independence led them to decide to raise their children differently than they had been raised. No longer would they "force" their children to go to church. One mother told me that she wasn't going to make her children go to church. Instead, she was going to let them decide for themselves when they grew up. I asked her, "Based on what? If they have never been to church, they won't have a choice to make." My daughter, Rebekah, who has the gift of evangelism, as a teenager kept bringing her school friends to church. Many of these friends had never been to church before, nor had many of their parents. Yet, once they visited, they stayed and became very involved in the church.

Another significant change has been an increase in the visibility of negative and judgmental messages coming from some portions of the Christian church. Though these messages do not accurately represent many congregations, people began to view the Church as a whole as being disproving and condemning of certain people. And when you knew these shunned people and were friends with them, why be part of an organization that rejected them. (This problem continues today and, while often political, is negatively affecting the Christian church because of the support some Christians are giving to these messages.)

Because we live in a society now where more than half of our neighbors have never been to church and whose perceptions about church are not true for many congregations, we have a tremendous challenge before us. We no longer can operate with a mindset of "if you build it, they will come." It is imperative that Christians find their voice and start sharing their faith, beginning in their own families and neighborhoods. Letting people know why you go to church and what it means for you is an important place to start in reaching out to others about the importance of a relationship with GOD and JESUS. Each Sunday, when you leave your home to go to church, you are witnessing to others, but only if they know that church is where you are going. Inviting people to get to know fellow Christians can help them to change their ideas about the Church and what it believes. And congregations need to

become more intentional about developing programs that teach people how to share their faith and become comfortable doing so.

My conversation with that Lutheran gentleman led him to begin rethinking his perspectives about church decline and growth. He admitted that he was uncomfortable with the thought that he needed to be involved in bringing other to church. Yet, it was something that he acknowledged he needed to give more consideration to. And he also said he needed to think more about the people he knew and to find out if they were involved in church. I told him that this was a great place to start and that I hoped it would led him to discover new ways to be a participant in GOD'S mission in the world and in bringing people to CHRIST.

In CHRIST'S love,  
Pastor Jeffrey