

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

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Dear Friends,

Periodically I am asked, “What’s your assessment of the state of the church?” It’s an intriguing question, and one where the answer can take many forms.

First, there is the question of what do we mean by “church”? Are we talking about the Presbyterian Church USA, which now has a membership of approximately 1.7 million adults in a country of 320 million people? Are we talking about the global church, which numbers over 2.2 billion adherents, half of which are Roman Catholic and a quarter of which are Pentecostal? Are we talking strictly about the mainline church—the historical denominations with their origins in the Reformation? Those denominations are shrinking, and have been since the mid-1960s. They now comprise just under 15 percent of U.S. adults or about 37 million. Or, should we focus on self-identified evangelicals, which now number close to 25 percent of U.S. adults (approx. 62 million)? The big change in the past 10 years, of course, has been the rise in the religiously unaffiliated, commonly called the “nones”, a group now as large as the evangelicals. This rise is primarily happening among Millennials. We also know that this group is deeply spiritual and invested in changing the world, but not so interested in organized religion.

Yet, a statistical breakdown doesn’t really tell us much about the state of the church. Shifting numbers don’t reveal much about the church’s vitality, much less the power of the church’s witness in the world. So, “How should we measure the status of the church?” How do we establish that the church is thriving?

When John the Baptist came to Jesus asking, “Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matt. 11:3) he wanted to know whether anything significant had changed in the world as a result of Jesus’s life and ministry. Was God really at work in a new way in and through Jesus? Was the Messiah really here? When Jesus answered John, however, he did not talk about how big the crowds were when he spoke—though apparently there were some big crowds, numbering in the thousands. Nor did he reference how many disciples he had added to his “start up” leadership team—he seemed quite happy with twelve, thank you. Instead, Jesus’s answer pointed to something else, to lives changed and social realities transformed—captives set free, blind people given sight, deaf people now hearing, dead people brought back to life, lame people now walking, lepers healed and cleansed, outcasts returned to a place of dignity and inclusion in their communities, and poor people hearing good news and becoming blessed.

If this is the criteria for measuring the state of the church, then the answer is not going to be statistical. It’s not about whether denominations are surviving, thriving, or reviving. It’s not about whether congregations are big or small, growing or dynamically maintaining a particular size. So, let’s cut to the chase. For me, the state of the church is about the vitality of the people of faith who gather together regularly for worship, study and prayer, and then put their faith to practice. Here are six questions that, in my experience, signal church vitality:

- 1. How real are the prayers of the people?** Prayer is about making ourselves vulnerable before God and opening ourselves and our communities to the work of the Holy Spirit. The ability to pray in community and as a community must be nurtured through example. It requires courage and humility to lift up questions, doubts, hurts, anger, and sorrow. It’s hard to pray for enemies and those who persecute us. It’s hard to pray for justice, forgiveness, and peace if our community is also where we experience the lack of these things. Honest prayer changes people and transforms communities in profound ways.

- 2. How fully does the worshipping community embrace young adults and children?** Congregations with dwindling numbers of children should be worried about their future. But it's not just the number of kids that matters; it's how they participate in the overall life of the church. Youth groups are important places for young adults to experience acceptance, ground themselves spiritually and develop their moral compass. But the vitality of a congregation is significantly strengthened when children and young people are integrated into worship, included in ministries of service, compassion, and justice, and given a voice in congregational life. They need to be invited and encouraged. Children and youth pay close attention to adults, even when we don't think they are. Congregations that know this are lively places.
- 3. How multicultural, diverse, and inclusive is the congregation?** For some congregations, this is a tough problem, in part because of location. But there are other obstacles to expanding the diversity in a congregation, many of which can be addressed. The United States is now much more culturally, racially and ethnically diverse than ever before, and there are wonderful multicultural and multiracial congregations everywhere. These congregations are intentional about adopting new habits of welcome and practicing inclusion. Remember, diversity is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. (Think Pentecost!)
- 4. Does the congregation engage with the marginalized in its local community?** Vital congregations do not exist for themselves. They find ways to become involved in the issues that affect their local community—hunger, homelessness, drug abuse, domestic violence, jobs, clean water, human rights. They are often participants through an ecumenical or interfaith council. However it happens, the congregation shows up in the public square—meeting with local officials, business leaders, and secular nonprofit groups. And when it does, it energizes not only the congregation, but the community as well.
- 5. Is the congregation invested in a mutually transformative relationship with a partner in a different part of the world?** There are many ways that congregations can be engaged with the world beyond their four walls and Sunday morning. I have seen cross-cultural partnerships here in this country that bridge divides and build significant relationships that transform those involved. U.S. congregations also partner with congregations, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other organizations in developing countries, organizing short-term mission projects and “reverse mission” exchanges. Such partnerships have limitations and been critiqued accordingly. But congregations who engage in this way will eventually and inevitably begin to wrestle with the important questions that such relationships engender, driving them to a more profound understanding of God's love and purposes, a key element of congregational vitality.
- 6. Can the congregation articulate how the Word of God shapes their lives and their life together?** Thriving congregations have lots of people who know the Bible well and call upon it to inform their common life. That means regular, communal, transformative Bible study, probably in small groups. The power of Bible study comes from the interaction of the Book, the community, and the Holy Spirit. Small groups foster the kind of relationships that allow the Bible to come alive, testimonials given, and questions asked. They're places where prayer becomes real, too—which brings us full circle. Dynamic preaching is also an essential element because good sermons help people understand how God is at work today and how we can participate in it.

Grace and peace,



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald,
President and Professor of Faith and Public Life



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