

INTRO

There seems to be a lot of hand-wringing about the state of the church in today. While your faith community might have a different story, the wide-view, zoomed-out picture of the American church is, to some, alarming. As you can read in the resources below, there's no shortage of data pointing to downward trends in terms of church attendance and membership. Such statistics prompt some to ask, "is the church dying?"

While the answer is complicated, Christianity is no stranger to death. In Mark Regele's book, *Death of the Church*, he writes: "At the core of Jesus' message is the insistence that unless there is first a death, there can be no life" (1995). Martin Luther wrote in his Large Catechism that Christian life "is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued" where our old selves die through repentance and rise as new people.

Death of the Church?

What's Happening? What's Next?

The Apostle Paul wrote that we are buried with Jesus by baptism so we might walk in "newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Jesus said "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24).

In short, Christians are "death and resurrection" people. Every day is a death and resurrection day. What does this mean for the church?

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Did you have a church growing up? What was it (the community, the building, the activities, the message) like? How has your church experience changed? Have you ever been part of a church that closed? Have you been part of a new church (or ministry) start-up? Where have you experienced new life in your faith communities? Are you worried about the future of the (or your) church? Have you ever experienced a "death" that led to new life? Is the church "dying"? Transforming? Remodeling? Reforming? How?

BIBLE BASICS

As you think about why the Christian church is experiencing a decline, take a look at some of these Biblical resources.

- **Romanas 6:1-14** – The Apostle Paul describes new life in Christ.
- **2 Corinthians 5:16-21** – In Christ there is a new creation
- **Acts** – Browse it. The story of the church.
- **Revelation 21:1-5** – A vision of a new everything. Who wins?

ESSENTIAL READINGS and LISTENINGS

A “Coming” (?) Evangelical Collapse

A 2009 *Christian Science Monitor* opinion by Michael Spencer, predicting “a major collapse of evangelical Christianity.” How has it come true, or not?

The Church’s death: real, or “greatly exaggerated?”

When author Mark Twain learned that a newspaper had prematurely published his obituary, Twain replied, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” Bob Burney asks whether the same is true about *the church*, in a column from November, 2007.

Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church

A Guideposts interview with the late Rachel Held Evans exploring why millennials (born 1981-1996-ish) have lost interest in the churches in which they were raised, and why the church’s “death” might be a good thing.

Boomer Denominations and Cultural Commutes

An 2014 article by Carol Howard Merit. How does your church reflect the time and context of your surroundings? (Or not?)

The “Real Reason” for religious decline?

Psychologist Jean Twenge looks into religious decline. Her findings? Rampant *individualism* is at the root of corroding communities of faith.

BONUS READINGS (for the nerds...)

The Church’s Great 500-year “Rummage Sales”.

Check out this summary and commentary by Kevin Neuner on Phyllis Tickle’s theory that the church reshuffles itself every 500 years. What does this mean for us? What’s the relationship between church and culture?

Renewal is Possible.

Prebyterian Tim Keller writes in *The Atlantic* ways church (re)growth can happen, and suggests some ways to attend to them. (Note: article possibly behind paywall, limited free reads.)

The Data: Modeling the Future of Religion in America

The Pew Research Center predicts a steady decline in religious affiliation, resulting in Christians making up fewer than half of the US population in just a few decades.

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