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When Smaller Isn't Better

Ken Briggs | Jun. 21, 2012 NCR Today

In the fight against obesity, smaller is everything. As a prescription for the Catholic church, it's risky.

As a mainline Protestant, I remember embracing similar utterances as our churches began to lose members in the 1970s. It sounded noble, a relay of God's will for a more dedicated corps of mature believers in place of a bloated membership of hangers-on, the kind the estimable Peter Berger called "almost believers."

It was a way of explaining a stunning exodus, one that has continued among Presyberians, Methodists, Lutherans and Episcopalians. We would shed the fat and emerge slimmer and better equipped to preach the Gospel.

But it was largely a defensive strategy which denies reality and feeds on its own negativism. The causes of decline are complex, both cultural and religious, but the answer wasn't to celebrate the outcome of those causes by attempting to put a better face. In a nutshell, we mainliners had lost the conviction needed to evangelize. We couldn't convert anyone if our lives depended on it, which in a eway they did.

Bold efforts to baptize the bad news won't help the Catholic church either. If the response is to circle the wagons with a hollow confidence that the pure remnant is better off for having shed the undesirables, then the premise rests on an obvious delusion. To think like my cohorts that a holier, more saintly church can take shape by equating shrinkage itself with the divine plan makes for tragic history.

There can be grandeur in smallness that isn't self-righteous, that doesn't retreat into denial, that coheres around a cluster of convictions that radiates to the world as a powerful attraction. The Trinitarian faith asserts that the Holy Spirit works through signs of the times, be they in the church or without. Only by recognizing those signs (having to do with gender, for example) can the mission move ahead. The alternative is to avert those signs and make believe the world rejects the church because it cannot bear the church's unalloyed truth.

It matters whether churches are bigger or smaller, accepted or rejected, for the right reasons. Perhaps the church is meant to be a minority, but if it is a minority built on resentment or rationalization it profits not.

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