

Turning to God to Fill the Void



by Mark Adams

It's over. The "me" generation party of the Eighties has run its course and its revelers, prodigal children of the new age, are returning to church.

More people are indeed coming to church, say ministers from a multitude of persuasions. But few are calling this resurgence of faith a "great awakening." Rather, they suggest the nineties are a time to re-examine social values.

"People have exhausted a lot of other avenues of expected fulfillment," said Pastor Daniel Brown of Coastlands Foursquare Church in Aptos.

"[They] are recognizing that, not only is there not a pot of gold at the end of that philosophical rainbow... but that it is quite empty," he said.

The 80s, renowned for the pursuit of wealth, S&L scandals and a national debt of unimaginable proportions, sustained few hopes. The self-serving service industry met few needs.

"After some time of prosperity," reasoned Pastor Gordon Story of Aptos Assembly of God, "I think people realized there was [still] an emptiness; people were not satisfied."

Ministers call this emptiness The Void, that spiritual chasm between worldly want and godly fulfillment. In church, pastors preach and

teach that only God can fill The Void.

And the masses, they say, have been searching for God all along, only he wasn't to be found at Wall Street.

Church for the Broken

Some ministers reason that world events have accelerated the search for God. The Cold War ended when the Berlin Wall fell in '89, but the end of this war simply marked the beginning of another.

The Gulf War was all consuming and indicated that the "New World Order" would forge a less than assuring peace.

Coupled with a continued recession and high unemployment, the American spirit is unsettled. Today, it seems, even heroes quit.

But the message of hope and faith has stayed relatively the same—there is a God, say the ministers, and he is the answer—only, the emphasis of ministry at many churches and among many denominations has shifted.

"I think most people are very lonely..." Daniel said. "There is... a brokenness in people that is craving repair."

This brokenness—a divided marriage, a troubled teenager, or concern for the world—is something churches are actively attempting to mend.

Healing ministries, both physical and emotional, are common among most growing church movements.

"When I use those terms,

30 years ago we would have thought of them as a minority in the population. Not because they were, but because everybody was pretending to be so together. Now, when I use this language I'm talking about very, very normal people," Daniel explained.

The freedom to express hurt made religion more accessible, allowing more people to find purpose in church.

People are also turning to the churches for guidance in raising their families.

A significant group of the returning parishioners are Baby Boomers, post-war children born between 1946 and 1964. Many pastors believe the

they feel cared for," he said.

For many, this is their second encounter with church, having once attended church when they were younger, and a lingering familiarity with its purpose has made the return somewhat natural.

The Growing Faithful

The recent resurgence is perhaps a consequence of more people noticing the changes in American Christianity.

In turning to church, more often than not, people are turning to less traditional churches. As a result, the ranks of the non-denominational churches—new upstarts of the 20th



century—have grown both in number and in size.

Yet, even though loyalty towards a particular denomination has diminished, the number of parishioners in American churches has not.

In 1970, 131 million Americans identified with a religious body of some sort, according to the National Council of Churches in Christ. In 1988, 145 million Americans identified with a religious body.

Those numbers, however, had actually decreased proportionately in regards to national population. In 1970, 63 percent of Americans were church goers. That fell to 59 percent in 1988.

This, however, did not mark the beginning of a decline in church attendance.

In 1990 it surged to 60 percent with 151 million Americans attending church. Today, growth remains steady making for more churches and larger congregations.

But church growth, in a statistical manner, is an ambiguous concept. Some churches measure growth by Sunday attendance, others by number of baptisms, and still others by number of tithing members

(those who give a portion of their income to the institution).

Additionally, some churches use a combination of those standards to examine growth.

Still, by any standard, more people are going to church.

Coastlands held its first services seven years ago with 17 congregants. Today, Coastlands achieves a Sunday attendance of 900.

Christ Lutheran reported a 20 percent growth-rate for the past two years running. It now has a Sunday attendance of about 140.

Father Larry Kambitsch of Resurrection Church in Aptos said his church doubled the number of baptisms over the past two years. Resurrection Church now has a congregation of 630 families.

Church membership, however, is not the primary concern of most ministers. It's important, but spiritual development within the church is of far greater importance, they said.

"I am far more interested in the development of the church, and by that I mean the transformation in people," Daniel said.

If the parishioners see that the church is concerned about their well-being, they will come.

Reformation and Modernization

Today's churches are markedly different than yesterday's, mainly because attitudes toward church have changed.

A generation ago, ministers could anticipate that a certain number of people would attend services. Baptists went to Baptist churches, Lutherans attended Lutheran churches and Catholics attended Catholic churches.

Not so anymore, say pastors. As society became more transient it became less common for individuals to identify with a particular denomination.

This phenomenon has provoked a certain amount of competition among churches, or, in other terms, it has forced churches to focus on the needs of the parishioners.

With the advent of television and 30-second sound bites, it seemed as if the attention span of the masses had also diminished. In order to sustain its congregation, many churches have reformed their services and modernized worship.

But many mainline denominations have not "modern-

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—Pastor Daniel Brown

Boomers are now ready to settle down.

"There is a real desire for Christian formation in their children," said Pastor Kevin Murphy of Christ Lutheran in Aptos.

"There is a real concern for a teaching of moral values... I think, more than anything else, there is a real, almost desperate desire to find some place where

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ized" their services, and openly admit they are experiencing a decline in membership.

Change is difficult. And, in the absence of change, new types on congregations have emerged.

Today, growth occurs mostly in non-denominational churches.

Why? "Because non-denominational churches don't feel they have any traditions to hang on to," said Dan Baker, music minister at Twin Lakes Baptist Church in Aptos.

Tradition for the sake of tradition turns people off, Baker explained.

But complete change is not always best.

Some churches, instead of embracing radical change, are trying to find common ground between the younger generation which prefers newer styles of worship and the older generation which is familiar with past styles of worship, Baker explained.

"At Twin Lakes, we are not doing away with tradition," Baker said. "What I seek to do [as music minister] is present different styles to different types of people."

For other churches, contemporary Christian music is fully incorporated into services; traditional hymnals are mostly absent from the pews, that is, if the church has pews.

Some churches have become entertainment oriented. Many hold skits and dramas during service.

Some pastors shy away from preaching sermons; they prefer to have "talks" with the congregation.

Again, these changes are most common among non-denominational churches, like Coastlands, but not exclusively. Some denominational churches have also adopted modern forms of worship, but they are few.

Touching the Heart

Across the board, churches are encouraging congregants to become more participatory. Warming a pew on Sunday does not assure a right relationship with God, the ministers

explained.

Faith calls for action, both socially, by helping the needy, and evangelically, by telling others about salvation through Jesus Christ.

Some say this could turn parishioners away, but ministers say quite the opposite is happening.

"Ultimately, church is a message, not a medium," Daniel said. "The desire of people captured by that message is to proclaim that message. To just sit around and agree with one another and say the same things back and forth is ul-



timately very un-satisfying."

Social justice, today's catchphrase for mercy, has also come to the forefront of the Christian faith. Issues of war, homelessness, relationships and prejudice are examined in congregational settings and action is taken.

For example, 41 churches in the county are members of the Inter-Faith Satellite Shelter Program. This program provides shelter and food to the homeless.

Additionally, numerous churches run food banks. And others simply give out money (or vouchers) to the poor.

Church is "much more accessible, much more participatory, much more oriented to the laity," said Father Kambitsch of Resurrection Church.

The most dynamic change, perhaps, is how people identify with church.

Generations ago, "they had the nuclear family and the extended family... church was the thing that the family goes to," Daniel explained. "Church

is no longer a location, it is a collective of the people."

Murphy of Christ Lutheran made a similar comment: "I think most churches attempt to be extended families."

Christianity, some suggest, is a religion searching for community. Some even say it is an attempt by parishioners to escape tradition.

Resurgence Within the Jewish Community

But if Christians are attempting to escape tradition, then many Jews are trying to capture it. After World War II, the Jewish community witnessed a mini-exodus of congregants from the faith.

Today, Jews in increasing numbers are returning to temple life.

In Santa Cruz County there is Temple Beth El, the area's only synagogue. A surge in membership was especially notable when the temple moved to a new facility in Aptos two years ago.

Today, there are about 500 congregant families affiliated with the temple. In 1985, there were 235 member families.

Temple ministers estimate there are about 2,000 Jewish families in the county.

The driving force behind this resurgence is that "young families feel the need for their children to identify [with the faith]," said the temple's cantorial soloist, Paula Marcus.

And part of identifying with the faith involves the practice of traditions, she said.

Temple Beth El is of the reformed-Judaic faith which means they practice an inter-

pretive understanding of the scriptures: prayers are de-genderized and women now play a significant role in temple worship.

Reformed Jews make up the largest segment of Jews in America.

Unlike Orthodox Jews, the 150-year-old reformed movement placed little emphasis on tradition. But some reformed-Jews are finding value in the ancient ways of Judaism: tradition edifies the community.

At Temple Beth El, for instance, congregants have revived a traditional Saturday morning observance of the Sabbath.

They still practice a reformed understanding of the scriptures, but are finding ways to incorporate tradition into their worship.

Values of family and community are not foreign to Judaism, and are not lacking. Much of the faith was built around family.

"Some of it is... for survival," Marcus said. "Throughout history, Jews have had to stand together... I think it's become instinctive."

A strong emphasis is also placed on addressing social issues and providing personnel support for congregants.

The temple runs its own pre-school and religious school, and organizes various kinds of support groups.

In October, the temple will hold a cultural fair to reach out to non-affiliated Jews and other members of the community.

Titled "The Route to our Roots," the fair will focus on the heritage of the Jewish faith around the world and on Judaic traditions.

Being the only temple in the community, Temple Beth El has had to meet the needs of many Jews, Marcus said. Some Jews, however, practice their

faith in a non-affiliated manner.

Many Jews belong to Kolayno (Hebrew for "our voice") which is the local chapter of the New Jewish Agenda, a national organization for a Jewish voice in the progressive community. There too, members are finding themselves drawn to tradition.

"If we don't save it, who will?" asked Kolaynu member Ethal Herring. Tradition, she said, draws the faithful together and where there are many, there is strength.

A Real Experience

In many ways, social forces, some say spiritual forces, have provoked this resurgence of faith. People are looking for a real experience with God; they desire a real relationship with the Creator.

"I think some other [religious] movements have run their course, and failed," said Rev. Paul Pfotenhauer of Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in Soquel.

Today, people are discovering that the churches and the synagogues have something tangible to offer, and something spiritual. But what effect will this resurgence have in the future?

The future, admit many ministers, is uncertain. But the fight they fight is not something that can be analyzed, not even with numbers, they say.

Real growth exists when congregants help the needy, reach out to youth and care for the elderly. Real growth exists when people seek out a relationship with God. He really has the answers, they say, and as long as there is time, there is hope. □



Above: Beth El Temple in Aptos. Left: The day care center is one of many programs run by Temple Beth El.



Pastor Daniel Brown leads the Coastlands congregation in worship.