

Evangelism a Priority for Others, Too

In an era marked by an intense personal quest for ultimate truth and meaning in an unstable world, fewer and fewer Americans seem to find the answers they seek within the so-called "mainline," or ecumenical, Protestant denominations.



Special Report

Since the mid-1960s, polls have indicated that fewer persons claim affiliation with any church or synagogue.

The loss has not been a substantial one, but the trend has been definitely downward, even given the notoriously imprecise way in which church statistics are gathered.

According to George Gallup, who has been polling for years in the religion field, in 1965 about three of every four adult Americans — 73 percent — claimed membership in a church or synagogue. By 1978 the figure stood at 68 percent.

But various surveys also show that the losses have not been general ones, across the board. While ecumenically minded Protestant denominations have experienced the fall-off, theologically conservative bodies and high-commitment sects and cults have gained, some dramatically.

The Roman Catholic Church also reported a gain. The Church in the U.S. lists 49.6 million adherents, compared to 47.8 million counted ten years ago, an increase of some three percent. Church sources estimate another 12 million baptized members who have "fallen away," and have targeted them especially in a nationwide evangelization drive.

The reason for the net loss in church membership appears to lie in the drop-out rate among the large mainline bodies — including the United Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church in the U.S., the Lutheran Church in America and the U.S. Episcopal Church.

A recent doctoral thesis done by Dr. William McKinney of the United Church of Christ Board of Homeland Ministries compared 20 denominations for membership gains and losses. Between 1965 and 1975 he found that ten denominations belonging to the National Council of Churches lost about three million members, about 11.3 percent.

In the same period, according to Dr. McKinney, ten evangelical, theologically conservative bodies gained 2.5 million members, an aggregate growth of about 16 percent.

A leading example of the evangelical boom was the growth of the Southern Baptist Convention. According to denominational statistics reported to the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, Southern Baptist membership bounded from 11.3 million in 1968 to 13.1 million in 1979.

Among the biggest losers during that period were the Episcopal Church which shrank from an inclusive membership of 3.3 to 2.8 million and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which dropped from nearly 1.6 to 1.2 million.

The most touted explanation for the shift in fortunes is that the traditional social activist stance of the mainline churches has lost ground to the conservative emphasis on a personal authoritative God of the Bible. Other reasons cited by analysts included the conservative denominations' trademark aggressive evangelism and their enforcement of an uncompromising code of religious existence which often costs the convert many of his former attitudes and personal habits.

Perhaps the most vexing aspect of the decline among the large Protestant churches is the highly orthodox beliefs held by the majority of potential members who are currently unchurched. A 1978 study by the George Gallup organization found that 64 percent of the 61 million American adults who do not attend church said they believed Jesus Christ to be God or the Son of God. Seventy percent considered the Bible to be divinely inspired and more than half felt there was life after death.

"Churches have lost the spiritual part of religion," said Gallup at a press conference explaining the results. About one of every five unchurched persons who indicated they had "problems" with organized religion



This cartoon by Arthur C. Henriksen of Des Plaines, Ill., pokes fun at church members who take to the golf links on balmy Sundays and confine church attendance to inclement weather.

checked a questionnaire statement which said, "I wanted deeper spiritual meaning than I found in the church or synagogue."

Some have even attributed the success of religious cult recruitment to the lack of emphasis on spirituality and personal morals in some of the larger churches. Middle-class American youth who search for spiritual meaning in their religious traditions often do not find a serious alternative to material existence, according to Subhananda dasa Brahmachari, 28, a leading spokesman for the Hare Krishna movement. Conversations with many Christian leaders and comparison of scriptural precepts to actual practice, lead him to believe that "it is a very small minority who lead a deeply Christian life."

"The problem is not within Christianity, but with a lack of Christianity," he said.

Evangelism is cited as the key to the building up of the membership rolls in conservative denominations. Even during the zenith of church activism against the war in Vietnam, evangelism was the top priority among most Southern Baptist pastors, according to M. Wendell Belew, an authority on Church Growth and an official with the SBC Home Mission Board in Atlanta.

Another example of the power of evangelism is found within the mainline group itself. Although the Episcopal Church has lost members steadily over the decade, those counted in overseas missions have increased 140 percent in the same period due to evangelization. Among the 14 dioceses in Latin America, four in Asia and one in Africa, baptized membership grew from 105,980 in 1969 to 224,221 in 1979.

The Catholic Church has launched an evangelism crusade aimed primarily at lapsed members. Preliminary studies of the problem report that Catholics drop out for reasons such as personal crisis, divorce, disagreement with doctrine on issues like birth control, conflict with priests and lifestyle changes.



Calendar

DOWNTOWN FRIDAY— Arts Council series at Christ Church, East Avenue and Broadway: Jan. 11, 8 p.m., Chorus of the Erie Canal.

ROCHESTER COMMUNITY PLAYERS— Cole Porter's Kiss Me, Kate Jan. 10-13, 8 p.m., at Monroe Community College Little Theatre; also Sunday matinee at 2.

RAPA PLAYERS— Auditions for Something's Afoot, 7 p.m. Jan. 17, 18; 2 p.m. Jan. 26, at 97 South Ave., Webster. Information: Judi Andreano, 265-9855.

GEVA THEATRE— Waltz of the Toreadors through Jan. 20 at 168 S. Clinton; performances Tuesday-Saturday 8 p.m., Sunday 2 and 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 16, 2 p.m. Box Office: 232-1363.

ROCHESTER MUSEUM AND SCIENCE CENTER— Paper, Press and Pen, a celebration of written communication, with activities for all ages, 1-5 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 13.

STRASBURGH PLANETARIUM— Illusions, with explanations based on current knowledge of universe, narrated by Leonard Nimoy, opens Friday, Jan. 11. Information line for show times: 442-7171.

MEMORIAL ART GALLERY— Film at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 15: Bruges— Story of a Medieval City (free). Current exhibitions: George Eastman collection, Christmas creches (final day Jan. 13); Child Hassam prints, Sharon Brandt

drawings through Jan. 20. Lending and Sales Gallery: Rochester, a Multiple Image — works by area artists — through Feb. 17.

EASTMAN TROMBONE CHOIR— With guest George Roberts, 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 18, Cutler Union, 560 University. Tickets at door or 26 Gibbs.

CLASSIC FILM SERIES— Tuesdays, 2 and 8 p.m., at RMSC's Eisenhart Auditorium. Jan. 15: A Walk in the Spring Rain.

RPO SPECIAL— James Galway, flutist, 8 p.m. Jan. 18, Eastman Theatre.

WIDOWS, WIDOWERS GROUP— At Good Shepherd, meeting in school, E. Henrietta Road, 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 11. Home energy conservation talk by RG&E representative. For information about group: Mildred Billy, 334-7449; Robert Kelly, 334-4868.

ST. CHARLES DIVORCED CATHOLICS GROUP— Meeting in school library, 3003 Dewey Ave., 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 13. Talk on behavior modification by Peter Patall, MCC psychology teacher; how to overcome shyness, loneliness, carry out New Years resolutions.

DREIKURS ASSOCIATION— Public meeting, 7:30 p.m. Jan. 18 in Unitarian Church, 220 S. Winton; Dr. Dennis Boike on "Enhancing Your Child's Self-esteem." Information: 325-9850.

GENESSEE VALLEY NURSES ASSOCIATION— Open meeting, 7:30-9:30 p.m. in Helen Wood Hall, U of R Nursing School, Crittenden Blvd. Cecilia Mulvey of Syracuse University nursing faculty on difference between legislative and political action.

GENESSEE CO-OP SCHOOL OF PRINTING— Photography, silkscreen, offset, calligraphy classes, workshops begin Feb. 11. Registration Jan. 19-26. Details: 461-2230.

BUYING NOW
ORIENTAL RUGS
Immediate Cash

for
antiques, semi-antiques
whole estates or individual pieces
any size, any condition
call any time

Darvish
271-8520

NOTRE DAME RETREAT HOUSE
ANNOUNCES A
CHARISMATIC HEALING
AND
RESTORATION SERVICE
conducted by
Fr. William O'Connor
Sat., Jan. 12, 7:30 p.m.
ALL WELCOME
— ALSO IN JANUARY —
SPECIAL RETREAT FOR
RECOVERING ALCOHOLICS
Jan. 25, 26, 27
Contact by phone or mail
Notre Dame Retreat House,
Canandaigua, N.Y. 14424
SPECIAL NOTE: Correction
from Notre Dame Newsletter:
MEMORIAL MASS FOR FR.
WILLIAM JAMISON CSSR
JAN. 27 AT 3:00, ALL WELCOME