

Christian Decline in America: The Pew Report

Co-Missioners,

The first step in a Crossing analysis, be it of a Scriptural text or a present reality, is to identify a problem that demands attention.

Our mission correspondent, Richard Gahl, does this today in a follow-up to [his reflection last week](#) about culture shifts in the U.S. His focus now is on a recent report from the [Pew Research Center](#) about trends in U.S. religious participation over the past decade. Most all of us will find this sobering. It will also confirm patterns we've been seeing in the congregations we belong to. It will not, however, try to identify the issues of misplaced faith and divine judgment that underlie such trends, or wrestle with the question of how Christ crucified addresses them.

Since the very point of Crossings is to press and explore these deeper questions, we ought to do that soon, whether in this Thursday Theology venue, or at a conference, or in a combination of both. For now, suffice it to find the presenting problem delineated as starkly as Dick does here, and after that to pray—each of us—for the faith and insight on which the mission of the Gospel depends.

Christ reigns in spite of our blindness, as we'll hear and celebrate the Sunday after next.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

Christian Decline in America: The Pew Report

by Richard Gahl



The last posting in this mission series appended a note from the October 18th news feeds about a Pew report chronicling the decline in Christianity in the US, dropping 12% from 2009 to 2019, settling in at 65% of our population. The point of that particular post was that U.S. culture was changing and assumptions that worked before that change were not working in 2019. The news feeds from the day the post was written underlined the extend of the culture change.

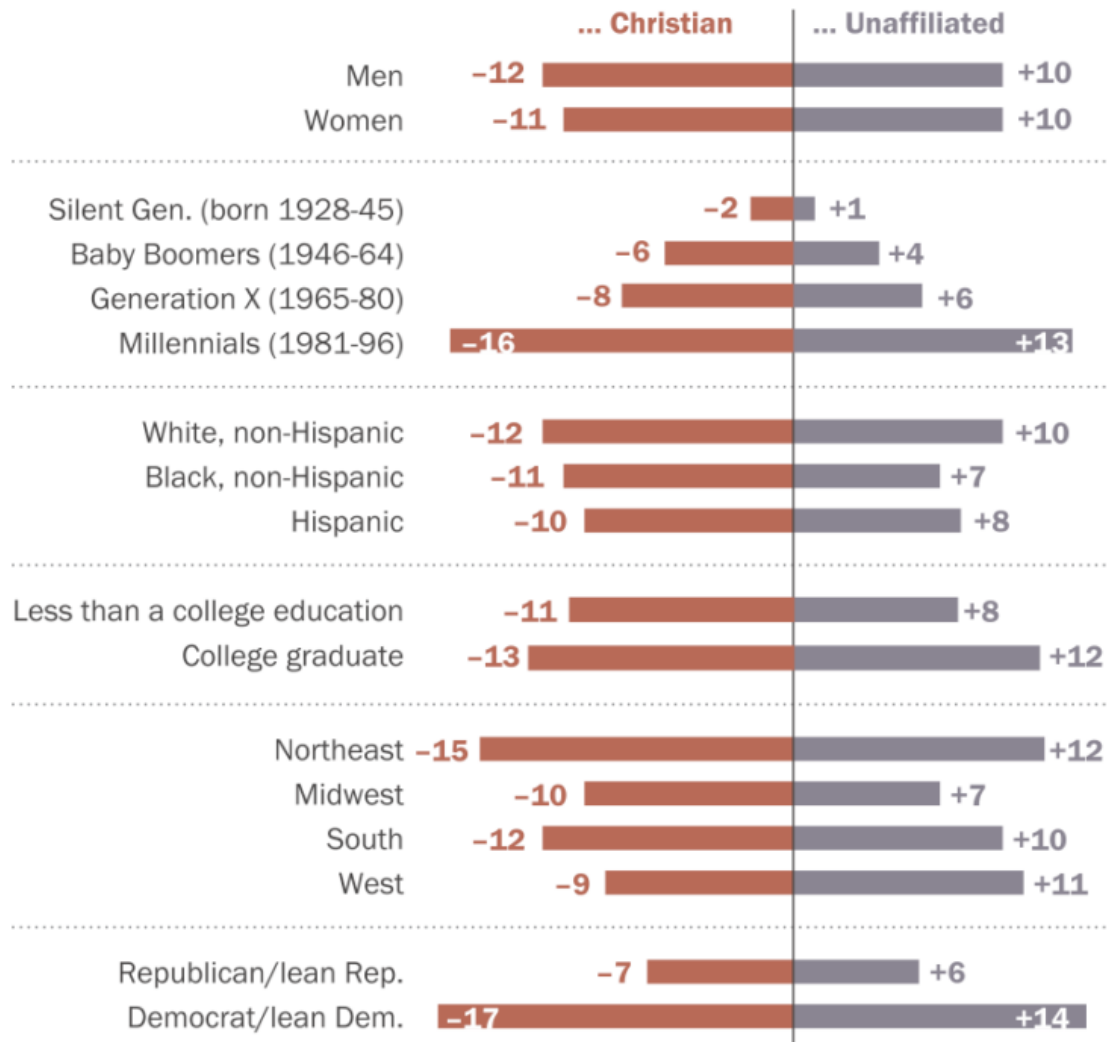
The Pew Research Center released its report on October 17, "[In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace](#)." Behind

the 20-page report was a series of 88 surveys from 2009 to 2019 that included interviews with 168,890 Americans. That number is very significant in that many of the polls we read about were based on data from 1000 – 2000 people that projected to a +/- rate of 4 to 5%. In other words, this Pew Report is much more reliable!

In working through the Pew data ten items jumped out for me.

Broad-based declines in share of Americans who say they are Christian

Percentage-point change between 2009 and 2018/2019 in the share who identify as ...



Source: Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted 2009 and January 2018-July 2019 on the telephone.

"In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

1. Over the last decade, the share of Americans who say they attended religious services at least once or twice a month dropped by 7%. More Americans now say they attend religious services a few times a year or

less (54%) than say they attend monthly (45%). (p.5)

2. "Nones" (religiously unaffiliated) are on the rise among younger people and most groups of older adults. Their growth is most pronounced among young adults. (p.5)
3. Generational differences are revealing.
 1. 84% of the Silent Generation (1928-1945) describe themselves as Christian
 2. 76% of the Baby Boomers (1946-1964) describe themselves as Christian
 3. 49% of Millennials (1981-1996) describe themselves as Christian with four in ten attending church seldom or never. (p.6)
4. Regionally the decline in church attendance is greatest in the Northeast with the Midwest showing the least decline.
 1. Northeast: -15% in attendance +12% in unaffiliated
 2. Midwest: -10% in attendance +7% in unaffiliated (p.6)
5. The nation's overall rate of religious attendance is declining not because Christians are attending less often, but rather because there are now fewer Christians as a share of the population. (p.8)
6. Religiously unaffiliated adults in the US grew by almost 30 million from 2009 to 2019. (p.8)
7. Trends documented by the Pew Research Center survey closely resemble those found in the long-running General Social Survey, a project of the independent research organization [NORC at the University of Chicago](#). (p. 9)

8. 47% of Hispanics describe themselves as Catholic, down from 57% a decade ago. (p.10)
9. While women (23%) are less likely than men (30%) to describe themselves as religious “nones,” women like men have grown noticeably less religious over the last decade: women as “nones” +10% , women as Christian -11%. (p.11)
10. A recent opinion piece in the *Washington Post* on October 27th by Christine Emba, “[Why Millennials Are Skipping Church and Not Going Back](#),” has an interesting tidbit linking the Pew report to an article in the October 2019 *Monthly Labor Review* of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Entitled “[Time use of millennials and nonmillennials](#),” the article reports as follows: “In 2017, millennials average about half as much time per day of organizational, civic, and religious activities (12 minutes) as did non millennials (23 minutes). (p.7)

It might be easy to hold up the Pew information about Millennials as the most significant. But this writer would caution jumping to such a conclusion too quickly. Ringing in my ears is the mantra of a seminary Christian education class when the professor stated: “There is no such thing as a nine year old boy.” He wanted us not to generalize but to consider one nine year old boy or girl at a time. Get to know the nine year old. Understand what makes him or her tick. How does this individual think and act? How is he or she uniquely gifted by the Creator?

In that spirit permit me to suggest that there is not likely one factor in our changing culture that, if properly dealt with, will be the “silver bullet” to regain lost members. I would suggest there are multiple factors across the whole spectrum of

congregation and the communities served. Generations. Men/women. Family situations including the age of children, if any. Education. Employment. Region of Country. Etc. Dare we include the age and experience of pastors and congregational leaders?

For me there is a major clue in a concept that was first encountered in mission conversations in the 80's: cross cultural. Its first application had to do with missionaries assigned to serve in foreign lands. Obviously a first task is to learn the language (even if the language is English). But there was much more. How do things work around this new place? What are the social norms? It was the opposite of recreating my preferred life back in the U.S., my hometown, the congregation I grew up in.

But it was soon evident to me that cross cultural was not just about serving in a foreign land. For pastors it would mean serving in a new call. One should not expect that the new congregation was the same as the previous one, or even the home congregation where one grew up. How are things done in this place? Who are the key thought influencers? Then I remembered the experiences in my first call – serving a store front church that was one year old when I arrived and starting a second congregation ten miles away. Both had building programs in 1969. One was a happy experience. The other was a struggle. I was the same pastor but had not yet picked up on different congregations and cultures. What worked well in one place did not go over the same way in the other.

The 30 million increase over the last ten years in Unaffiliated is really important! Back in the 80s I heard national mission leaders stating that the US was the fifth largest mission field in the world. Later the US was deemed the fourth largest. It is shocking to see that the mission field has gotten larger by almost 30 million people in the last ten years. And it is

happening on our watch! Sitting back and waiting for folks to come to our churches has not really worked for some time. And it will not work in the future. Didn't Someone once say "Go"? That sounds like a get up and get moving assignment. The PEW report does highlight millennials. But permit me to suggest the report is symptomatic, not a cause for blame. The promise is for all—for each and every household in Chicago, in Illinois, in the United States, and across the globe. See the model in Acts 1:8.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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