

Shrinking congregations have led to revival tactics

by Sandi Dolbee

Martha Grace Reese doesn't sugarcoat the numbers.

Between 1960 and 2000, membership dropped by 5 million people in the seven mainline Protestant denominations she studied. Meanwhile, the population of the United States grew by 100 million. "That's not good," writes Reese in "Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism" (Chalice Press, \$19.99), which is the culmination of a four-year national study.

REVIVAL TACTICS - Lutheran Bishop Murray Finck (top left, in glasses) blesses the Rev. Erin Martinson (center) during her installation as pastor for outreach at Christ Lutheran Church in San Diego. Her job will be to bridge the gap between the church and the community. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin.

The reasons for the slide depend on who is asked. Reese, a former pastor who is now a church consultant, acknowledges that the country isn't as traditionally religious as it used to be. Still, she offers another possibility for empty pews: Mainline churches, many of which tend to be more liberal, are suffering from a fear of evangelism.

Reese's Mainline Evangelism Project, funded by the Lilly Endowment and based in St. Louis, looked at hundreds of congregations in the American Baptist denomination, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and United Methodist Church. She found that many mainline Protestants are embarrassed, even angry, about evangelism - turned off, in part, because of the emphasis evangelical, conservative churches put on conversion as the only way to salvation.

"Mainline churches don't want to look fundamentalist," says Reese, who was in San Diego in January to conduct a workshop and meet with Methodist clergy. "They don't want to do all the cartoonish bad stuff of threatening people, scaring people. They want people to know that God is love." But she has a message for them: Embrace your inner evangelist. She thinks they can do it without threatening people or offending other faiths.

As it turns out, evangelism is slowly starting to make a comeback in mainline churches, from staff being hired to concentrate on outreach to training programs launched to revitalize congregations.

DIFFERENT LOOK

At First United Methodist Church in Escondido, Calif., senior pastor Faith Conklin is looking for a director of evangelism and marketing. "United Methodist churches have been scared of the word for the most part and,

in many ways, we've given it up, which is unfortunate because it's foundational," says Conklin.

For the Escondido church, and like-minded congregations, evangelism is more about relationships than conversions. "Evangelism is our work, and conversion is God's work," says Conklin. "It's not my job to save your soul. That's God's task."

Instead, she speaks of evangelism in terms of study groups, sports teams and even a monthly movie night at the church. "How do you share your passion (for Jesus) in such a way that other people aren't put off by it?" she says. "And the answer, I think, is that you start by listening. And you have to listen to where people are and sometimes we're not good at listening. We go out and tell them the answers to questions they don't ask."

Recently, the Rev. Erin Martinson was formally installed as pastor for outreach at Christ Lutheran Church in San Diego's Pacific Beach area. Her job: Bridge the gap between the church and the community. Martinson suggests that much of evangelism is about getting comfortable with talking about religion. "We have a generation who have learned we don't talk about our faith and we don't talk about our politics," she says.

But current events have taught otherwise. "Politics is a part of our lives, period," says Martinson. "I think the same is true about faith."

Again, her emphasis is not on converting people. "I don't think it's our business to convert," Martinson says. "I think that's the work of the Holy Spirit. It's our business to be present in the world."

INSIDE OUT

The United Church of Christ also has climbed aboard the evangelism bandwagon, or at least a version of it, launching a Congregational Vitality Initiative designed to offer a "holistic approach" to evangelism, education and leadership.

"The church is reaching out," says the Rev. Arthur Cribbs, who attended a Congregational Vitality training workshop recently in nearby San Bernardino County. "It is not necessarily saying everybody has to come in. We're saying everybody who is inside must move out."

For Cribbs, pastor of Christian Fellowship Congregational Church in the Emerald Hills area of San Diego, evangelism is about encouraging people on their own spiritual path. Using it to proselytize is not only wrong,

he says, it's sinful. "I believe it is a great mistake to think that I have the answer for the world."

Reese is reluctant to talk about specific churches in her evangelism study but she will say that Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian was one of the healthier models she encountered. Besides being good at outreach, it has strong programs once visitors get inside the doors, she says. "There is excellent worship, extraordinary preaching, wonderful educational programs, great prayer training. It's all in place."

The Rev. Joe Farrell, associate pastor for spiritual growth, says members are encouraged to invite friends on social service projects like cleaning up the beach. He believes people need to feel like they belong to something of value before they are willing to adopt the beliefs of that community.

Farrell says talking about his Christianity doesn't have to be a turnoff. "As a Christian, I still believe there is one truth, but I don't negate other people's stories."

Besides the research in it, Reese says her book is designed to be a how-to manual for the evangelically squeamish. Much time is spent coaxing people to share their faith and to figure out how their own church is doing at outreach.

Whether evangelism will fill the pews of emptying churches, revitalize sluggish ones and strengthen those that are already healthy remains to be seen. If Reese has her way, it will. She's adamant that the best way to practice a spiritual life is in a congregation. "You have to have a community for support," she says. "There's no way of being a Christian alone. You just can't do it."

Copley News Service

Shrinking congregations have led to revival tactics by Sandi Dolbee