

## **Christ in our Church**

Over the past forty years, the number of Anglicans in Canada has declined by more than half. Meanwhile, during the same period, Canada's population grew by three quarters. Juxtaposing these numbers points to how a serious problem we have. Following are some thoughts on this problem, the context in which it exists, and how we might find our way toward new life and growth, again.

Looking at the context issue, first, we could begin by pointing to similarly declining numbers in other denominations. We Anglicans are not alone. But, other people's grief doesn't help us resolve our problem.

The secular media tells us a lot about the public's spiritual needs. NEWSWEEK, TIME and MacLEANS magazines, along with national and local newspapers, often have feature articles on religious trends. Their recurring points are:

- i) people want to have a personal encounter with God
- ii) they don't know how to have this encounter
- iii) they see mainline denominations as irrelevant and judgmental.

To help us serve public needs, we Anglicans have never been so blessed with consultants, books, audio-visual aids and programs for 'growing the Church.' They tell us how to attract and welcome people into our churches, and how to inspire them with meaningful worship. There are also books, programs and consultants who teach us how raise funds; what Church governance structures and ministries work best; how to do youth ministry, and what kind of youth programs are most effective. For all our abundance of human and information resources, little benefit is found.

It seems to me that our Church has lost its vision for what its center and purpose are. The Church is (supposed to be) about Jesus. Our task is to share the Good News of the difference Jesus can make in people's lives. Recent articles in our Church newspapers, web sites and meetings, however, do not feature this vision. They concentrate on issues, not Christ. Traditional Anglican norms of theological tolerance, personal respect, and the courage to debate issues which many Christians shy away from, work best in the context of our Church's vision of who Christ is, and who we are as his people.

No doubt, everyone has a view and some passion on same-gender union issues, church-finance and governance, and what programs we would like to see our Church adopt. Each of us has a unique way of experiencing God. When issues - not Jesus - become the center of our attention, and when rancor replaces traditional Anglican civility, we can expect negative consequences. It won't matter how many consultants etc. we have. Our numbers will continue to decline. I suspect we all know people who have left the Church over its apparent loss of vision, and concentration on issues.

Stories in The Acts of the Apostles, and many of St. Paul's letters remind us: it's all about Jesus! Our Christian ancestors, for all their struggles and mistakes, shared a vision of life

- with Jesus' presence and teachings at its center - which subsequently changed the world. They learned: the purpose of life is to be with God. With Christ, their lives were changed. Then, they changed the Roman Empire. In subsequent centuries, they spread the Good News all over the world.

What our ancestors did still holds true, today. In her book, Unbinding the Gospel, Martha Reese demonstrates that the mainline churches that are growing are not the ones with the 'right tools, programs or perspectives.' Rather, they are 'practicing churches,' whose members (i) have a vivid relationship with Jesus, and (ii) share the difference which this makes in their lives with other people.

Because "it's all about Jesus," not us, what program we use or debate we immerse ourselves in, I am encouraged by the early Church's experiences about the challenges we Anglicans face, today. Society may be anti-Church; but, it is not anti-God. As we choose to make Christ and his values primary in our lives, Christ's and our Church will grow. We have God's word on that in Scripture, and historical evidence over many centuries.

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09/05/07