

Rector's Column

“Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So, she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.’”

Ruth 1:14-16



Dear Friends,

In the 1950s, the Episcopal Church experienced a pinnacle of membership enrollment globally. The international phenomenon that is the Episcopal Church added 1.4 million members in the nine years leading up to 1959, reaching an all-time peak of 3.4 million members. Members of the church in the United States who lived during that time and who are still alive today may recall large Sunday school classes, multiple active church guilds and ministries, confirmations of several people from every congregation, and massive new building programs.

Unfortunately, since that time to this mainline Christian faith traditions have experienced tremendous decline in membership. For example, by the mid-1990s, overall membership in the Episcopal Church had dropped to around 2.5 million. By 2010, membership was below 2 million. Every year in the last decade is more of the same – annually losing approximately one hundred thousand members. Following the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the Episcopal Church reported 1.68M in 2021, dropping to 1.58M in 2022.

In 2009, the Episcopal Church reported that 725,000 people on an average weekend attended services across the United States. Numbers held relatively steady from 2011, down to about 700K. However, from that point forward, weekly attendance began dropping at a faster rate - typically a decline of about 3% per year. Church attendance dropped 11% from 2019 to 2020. Then in 2021, weekly attendance was down 40%. Attendance recovered somewhat in 2022, when the Episcopal Church reported a weekly attendance figure of about 373,000 - an increase of 27% from the prior low of 2021. Yet, in spite of the decline in membership and attendance, churchwide plate and pledge income was effectively unchanged from 2018 to 2022 at \$1.3 billion and up 6% since 2013.

We need to recognize the reality of declining membership in order to change our collective expectations from those of the heydays of the 1950's to truth of today's challenges that all our congregations across are facing. Most parishes are experiencing increasing costs associated with older building maintenance and utility use while also experiencing a decrease in available finances from income and pledges. Our congregational statistics are somewhat reflective of global and national trends in our church, though we have maintained actually very stable membership since 2011, even experiencing very modest growth balancing those who have moved or died over the years. Our operating costs have increased annually, and though our total pledge figures have increased, our overall income has not kept pace with cost of living increases.

Strategic planning for the years ahead will include revisiting and renewing our congregational vision and mission. In the awareness of the context of trends in membership and finances, we know that we do not stand alone in this work. Our diocese and the entire Episcopal Church walks beside us on this journey of our full community, with Christ leading us all of us into deeper trust and faith.

In Christ's Peace,
Pastor Rachel+