

# **Hope and promise: What gloomy predictions about church overlook**

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Are you tired of the doomsday rhetoric about the church in America? Have you noticed the bandwagon of those predicting the imminent demise of congregational life is filled to capacity? Are you ready to tune out another diatribe proclaiming the church ship is sinking and we are all doomed?

You have to admit the numbers do not look good. Denominations regularly report widespread decline. “Spiritual but not religious” is the fastest growing segment of American religious life. Thousands of local congregations are closing annually. Church plants fail at an alarmingly high rate. The financial crisis threatens to overwhelm many local churches. [Megachurches report](#) the vast majority of their growth comes from attracting members from other congregations. The prevailing opinion about the viability of local church life in America is decidedly grim and gloomy.

## **A minority opinion in contrast to prevailing notions**

I believe there has never been a better day to be the church. There has never been a richer opportunity, a more compelling need or a more invigorating challenge than what we have before us. I believe the 21st century will find the church of Jesus Christ emerging from decades of slow decline to rediscover authentic community, witness and vibrancy.

How? I do not know. No one does. But I believe it will happen.

I say this because I believe Jesus told the truth about his church enduring forever, because of church history and because of what I know about local churches and the people in them today.

## **Gloom is a disposition toward the facts**

Phoebe Venable, a chartered financial analyst, writes regularly about the economy, families and building wealth. In a *Tennessean* column titled “Gloomy predictions overlook change,” she noted developments in the world oil supply debunking the notion that the human race eventually will deplete the supply of oil and civilization will grind to a halt.

Venable observed: “It is not uncommon to hear reports that say if something continues on its current path, the result will spell disaster ... these reports take a current trend and extrapolate it into the future to arrive at a devastating conclusion.”

Though she was not talking about congregational life in America early in the 21st century, she might as well have been.

This phenomenon reminded her of the Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894.

“The primary form of transportation at the turn of the last century was by horse,” Venable wrote. “By the early 1900s, the number of people living in cities had doubled while the population of horses had more than tripled. London was the largest city in the world in 1900 and it had 11,000 horse-drawn cabs. There were also several thousand buses, each needing 12 horses per day.

“The horses produced large amounts of manure. The streets of London and New York began to fill with the malodorous byproduct. In 1894, a writer for *The Times* of London predicted that in 50 years every street in London would be buried under nine feet of manure.

“As always, necessity bred innovation, and horses were replaced by motor vehicles.”

## **Gloom overlooks positive potential**

Doomsday scenarios usually overlook a vital truth: things can change. Those who make straight-line projections about the future fail to account for the innovation, creativity and God-inspired change we cannot see today.

This is no time to relax or give in to the temptation to dismiss the facts with a naïve belief that all will work out for good. Every congregation needs to take a fearless look at itself and admit its future is grim without significant God-inspired innovation and retooling.

Fear may be your starting point for change, but it must give way soon to God-inspired hope and hard work if your church is to endure.

Motor vehicles didn't drop out of the sky in the early 20th century. They came about because entrepreneurs and inventors painstakingly tried and failed with hundreds of ideas. The same will be true for the new life our churches will embrace. It will come one step at a time, will involve change and pain and failure, and will require great humility.

## **Gloom misses the promise and the hope**

Thankfully, we come from a long line of those who defied conventional wisdom and were willing to adapt to the unexpected. From Noah to Abraham to Mary to Paul, our forefathers and mothers personified the idea that an uncertain future could be faced with confidence if they followed the Spirit's leadership.

Continuing that spirit, the church has adapted to the printing press, wars, colonial expansion, scientific discoveries, modernity, space travel, the internet and countless other challenges and opportunities. I believe we will do so again.

The next time you make a trip in a car rather than on a horse, be reminded that Spirit-led change is what will save us from our doom and gloom.

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