

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? ?Mainline? churches are failing

Since this is Christmas week, after all, what better time to talk about the God part of this celebratory period?

It was Norman Vincent Peale who once said that ?Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.?

Peale, most famous for his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, lived at a time when the ?Christ? part of Christmas was perhaps even more important than the scurrying around from store to store hunting for bargains.

It still should be, or, to cite Dr. Seuss: ?Maybe Christmas, the Grinch thought, doesn't come from a store.?

And, of course, many parts of the world don't celebrate Christmas, although most have their own version or something similar to it. There is no doubt that in Canada, religion isn't what it used to be, or at least the practice of various religions is not nearly as widespread as it was.

That being said, however, reports of the death of traditional religions in Canada are, as Mark Twain supposedly quipped about a premature report of his death, are ?greatly exaggerated.?

To be sure, many of the so-called mainline Protestant denominations ?particularly the United Church, Anglican Church and Presbyterian (the one I grew up in) ? have suffered devastating losses in their membership. Between 1991 and 2011, for example, United Church membership has plummeted from just over three million Canadians to just over two million. And that's just part of the story. It may still have close to two million members, but only a fraction of them actually attend services on a regular basis. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church ? with more than 12 million members ? has increased slightly over that period, thanks largely to immigration, and the more conservative evangelical Protestant churches have also more than held their own. But for all that, recent polls have shown that 73 per cent of Canadians asked said they still believe in God or a higher power. So if this is true, then the question is how come church attendance overall is falling so badly?

A recent study on the subject concluded what I have long thought from my own experience, i.e. that the further a church gets away from the traditional teachings of Christ, the fewer people it attracts.

Being a liberal may be good for getting votes in this country, but it doesn't work that well in attracting adherents to the churches.

Take the United Church, for example. It is not only the most liberal ? i.e. it has had moderators who don't even believe in God ? but it has suffered the largest decline in membership. Long called ?the NDP at prayer,? the Church seems to spend more time arguing about left-wing political causes than it does on trying to spread God's wonderful message.

For many years, I faithfully attended a local Presbyterian Church, but it has been some time now since I've taken my place in a pew. Why? Well, the last time I went I told the minister that if I wanted to listen to an NDP speech, I'd attend a party rally. I didn't go to church to listen to that. Instead, I can pray at home and not waste my time listening to somebody who knows a lot less about politics than I do.

And since so many Canadians ? myself included ? still believe in God, it's obvious that many of these disappearing congregations are totally missing the boat, focussing on their left-leaning politics instead of the needs and desires of those looking for comfort in God's word.

Writing in the *Sunday Star*, Wilfrid Laurier University religion professor David Millard Haskell, lead author of *Theology Matters*, an in-depth study of religion in Canada, wrote: ?We found, without exception, the clergy and congregants of the growing mainline Protestant churches held more firmly to traditional Christian beliefs ? such as the belief Jesus rose physically from the grave and that God answers prayer.?

?The clergy of the growing churches were the most theologically conservative and the declining church clergy the least. . .?

And while presents and family and good times are for sure things that help make Christmas arguably the best day of the year, these failing churches should remember that if they are so busy running away from the true message of Christmas that they end up standing for everything and nothing at the same time, they'll continue to fade into a distant memory.

But those who include Christ ? not only at Christmas, but year-round ? will continue to thrive.

And to all of you, whatever your beliefs, Merry Christmas.

