

Why Are We Here?

**Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan
as read by Mary McDonald**

March 26, 2023

The children in the after-school program sat in a circle. They were drawing pictures of buildings, in the most spectacular of ways that six-, seven-, eight- and nine-year-olds do. One young boy said aloud to no one in particular, "I'm going to draw a church." A six-year-old answered, "What's a church?" The older child thought she was joking and kept saying, "C'mon, you know... a church..." The six-year-old wasn't joking. She didn't know. Then a seven-year-old said, "I don't know either. What is it?"

There was a time, long ago, when "everyone" went to church. Then, not so long ago, "most people" went to church. Now, more people don't go to church or belong to any religious community.

Gallup polls reported that the percentage of Americans who were members in any house of worship in 2020 dropped below 50% for the first time in eighty years of tracking such trends. In 2018, 50 percent of Americans belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 70 percent in 1999. In 2020 that percentage dropped to 47 percent. In the year 2000, 8 percent of Americans did not identify with any religion. Today that number is 21 percent.¹

And yes, age does correlate with church membership:

Sixty-six percent of Americans born before 1946 belong to a church.

Fifty-eight percent of baby boomers belong to a church.

Fifty percent of those in Generation X belong to a church.

Thirty-six percent of millennials belong to a church.²

Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people! How many of you know those lines or grew up with them in Sunday

1 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

2 Ibid.

School? Me, too.

We've been bemoaning the decrease in religious involvement for years. I fear that it has assumed the role of the boy calling wolf and its warning bells are not being heard.

Why are we here? Why are we here? Why are we here?

I answered that question for myself in the testimonial I gave at the Campaign Kickoff Service earlier this month. Reverend Rebecca told me that the more she read my words, the more powerful they became.

I could feel very strongly that families in reduced circumstances should have wonderful holidays and experiences like summer camps, but I wouldn't be able to figure out what I could do about it, and I'd push it off 'til later.

I might suffer from loss and loneliness and know that I should not bear it alone, yet shy away from burdening my children or my neighbors.

I'm sure we are here for different reasons. We're here because we were raised to go to church or because we are looking for community or hope or peace. We are here because we have come to love the people here, even the ones that are the most challenging to us. We love them and miss them when they're gone.

We are here because tradition calls us to return, mystery urges us to explore, and pain claims that there be more to life.

Why are you here?

The 2022 Faith Communities Today reports on statistics from 15,278 congregations representing 80 different faith traditions. It reports, "As increasing percentages of individuals choose to identify as none, done, or spiritual not religious, it might seem as if religious congregations no longer matter. However, personal commitments and identities are often insubstantial without a supportive community. An individual's faith is transitory, is subject to changes throughout one's life, and ultimately lasts only as long as the

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individual does. It is the religious organizations—congregations, denominations, and parachurch groups—that create the bedrock foundation of religious and spiritual life in this country and sustain both faith traditions and individuals’ quests across time and generational variations.”³

Though people are here for a variety of reasons, I think we need to seriously consider two of them. These are not so much about the person as the collective impact of our being here. They have to do with the future we are creating for our children and for the Earth.

The vast majority of congregations across the country and included in the 2020 Faith Today study are Evangelical Protestant. These congregations make up 71.3 percent, including black Protestant churches. This is followed by the Mainline Protestant Christian tradition at 20.2 percent and then by Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities at 5.2 percent. “Other religious traditions,” of which Unitarian Universalists are a part, are 1.4 percent of the religious landscape in our country. We are joined by Baha’i, Jewish, and Muslim congregations. The study does admit to undercounting the growing diversity of non-Christian religious groups within the country.⁴ Those are difficult to catalogue. Still, the impact of this data remains.

Half of all congregations in our country are in the South, where 38 percent of the U.S. population lives. “The Northeast has 12 percent of congregations and 17 percent of Americans while the North Central states have 24 percent of faith communities and 21 percent of the total population. This means that the south and central states have nearly double the churches per million residents as do the northeast and west.”⁵

We know that religious and political affiliation have a strong correlation and likewise affect one’s position on issues of social justice and human rights. Consider just a few facts.

The Pew Research Center reports that “Highly

3 <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2020-survey/>

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

religious Americans (those who say they pray each day, regularly attend religious services and consider religion very important in their lives) are far less likely than other U.S. adults to express concern about warming temperatures around the globe.”⁶

So, are people’s views on issues related to transgender directly correlated to their religious views? In July of 2022, Pew Research Center reported that white evangelicals are the single religious group in which a majority believe our country has gone too far in accepting transgender people. Other religious groups are divided and have just as many people who feel we haven’t gone far enough. The majority of people who are religiously unaffiliated believe we haven’t gone far enough.⁷

Young adults, those aged eighteen to twenty-nine, do not feel optimistic about our country. The Pew Research Center asked them in a 2022 study to give one word to describe their feelings about the current state of our country. The top words were “angry, concerning, confusing, defeat, embarrassing, expensive, fragmented, tense, unstable and wary. The two positive words were “decent and fixable.”⁸ That same study showed that a global response to climate change is the overarching top priority for young adults.

When American young adults were asked what they felt shame about with respect to our country, they answered “internal social division, political intervention abroad, prolonged warfare, slavery, unresolved racial issues, and withdrawal from Afghanistan.” When asked what they were proud about, they replied “democracy, economic strength, foreign aid, Marshall Plan, and the

6 <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/17/how-religion-intersects-with-americans-views-on-the-environment/>

7 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/07/07/attitudes-about-transgender-issues-vary-widely-among-christians-religious-nones-in-u-s/>

8 <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/03/08/how-young-adults-want-their-country-to-engage-with-the-world/>

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American Dream.”⁹

Without tooting our own Unitarian Universalist horn (or organ as the case may be), we align with the young adults and the religiously unaffiliated. We do believe that climate change is real. We work for the rights of trans people. Like young adults, we find the divisions within our country and the unresolved history of slavery concerning. We also believe that our country is decent and “fixable.”

Not only must we keep Unitarian Universalism in the religious dialogue, but also we must increase its presence, nationally and locally. We are called to let the children and young adults know they are not alone. We listen to them, and we agree. We must fight for the preservation and restoration of our mother Earth, and we of course must further our spiritual journeys and show up for one another. The religious landscape needs our values and our engagement.

The 2020 Faith Communities Today study also has research that shows the nine things required for faith communities today to thrive:

- have strong leadership that fits well with the participants
- have a clear and compelling mission
- be innovative and open to change
- be active in the local community
- have more vibrant worship that is thought-provoking and stimulating
- have a community of participants that represents a diversity of ages, genders, races and other differences
- be good at incorporating new people
- have significant lay involvement, including contributing financially and volunteering
- live out their faith commitments in everyday life and tell others about the congregation¹⁰

That’s a lot, and it gives us metrics we can use to

9 Ibid.

10 <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-To-day-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>

assess ourselves.

Why are you here?

Why are we here?

I believe it is for ourselves, each other, the children, the young adults, and the future. We are here for the here and now and for the life yet to come, here, on this Earth.

Please pledge if you haven’t already. Please increase your pledge if you can. Please get involved with the auction. Please share about our faith, and please make your belonging meaningful to you.

Let’s complete the campaign and assure our health so that we, the staff, and Reverend Rebecca can concentrate on getting our values into the world and working to protect the Earth to leave a healthy world for our children and grandchildren.

Amen and blessed be.