

## ***Uncomfortable: The Awkward & Essential Challenge of Christian Community***

### ***“Embracing Discomfort”***

#### [Romans 12:1-2](#)

It's wonderful that our sanctuary looks fuller today than the past few months of the travel season. As all of our ministries are back to their normal schedules after the summer break, and especially with our Chancel Choir singing again, I hope that you will continue to show up for worship each Sunday as long as you are in town.

Yet, if you have been a long-time member of our church, you know this is nothing in comparison to what we had in our glory days. Back then, our sanctuary was packed, our Sunday School classrooms were overflowing with kids, and we were recognized as one of the biggest churches in the area. Even the name of our church reflected our prestigious status - the First United Methodist Church. Sadly, the heydays of our church are long gone.

The subject of church decline is not anything new. Few would argue that the majority of churches in our country are not growing. The continuing decline in church membership and worship attendance is the biggest problem most churches in America are facing today.

According to a Gallup report that was published last spring, from 1937 through 1976, over 70% of Americans belonged to a church. The number fell slightly to 68% in the 1970s through the 1990s. Then, in the past 20 years, the percentage dropped drastically; and now, the number of Americans who say they belong to a church is barely 50%. This decline in church membership is consistent with a concurrent decline in weekly worship attendance. Even committed church attenders are attending church less often.

Surely, the trend has been happening for years, but now the issue is reaching a tipping point. According to Thom Rainer, a church growth consultant, while 27% of all churches in America are growing, 32% are steadily declining, 22% are rapidly declining, and 19% are declining toward death. All this is a sobering reality of the churches in our nation.

Why is this happening? When and how did this get started? What does all this mean for the church? Since church decline was first noted in the 1970s, many pastors and church leaders have tried to answer these questions and made suggestions on how to turn the trend around. Among them were two theologians, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, who co-authored, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. When their book was published in 1989, it sparked lively discussions and debates among Christians about Christian identity as well as the nature, mission, and ministry of the church.

In their book, Hauerwas and Willimon claim that the world changed distinctly sometime between 1960 and 1980. They highlight one Sunday evening in 1963 when the Fox Theater in Greenville, South Carolina opened on Sunday evening in defiance of the state's time-honored blue laws as one of the early signs of

this drastic shift happening all across America. They write, "Seven of us - regular attenders of the Methodist Youth Fellowship at Buncombe Street Church - made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox. That evening... The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish."

Until then, Sunday in America was always a church day. Local laws prohibited commercial activity on Sundays, meaning that all stores, even movie theaters, were closed. And almost everyone went to church as the church was the only show in town, the only meeting place for people. I've heard that there were even traffic jams on Sunday mornings at 9:45 as people headed to their churches for Sunday School! And of course, children never asked their parents if they could stay at home instead of going to church. Hearing all of this, perhaps some of you are thinking, 'Yes, what a Golden Age!'

Indeed, for most of US history, being an American meant being a Christian, though there was no law requiring it. With this Christian identity overlapping with national identity, being a good Christian was conflated as being a good American citizen. And good Christian living meant achieving the American dream of living a comfortable and happy life, in a lovely home in a nice neighborhood. Brett McCracken writes in his book, *Uncomfortable*, which inspired our current sermon series, "In this context, mainstream Christianity became less about truly believing in God and supernatural events like the incarnation and resurrection; it became more about the rites and rituals of Christianity-flavored morality: a convenient, comfortable, quaint system of personal and societal uplift."

During the 60s and 80s that Hauerwas and Willimon pointed out as a period of distinct change, one by one, the nation's leading retail chains began to open their stores on Sundays. Soon, Sunday shopping became a normal way of life for Americans -- similar to how retailers are now beginning to open their doors even on Thanksgiving Day! And, with the nation's growing affluence and prosperity and the increased options this wealth has given us, consumerism has become the air we now breathe. We are encouraged to choose whatever we want, whenever and wherever we want them. It's all about me -- my preferences, my pleasure, and my comfort.

It did not take long for the church to be influenced by this consumerist mind-set and attitude. New, seeker-sensitive churches began to rise. Driven by the idea that church should pay attention to the needs of seekers, churches created their worship spaces and styles as well their preaching to be as friendly and appealing as possible. This approach resulted in numeric growth, and we saw the rise of many megachurches, including Willow Creek in Illinois and Saddleback in California. Impressed by their growth, one by one, many Protestant churches and even some Catholic churches across the nation have adopted their approach and implemented their methods.

About this trend that has influenced the majority of the churches in America, McCracken writes, "Today, the seeker-sensitive approach takes the form of the radically individualistic *iChurch*, which is all about what church does for me and has little tolerance for covenantal commitment or accountability. Naturally, *iChurch* transitions eventually to *noChurch*, which is precisely the nominal-none trajectory we are now seeing."

After all, as we are observing, despite the births of new mega-churches and the growth of some revitalized churches, church decline in our nation has never stopped since it started in the 1970s, and now this decline is happening at an alarming speed. And, we are all greatly concerned about this trend, watching our denom-

ination shrinking in size. We see the evidence of the denominational decline in our own Annual Conference. Three churches were closed this year -- two old churches and one of the newly planted churches that had been struggling for quite a while.

However, maybe, what's happening to Christianity in America is not a bad thing. Perhaps, it's even "a good thing." Quoting the words of Ed Stetzer, a church growth consultant, McCracken writes, "Christianity isn't collapsing; it's being clarified." While nominal Christians give up the pretense of faith, convictional Christians are remaining and staying committed. He believes church decline is "a healthy pruning away of the mutant and neutered forms of it that are easily abandoned when they become culturally inconvenient or unfashionable."

To be culturally relevant in a world of consumerism, we tend to frame our Christian faith as a product to be sold to a consumer. But, this is not true to our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus offers his followers forgiveness and reconciliation, grace and mercy, peace and love, hope and salvation, new, abundant life, and eternal life. But, following Jesus also comes at a cost. There is a cost to discipleship. To be his disciple is to deny yourself, to take up your cross, to be crucified with him. To be a disciple of Jesus is to humble yourself among your fellow followers of Jesus, to bear one another's burdens in the community of believers, to work for unity in the midst of diversity, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Being a Christian, following Christ is not easy and comfortable. On the contrary, it is rather difficult and uncomfortable because it is counter-cultural. The early church recognized this and emphasized to its believers that in order to follow Christ, they had to live a life of holiness, to set themselves apart from their world. This is what the apostle Paul was urging in his letter to the Roman churches. He writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, as we make our way back into the normal rhythms of school and work, back from the leisure-filled days of summer, let us take a closer look at where we are in our faith journey. Where are you in your walk with Jesus Christ? Where are you in your walk of discipleship? The answers might make us uncomfortable. They might reveal that we are too conformed to the ways of the world and not to the kingdom of God.

May the Holy Spirit give us the courage to embrace the discomfort. May the Holy Spirit give us the conviction that we need to turn back to God and place Christ at the center of our lives and our hearts.

May the Holy Spirit remind us of God's grace, which is ever with us, especially in our places of brokenness and discomfort.

Amen.