

Debunking Gallagher: the other side of the story about church statistics

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One of the reasons why people involved with vital issues in all denominations of the Christian church must try to move forward through a more difficult fog than necessary is because of the misinformation provided by such columnists as Maggie Gallagher. An excellent example of the problem which Gallagher represents is found in her April 14, 2009 column entitled, "Mainline Protestants' Dead End."¹

Citing a 2006 study from Baylor University titled, "American Piety in the 21st Century," Gallagher notes the study's conclusion regarding declining church membership which stated: "Ninety percent of the decline comes from the non-Catholic segment of the Christian population, largely from the mainline denominations, including Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians/Anglicans and the United Church of Christ. These groups, whose proportion of the American population shrank from 18.7 percent in 1990 to 17.2 percent in 2001, all experienced sharp numerical declines in this decade and now constitute just 12.9 percent."

In a remarkable abuse of critical thinking skills, Gallagher tries to tie these statistics to the notion that mainline Protestantism's membership decline is directly related to her soap-box issue: "... the reality is that the only Christian denominations declining in recent years are those which have surrendered core Christian teaching on sex, marriage and the dignity of human life."

Her presentation then takes the form of a tirade, and she writes, "What we have all learned over the last two decades is this: A religion that caves in to pressure from sexual liberalism is a dead end. Surrender Christian teachings to appease the secular princes and Christianity dies. If faith leaders had any doubts about that strategy we now know where it leads."

¹ In www.townhall.com

Gallagher suffers from a number of problems in her approach, not the least of which is that of being statistically challenged. For example, if these non-Catholic, mainline Protestant denominations constitute 90 percent of the decline, then Catholics must constitute the other 10 percent, a fact which runs against the grain of her conclusion in light of the Catholic position on “sex, marriage and the dignity of every human life.” If, in fact, Gallagher is correct (and she is not) in asserting that her soap-box issue is responsible for the decline within Protestantism, then what is responsible for the significant decline within Catholicism, which (according to her) takes exactly the opposite position on her soap-box issue?

And, interestingly enough, if Gallagher were right about any relationship between membership loss and a liberal attitude on this issue, then it stands to reason that the most liberal group—Unitarian Universalism—would suffer the greatest loss. But, interesting enough, the Unitarians (according to their own statistics) have enjoyed modest membership gains over the last several years along the lines of one-half of one percent annually, demonstrating again that Gallagher's conclusions are wrong.

The reason why Gallagher's abuse of critical thinking skills occurs is because she attempts to live in a black-and-white world when, in fact, the world never has been black-and-white when dealing with such complex subjects. She is absolutely wrong in her characterization of the approach these mainline, Protestant denominations have taken on these important issues. If she had taken time to read their social statements, she would have discovered that they consist of measured, well-reasoned and contextual analyses of these serious social and cultural problems which take into account doctrine, scripture, the human condition, compassion and realistic circumstances of ministry in contrast to her dogmatic diatribe.

To attempt to lay a single cause at the foot of this declining-membership trend is incredibly naïve in a world of complex human, institutional and theological dynamics. Yes, there has been spirited, adversarial and even acrimonious debate within some of these mainline denominations regarding (for example) whether or not a gay pastor in a committed, monogamous relationship should be allowed to be a rostered, ordained minister. In light of the cultural and social circumstances of the present age, this debate is healthy because it calls out into the open an important issue with a major impact on human lives rather than hiding it under a doctrinarian rock. But the effort to tie this and similar controversial issues (including abortion) to statistical, church-membership benchmarks is an affront to sophisticated and well-established sociological metrics.

There are other possible reasons for the membership shift which cut a wide swath beyond Gallagher's myopic reasons, and they include: (1) the difficulty contemporary, intelligent people (especially young people) have with dogmatic, doctrinal and confessional assertions in a world come of age at a time when mainline denominations have made little effort to elevate theology to a new level of analysis and understanding; (2) the reluctance of denominations embracing the traditional orthodoxy of theology to promote and teach the study of scripture at a level of academic integrity which includes the use of historical criticism, form criticism, textual criticism and source analysis which moves beyond mythology to the level of actually understanding the basis of knowledge acquisition through the important principles of epistemology; (3) the inclination of mainline denominations to give only lip service to such critical issues as state-sanctioned torture, the waging of immoral war, inhumane immigration policies, and similar issues about which conscientious and morally-sophisticated people have specific and well-reasoned opinions based on Christian, moral and biblical principles, but which remain on the back burner only as topics of conversation for mainline Protestants.

Gallagher also offers this quote from another neoconservative source: “ ' It looks like the two-party system of American Protestantism —mainline versus evangelical—is collapsing,' said Mark Silk, director of the Public Values Program. 'A generic form of evangelicalism is emerging as the normative form of non-Catholic Christianity in the United States.'”

Any intelligent and in-depth analysis regarding the rise of membership in evangelical, televangelical and super-evangelical venues relates to the manner in which those approaches are packaged to appeal to self-interested human need for prosperity (the health-and-wealth gospel), for healing of physical maladies, and for salvific guarantees. There is no evidence directly connecting these flavors of evangelical initiatives to the narrowly-construed, soap-box issue Gallagher wants to promote in evangelical venues which have experienced membership growth.

In addition, Gallagher has another problem, namely her own credibility and moral compass. As reported in *The Washington Post*² Gallagher received tens of thousands of dollars from the Bush (43) administration's Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) for helping promote the president's “healthy marriage” programs. She testified before Congress in favor of the programs but never disclosed the payments. The failure to make such a disclosure clearly breached professional ethics. According to the article, Thomas Kunkel, president

2 Article by Joe Crea, issue of February 4, 2005.

of the American Journalism Review and dean of the journalism department at the University of Maryland, said Gallagher should have made the disclosure. In addition, Winnie Stachelberg of the Human Rights Campaign (as reported in the article) said, “For someone who is in the business of promoting marriage, sending mixed signals and blurring the lines of ethics is a very damaging and dangerous position. She of all people should be held to a high standard, let alone those who employ her.”

The article said Gallagher defended her non-disclosure with a statement on her website and said that it “never occurred” to her to disclose the contract, and that she would have done so if she “had remembered it.”

In the final analysis, Gallagher's proposition regarding the decline in church membership lacks the same level of reason and critical thinking skills which caused her to “forget” the important ethical consideration relating to full disclosure.

We can only hope that, in the future, she works harder at doing a better job in research, analysis, logic, and in the use of her moral compass.