

A Look Ahead
Acts 2:1-4
Sermon by Dan Schrock
May 19, 2013
Pentecost

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Pentecost, the birthday of the church, is a good chance to think about the changing religious landscape in America and how our congregation might fit into that. I begin with a story.

I

A while back I was eating lunch with another pastor, a casual acquaintance of mine. Since this pastor was studying new church development in a doctoral program, we chatted about the future of evangelism and church planting in America.

“So what’s new in the world of evangelism and church planting?” I asked.

“Well,” he replied, “one new thing is that the megachurch era is basically over.”

I swallowed the potatoes in my mouth then gasped. “What?! The era of the megachurch is over? What do you mean by that?”

“It’s peaked,” he said evenly. “The research on this is fairly clear. Of the new churches that are being planted, a smaller percentage are evolving into megachurches. And the existing megachurches aren’t growing numerically like they once did.”

“If the megachurch movement has peaked,” I asked, “then what’s next in new church development? What’s the next trend?”

“We’re not sure,” he answered, “but we’re fairly certain it’s not going to be the megachurch. Some megachurches will continue to thrive, and certainly they’ll continue receiving media attention because they’re so big, but we do not think megachurches are the wave of the future. It will be something else.”

It seems my friend was right about megachurches, at least from the bits and pieces I've heard. The Chrystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, CA, which was in some ways the mother of megachurches, has fallen on hard times and recently sold their building. The Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, once a darling church among evangelicals, appears to be struggling or has at least reached a plateau. Many young evangelical pastors fresh out of seminary say they have no interest in starting megachurches. It's as if the megachurch movement belonged to the generation that came of age in the 1980s, and the generation of young people now coming of age is looking for something different. In the next decade it will be interesting to watch what happens to megachurches in our own community, such as Nappanee Missionary Church, Grace Community Church here in Goshen, and the large evangelical churches on the west side of Elkhart along the new CR 17 corridor. What will the religious landscape look like in 2023?

In this sermon I want to name a few religious trends in American culture. American religious culture is complex, full of multiple trends moving in all sorts of directions. I'm only going to pick out a few trends in the evangelical segment of American Christianity, and then suggest why I think our congregation is well-suited to respond to some of these trends. At our best, we Mennonites have tried to stay relatively independent from both evangelical Protestants and mainline Protestants. We're not fully in either camp. Then why focus on evangelicals? Partly because evangelicals have strongly influenced the way some Mennonites think about Christianity. The more important reason to focus on evangelicals is because they have been so prominent in the last few decades. When people think of Christians, it's frequently evangelicals they have in mind. For the last three or four decades, evangelicals have received a lot of media attention for their huge megachurches, their robust numerical growth, and their political activism, most prominently expressed in the Religious Right.

II

In addition to a shift away from megachurches, other shifts seem to be underway among American evangelicals. Take numerical growth. For decades we've known that mainline denominations have been losing members. Episcopalians, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, United Methodists, American Baptists, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (which is mainline despite the word "evangelical" in their official name) had all been losing members at a steady pace. Meanwhile, evangelical denominations had been adding members at a steady pace. People were arguing that the mainline was spiritually dead while evangelicalism was spiritually alive. It looked like the mainline would wither away and evangelicals would get bigger and bigger.

That trend is changing, however. At least two evangelical denominations in America, the Southern Baptists and the Assemblies of God, are now *losing* members for the first time in decades. So it's probably most accurate to say that spiritual vitality and spiritual deadness can be found in both mainline churches and evangelical churches.¹ That, by the way, would also be true for the Mennonite Church USA.

As for the Religious Right, that too may be waning in power and influence. Not all evangelicals approve of what the Religious Right has tried to accomplish in the political arena. In fact, some evangelicals sharply criticize the Religious Right for fighting the wrong battles in the so-called culture wars, and for using strategies inconsistent with Christian faith.² In any case, it looks like the influence of the Religious Right is not what it used to be. After the most recent national election, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a prominent leader in the Religious Right, said this in an interview: "It's not that our message . . . didn't get out [to the voters]. It did get out. It's that the entire moral landscape has changed. An increasingly secularized America understands our positions, and has rejected them."³

Whether we agree with Mohler's views or not, surveys demonstrate that large numbers of young people are turning away from Christian faith or are deeply turned off by people who profess to be Christians. Around 2006, the Barna Group, an evangelical research organization, did a large survey of young Americans from the ages of 16 to 29.

These were all young people who are *not* Christian. The intent of the survey was to find out what young, non-Christian Americans think of Christianity. Most people in the study had a lot of first-hand experience with Christians. Many of them had attended church at one point, and 9 out of 10 have about 5 Christian friends. So they were well-acquainted with Christians.

The results were deeply troubling. Phrases that these young people used to describe Christians included “judgmental,” “hypocritical,” “too focused on getting converts,” and “too involved in politics.”⁴ There are probably many reasons why young people perceive Christians this way, but observers both inside and outside of evangelicalism suspect one of those reasons is that young people are turned off by the tactics and attitudes of the Religious Right.⁵ If that’s true, then there’s a cruel irony in all of this: in its quest to win the American culture war and recruit more people to its cause, the Religious Right has instead alienated young people and made them even less willing to become Christian or to stay Christian. In fact, half of the young people who grew up in evangelical churches have left evangelicalism. Many aren’t Christian at all. A recent survey by Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame, finds that Christians who now call themselves “evangelical” has declined to only 7% of the American population.⁶

III

Where does this leave us at Berkey Avenue Mennonite? How might we flourish as a congregation in the contemporary religious arena? I’ll offer 3 ideas, but I’m sure you’ll have other ideas as well.

First, in a landscape where young people think Christians are judgmental, let us say what we are for instead of what we are against. In this congregation we’re already doing a good job with this. Rarely have I heard people here be critical, saying what’s wrong or terrible. Instead people find ways to word things positively. The chairpersons of our congregation and of our commissions have done a lot to model this and set the tone for it, but lots of other people here do it well too. The field of appreciative inquiry has

helped us to see that organizations do much better with questions and strategies that elicit the positive.

Second, in a landscape where outsiders think Christians are hypocritical, let us continue striving for consistency between what we say and how we act. Already back in 20005, Ron Sider pointed out that evangelicals were not behaving any better, any more morally, than their non-Christian neighbors. He rightly called this a “scandal,” and it’s one thing young people outside the church criticize Christians for.⁷ I think our congregation’s emphasis on spiritual practices, outlined in our Recalibrated Vision, is exactly the right pathway that will lead us to great consistency of word and deed. Spiritual practices form us over time into the image of Christ so that other people glimpse something of Christ in us.

Recent research has also revealed that young people today are not so interested in the “believing” part of Christianity. They’re much more interested in the “behaving” and “belonging” parts. Core beliefs about the Trinity or how Jesus saves are important, of course, but they simply aren’t interesting to a lot of young adults. More often what they want to know about are “how” questions. How do I flourish as a human person in relation to God, others, and the environment? How do I trust God? How do I practice faith? How can I behave with integrity? Those questions are all about behaving—they’re practical, experiential, action-oriented questions. Moreover, three-fourths of young adults inside the church say they long for community, while one-half of young adults outside the church say the same thing. This longing for community is about belonging.⁸

Therefore a new thing I will be doing this fall is to start a spiritual practice small group. This will be for up to 11 people, with priority given to people who aren’t already in another small group. We’ll make a covenant with each other to do a given spiritual practice for at least one hour a week. Then at our monthly meetings we’ll share how that practice is going and how it’s shaping us. We’ll also do the practice together there in the small group meeting. You can look for details later this summer.

Third, in a landscape where outsiders accuse Christians of being too involved in politics, let our congregation continue focusing on God, church life, and mission. Of

course Jewish-Christian faith sometimes does need to address events the political arena. A careful reading of the Bible provides ample reason for that. But let us not go the route of the Religious Right and turn politics into our primary focus.

In one of the previous congregations I pastored, a member gave me blunt advice. “Don’t talk too much about politics in the pulpit,” he warned, “in sermons we want to hear about God, not politics.” His advice stuck with me partly because he and his wife contributed to the Democratic Party, strategized with local party officials, and actively canvassed for the party. Everybody in the congregation knew they were Democrats. Yet he had the wisdom to realize that church is not the place for a lot of political organizing. The church has a bigger and more important focus.

IV

In a shifting religious landscape, let us continue our course of worshiping God and doing spiritual practices in the context of community. Let us continue our mission of blessing our neighbors, upholding justice, and working for peace. Let us continue working toward a congregation where people of all generations can flourish. I’m grateful to God that our congregation has many strengths that will help it to do well in the coming years.

Notes

¹ For evidence of vitality in the mainline, see Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne, 2006).

² See, for instance, Randall Balmer’s *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical’s Lament* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

³ “Christian Right Failed to Sway Voters on Issues,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/us/politics/christian-conservatives-failed-to-sway-voters.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Even before the 2012 election, key leaders in the Religious Right, including Chuck Colson, James Dobson, Cal Thomas, and Albert Mohler, were already saying that they’ve “lost” their cultural battles over abortion, school prayer, and same-sex marriage. See Kathleen Parker, “Is a New Generation of Christians Finished with Politics?” *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/03/AR2009040303026.html>; and Jon Meacham, “The End of Christian America,” *Newsweek*, April 13, 2009, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/04/03/the-end-of-christian-america.html>.

⁴ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2007).

⁵ Observers inside Christian faith with this view include Rachel Held Evans, “How to Win a Culture War and Lose a Generation,” <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/win-culture-war-lose-generation-amendment-one-north-carolina>, and Mark Chaves, “Faith Talk Losing Appeal to Voters,” *Christian Century*, September 20, 2011, p. 14. Observers outside of Christian faith with this view include Eric Weiner, “Americans: Undecided about God?” *New York Times*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/opinion/sunday/americans-and-god.html>.

⁶ John S. Dickerson, “The Decline of Evangelical America,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/opinion/sunday/the-decline-of-evangelical-america.html>.

⁷ Ronald Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 107-202.