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IS THE UNITED STATES A NATION OF RELIGIOUS DRIFTERS?

Fellow Pilgrims:

The Pew Foundation conducts many surveys about a whole host of issues. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life concludes that the U.S. is a nation of religious drifters. About half of adults switch their faith/denominational affiliation at least once during their lives. The reasons for the change depends a lot on whether or not one grew up Roman Catholic, Protestant, or nonreligious. Roman Catholics are more likely than Protestants to leave their denomination because they have stopped believing in its teachings. Many Protestants trade one Protestant denomination for another because of changed life circumstances. The numbers of those unaffiliated with any religion or denomination are growing. They are growing because of disenchantment with religious leaders and institutions, not because of a lack of religious belief.

In general between 47% and 59% of United States adults have changed affiliation at least once. Most of them described their experience as drifting away from their childhood faith. Many sociologists and anthropologists have described American religious life as an a la carte faith, that is, you pick and choose what to believe within a specific group rather than believing in a systematic whole. Dr. D. Michael Lindsay (sociology, Rice University) says, the religious behavior of adults is an indictment of organized Christianity. He believes the data suggests there is a big open door for newcomers, but a wide back door where people are leaving.

This situation he describes creates opportunities for us at St. Marks. We can be looking at our programs and emphasizes along two lines of inquiry. What is our ‘open door’ for newcomers? How do we energize people who come so they stay, grow in the faith, and not seek a “wide rear door” to leave? How do we identify, welcome, and follow-up with newcomers who come to worship, special programs, youth and children’s programs, or call the church for information? How do we get St. Mark’s story and the Gospel out in the community and raise our visibility in the wider community? How do we help people cope with a new environment and perhaps, a new style of worship? How do we follow-up with them about our identity and services? Once they pass beyond the “newcomer status, how do we continue to minister to them as individuals? How do we help people not fall between the cracks and gradually drift away? How do we live so that we are Bibles for those who do not read the Bible?

If you goggle *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, you can read the full survey. I would like to end with this prayer: Lord, You said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Let Your truth be our truth. Show us Your way. Help us bring life to the world through a loving service, both here at St. Mark’s and in all the arenas we find ourselves in. Help us bring Your light to the darkest corners of our own lives and to the lives of others. Be with our mouths when we speak. Be with our hands in what they do. Be with our minds in what we think. Be with our hearts in what we feel. Work in us, through us, in spite of us. Amen.

In Christ’s love,

Chuck Ellenbaum ><>+

Spiritual Director