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# First Press

*Celebrating Christ and Serving Community*

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## Musings on Church Growth—and Decline (or why I don't worry much about this anymore!)

By Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

I am now in my fifth decade of ordained ministry as a Teaching Elder (Minister of Word and Sacrament) in the Presbyterian Church USA. For the entirety of my ministry, the congregations I have served, and the denomination as a whole, as well as other mainline Protestant denominations, generally, have been anxious about “church growth”—or more often, the lack there of. This is ultimately rooted in the widespread notion (which is mistaken in my opinion) that church size equals cultural influence and power.

Early in my ministry I absorbed this concern from the parishioners I was serving and my clergy colleagues—so I read widely in the burgeoning “church growth” literature of the time and attended numerous seminars and retreats on the subject. The assumptions behind all of this was that if we just “tweaked” what we were doing, “church growth” was there for the taking. Usually this meant copying some of the “best practices” of what were deemed “successful” churches (which were almost all exclusively located in fast-growing, white, upper-middle-class suburban communities).

However, one of the things I noticed early on was the fact that for the most part it was “white” churches that were declining, of all kinds: Mainline, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic, and not necessarily churches of “color”: Black, Hispanic, Asian, etc. Why was this?

The obvious reasons, that almost no one recognizes, are birthrates, deathrates, and family size: Education/Affluence=Small Family Size. For example, after World War II, we had a “baby-boom” that lasted until about 1965: larger families along with mostly white migration from cities to newly developing inner-ring “suburban” communities produced membership growth in both existing churches as well as numerous new church developments around the country (this was all intentionally fostered, by the way, by local, state, and federal government policy at the time).

But after 1965 there was a “baby-bust” that lasted into the early 1990’s, until the advent of the “millennial generation”, which is now actually larger than the “baby boom generation. The result was that many of these once burgeoning “white” churches now found themselves in steep numerical decline, thus the anxiety mentioned above. And most PCUSA churches were typical of this demographic shift: at the national level, during a typical year for the past several decades, we have added, on average, 40,000-45,000 new members per year but have lost 70,000-75,000 existing members per year due to death. This is why our numbers have been in decline, for the most part. Yes, there have been lots of theological and cultural “fights” between liberals and conservatives in these mostly white denominations in recent decades that have resulted in some “defections,” but they do not account for the larger demographic trends mentioned above.

Evangelical “white” churches are also in rapid decline, although their decline started a bit later than that of the Mainliners and Roman Catholics. This is because they planted a lot of new churches from the early 1970’s to the early 1990’s: this was the “mega-church” heyday in growing white suburban areas (outer ring and exurban) and in “sun belt” cities in the south that experienced population migration mostly from the Northeast and Midwest. But small family size due to low birthrates has caught up to them, too. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, is now closing, on average, about 60 churches a week.

But note that just because “white” churches have been declining in recent decades—it doesn’t necessarily follow that “Christianity” in the United States is in “crisis” or “decline.” This is a mostly “white” perception. The reality is that Black, Hispanic, and Asian churches have been growing rapidly in recent decades. For example, Hispanic Roman Catholic population growth in the Southwestern United States in recent decades has largely off-set white Roman Catholic decline in the Northeast and Midwest. Similar trends can be seen in major metropolitan areas, mostly on the coasts, with rapidly growing African American populations, like Atlanta, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., and Asian populations in cities like Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. The result is that American Christianity is much more multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic than it was just a few decades ago—it’s just not as “white.” Add to this large numbers of Millennials and “Gen-Z” young people leaving conservative churches of all sorts in recent years, because of overt or perceived anti-LGBT, anti-science, patriarchal, and racist church policy positions, and you can see why “white-Christian-angst” has been compounded.

But we need to realize that we are not in the “church-growth” business—we are in the “disciple-ship-making” business—and that is a different thing altogether. The problem with the “church growth” model is that it has tended to simply perpetuate racial segregation and “white” middle-class “American” values (we call this Christian nationalism) at the expense of “Jesus movement” values like inclusiveness, liberation, justice, peace, earth-care, and deep spirituality.

Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, USA, speaks for all mainstream Christians when he said this:

*“The Jesus Movement is the ongoing community of people who center their lives on Jesus and following him into loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God, each other and creation.*

*Together, we follow Jesus as we love God with our whole heart, soul and mind and love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40) and restore each other and all of creation to unity with God in Christ.*

*Jesus launched this movement when he welcomed the first disciples to follow his loving, liberating, life-giving Way. Today, we participate in his movement with our whole lives: our prayer, worship, teaching, preaching, gathering, healing, action, family, work, play and rest.*

*In all things, we seek to be loving, liberating, and life-giving—just like the God who formed all things in love; liberates us all from prisons of mind, body and spirit; and gives life so we can participate in the resurrection and healing of God’s world.”*

I don’t know about you, but I decided to hitch my wagon to Jesus Movement values a long time ago. They represent the church at its best—and, I am convinced, represent its future. It’s also why I no longer worry about church growth.

Blessings,  
Scott Kenefake

## SESSION MEETING NOTES June 13, 2021

### Session Actions:

- Approved a motion from the Worship Committee to allow communion to be served at an outdoor family service at the Larry Crowe property on August 1.
- Approved a motion from the Outreach Committee for a one-time appeal by the Outreach Committee for individual members to donate through FPC for Robin and Trisha's House which supports housing for the homeless.
- Approved the extension of the Transitional Associate Pastor agreement with Rev. Kelley Jepsen for another year.
- Approved placing the responsibility for the church library under the Christian Education Committee.
- **Approved a congregational meeting to elect a Pastor Nominating Committee. The meeting will be held on July 11 after the worship service. The intention is to hold a hybrid meeting including those at home and in the sanctuary.**
- Approved the creation of a Web Advisory Committee proposed by the Communications Task Force.
- Approved a committee to select a website designer to work with the Web Advisory Committee.

### Informational Items:

- Rev. Jepsen reported that 12 children attended the first Vacation Bible School session on Sunday June 13.
- Gary Crow reported that the Racial Justice Task Force met with Chris Roseland who is a PCUSA Mission Engagement Advisor.
- The Faith and Film group is planning to start showing films again this summer.
- The Session continued its discussion of the church Mission Study.
- There will be a Back-to-School outdoor family service at the Larry Crowe property on August 1. All are invited to this event.
- There was an excellent turnout for the Pat Riggins blood drive held on June 3. Twenty-nine units of blood were collected.
- The Property Committee reported that the inspection by the Fire Marshal went well.

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- More volunteers are needed for the Area 10 grocery delivery program.
- Volunteers are needed for the Saturday breakfast program at Shalom.
- Instead of a Youth Mission Trip this year, the youth will do exterior work at the home of Nasrin Hepfer.
- The Theology on Tap small group explored the work of several African American contemporary theologians/historians during this past month.





## FPC Movie Night: The Hate U Give

*Sponsored by the Racial Justice Task Force, Adult Education and Small Groups Committees*

Monday, July 26

6:30 – 9:00 p.m.

Lyman Hall

Join us on Monday, July 26 for the showing of *The Hate U Give* – a fictional story of 16 year old Starr Carter. After being a witness to the police shooting of her friend Khalil, Starr is faced with challenge of staying quiet, or stepping out to tell her truth. The story follows Starr’s life, complicated by her home life and school situation, neighborhood gang and collective trauma.

Lauded as “an inspiring film that both gets to the heart of #BlackLivesMatter and celebrates the love and strength to be gained from a cohesive family, regardless of race,” we thought this would be a great start to a Racial Justice Film Series that is led through the PCUSA’s Matthew 25 initiative.

We hope you’ll join us for film, discussion, and snacks! Childcare is available if requested to the office by July 19.



*You Gave blood. You helped save lives.*

Thank you to First Presbyterian Church members and friends for your blood donations and volunteer help at the June 3, Pat Riggins Red Cross blood drive. 29 units of blood were given, one of the highest collection totals at FPC.

This amount can go on to save as many as 87 lives! In addition, there were 3 first time donors. Unfortunately, wait times were longer than usual due to the fact that one staff member could not come due to an injury sustained right before the blood drive. Nevertheless, donors were patient considering the circumstances. Again, thanks to all, especially Don Hollinger who coordinated it all so well.

**The next blood drive at First Presbyterian Church will be on Thursday, October 14, 2021.  
Please mark your calendars.**



## VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!



### **Our Area 10 Food Delivery team is looking for a few new volunteers.**

Once a month a group of about 25 FPC members gather to bag groceries and deliver them to older folks in need in our community. At this time, we need two new drivers and a couple of substitute drivers. Each driver has a set route of about 8 or 9 individuals. The time commitment is about 1-2 hours, in the morning or early afternoon on the 4th Wednesday or Thursday of each month. Training and encouragement are provided!

Several of our FPC members who volunteer with this project feel it is a very rewarding way to help others. That was especially true during the pandemic as we continued our deliveries each month. If you are looking for a way to help those in need, please contact **Gail Dunning**, [gdunning45@sbcglobal.net](mailto:gdunning45@sbcglobal.net) or **Allan Edmonds**, [allan.edmonds@gmail.com](mailto:allan.edmonds@gmail.com).

- from the Outreach Committee

## A Special Flower by Pat Stackhouse

Not long ago my son made me a very stunning sun catcher. I planned to put it in my window where I could enjoy it. The round sun catcher was made of a cross with doves, with violets in their mouths, on all sides of the cross. I was immensely proud of it.

However, it lay on the kitchen cupboard for some time because I was unable to affix it to the window. But it was always on my mind, for two reasons; 1) my son made it and 2) because of its beauty.

Little did I realize the significance it would later have.

Then one day, I found just the right suction cup. It didn't cost much but made me happy. I immediately came home and put the sun catcher in the window. I added a plant to the sill of the window. The plant didn't grow for a long time, despite the fact that it had plenty of sun and water. I cared for it, hoping it would finally grow.

Then it began to grow and grow. As an added surprise to the plant, tiny purple flowers begin to appear on long stems, reaching out of the plant. Amazingly, one of the flowers reached out and entwined itself about the top of the cross on the sun catcher.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Here was a plant that would hardly grow and now had a lovely purple flower entwined about the top of the cross.

We are, like the plant, being cared for and tendered by our Heavenly Father. We begin to grow until our hearts entwine themselves about the cross. We feel secure in Christ's love and beauty.



## **Bats Under Stress** By Norm Holy and Allan Edmonds

White-nose syndrome has killed over 90% of northern long-eared, little brown, and tri-colored bat populations in fewer than 10 years, according to a new study published in *Conservation Biology*. Researchers also noted declines in Indiana bat and big brown bat populations.

The findings, detailed in “The scope and severity of white-nose syndrome on hibernating bats in North America,” underscore the devastating impacts of the deadly fungal disease. The research tapped into the most comprehensive data set on North American bat populations to date, which includes data from over 200 locations in 27 states and two Canadian provinces.

As the article notes, quantitative assessment of such threats require expensive and difficult monitoring that is hard to obtain funding for until the problem has become acute. This leads to a paradox of conservation planning: data needed for critical decisions are often lacking for the very species most under threat.

Bats are an important part of the natural order, helping to keep natural systems healthy as they eat TONS of insects, pollinate plants, disperse seeds, and are prey for other animals such as hawks and weasels.

If you are a spelunker, take extra care to clean and disinfect clothing and gear after caving trips to prevent the spread of the fungus causing WNS.

Read more about WNS in general at <https://www.whitenosesyndrome.org> and about the latest study at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cobi.13739>



7/1 - Don Hanna  
7/2 - Ed McClellan  
7/2- Mikaela Coppedge  
7/6 - Norman Dean  
7/7 - Leandra Drummy  
7/9 - Miles Main  
7/12 - Kathy Norris  
7/14- Heidi Darling, Eleanor Baude - Phillips

7/16 - Gregory Darling  
7/18 - Jack Peterman, Larry Brown  
7/20 - Kent Honeycutt  
7/22 - Donald Hollinger, Sue Dukeman  
7/23 - Beth Haeberle, Jakob Chickedantz  
7/24 - Glen Darling  
7/30 - Tom Gettinger, Nate Nickel



# JULY 2021

| Sunday   | Monday  | Tuesday                                  | Wednesday  | Thursday  | Friday | Saturday |
|--|---|--|--|---|--------|----------|
|  |   |  |  | <b>12 pm</b> 1<br>Congregational<br>Prayer Gathering  | 2      | 3        |
| <b>10 am</b> 4<br>Worship Service<br>(Communion)<br><br><i>Independence Day</i>                      | <b>11:30 pm</b> 5<br>Emmaus Group   | <b>4 pm</b> 6<br>Membership<br>Committee | <b>6:30 pm</b> 7<br>Christian<br>Education Meeting | 8   | 9      | 10       |
| <b>10 am</b> 11<br>Worship Service &<br>Congregational<br>Meeting<br><b>11 am</b><br>Choir Gathering | 12  | 13                                       | 14   | <b>12 pm</b> 15<br>Congregational<br>Prayer Gathering   | 16     | 17       |
| <b>10 am</b> 18<br>Worship Service<br><br><b>11 am</b><br>Vacation Bible<br>School                   | <b>11:30 pm</b> 19<br>Emmaus Group<br><br><b>6 pm</b><br>Theology on Tap<br>(In person) | 20                                       | 21   | 22  | 23     | 24       |
| <b>10 am</b> 25<br>Worship Service   | 26  | 27                                       | 28   | <b>12 pm</b> 29<br>Congregational<br>Prayer Gathering<br><b>7 pm</b><br>Choir Practice<br>(In person) | 30     | 31       |