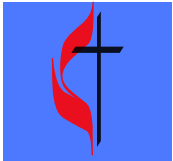


BACKGROUND DATA FOR MISSION

Providing Data for Planning and Ministry

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TWO DIRECTIONS



This writer recently returned from a trip to Africa, thus having had an opportunity to see a bit of that part of the United Methodist Church.

As has often been noted, the African UMC is growing overall and the US church is declining. There are reasons for this, of course, though opinions vary widely on what exactly those are. This issue will dare to venture into a few observations on each side of this divergence of direction, realizing that any attempt to do so will obviously fail to capture the entirety of the complexity involved.

On the African front, one of the most prominent players in their growth is the acquisition of entire existing church bodies which opt to leave whatever group they were a part of to become United Methodist. The autonomous Methodist Church of the Ivory Coast joining ranks with the UMC has captured the attention of the past two General Conferences, for example. This type of group transfer has taken place to a less visible degree with other circumstances, as well.

Many Africans live difficult lives, with poverty and disease all too common. They are grasping for something which brings hope. The Christian faith provides just that. In addition the presence of the church often brings aid in many forms as well, through General Board of Global Ministries outreaches, UMCOR, VIM teams, and the like. In short, the

church offers hope and help, therefore attracting new congregants.

One more aspect of the church in Africa is their zeal, including commitment to evangelism. For example new churches being started in many places. GBGM has Mission Initiatives in Cameroon and Senegal. The North Katanga Annual Conference is now starting churches in neighboring Tanzania. South Congo Annual Conference is doing the same in Zambia. US congregational developers have long maintained that starting new churches is the single most effective means of evangelism.

A number of the new ministries are established in somewhat isolated villages. In many of these, there is little or no electrical power so village life slows down considerably after dark. Few entertainment outlets are to be found in general. Other than tasks related to basic living, as considerable as these can be, there is not much competition on one's time. When a church starts, complete with preaching and music, this is something to do. African worship tends to be highly energetic and uplifting, as well, making it even more compelling. All this is to say that many folks are drawn to a new ministry in that context.

Decline in the US church is a subject of much discussion. One sociologist of religion, in a footnote on her book on mainline decline, noted that writing on the topic was a growth

industry. Many theories and opinions have been bandied about. One thing we can be sure of is that it is a multi-faceted problem, perhaps without a simple dominant reason. Some factors which have been cited include changing demographics in neighborhoods around the church, families having less children, churches located in the wrong places, the "Sixties," loss of emphasis on evangelism, competition from new church movements and megachurches, not starting new churches as before, and inability to retain young people, to name but a few.

One point to explore is something which contrasts with part of the African context. In US culture, church has lots of competition. This is true of opportunities which vie for our time, such as cultural events, sports, recreation, entertainment, and media. When the sun goes down, vast options still remain. Americans have more leisure time, as well, to explore the possibilities. Also in contrast to a large portion of Africans, most Americans are not struggling with poverty and disease. With basic needs met, they are not as focused on medical care, food, and shelter. Hope is not in such short supply either. As such the church is not as compelling a place to meet those needs.

In a related issue, the US is starting to resemble Western Europe in ways which may impact church participation. In much of Western Europe, though once highly churched, church participation is now minimal. For years the US stood out as the "exception" in the eyes of sociologists of religion looking at Western religious activity. The mainline US church is surely progressing towards the European norm, with other portions of Christianity losing market share as well. While the US still stands out as the exception, the trend away from organized religion is clear.

Again, there is no single factor with widespread agreement which accounts for the changes in US religious culture, including this tendency to go the way of Europe. One theory

is that most European governments are more highly socialized and therefore the governments meet more of the basic needs of their constituents. In some sense the government replaces the need for God and the church, whether this is a conscious understanding or not. The US is trending toward the government playing a larger role, as evidenced by the massive bailouts taking place now to stabilize the economy. Furthermore, part of the winning platform in recent elections suggested a move toward socialism to some degree. As Americans trend toward more dependence on the government, there may be a corresponding move away from the church.

Of course, all people have needs which only God and the community called the Church can meet. Those who are marginalized are most open to this, but even those who are doing well, or finding their material and physical needs met by institutions other than the church, still have basic spiritual needs. The challenge will be to find more effective means to communicate and demonstrate that in this changing culture.

This time of year highlights the cultural transitions as we again witness the "Christmas wars." The reaction of portions of our culture against the religious aspect of Christmas was off the radar screen until recently. Christmas has now become offensive to many, or so we are told. Nativity scenes on public property are becoming more scarce, for example. At the same time, ministry opportunities increase with more people attending Christmas church services and with the season stirring felt needs in many. The Research Office would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a happy, prosperous, and hope filled New Year.

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