

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 5/1/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, May 2 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for yourself. Ask GOD specifically for the things you need now. Seek the guidance of the HOLY SPIRIT to shape your prayers by GOD'S will for you. Thank GOD for the many ways that GOD is present in your life in all situations.*

A recent article by Jim Nelles shared a number of statistics about current church trends that I think are important to hear. I've added some additional context to what he shares based on other research I've done. Overall, though, this information is worthwhile to know and to consider as we map our future as a Christian congregation in today's world.

- Fewer Americans are attending religious services. American membership in houses of worship has dropped below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade tracking. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 70% in 1999. It had been above 70% since the following of this statistic began in 1937. (This statistic refers to how many people claim church membership. Actual attendance has often rested at about one-third of membership. But, as membership has declined, so has attendance.)
- One-fifth of all Americans hold no religious affiliation at all.
- Every generation of adults is less religious than the generation that preceded it. Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2013) is the least religious generation with 34% claiming no religious affiliation. (Yet, at the same time, each generation is more spiritual than the preceding generation. Many of these unaffiliated people are extremely spiritual and desire to connect with a higher power or being. They just do not find a comfortable opportunity to do so in churches which limit their ability to explore the possibilities of who GOD is and how to experience GOD. They are also turned off by the messages of religious organizations that claim restrictions as to who GOD loves or accepts.)
- Research shows that houses of worship have to replace 32% of their membership each year just to stay even. (This figure likely refers to the need to replace lost financial contributions as wealthier generations decline. The loss of a long-time member requires the addition of several new households to compensate for the lost revenue. While this fact has significant financial impact on the future of churches, it is important to remember that we are not called to make members or givers, but disciples who give as part of their discipleship.)
- One of the primary reasons that each generation is less religious is due to the fact that fewer and fewer children are exposed to religious experiences like attending worship regularly or even praying before a meal. (A mother once told me she wasn't going to bring her children to church, but rather let them decide whether to attend church when they grew up. I asked her, "Based on what? If they haven't been exposed to church, how will they know whether they want to be a part of church or not?")
- The COVID pandemic was devastating to religious communities. One in three practicing Christians have dropped out of church participation completely. One in five Americans say they attend worship in person less now than they did before the pandemic. (This stepping away from worship has greater impact than just on worship numbers and ministry support, though. Those who drift away from church also lose the significant support of church friends as well as foundational values that are reinforced in church. It's worth noting that research by the Mayo

Clinic confirms that active religious involvement and spirituality are associated with greater longevity, better coping skills, a higher health-related quality of life, and less anxiety, depression, and suicide.)

I don't expect the spread of information like this to have a direct impact on people's decisions about church. I don't think most people would read something like this and decide, "Oh, I better go back to church." Rather, as Christians, we need to make changes in our relationships with others including family members. We need to be more open, not just about our religious practices, but also in sharing why they matter to us. We need to tell stories of how our church affiliation and interaction with other Christians makes a difference in our lives. How is, as JESUS says, life more abundant, more full because of our participation in church? How does our faith ground us and support us in the challenges we face? And we need to be more intentional about bringing others to experience what we have found in our fellowship in church and in relationship to GOD and other believers. But we also need to explore as a congregation, what we need to add, change, and/or jettison to better meet the needs of younger generations who are looking for things that we currently do not offer, or at least not in the way we do things now? My faith in GOD says that Christianity is not going to go away. But I also believe that it is going to look different in some ways than what we have known in the past. And that's okay. History tells us that the Christian Church has gone through many changes to better reach future believers. We just have to decide to be open to what GOD is doing and ready to respond when GOD invites us to be a part of what is happening.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey