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About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Articles are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the Vintage Voice! Send your submissions to vintagevoice@cpf.org.

VINTAGE VOICE



Change

By Judy Wright Mathews

For some time, we've been reading of declining numbers in established religious organizations. We realize that this has been happening in our own Episcopal Church. In 1950, according to Mark J. Duffy, Canonical Archivist and Director for The Archives of the Episcopal Church, there were 2,512,265 baptized Episcopalians out of a US population of 152.3 million (United States Census). In 2017, there were 1,712,563 baptized Episcopalians out of a US population of 325.7 million.

How do we feel about this? Does this reality affect our own, personal church life? Moreover, I wonder just how concerned we older Episcopalians are about these statistics. Most Episcopalians reading this are in their 60s and 70s; I'm 87.

No doubt, our secular, daily lives have changed. We see reports of change in the mainstream press, telling us what we want, what to wear, what to think, and, at times, what to believe. When I think about the declining number of Episcopalians, I enjoy the memory of a delightful occurrence in church some years ago when a loud child was heard by the entire congregation. The preacher stopped preaching and said, "Leave that child alone, and let him stay in church. Without children, our Church has no future." That hit me — he is right! A decade later, while taking part in the Eucharist in another church, a paper airplane hit me; I told myself, the child who threw it is the future of our Church.

Thinking about all of this, I recently sent out a survey across the United States asking my friends questions about their church experiences and that of their families. It went to both the laity and ordained in our Episcopal Church, to friends who are connected to, or active with, an Episcopal congregation, ranging from very large to small.

The survey begins by asking these lay and ordained Episcopalians questions about the church attendance of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. More than half responded that these younger family members go to church "all the time" or "occasionally."

Responses overall from clergy were strong. A priest, younger than me, said of his six children, five go to church most or all of the time, and the other one occasionally. One said that of five children, two children seldom go to church, but three do, and the youngest two are both on the vestry at their church. He added that all five grandchildren are active. Another said that some of his grandchildren attend church all the time, some occasionally, and one grandchild may be headed for seminary. I noted that he didn't indicate she or he.

In 2018, we're not surprised by a young woman considering seminary. My experiences go back to more conservative times. We Episcopalians who grew up in the Episcopal Church are familiar with the robust women's groups such as the Women's Auxiliary and the Episcopal Church Women (ECW). Since 1889, women in the Episcopal Church have been putting money—coins at first—into the small United Thank Offering (UTO) blue boxes when they were thankful.

This collection of coins has grown. A \$3 million gift was presented at the recent General Convention Triennial by the women of our Church. This money helps people in need around the world. The UTO began before women were allowed to serve as ordained. They excelled in the only things they were allowed to do to serve their Church. They taught Sunday School, cooked, called on the sick, and served on altar guilds.

Beginning in the late 1800s, our Church authorized a new woman's position, Deaconess. These dedicated women worked in areas of poverty and served the Church in a wide range of social services. I remember a Deaconess at my parish in the 1950s. In 1970, when women were allowed to be ordained, Deaconesses simply became Deacons. In the 1940s, we had busy, active youth groups that included girls; now girls serve as acolytes. In the mid-1970s, women were ordained to the priesthood.

Of course, changes in the Church have not been limited to those regarding gender. The congregations I grew up in were all white. Every survey response that I received said that their congregation was racially integrated, except for one. Almost two-thirds of my responders said their congregation has a gender-preferred mix. While total numbers may be decreasing, these developments over the past decades have given us, in my opinion, stronger, healthier, more active congregations.

All my life, I have heard in church on Sundays that we must carry the Sunday message of Jesus out into our daily lives, to our workplace, homes, and schools. We certainly hear that in my parish. Our exterior mission has definitely changed where I worship. We are provided packages of food and other necessities to offer people on the street who ask for help at traffic lights.

Today, I see a strong commitment to outreach, reaching out to those in need beyond the walls of our sacred spaces. I see this in what I read and see in our Episcopal Church. If our denomination is not as large as it was when we were mostly white and led by all men, then some of us believe we are better for it, not in spite of it! When volunteers at a food pantry were asked why they got involved, one woman replied, "It's the right thing to do. Jesus told us to feed the hungry."

The demographics of our Church leadership have also changed. We elected a woman as our Presiding Bishop, and next, an African American. People of different races sit in our pews and receive communion from lay people as well as priests, Deacons, and teenage acolytes. Divorced women and men serve communion when there was a time when they were not allowed to receive our Eucharist. Our congregations arrange to feed the people in the street and at food pantries inside our church buildings. In my diocese, services are held outside the diocesan office, on the street, each Sunday. People on the street receive communion, then lunch.

Again, I wonder if we older Episcopalians are concerned about these changes or are we pleased? I, myself, am pleased with the current state of our Episcopal Church.



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