

“The Church in the U.S, Canada & Europe”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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Today's sermon was requested by one of our younger congregants. He had seen some videos on YouTube about how religious belief and church services differed between Europe and the United States. So he asked me to talk about where Canada fits in. How is the decline in religiosity and faith affecting Canada, the United States and Europe?

Let's start with Europe. For over a thousand years, Christianity has been the main religion in Europe. It was home to the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants trace our roots back to Germany in 1517 when Martin Luther declared his objections and created an alternative to Roman Catholicism. Europe is also home to the Orthodox Churches. Yet, despite all of that, Europe has become a very secular society.

European Christians

The irony is that most people in Europe still call themselves Christians. They were baptized, raised Christian, 67% call themselves Christian, yet only 22% go to church monthly or more.

They are cultural Christians, most of whom do not believe in the God of the Bible, although they do believe in a higher power of some kind.

The fastest growing faith group in Europe are those who say they have no faith at all. They don't have any association with any kind of religion. They make up 24% of Europeans, although in some countries, like France, the number is much higher at 70 percent.

A few years ago I was at a talk where a Dutch minister spoke. He said that very few people go to church services in Holland. One day, he was talking to neighbour after he bought a new house. The neighbour asked what he did for a living. He replied that he was a Christian minister. He said that the neighbour reacted as though he had said he was into skateboarding or some other odd hobby. Christianity as a faith just doesn't matter anymore in many parts of Europe.

This indifference is most notable among young people in Europe.

No Faith Young Europe

This graph shows in red the percentage of young people in Europe who identify with no religion at all. The Czech Republic rates highest, with over 75% of their young people having no interest or affiliation with religion. In Britain, almost 75% of young people identify with no religion at all. In Norway, Finland, Spain, France - over 50% of people under thirty have no religious affiliation .

For them, church is something from the past, and so is the Christian faith. Their parents may not go to church, and still say they are Christians, but the younger generation isn't interested in pretending. Scholars expect these trends to continue, and Europe will become increasingly secular and less Christian. Our faith will be something tourists visit, touring beautiful old churches, but few people will actually practice the faith.

Now, you may ask, doesn't age figure into this? Don't people get more interested in religion as they get older, and closer to death? Won't that happen to today's fifty year olds when they enter their senior years? Scholars have wondered about that, too. What they have discovered is that we don't get more religious as we age. Instead, the reason churches have many old people in the pews is because those people came from a generation that liked church more than the newer, younger generations. People born before the Second World War were raised to think that church was mandatory, and it held values that were important for becoming a good person and holding society together. Baby boomers also felt that way, although to a lesser extent. This is why so many of the people who attend church in Europe and here are older - they come from generations who attended church when they were young, too.

For the people who were born after 1964, the picture changes. The 1960s was a time when all forms of authority were called into question.

London Protest

The rise of feminism and gay rights, as well as the civil rights movement put a greater emphasis on personal freedom, and the liberty to seek our personal pleasure, through sex and drugs.

In Europe and elsewhere, the church looked like the enemy. A Bastion of traditional values holding people back. This is when church attendance started a steep decline in Europe. Since then, younger generations have left church as soon as they got old enough to decide. And when they became adults in the 80s and 90s, they didn't take their kids to church, either.

This process also took place in Canada. We've all lived through it. Packed churches with hundreds of congregants were normal in the 1950s, but since the 1960s, there has been a steady drop. In the United Church, we lost 50 percent of our members between 1971 and 2011. It was even worse among the Presbyterians. The Roman Catholics saw a slight rise due to the immigration of Catholics from other countries. But since then they have been experiencing declining numbers, too.

Canada 1

Today, 55% of Canadians say that they have no religious affiliation.

Canada 2

53 percent say they never attend church at all.

Canada 3

Only 23% say they attend any kind of church activity monthly. Like Europe, we are becoming a secular society.

The Americans are the outliers in all of this. They are much more religious than either Canada or Europe. They, too had been experiencing a decline since the 1960s, but it appears to have levelled off since 2020. Today, 63% of Americans say that they are Christians. 33% of Americans say that they go church services monthly - 10 percent higher than here. 83% believe in God of some kind of higher power, and 44% say they pray daily. While Canada and Europe have become more secular, the Americans are staying religious. This begs the question why.

Christianity in the United States is different from the faith in Canada and Europe. Almost one quarter of all Americans identify as evangelical. Most of those evangelicals live in the South. Their form of religion has been highly influential. They worked hard to get Trump elected, both times. They promote a very conservative agenda, and stress that without faith, individuals face eternal damnation. Their faith is not interested in free thinkers, but rather, adherence to a literal and patriarchal understanding of the Bible.

This approach to Christianity has been very effective and powerful. It has deep roots. It has been the Southern white churches who have driven the rise of the political right in the United States. Since this is Black history month, let me take a minute to explain some of the backstory.

When the South lost the civil war in the United States, whites were shocked and horrified. By law, the Black people they had enslaved would now go free. They were allowed to buy property nearby and start running their own farms and stores. They would become neighbours. The whites didn't want this. They turned to their churches to provide moral and spiritual support as they came to grips with this new situation. Before the Civil War, these churches had preached that Black people were inherently inferior, created that way by God. Those churches continued to preach that message after the war was over. White Southern Christians came to believe that the rest of the United States had lost its mind by granting freedom to Black people. The white churches became a place where whites could gather to hear that the rest of the country was wrong. America had drifted away from the truth of the Bible.

This idea has persisted to this day. In the 1970s, evangelical ministers like Jerry Falwell launched a crusade against the sins of modern society. From their perspective, the 1960s was like the Civil War, and once again, people with unchristian values had won.

Moral Majority

Falwell launched the Moral Majority, an organization that mobilized Americans to reject abortion, feminism and gay rights. These Southern evangelicals threw their support behind Ronald Reagan to get him elected as President.

To this day, American evangelicals believe Christianity is in a constant battle against modern society. This message has proven very effective for recruiting new members. It is quite intoxicating to attend a church service where you are told that you are better than other people. That you deserve to be in charge of your country; that there are enemies everywhere that you alone can defeat by putting the right people in power. In many of these churches, this conservative message is married to the idea of the Prosperity Gospel. If you love God enough, and give enough money to your church, God will grant you prosperity - a new job, a better house, a chance to marry well. This kind of religion has proven very powerful in the United States, and is the largest single group of Christians, making up almost a quarter of the population. And they are powerful - they helped get Trump elected, both times. Their power helps explain why religion remains a powerful force in the United States, and is more prevalent than in Canada and Europe.

The deep conservatism of right wing churches in the United States plays a role in religion here in Canada, too. Earlier, I mentioned that younger people are less religious than baby boomers and people born before the Second World War. When young Canadians have been asked why they have rejected religion, one of their top answers is that equate religion with the values of the religious right in the United States. American evangelicals are in the news a lot, and their values show up on the Internet, too. Many Canadian young people assume that all Christians embrace the same extremely conservative, sexist, anti-immigrant values. They find those values

backward and repellant, so they reject Christianity in its entirety. It's something their grandparents do, but they don't need it.

But this is not the faith we are called to embrace. Books will be written for many years about how American right wing Christianity lost its way. For us, we are called to follow the God who speaks in today's scripture reading from the Book of Isaiah. God declares that how people worship does not matter much - the fasting, the sacrifices. What really matters is how we treat those who suffer. How we fight injustice, set the oppressed free, and provide the poor wanderer with shelter - an age old plea for helping refugees. We know all of this, and most of the public knows that this is what churches should be doing. But Isaiah's passage includes another message. That those who help the person who suffers will be rewarded:

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

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and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58)

God promises a life of meaning if we take the extra step to help others. If we reject hate and embrace love. Helping others lets us dial down our egos and make more space for the holy

inside and outside us. God offers help to those who offer help to others. God offers compassion and comfort to those who share compassion and comfort. It is not our rituals which make us holy.

When people have wandered away, into the darkness of hatred and loneliness, it is more important than ever that we keep the light of God's compassion alive. To be a safe place where God's message of love can be heard. We may be facing a period when many churches will close, when many more people will become secular. Many people may become disillusioned with Christianity for its support of Trump. Let us not be discouraged or become faint of heart. Instead, Let us keep God's light in the window, a candle in the dark, so people can find their way back to God when they are ready. Amen.