

Are we already living in a post-Christian society?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

A pastor in Brooklyn, New York, consults with churches on how to keep their doors open ("The Church Fixer," NYT, Jan. 6, 2025). She helps congregations with gaining members (evangelism) and increasing finances (economics). Her work renovating her own church has even impressed non-members: "There are people who live down the street who don't go to the church who bring us a check every year because they see what we are doing." The pastor is doing all this against the tide of church closures. She's swimming upstream, but believes the Church will survive, in some, possibly unrecognizable, form.

We often hear the lament from those who want to hold onto the old ways: "We're living in a post-Christian culture." Social scientists sometimes identify the same trend. Personally, I think this is a good thing, but we need to define what that even means. Basically I think it's clear that Christianity is losing its dominant position in our culture. On the other hand, the privileges of power continue to rest in predominantly Christian hands. It can't mean "after" Christianity or even "after" Religion. As I say, "Religion ye shall have with you always." Some people are always going to have faith, and frankly, I have no big problem with that. Yet, I think "Post-Christian" comes down to several important considerations: In a pluralistic world, one religion cannot assume superiority; and we're seeing new understandings and shapes of what "Christian" means — perhaps a better kind of

Christianity?

As the quoted article states: "Keeping churches open today is not an easy task." One financial advisor to churches and nonprofits says: "The demand is not there...Unfortunately, this is the culture we live in. In the post-Christian society, fewer people are going to church, and even the church people are going less often...There are going to be more and more churches that face some tough decisions." The article leans into that reality: "Indeed, some researchers predict that tens of thousands of churches will close across the United States in the next decade." With hundreds of thousands of faith communities, this could be seen as a healthy move. It may seem "unfortunate" for some (especially for those most concerned with the finances), but "keeping churches open" can also be an opportunity to "unlock" re-imagined spaces. What if many of those facilities were transformed into

new shapes of sanctuaries?

What are some of those "tough decisions" congregations need to face? Reasonable responses to this must begin with a disturbing question that has troubled me for a long time: What is the Church? In my Evangelical years, we were confident the Church was the people — "true believers" — not the building. This freed us to practice a faith as "outsiders, like Jesus." One of the most difficult decisions is how to use a space — make a space useful — as an authentic sanctuary. Is this restricted to worship, to prayer, to ritual, to "religious activity," or can it also be for shelter, education, child care, community events. Many churches already do this, adapting their spaces as multi-use facilities. But what if the center was not exclusively worship but service to the community, and not merely the "faith com-

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munity"? The NYC pastor seems to understand that, to a degree. She welcomes neighborhood participation without requiring membership. Creative models of "doing church" have to include fresh forms of "church beyond church." If some members don't support that, and wish to defend traditional ways, they probably need to move on.

I was amused to read the Brooklyn pastor "announced that when people came to church, they al-

ways had questions like, "Is the church full of hypocrites?" "Yes, it is," she answered. "And there's always room for one more. In fact, we'll give you a score sheet so that you can keep track of the sins of others." This is a person who understands the value of honesty, humor and humility wrapped into relevant faith.

I suggest we need a "renovation" in our thinking. Not a new Reformation, but a radical re-think of what church, religion, faith and God mean. We're in a transitional time of "posting." When it comes to defending faith, some say: "Stay at your post! Guard the gates, and fence posts! Post your solid and secure beliefs on social media! We can't allow a post-Christian culture!" What they really mean is: We're afraid of losing our

dominance. Yet, this won't cut it any longer. Not in a progressing culture opening ever wider to embrace new perspectives that potentially render the old beliefs obsolete.

The "fixer" in NYC has no sacred post to defend. More people need to refurbish their head space and sanctuary space. What posts may be ahead to build something better, more welcoming, more inclusive?

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