



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

We're Number Two! We're Number Two! Raise the boisterous cheer, we are number two! After hundreds of years of being number one, we have suddenly and surprisingly slipped to number two. Such a realization may not keep us awake at night, but such news indicates that something is fundamentally shifting in the religious life of America. We are no longer number one.

What is this all about? Two articles in recent days have documented the paradigmatic shifts taking place in the spiritual landscape of America. The first article from the National Opinion Research Center contained the rather sensationalistic headline, "America is no longer a Protestant nation." The fine print went on to say that the percentage of Protestants in our country has been dropping rather precipitously in the past decade, and most likely will fall below 50% at any moment, and may have already done so.

We have gone from number one to number two. For the first time in our history there are more people in the U.S. who are not Protestant than those who are. Nothing in the research indicates that this trend will be reversed anytime soon, if ever. So we might as well create new banners and logos and repeat the mantra of the future, "We are number two." (Of course as number two maybe we will try harder, but don't hold your breath.)

Interestingly enough, between 1972 and 1993 the Protestant slice of the American pie remained relatively stable, but then about a decade ago it all headed south. In 1993 63% of our population was Protestant, but by 2002 the percentage had dropped to 52% and has been declining ever since, most likely it is below 50% at this very moment. Those people who say they have no religious connection has grown from 9% to 14% during this past decade.

The director of the research center comments, "Here is another example of how America is moving toward a nation of minorities." While Protestants have been declining, the Roman Catholic population has remained steady at about 25%. Of course immigration trends in the past generation have added to the growth and stability of Roman Catholicism, very few Protestants from Scandinavia or Germany are docking at Ellis Island, as my grandparents did a century ago.

In addition, people who belong to other religions other than Protestant and Roman Catholic: Eastern religions, Orthodox Christianity, Interdenominational Christianity or Native American faiths have increased from 3% to 7% in this same time frame. Jews remained about the same at slightly less than 2%.

Some further statistics partially explain the trend line. Those who say they were raised Protestant stayed constant at about 65% from 1973 to 1992. But it dropped quickly to 56% by 2002. Among people born after 1980, only 49% of them now say they were raised Protestant. Much of the Protestant decline comes in large part from the loss of younger members and a related drop in the retention rate. Fewer people in their late teens or early 20's call themselves Protestants. We seem to be losing our youngest generation of adults. Up until 1993, about 90% of those raised Protestant stayed that way for a lifetime, but now it has dropped to 83%.

Interpreting these shifts is tricky. The survey suggests that one of the major reasons for this decline of Protestantism is the growing fracture within. There seems no longer to be a single Protestant voice or vision. At one time we were united under the notion of individual conscience (Martin Luther's words, 'With conscience as my guide, I will not recant.') Or we joined together in our ability to connect with God without a priest or intermediary,

separating ourselves from our Catholic roots.

But today Protestantism seems to be dominated by an evangelical-mainline split. Evangelicals came to the forefront in the 1970's and their influence has dramatically altered the Protestant culture. Tensions have been steadily heightened, the present election seems to be embodying much of the animosity. In fact, there seems to be much more disagreement today among Protestants than there is between Protestant and Catholic, or even sometimes between Protestants and non-Christians.

These serious quarrels have had a dramatic effect on Protestantism. Another study claims that in 1960 there were about 29 million Protestants in the country, by the year 2000 that number had dropped to 22 million. This was a 21% drop in membership while at the same time the nation was experiencing a 33% increase in population. Add these together and it seems as if we are down 55% from just holding our own.

On the "glass is half full" side, experts do not expect a dramatic shift toward a non-Christian nation. In 2002, still three-quarters of Americans identified themselves as Protestants or Catholics. Protestants are still the single largest faith group.

The other sobering article about statistics came from the Christian Century Magazine, which contained the following headline, "ELCA numbers drop below 5 million. The nation's largest Lutheran denomination, which has always been well above the 5 million number, has slipped swiftly below this line. In the past fifteen years, since the ELCA was established, it has suffered a net loss of one-half million people.

What is most alarming is that one half of these losses took place in the past two years, 2002 and 2003. A major reasons for this decline, the article suggests, is the decreasing number of new members who are joining ELCA congregations. Another major factor in this decline is that Lutherans are aging quickly, (I resemble that demography). In fact the average Lutheran today is pushing near to 65 years old.

As Lyle Schaller has said, we have two choices, growing older and smaller or younger and larger.

Predictions are better for Protestants than for Lutherans. I mentioned in a recent Update the explosion today of mega-churches, those which worship at least 2000 on a weekend. Beginning with just 10 of these in 1970, an explosion has pushed the number to 835 in 2004. Most of these congregations have chosen younger and larger. But as also mentioned, few of them are Lutheran, and less than 20% are from mainline denominations.

How does the ELCA turn this situation around? Answer; "with great difficulty." It would mean drastic changes in vision and strategy. I see no evidence of such a shift.

Lutheran Church of Hope has discovered some ways to change this trend line. It begins with a powerful vision: "Jesus is life, all else is details. Lost people matter to God, so they matter to us. We worship God, not tradition. Following Jesus is a growing experience. We are one body, united in Jesus Christ." Proverbs 29 tells us that without a vision the people perish, but history tells us that with a Christ-centered and evangelistic vision a church can grow.

Our strategies continue to evolve. We believe worship is the most important activity we do, so we will have nine worship services this fall. Alpha is a spiritual growth experience which brings transformation to minds and hearts. The Great Commission compels us to go and invite others. Luther's four affirmations guide us as a church, "Grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Word alone."

Statistics are not everything. But they do tell us something, especially as they report trends.

So in unison now, repeat our new Protestant cheer, "We're Number Two. We're Number Two."