



“ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*

— 1 Peter 1:3-4

”

“*The church is dying.*”

You’ve probably heard that said. Perhaps not in those exact words, but you’ve probably heard people talking about how much trouble the church is in. How disconnected the church has become from the society around it, how irrelevant it has become. Declining numbers in the pews each week. Fewer and fewer people involved in ministries. Formerly vital missions struggling to keep their doors open as financial support dwindles away.

The Vietnam War, Watergate, church scandals — all these and more have contributed to a breakdown in trust for the “institution,” including that of religion. The economic crises of the past decades have also led to a growing tension in the church, as more people become anxious about their finances and fewer are giving to the ministries of the church.

It used to be that the church had only to open its doors, and people from the community would stream in.

No more.

Now when people think of “church,” they’re not usually thinking of a place that is centrally important to their lives. The church is simply one of those buildings you pass by on your way to somewhere else. Perhaps it is a directional marker (as in, “Turn right at Aldersgate Church on Fort Hunt Road”), or a place you visit for a cub scout meeting or yearly flea market. It’s available if you and your family are in the mood to attend a Christmas Eve candlelight service, or as an attractive venue for a wedding. In the autumn, the front lawn is a good place to

pick up a pumpkin, and the parking lot is a convenient location to teach your teenager how to drive.

The church has fewer and fewer stalwart members, and more and more spectator attenders. It is ironic that as the number of programs, missions, and ministries offered in and through our churches has increased, this has led people to more highly value what the church can do for them and what they get out of church, than what they can offer to the church and its community.

I recently heard a lay leader in my congregation describing his knowledge of leadership in the church as “seeing how sausage gets made.” This statement, quite unfortunately, came in the context of an announcement made in a worship service, in which he went on to comment: “And, let’s be honest, *no one* wants to know how sausage gets made.” (Yikes!)

But amidst the doom and gloom portrayed by the media, and the moments of panic induced by a perusal of our church budgets... there is hope! Big, huge, enormous, life-transforming hope!

QUESTION:

On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent), how would you rate the health of your particular congregation at this moment?

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