

Feb 18, 2022

Charles:

With this note I am finally responding to your twice-made formal invitation from the pulpit to discuss an online article wondering why people across North America are not "coming back" to regular church attendance. As well, I shall suggest two steps our own local congregation can take towards shoring up its membership after the pandemic.

Regarding the online article's main observation, declining membership across North American Churches, I strongly suspect it results from many causes, the greatest of which is the rampant growth of secularism. Why would the general population bother to ponder life's difficult questions at church when the lure of Sunday shopping and its best ally, the internet, offer such wonderful distractions?

Where would many people prefer to be on Sunday- in a pew or at a mall? Other powerful factors such as inertia and/or a simple lack of curiosity have merely accelerated this long-term downtrend in church attendance. Sadly, in this country Christianity has been fighting a slow retreat for over half a century now.

On a more positive local note, we at Huron Shores United Church have the chance after the pandemic to regrow our numbers by adopting inclusive policies for old and new members alike. The most needed reform, as I see it, lies in this church's governance. In this area we are clearly not an inclusive organization. Let's face it: no one likes to be left out of the decision-making process especially when asked later to support those decisions financially. Unfortunately, I have observed over the last four or five years that decision making here has become the preserve of small groups of people, be they the Building Executive Team or the Church Council. Communication blockers, such as the lack of published minutes for Congregation members, have produced embarrassments such as the bold announcement at an annual meeting of the fait accompli establishment of Grand Bend Place. To our knowledge its mission and logo received neither congregational input nor approval.

From the grumbling observed at that meeting my wife and I sensed that others also disapproved of this church's current style of governance. In response, on December 16, 2019 we sent Council a formal note asking them "to end the parachuting of important decisions onto this Congregation." Although we were notified as requested that this letter was read aloud at Council, it was soon obvious that no one at that meeting was listening. How do we know? Not that long afterwards another potentially valuable project, the front lawn meeting space, took shape again with no Congregational input or approval. Many church members with whom I spoke admitted they learned of the project only after reading the Lakeshore Times Advance. Let's be clear. We are not denying the value of these two projects but simply identifying the slipshod and exclusive manner of their introduction. To be the inclusive church of our claims we must practise inclusive governance.

A second suggestion for making "coming back" attractive for current and possibly future members would be to rethink the treatment accorded church volunteers outside the inner decision-making groups. Too often I have heard of working groups or volunteer teams being formed with no public request for members. Worse is the situation faced by those outsiders who do manage to join a church volunteer team only to find themselves excluded from an e-mail chain notifying them of changes in date and time for the work at hand. Other volunteers have complained to us about being reprimanded. None of these situations is positive.

These last two paragraphs should indicate how people in charge here are literally, by carelessness or design, driving people away from Huron Shores United Church. We have heard their concerns and, yes, they will not be "coming back". While the recent limited call for additional members on the interim pastor committee is a welcome change, still our church with its community mission and its serious debt cannot afford to drive away any members. Thank you again for your twice-made invitation.

Sincerely,