



## Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

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### HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL?

A couple of months ago the results of a recent nationwide religious preference survey were released. I suspect that many of us in the institutional Church are not very happy with what this study revealed.

As reported in *Christian Century* (April 7, 2009—p. 15), the American Religious Identification Survey showed that over the past two decades the number of self-identified “Christians” in our country has decreased from 86 percent of the population to 76 percent.

Which religious group do you suppose had the most to gain from the precipitous drop in USA Christianity: Jews? Buddhists? Muslims? Hindus? Jehovah’s Witnesses? Rastafarians?

Actually, *none* of these faith communities had the most to gain. As it turns out, *none* stood out as the fastest growing religious group in America. No, I’m serious here ... it was the “nones” that grew the most.

*(I know, I know; this is beginning to sound a little bit like that famous Abbot and Costello skit, “Who’s on First?”)*

The “nones” are what sociologists have taken to calling people who claim to be anti-religious, atheists, agnostics or secularists of some kind. This group of self-confessing *non*-religious folk grew from a little over 8 percent of the national population in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008! The biggest gains were in New England, while the Pacific Northwest continued to be a hot-spot for people who express little or no interest in community-based religion.

Moreover—and this too is startling—the number of Christians who refuse to identify with a particular religious tradition exploded from 200,000 in 1990 to 8 million+ in 2008! Meanwhile, as one might expect, mainline

Protestantism (which includes us!) shrank from nearly 19% of the total Christian “pie” in 1990 to about 13% last year.

As the survey’s co-author, Barry Kosmin, said, “Brand loyalty is gone.”

Now I prefer to see this “Great Recession” of institutional Christianity the way some intrepid entrepreneurs are beginning to look at the depleted stock market and world economy right now. They believe there are tremendous opportunities awaiting those who are able to transform their thinking from outdated modes of production to new ways of generating products, services, and wealth. Could this be true in the religious sphere as well?

Despite the manifest rise in irreligiosity, surveys indicate that *most* people who have checked out of organized religion—and especially the ones who are young adults—are actually quite spiritual. As one recent book about this up-and-coming cohort says in its title: *I Like Jesus but Not the Church*.

What turns these 20-something people off to the church as we know it isn’t so much what we believe as how it is we practice these beliefs on Sunday—and the rest of the week.

They are looking for less bureaucracy and more community (where *everyone* is fully accepted) ... less hypocrisy and more spiritual authenticity ... less about the church building and more about building the *church* ... less about what goes on *in* the church building, and more about what the church has going on—i.e. mission—*outside* the building. You get the picture...

We of the older generation can take umbrage at our children’s and grandchildren’s critique of our way of practicing the Christian faith all we want. But if we do, our churches will surely die. The statistics don’t lie!

Or ... we can wake up and seize this golden opportunity to help create a new Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—one where God is revered, Jesus is followed, and the power of the Spirit is manifested in our loving concern for one another and the world.

What shall we choose to do?

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