It's Not Your Fault

BY DAVID EWART

American author and social critic James Howard Kunstler coined the phrase "long emergency" to describe the effect of decades of small changes. For example, if your congregation were to lose half its members in one year, that would be an emergency. But if it were to halve its membership over two decades, losing maybe three of four per year, you would adjust and carry on. But, says Kunstler, it's still an emergency – a long emergency.

Here's how it looks on a national scale. In 1977, when the United Church began recording average weekly attendance, 378,000 people went to church. That number peaked at 404,000 in 1984. Since then, attendance has gradually declined by 2.5 percent each year, so that in 2011 the number was 167,000. And if the rate of decline for only the past 10 years does not change, attendance will drop to 25,000 by 2025.

United Church weekly attendance
1977-2011, projected to 2025

But here is the really bad news: It's not your fault. The decline in worship attendance is not because you need a better minister, cheerier music, more small groups or jazzier youth programs. It's not because you need read one more church-improvement book or to attend one more workshop. It's not because the United Church is too liberal or too political.

The simple fact is that Canadians are not going to church like they used to. In fact, Canadians aren't going to synagogues, mosques, temples, or Kiwanis either. Volunteer membership organizations of all types are declining.

Attendance decline is not a problem that can be fixed. It is simply a reality to which we must respond. Congregations must plan to be fewer, smaller and without buildings or payrolls. The challenge is too big for individual congregations to meet on their own; we will need to close, merge, and work together in new ways.

The good news is that the United Church was founded by those who left the beloved familiar behind and embraced the desired unknown. Where that heart still beats, our hope for the future can be found.

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