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In tough times, churches should stick with what they do best

Chase Nordengren | Dec. 19, 2013 Young Voices

A while ago, I was talking to a classmate whose friend had entered the Episcopal seminary. When my colleague asked the friend why he was entering a faith tradition with rapidly declining membership and interest, he replied, "To help the tradition have a noble death."

Reports of the death of any tradition are likely very exaggerated. Even as mainline Protestantism gets smaller, it seems unlikely it will go extinct. The decline of Catholicism among white Americans has been met or surpassed by Catholics of other cultures immigrating to the U.S. *Time*'s selection of Pope Francis as Person of the Year last week is yet another signal that people around the world look to Christians in general, and Catholics in particular, for a particular kind of global leadership.

Still, I'm left wondering what the church might do if its formal membership drops below a critical point. If not a question for the global church, this will likely become a question for certain churches -- Catholic and Protestant -- in regions of the country where faith will continue to wane or change.

What does the church have to offer the non-Christian? This time of year, that question draws me to the story of the three kings, among the first recipients of Christ's preaching. In the Western tradition, these Magi, coming "from the east," are represented by scholars from Persia, India and Arabia. Origin stories differ around the world, but what they share is the idea that these Magi were strangers to the region, perhaps even strangers to Judaism.

Matthew, the only Gospel to speak of the Magi, tells us nothing of their story after their return home. Early Christians suspected the Magi converted to Christianity, either immediately or soon after the beginning of the apostles' public teaching. What eventually happened to these foreign figures, however, seems incidental to what happened to them at the manger.

One of the worst-kept secrets, particularly among members of my generation, is that secular people go to church. They may not go weekly, and they may not participate in the life of a parish, but they do find certain expressions of their spirituality in the back few pews.

Often, these times and places are well-known and shared: a weekly vespers service here, a Taize service there. The promise of beautiful music, of a place of quiet, of a safe space for one's thoughts, is enough to bring many people through the door. A tremendous sense of both peace and reverence can be taken away from hours like these. Like the Magi, there's a sense that something powerful and meaningful goes on here and that such power and meaning must be taken in.

Older parish members often express great interest in this seemingly elusive population of young people. On their minds: How do we convince young people to stay here, to join us every week? How do we bring them into the regular work of this community? What are we doing wrong that they don't find us attractive or meaningful?

Though extraordinarily well-intentioned, I've come to believe these questions are the wrong ones. They express a desire to serve the spiritual needs of young adults on terms other than their own. They conflate offering hospitality, which is essential to any church, with someone taking us up on that offer. They represent a kind of

focus on results, on numbers, which isn't an appropriate measure of the richness of a spiritual life.

No one truly knows today which churches will sustain social prominence for the next 50 or 100 years. As times get tough, we may need to let go of schools, offices and buildings that are part of our cherished history. But the primary spiritual obligation of the Christian -- an open door to our neighbor -- costs relatively little. The church that loses formal members and tithing but provides a service to its community, provides the mystical body of Christ in its neighborliness, may not be a failure. It may instead be returning to the church's roots.

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