

2nd Opinion: 5 ways churches inflicted pain on themselves

May 21, 2015

Let's be clear: The much-heralded "decline of Christianity in America" isn't about God losing faith in humankind.

It isn't about losing our moral compass thanks to whatever you happen to loathe. It isn't about fickle Millennials. It isn't about zigging trendy or zagging traditional.



Tom Ehrich In fact, I would argue Christianity isn't in trouble at all. Churches are in trouble. Denominations are in trouble. Religious institutions like seminaries are in trouble. Professional church leaders are in trouble.

But churches can't hold God hostage. God will do what God will do. Whether our churches stay open for business, God will keep on loving all God has made. Loss of an institution won't deter God.

So let's relax about Christianity—the faith—going down the tubes. This isn't an existential crisis for God or for faith in God. Even if every church in America went dark, God would try another way.

The tragedy—in the classic sense of self-inflicted wounds and fatal flaws—is that we did this to ourselves, and we hurt many people along the way. Here

is what we did:

- **We stopped trying.**

For a time, religious institutions in America were bold risk-takers. Then we settled into maintenance mode, because it felt safe and comfortable. We fought over churchy things that didn't matter because the things that did matter—racism, inequality, demagoguery, corporate thievery, obsession with money and sex—cut too close to home.

- **We stopped giving.**

Over the past 50 years, our giving has dropped by more than half as a percentage of family income. We have starved our churches of resources. When tough budget choices had to be made, the facilities we wanted usually defeated the mission God wanted.

- **We turned inward.**

Just as American houses went from porches in front to patios out back, we stopped connecting with our neighbors. We stopped looking outward, except for the occasional *noblesse oblige* charity. We opened our doors on Sunday and welcomed each other.

- **We fixated on Sunday morning.**

Long after Sunday changed character in American life, we kept expecting Sunday worship to do our work. Rather than transform lives through mission work, circles of growth and personal spirituality, we had people sit in pews for a crammed hour of singing, praying, announcing, chatting, communing and learning. Then we sent people out to their cars and figured we had done our work for the week.

- **We trashed our reputation.**

We became known as judgmental, angry, self-serving, smug, boring and old. As far as people outside can tell, we live to fight, we think too highly of ourselves, and we are moral scolds. Who needs that?

What, then, is the future? The future for God is as bright and glorious as ever. Our ever-changing, ever-dynamic, ever-loving and ever-transformational God will be just fine. We can say our prayers with confidence.

Churches, on the other hand, are in trouble. Many will run out of money. Many will lose heart. And yet some, perhaps many, will rise to the challenge. They will give up the old certainties and do what Jesus did.

Those challenge-meeters will look outward, proclaim good news, welcome strangers, serve “the least of these,” give their lives and resources away, work for justice and mercy, be faith communities seven days a week and put love ahead of right opinion and kindness ahead of victory.

And God will be in the midst of them.

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