

Spiritually Remote

The pandemic is affecting already declining church attendance

By Jade Campos

Dwindling daylight shimmers through the stained glass and onto the pews of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in State College, Pennsylvania, on a Sunday in late autumn as the sun sets on its 5 p.m. service

Congregants shuffle in and take their seats quietly under the towering ceiling. The 112-year-old church can hold several hundred people, but it won't today.

Only 13 congregants have found their way through the heavy wooden doors.

Carolyn Donaldson, 59, of State College, is one of them — and she said this is actually a good day for the church in the pandemic. Typically, five to seven people sit quietly among the many rows of pews.

"There's always room," she said.

The Rev. Jeffrey Packard, St. Andrew's rector, said the church holds a 10 a.m. service on Sunday mornings through Facebook Live. Additionally, St. Andrew's has a half-hour morning prayer on Zoom every day except Sundays. On Wednesdays, the church holds a 15-minute "noon day prayer," when communion used to be held.

Now, communion takes place during the church's only in-person worship — the 5 p.m. service. Hand sanitizer bottles click open as Packard makes his rounds to each pew to bless the parishioners. People keep on their masks until Packard goes to the next row. After he's moved on, they drop their masks to consume the wafer.

The emptiness of the church is amplified by how spacious the building is. What once was such a comforting space for the community has now become an eerily quiet room.

Packard said a typical Sunday in a "pre-COVID" world drew around 200 or 300 parishioners — in person.

Silence creates what feels like tension in the air, making the space between congregants seem even wider. There is no singing — only silent humming of familiar hymns. And the pews are taped off to enforce a 6-foot social distance rule. Tissue boxes and hand sanitizer take the place of worshippers.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic began to wreak havoc, mainline Protestant churches were seeing attendance plummet. Once representing some of the biggest denominations in the United States, mainline Protestantism has, over several decades, experienced a series of steep declines in membership. And in many of the large church buildings that remain open, congregations have become smaller and aged. In some cases, small, local churches have closed.

“Like all churches, I think we’ve been kind of on a slow decline, year by year, for a number of years. But we’re still a pretty healthy church,” Packard said. “But honestly, I am not lying to myself or anyone else — I don’t really expect us to grow.”

Collectively, mainline churches — comprised of the American Baptist Churches USA, the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church — accounted for more than 30% of American church-goers in 1975. That number fell to about 11% in 2018, according to the General Social Survey, a data collection project of the “non-partisan and objective research organization at the University of Chicago,” an independent organization referred to as NORC.

According to the Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014, mainline Protestantism has one of the lowest retention rates of any major segments of religion in America, with only 45% of those raised in a mainline church continuing to practice the faith throughout their lives.

Over time, people have generally become less religious, according to research. Pew reported 26% of Americans were unaffiliated with a religion in 2019.

Some faiths are doing better than others.

In 2007, Roman Catholics made up about 24% of the U.S. population. That dipped to about 21% in 2014, according to Pew. During that same period, mainline protestant churches’ share of the religious-affiliated population fell from slightly more than 18% to about 15%.

Evangelical Protestants have experienced the least decline, falling only from slightly more than 26% to a bit more than 25%.

Of course, members have been further driven out of church doors this year to accommodate social distancing policies and safety guidelines. When the pandemic began, many mainline church leaders struggled to strategize their next steps on what felt like an already ticking time bomb.

Packard said he wondered how the struggling church would make it past the first few weeks of the pandemic. Without a proper internet connection, he said the church was forced to make technical changes to continue serving members through Facebook Live and Zoom.

“The nearest internet is down the hall. So I had the wire sort of taped to the floor around the corner and we put the little router in here,” Packard said, standing inside a small room off the sanctuary. “It’s a crazy, crazy time to figure all that stuff out.”

Packard began conducting remote services with the help of his college-aged daughter by setting up his iPhone to stream on Facebook. His three children and wife sit in the large, empty church to help conduct virtual services as a family.

Now, Packard said he has developed a routine that seems to be working after an initial “chaotic stage” where every next step was up in the air.

“People were sort of reaching out to the church as a kind of anchor in that storm. Things then seem to kind of settle down by summertime. We all kind of got into a routine. I think people saw the church at that point, as a kind of that constant. It’s not the same, but you know, it’s a constant in my life — a source of strength,” Packard said.

When the world shut down, many mainline denomination members began rekindling their relationship with the church, according to Victoria Rebeck, the director of connecting ministries of the Susquehanna Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church in Pennsylvania. Morale was higher than ever at the beginning of the pandemic under the heading of being in this together, ministers said. People showed their support by logging on to virtual services.

In fact, remote worship and services seemed to be a saving grace for many churches struggling to bring people together. Although physically apart from their congregations, many pastors said their churches felt closer than they had for years. In some churches, users signed on from around the world to tune into worship, a sign of reassurance for many.

“Who would have guessed it, but we have so many more people,” Rebeck said. “People who probably wouldn’t have walked in the door of the church ... are walking to the verge of the church, and it’s fascinating.”

"I would argue that we’re impacting more people now than ever before."

Scott Schul, senior minister of Grace Lutheran Church in State College

For Scott Schul, the senior minister of Grace Lutheran Church in State College, mainline churches have created stronger connections with members and the surrounding communities than they were able to do under normal circumstances.

“I would argue that we’re impacting more people now than ever before,” said Schul, whose church briefly offered drive-in services after closing in-person worship because of COVID-19.

With mainline churches having difficulty attracting new parishioners, virtual services may have been the thing needed to draw in people who lingered on the idea of joining for years,

according to Schul. Rebeck said there isn't "anxiety" in joining a church virtually, because the concern over being "the new person in a new place" is lost.

"Now you can watch a video or you can listen to the radio. You can see something on Facebook and get a better sense — a less vulnerable sense — whether this is the kind of place for you," Schul said.

The new faces give promise to mainline church leaders in a difficult time. Additionally, older members who have had challenges getting to church each week in the past, as well as those who have moved to other states, have taken advantage of their ability to tune in through their screens.

"I'm enthused by those early days when I was on those Zoom calls," Donaldson said. "Some of the older people in their 80s and 90s, they were on Zoom calls."

The years of steep declines in attendance led to steep declines in funding and donations, making it more difficult than ever to keep churches vibrant in communities across the country. Economic losses forced many churches to reevaluate their structures, as staffing and maintaining the buildings became too costly, according to James Hudnut-Beumler, an American religious history professor at Vanderbilt University.

"You go from two ministers to one minister to a part-time minister — and that's already happened in rural America where the mainline churches were pretty big," Hudnut-Beumler said.

Packard described the combination of plummeting attendance and less income as a "vicious cycle." With fewer dollars, it's difficult to afford programs to attract and retain members.

Yet, even financially, a glimmer of hope began to shine through with the onslaught of the pandemic. With early morale boosts, many churches have exceeded their expected revenue for the year primarily through donations from the community, hoping to keep the churches safe from the economic doom of the pandemic.

Packard said many parishioners, and some community members not associated with his church, offered parts of their stimulus checks to St. Andrew's. Some gave checks for \$1,200.

Rebeck said the move to virtual services has also forced many churches to institute online giving, which makes it easier for people to donate than ever before.

While next year's finances may be uncertain, officials like Packard said they have felt assured that they can at least make it through one more year.

Hudnut-Beumler said it's likely churches have not yet received the full "economic bill" from the pandemic. That could occur when salary cuts begin stacking up and more people lose their jobs.

During national crises and pandemics in the past, such as the Great Depression, Hudnut-Beumler said members felt obliged to “honor their financial pledges” in the first few dim months. However, the economy would eventually fall to lower extremes making it difficult for people to contribute.

“The pandemic is not just a health crisis, which is a problem for churches gathering, but it’s also a looming economic crisis,” Hudnut-Beumler said.

Hudnut-Beumler said mainline churches in the Midwest and South will likely get back to normal one day, because they were doing well before the pandemic. However, the economic and social effects of the pandemic could take its toll in the “over-churched” Northeast, Hudnut-Beumler said, which has historically had more churches in a region than people interested in attending.

Likewise, he added, in the Northwest, people tend to be evangelical or secular, leaving less room for mainline churches.

The key to the churches’ financial future, Hudnut-Beumler said, will depend on the shape of country’s economic recovery from the pandemic.

Pastors do acknowledge, however, that they must temper their optimism. As the pandemic has continued, they realize that the numbers are not always making sense. For instance, as church officials became more aware of how Facebook analytics work, they realized that not all the high numbers meant people were attending and staying through their online services.

“There’s probably more information than we even need there. Because it’ll say... like, so many views, per video. Well, a view could be... someone’s scrolling through and it automatically plays for like three seconds,” Packard said. “Then they’ll say ‘people reached’ and have these crazy numbers.”

Some ministers said Zoom fatigue has also started to hit, and enthusiasm for online worship has begun to decline again — and with it the attendance church leadership had been craving for years.

According to Packard, many people stopped participating in regular online services, because they couldn’t handle staring at a screen any longer. Many became “worn out” by autumn. No one really thought online worship would last this long.

“I Zoom in and I started my day off with prayer and with the church,” Donaldson said. “And then it got to be like ‘Oh, this is going to be going on for a really long time.’”

St. Andrew’s reopened for in-person services in June to accommodate this virtual fatigue, but some people are still too worried about the rising number of COVID-19 cases to consider attending a service in person.

Others are not interested in adjusting to new practices. For instance, the tradition of “passing the peace” was once a very intimate gesture in the church that involved handshaking and hugging. Now, members exchange peace signs across the aisles from one another.

Schul worries some churches may not reconvene after the pandemic slows down.

“You lose some of the nature of our faith when we don’t gather together,” Schul said. “The alternative to that is a community that continues to be terribly fractured.”

With the convenience of remote services — he said he has attended online services during vacations — Schul said he wonders if congregants will continue to gather through their laptop screens, but he’s hopeful.

“You don’t have to worry about the person who sings off key. You don’t have to worry about the crying baby. You don’t have to worry about parking or whether your little spot in the church is too cold or too hot,” Schul said. “It’ll always be just the right temperature.”

The steady membership decline in mainline churches, experts said, can be traced back to the 1970s and factors sweeping the United States — many of which are external to the church.

For instance, a demographic shift in age groups has been a primary cause. In the 1970s, 26% of young Americans identified with a mainline denomination. According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by Pew, only 11% of mainline Protestants are millennials.

The same study found that the average age of mainline churches is 52, which is older than any other major religious tradition.

“There was a time, in the ‘70s, when this place was full every Sunday,” Packard said. The current crowd at St. Andrew’s is primarily older couples.

The 1950s are often referred to as the “golden age” for mainline Protestantism because church attendance was booming. At the time, everyone was expected to attend church and become an active part of the religious community to boost his or her social status, according to Hudnut-Beumler.

Baby Boomers began shifting away from institutional worship. For many mainline churches, the average population is grayer, especially as families have fewer children to pass down their religion.

Yet, mainline churches are partially to blame for their inability to attract new members, according to Hudnut-Beumler. The traditions of the church have remained the same for decades with a refusal to change with modern times.

Hudnut-Beumler said Evangelical churches, which made up 55% of all U.S. Protestant churches in 2014, have adapted better to the changing times by planting more churches in suburban neighborhoods, too.

Some mainline churches are latching onto or adopting some features of Evangelical churches and finding success — like Grandview United Methodist Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

The Rev. Andrea Brown, Grandview's lead pastor, said the church has tried to keep up with the changing times, while remaining true to the Methodist traditions the church was founded upon. Brown said her church holds "intergenerational" services that combine traditional liturgies and contemporary worship — a practice common among many Evangelical churches that involves modern worship music and an emphasis on technology.

For five-year member, Amy Link, Grandview's contemporary worship was an attractive feature. She said it was important to have her children become baptized when it's "really hard to raise kids in our current society."

Link, who is 42 and lives in Lancaster, said the church has a "core group" of families who attend regularly and said there's an "uptick" in young families at Grandview

Link said her son Jack, 7, begged his parents to go to church each Sunday when in-person services were happening. Jack brought the family of four to the very front pew for the 9:30 a.m. service, which Link said is more contemporary, where he "loves the music, loves every aspect of it."

But virtual services have been difficult, Link said — especially with Jack and his younger sister, Caroline, 5, because they have trouble sitting still.

"The first time that [Grandview] started to go virtual, I was crying afterwards, because I missed it so much," Link said. "It just seemed like, 'Oh my God, we're just not going to be able to go back.'"

Brown said the church's integration into the community — which lies in the heart of a suburb right outside of the city of Lancaster — has been integral in keeping attendance and engagement high. Brown said the location makes it easy for community members to recognize the church with a lot of "foot traffic" surrounding it.

"We make a difference in the lives of people around us — we keep people from getting evicted, we feed people, we build affordable housing," Brown said. "And people know these things about us. We show up when there are matters of justice in the community."

“When churches become very inwardly focused, then they are going to fade away if they have an attitude of ‘we just want the pastor to take care of us and we don’t really care about the world around us.’ They will fade away, and they probably should.”

Caroline Cupp, executive pastor of First Presbyterian Church in West Chester, Pennsylvania, said her church has essentially followed the same practices for nearly 75 years. With the onslaught of the pandemic, Cupp said the church had to make long overdue changes to the everyday function of the church. While First Presbyterian already had technology integrated into services, Cupp said the pandemic forced them to think “more dramatically” with ways to create engaging virtual services.

Political issues have also increasingly become a factor in church attendance. For decades, the morality of gay marriage, for example, has made waves across the country. The issue has not only seeped into the church, but it has divided individual churches and denominations.

As Schul, the Lutheran pastor in State College, noted, “It used to be the church that influenced our politics, but the politics now influence our churches to a greater degree.”

While Evangelical and independent churches have often become identified for their association with conservatism, mainline denominations have primarily remained non-partisan in their beliefs, often because they have fairly equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats, according to Hudnut-Beumler.

Cupp noted, however, that political tensions really boiled over in 2016 after the election of Donald Trump. Then, more than ever, congregants walked into church expecting politics to appear in sermons.

Cupp said many people left First Presbyterian after the church did not issue any congratulations to the then newly elected president.

“Because we didn’t do that,” said Cupp, “a lot of Trump supporters were like, ‘Hey, well, how can you guys not be celebrating and dancing — dancing from the pulpit that Trump got elected?’”

Some people are looking for confirmation bias, Cupp said. They’re hungry for a church official to tell them that they’re correct — that the world is “black and white” — and if they aren’t finding it in one of the mainline denominations, they will find it somewhere else.

Cupp said politics has “encroached” on many moral issues the church has been talking about for its entire existence.

“We’ve certainly talked about racism and had a church member say, ‘You shouldn’t talk about that. That’s political.’ That’s in the Bible,” Cupp said. “If MSNBC and Fox News are talking about something, it doesn’t mean that I need to stop talking about it — but it also means that we have to be very careful, because I don’t want to be one more talking head.”

Donaldson said she immediately “felt at home” for the inviting atmosphere of the Episcopalian church, especially after spending most of her life as a Catholic. Inside of the mainline church, she said members are free to make their own political decisions, and she’s never felt swayed to either direction.

“It just feels more inviting for the community, whether you’re a member of St. Andrew’s or not, you just feel welcomed into that world,” Donaldson said.

“We welcome all persons, regardless of race, ethnic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, capability, or circumstances of life,” reads the St. Andrew’s weekly service pamphlet.

Brown said Grandview seeks to be nonpartisan in its services, and Link, the Grandview member, said that environment and open conversation was the primary thing that drew her. She said she spent her most of her life as a Catholic, where priests were “telling you how to live your life,” and seeing a woman as the pastor made her feel “at home.”

St. Andrew’s held its last in-person service Nov. 15 as Centre County COVID-19 cases surged to 3,146. With fears of the virus spreading further, Packard said church officials were forced to make the difficult decision — meaning no in-person services for Christmas.

Packard preached about the virus to a crowd of 25 parishioners — the best attendance the church had seen over the past few months. The pastor said people wanted to take advantage of their last opportunity to set foot in the church for the year.

“It really sucks to live in an in-between time,” Packard said.

Packard has developed plans to expand St. Andrew’s, inspired by the different directions the church began to move throughout the pandemic. He even has a “wish list” of electronics to integrate the church more fully into modern times.

“I do want to think about the future. And I do want to think about remaining a presence here in State College,” Packard said. “We’re trying to figure we can keep a presence and a witness ministry here in this place.”

Many mainline church pastors say it’s still too soon to tell what the future will look like — whether bright or bleak, but they will continue to adapt in the age of COVID-19 to keep their

communities engaged. Those changes will run the gamut – from consolidating churches to simply upgrading technology.

And they say the faithful members will continue showing up, no matter the impacts of the pandemic.

“It’s really hard to kill a church,” Hudnut-Beumler said. “People will try, down to the last two or three members, which makes churches resilient even if they’re declining.”