

## **The Best of Times, The Worst of Times**

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Some of you may have heard the story of what happened when Pope Leo, soon after his election, called his Chicago bank to update his phone number and address.

After answering all of his security questions, he was told that he would actually have to come in person to make the changes. So Pope Leo tried to explain that getting back to Chicago might be a little complicated for him, given his work situation. Finally he said, “Would it help if I told you that I’m Pope Leo?”

It did not help. The customer service representative, thinking it was a prank, hung up on him.

The issue eventually was straightened out by one of Pope Leo’s staff members. But it’s a wonderful story about how even the Pope has difficulty getting good customer service. And I love the fact that somewhere in Chicago is a woman who can honestly say she hung up on the pope.

A lot of people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, have been charmed by Pope Leo. Maybe it’s his sense of humor. Maybe it’s his air of humility. Or maybe it’s simply that in a loud and angry age, people are hungry for spiritual leaders who are grounded and compassionate.

Because let’s be honest: this is not an easy moment for the Christian church.

Many churches are shrinking. Congregations are aging. Budgets are tighter. Some are closing buildings that once seemed permanent and thriving. Christianity itself has become tangled up with politics, ideology, outrage, and culture wars in ways that leave many people exhausted or wary.

And many of us, especially those on the progressive side of the political spectrum, have accepted a larger story about religion — the idea that modern societies simply become more secular over time. Fewer people attend church. Fewer people identify as religious. The old certainties fade away. We assume that this is simply the direction in which history moves.

Mainline churches like the Episcopal Church seem to fit this secularization thesis pretty well because we once occupied a much more central place in American life. We built beautiful buildings meant to last for centuries. We developed policies and structures assuming there would always be enough people and money to sustain them. But now many congregations are asking difficult questions about identity, mission, and survival.

These questions were at the forefront of a recent clergy conference that Father Jim and I attended. The theme was “The Remnant Church.” At a retreat center in western Iowa, we spent two days talking about what it means to be Christian in this changing landscape.

And honestly, sometimes the mood in the room was pretty heavy.

We talked about shrinking congregations, exhausted clergy, and aging buildings. There was a lot of concern about sustainability and survival, both for individual parishes and for Christianity in general.

But as I listened to those conversations, I found myself thinking about something else. Because while there are many reasons for discouragement, there are also genuine signs of growing spiritual hunger and unexpected renewal in the Church, especially in places that include many nations in Africa, South America, and Asia.

But even here in the United States, I keep hearing stories about young adults showing up in churches, searching for meaning and community in a fragmented and lonely world. Some congregations are seeing newcomers drawn not by flashy programming, but by silence, liturgy, beauty, authenticity, and a longing for something rooted and real.

In the past few years, Catholic dioceses in particular have reported a surprising rise in adult conversions, especially among Millennials and Gen Z. At Easter, some archdioceses welcomed the largest classes of new Catholics they’ve seen in decades. Many Orthodox churches are also reporting packed introductory classes and growing numbers of young families exploring one of the most ancient forms of Christianity.

Now, I know we may hear this news and think, “Well yes, but that’s just conservatives finding religion. Or maybe it’s white nationalism at work.” It’s easy to dismiss these trends as “well, there may be growth, but it’s not the *right* kind of growth.”

But I think something deeper is going on.

In a supposedly secular age, spiritual hunger has not disappeared. In some ways, it is actually intensifying.

People are exhausted by loneliness, anxiety, polarization, consumerism, and life lived through screens. Many younger adults in particular feel they have inherited a world that feels unstable. Institutions have lost credibility. Community has frayed. People are hungry for meaning, for belonging, and for practices that help them live with courage and hope.

And in moments like this, some people begin searching for God.

I’ve seen some of this spiritual growth myself. I’ve visited my cousin’s Catholic church in Alaska, for example, twice during the past five years, and I saw how the number of people in the pews has doubled. I’ve talked to local Catholic friends who report similar trends. And at the icon

painting workshop I attended in Connecticut last fall, I talked to fellow students from around the country whose Orthodox and Catholic parishes are experiencing surprising growth.

But I've also seen another side of the story, which to me is exemplified in the experience of a friend of ours who recently retired and moved to a new city. In his earlier life, he had been a pretty faithful churchgoer. Church had shaped his routines and identity for years. But in his new home, things changed. He joined a bike group that met on Sunday mornings. There were weekend rides and social activities and trips. Life became busy and pleasant and full.

And little by little, church just slipped away. Not because he became hostile to Christianity. Not because he stopped believing in God. It simply stopped feeling central, and other things quietly took its place.

So sometimes it is not younger people who are drifting furthest from spiritual commitment. Sometimes it is older Christians for whom faith becomes one optional activity among many others.

Meanwhile, some younger people — raised in a culture of anxiety and loneliness — are searching intensely for meaning and transcendence.

That, I think, is one of the great surprises of this moment in time. The hunger for God has not disappeared. If anything, in some corners of our culture, it may be reawakening.

Ross Douthat, a columnist for the *New York Times*, has made the observation that spiritual revival and decline can happen at the very same time, especially in eras of great cultural and political turmoil. While some people drift away quietly, others become spiritually restless and start searching with greater intensity.

This feels true to me. And it makes me think of Charles Dickens' line at the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

This may describe the Church of today better than any strategic report or demographic study.

There is real loss. We should not pretend otherwise. Some beloved things are passing away. But there are also signs of renewal stirring in unexpected places. People are hungry for beauty, for meaning, for authentic community. Hungry, perhaps without even realizing it, for God.

So maybe the question is this:

How can the Church, including our own New Song, speak to this spiritual hunger?

Because many people today are looking for a place where eternal truths are contemplated and expressed through liturgy and tradition. A place where beauty, prayer, justice, and authentic community are taken seriously. A place where the Spirit feels alive.

So let's think what this might mean for us at New Song.

We will never be a giant church. But as the reading from Acts reminded us this morning, Pentecost did not begin with a giant church. It began with a small, uncertain group of people gathered in prayer, wondering what would happen next.

They had no buildings. No prestige. No political influence. No strategic plan for church growth.

What they had was openness to the Spirit.

And then came wind. Fire. Courage. Connection across barriers of language and culture. Pentecost was not about preserving an institution. It was about God breathing new life into ordinary people and sending them into the world filled with hope.

And, that, I think, is still how the Spirit works.

This message was one of the key points made at our clergy conference by Regina Walton, an Episcopal priest and scholar who facilitated our discussions. She acknowledged that the title of the retreat, The Remnant Church, can sound unsettling. Nobody wants to think of themselves as part of a remnant. It sounds small. Old. Left behind.

But she reminded us that in Scripture, the remnant is not simply what is left over after a disaster. The remnant is the group that keeps listening for God, formed from the people who carry the story forward when power and status have fallen away. Not by preserving everything exactly as it has always been, but by continually creating something new.

During the conference, her final presentation focused on nurturing people's spiritual lives in this time of great change. Maybe, Regina suggested, it starts when we ask each other this simple question: "How is it with your soul?" Because that is where the church ultimately lives.

So maybe in the future, the church, especially in our own Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, will be smaller. But it can at the same time be deeper. Less about cultural habit and more about genuine spiritual longing.

And maybe that is not the death of the Church. Maybe, in its own strange and surprising way, it is the beginning of another Pentecost.