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With shrinking congregations, churches must inspire

Bill Tammeus | Dec. 2, 2010 A small c catholic

Several months ago, in the column I write for a national Presbyterian magazine *The Presbyterian Outlook* [1], I pondered my denomination?s shrinking world [2] and wondered who the last Presbyterian might be.

I was being only a little facetious. American Catholics might well be wondering something similar, given the findings of a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life [3] that showed that one out of every three adult Americans who had been raised Catholic has left the church.

Of course, despite this, the Catholic Church in the United States has experienced slow growth in recent years, although the numbers are attributable almost completely to immigrant members of the faith.

Peter Steinfels, a wise and clear-eyed observer of things religious and especially of things Catholic, pondered all this in a column in *Commonweal* [4] and suggested that what matters is not this or that set of ideas on how to keep Catholics from leaving the church. Rather, he wrote, ?What matters is merely some kind of acknowledgement from the hierarchy, or even leading individuals within the hierarchy, of the seriousness of the situation.? That?s not happening, he said.

Isn?t that the way with things spiritual? The last people who seem to want to acknowledge change or crisis or simple trouble are the ones paid to do exactly that. And part of the reason for their reluctance to face what?s happening is that they sometimes lose track of what church really is all about. Thus, to acknowledge a steady loss of members is, in effect, to acknowledge that they aren?t doing their best to keep people tethered to the church and its essential message of hope.

When my church [5] recently installed our new pastor [6] I was asked to give the ?charge to the pastor.? This is a customary talk -- kind of a set of marching orders -- from someone in the pews.

In my remarks, I told our new pastor that he really had only one job -- ?you are to help people meet -- and then follow -- Jesus Christ.?

In other words, we are to offer people what only the church can offer to help them find -- a healing, saving, comforting, challenging relationship with God, a relationship that calls forth lives of gratitude expressed in acts of ministry to a wounded world.

All the rest is commentary and footnotes.

When Catholics and Protestants ponder the reasons for people leaving church, perhaps they should return to the irreducible core of Christian theology. Yes, there are different ways to express that central theology, different ways to live it out in worship and witness. And, for sure, we will differ in our understandings of what lived-out Christianity should look like.

But at its most basic level, the church has a word of hope -- good news -- for a world that?s desperate to hear

good news, saturated with bad news and distrustful of the media that deliver any news.

It should be an easy sell. Instead, we let all kinds of things distort our message. The message women and gay people often receive from us Christians is that they don?t count much. The message children often hear is that they should quit asking bothersome questions and accept what we adults tell them. The message the elderly may hear is that we no longer honor their wisdom. The message outsiders may receive is that there are lots of barriers to cross before they can be with us insiders.

In a selfish sort of way, I wish this were just a Catholic problem. It might mean that as Catholics continue to drift away from under the Catholic umbrella they would find a home among us Protestants -- as some do, though it also works the other way.

But, in fact, all of our churches often fail to preach Christ?s gospel of grace in ways that 21st Century American ears can hear it.

The result is stagnation where there should be celebration.

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