

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras
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Matthew 16:18

Grace to you and peace.

Several members of our congregation have shared with me their concern regarding declining the membership of our congregation and the church in general in the U. S. Christian faith is in the process of change and decay. Some of you are worried because people are no longer interested in church. I heard people complaining that the churches will become museums. The majority of churches are aging because youth are not interested in church. The number of "nones" continues to grow among the young generations.

My sister in Belgium shared with me that she needs to travel an hour each Sunday to go to Brussels for worship. They are several churches in her town, but the churches are empty and closed. Last October I attended a theological conference arranged by our Synod. Our Bishop Gerald Mansholt shared with the pastors that ELCA is experiencing a severe shortage of pastors. People are no longer interested in seminary for many reasons. Is Christianity going to die?

Many of you are worried about the future of the churches in the U.S. I'm glad that you are concerned because I believe you want to revive our church. As for me, I am not worried at all because I trust in Jesus' promise in Matthew 16:18 "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." History proves that Jesus is faithful to his promise. I'll give you two examples.

In the 18th century Britain, people had little time to devote to God. They were extremely poor and focused on their survival. They worked very hard, but they gained little. There was no law to protect them. Children worked in mines and in general, people worked like animals to survive. People were used and abused. It was impossible for them to care about their spiritual life. The church had nothing to do with them. The churches in Britain were almost empty. But because Jesus is faithful to his promise, he used John Wesley and his brother Charles Wesley to change the lives of the poor and to transform Britain.

John Wesley preached in fields and had personal contact with the poor. He taught that they are valuable people. Wesley changed the life of people. He taught, like Luther, "salvation by faith alone through God's grace." He also taught to serve the neighbors. As a result, the Methodist church was established. Churches were packed with people and one time, the roof of a crowded church collapsed. People became hungry for the word of God. Jesus used Wesley to revive his church. No one can defeat the church of Christ.

A second example is taken from the Church in Russia during the communist regime. The Communists destroyed and desecrated and repurposed many churches. For example, the Communists destroyed the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and turned it into an outdoor swimming pool. Christians were persecuted, and priests were imprisoned and tortured. The Communists replaced religious belief with atheism. The majority of Russians converted to atheism. The churches were almost empty. However, there were underground churches, and very few people kept the faith.

In June 1941, Nazi invaded the Soviet Union, and in winter the Nazis were very close to Moscow. In that time, Stalin was worried that the Nazis would take Moscow. So, he ordered to open all the churches and invited people to pray to save Moscow. Because Jesus Christ is faithful to his promise, he used a dictator and brutal leader like Stalin to end his anti-religious campaign. He also agreed to open an Orthodox seminary.

Years later, the Orthodox Church in Russia became very strong, and many atheists converted to Christianity. After decades of rejecting faith, churches in Russia are thriving, in particular, the Orthodox Church. The government of Russia supports the church. Now Russia is considered a Christian country.

These examples of Dying and reviving the church in Britain and Russia assure us that the church in the United States will not die. Jesus will use you and me to fulfill his promise "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Examples of the Gates of Hades are atheism, materialism, sexism...etc. I do not deny that we are experiencing a spiritual crisis in the United States. I have confidence in Jesus who will help us to deal with our spiritual crisis and transform and revive the church in the United States. As we are starting a new year, I strongly encourage you, not to be worried about the future of our church, instead keep witnessing to the love of God by taking care of your neighbor. I encourage you to keep inviting people to our church. Keep speaking the words of love and wisdom and Live your life as a child of God, and you will witness the revival of our church in the U. S.