

Your Church Must Learn to Swim in Today's Religious Currents

Bob Dylan wrote these words over 55 years ago:

*"Come gather 'round people, wherever you roam
And admit that the waters around you have grown
And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth saving
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'"*

According to an [Oct. 17 report](#) by the Pew Research Center on religion and public life, the religious landscape of the United States continues to change at a rapid clip. And the news isn't good, at least with regard to the Christian faith.

We need to face the fact that the times they are a-changin'.

In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade.

Let that sink in for a second. A loss of 12 percentage points in 10 years.

Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009.

Some people call this the trend toward disaffiliation.

What about worship attendance?

Over the last decade, the share of Americans who say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month dropped by 7 percentage points.

On the other hand, those who say they attend religious services less often (if at all) has risen by the same degree.

In 2009, regular worship attenders (those who attend religious services at least

once or twice a month) outnumbered those who attend services only occasionally or not at all by a 52%-to-47% margin. Today, those figures are reversed.

What this means is that the American population is becoming less Christian and less observant.

Essentially, we are seeing more and more evidence that [young people](#) look at the faith and religious institutions their parents built and say, "Um, no thanks."

We could talk about a variety of reasons for this shift: anti-institutionalism, the rise of information access, negative views toward religious groups, perceived hypocrisy or an unwillingness to change among people of faith.

But I believe that time is better spent on trying to discover any good news that can be found and then address how we should respond to this shifting landscape.

Here's some good news.

First, as we come to the close of the 2010s, 71% of Americans still describe themselves as Christian (48% Protestant, 23% Catholic).

The religious "nones" among U.S. adults now number around 22%, but the vast majority of Americans are still willing to self-identity as Christian. That's a lot of people, offering a broad opportunity for discipleship and engagement.

Second, the segment of Americans who identify as Protestant "evangelicals" (a term I don't really like for its political implications) - generally people who want to see the way of Jesus spread - has remained steady for the last 10 years.

Again, there is a strong segment within society that still promotes the way of Jesus, at least on some level.

Many have left who weren't really that interested, but those who are truly seeking to follow Jesus are still following.

How should we respond to the changing currents?

1. More salt, less hot sauce

Christians have become known as culture warriors, especially on the far right and far left. The Tabasco-like vitriol toward those who disagree with their views

poorly represents the person of Jesus.

He taught in Matthew 5 that we are the “salt of the earth.” Salt preserves, flavors and generally makes food better. That is our function in society: bringing good news that makes things better for people.

Any time we can help to bring liberation, justice and compassion to those who suffer, we fulfill our function as salt. And we must be willing to go to where people are and connect around dinner tables, in the gym and at the coffee shop.

2. More listening, less talk

Now is the time to listen and seek to understand, not to talk and demand to be heard.

It can take a long time before someone tells you why they have disassociated with the Christian faith. You might be surprised that they love Jesus; they just don't love the church.

The future church will understand how to cultivate deep, lasting relationships.

3. More connection, less cutoff

The word religion comes from “re-ligio,” the same word from which the word “ligament” derives. A ligament is connective tissue. So, the word religion means “re-connect.”

Religion reconnects us to the nature of reality - a sacred context, infused by a loving Creator who permeates the wholeness of our world.

Religion also reconnects us to one another. It is intended to be a healing endeavor where what is broken can be set right.

The separation of races, the brokenness of family bonds, the gap between rich and poor - each of these realities should be addressed by people of faith, with religious activity working to reconnect these areas of life, not tear them further apart.

The more we seek to include and bless, rather than cutting off and excluding, the greater opportunity we will have to witness and teach.

4. More creativity, less control

Yes, we need accountability. But the expressions of church thriving around the world tend to be highly creative and part of a permission-giving culture.

Believers are creating churches in art galleries, in pubs, around dinner tables, in gardens and in [a thousand different ways](#). We need to give permission for people to unleash their God-given creativity to the glory of God.

Those who can learn to swim in the current waters will define the future. Dodging or condemning our cultural currents is fruitless.

If we believe in the God who can raise Jesus from the grave, surely God can raise up the church in today's context.

*"The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast
The slow one now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past
The order is rapidly fading
And the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'."*

Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Cliff Temple Baptist Church's [blog](#). It is used with permission.