

U.S. News

Mainline denominations losing impact on nation

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By Steve Levin, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The foot soldiers in some of America's greatest battles carried neither guns nor swords. Instead, armed with Bibles and faith in God's mercy, they prayed and marched and fought to end slavery, improve social welfare and establish civil rights.

Members of those churches, some of which became known as mainline denominations, were society's vanguard, shaping the country's culture and refining debate.

But those times are long past. Today, the opposite is occurring as secular culture defines mainline churches' dialogue on everything from social issues to politics and morality, tellingly shown this summer at the emotional and acrimonious national gatherings of the Presbyterian Church USA and the Episcopal Church.

"Culture has moved so that no longer is the mainline [church] the moral voice for America the way it might have been perceived in the '40s, '50s and '60s," said Scott L. Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary.

"The mainline isn't the public player that it once was."

The mainline churches, Protestant denominations so named for their moderate theologies that balance societal changes with the Christian faith's historical roots, are reeling on several fronts.

- Huge membership declines in the Presbyterian Church USA, United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church from declining birth rates and weaker denominational ties have sapped their collective strength.
- The mainline churches have been paralyzed by internal theological and political debates. Stark divisions between denominations' "liberals" and "conservatives" make it difficult for Christians even to communicate with one another.
- Secularism -- the number of people who say they have no religious affiliation -- has increased to 14 percent of the American adult population, up from 8 percent in 1990. That segment's growth easily has outpaced that of any religious denomination.
- Church giving is down. According to Empty Tomb, a mission research and advocacy organization in Champaign, Ill., per capita giving among 11 mainline denominations in 2003 was 2.5 percent of income, less than the 3.3 percent of income that was given in 1933 during the Great Depression. What is being given is being focused on salaries and in-house programs, not missions and evangelism.

Most enervating, however, has been the mainline churches' inability to frame or participate in issues of national importance. Notwithstanding mobilizations in response to humanitarian needs after hurricanes Katrina and Rita last year, the mainline churches have more often mimicked the U.S. Congress' creeping, negative partisan debates than taken bold action of their own.

Homosexuality hamstrings churches

The single issue hamstringing the mainline churches is homosexuality and its place in the church. At its 2004 General Conference in Pittsburgh, the United Methodist Church maintained its stance against gay ordination and same-sex blessings. Last year, it was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The national gatherings this summer of both the Presbyterians and Episcopalians were consumed by it.

"We've been fighting in this ditch for 28 years and the ditch is getting deeper," the Presbyterians' former moderator, Marj Carpenter, of Big Spring, Texas, said in a speech at the denomination's General Assembly last month. "It's starting to affect our mission work, our youth ministry, and our evangelism, and I'm ready to try something else.

"Please, let's get on with being the church, taking the gospel into the world and offering them something else other than arguments."

Derek H. Davis, dean of the college of humanities at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Texas and an expert in church-state relations, said part of the problem is that moderates in the mainline churches have gone silent.

"My own sense is it's a voice that's greatly needed in our present condition," he said. "It tends to be a debate that's vigorously pursued on the far ends. It makes the cultural wars in America seem more profound than they should be.

"The mainline churches have always represented this moderate middle. Without their voice, we're not debating, we're dividing."

John C. Green, a senior fellow with the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and a professor of political science at the University of Akron, blames the churches' divisions on the country's deep rifts. "What we lack is a consensus on what is moral and what we should do about it," he said. "But if history is any guide, the current warring parties -- whether in the mainline churches or in the country at large -- are unlikely to provide a solution.

"Quite literally, they are part of the problem."

Shrinking membership

One reason the national impact of mainline churches has lessened is that they no longer represent the American churchgoing public.

The Empty Tomb study showed that liberal Protestant denominations in 1968, defined as those belonging to the National Council of Churches, had 26.5 million members, or about 13.2 percent of the country's population. By 2003, that had shrunk to 6.8 percent while the U.S. population grew 45 percent during the same period.

Taking their place have been evangelical and Pentecostal groups. Allan Carlson, president of the conservative Howard Center on Family, Religion & Society in Rockford, Ill., said the rise of "militant secularism" during that time, exemplified by 1973's Roe v. Wade decision overturning the country's abortion laws and the curtailing of religious tax exemptions, helped fuel the rise of the Religious Right.

Religion today in America is a virtual flip-flop of the 20th century, when biblical traditionalists were marginalized while liberal Protestantism was ascendant.

Mr. Carlson said there are similarities between today and the periods of American history known as the first and second Great Awakenings. The former, from the 1740-1760s, featured a renewal of religious belief highlighted by the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, who chastised Colonists for falling away from their faith. The spike in faith ultimately led to a political revitalization, setting the stage for the Revolutionary War.

The second Great Awakening occurred at the beginning of the 19th century. Church membership grew by 300 percent, new denominations formed and missionary societies were created to convert Native Americans, Africans and Asians, and to witness to western frontiersmen.

The best example of the moral revival it sparked was in pre-marital pregnancy rates. In 1800, 35 percent of new brides were pregnant when they married. By 1850, that had dropped to 10 percent. The period also marked the start of the temperance movement. More importantly, it was the beginning of the anti-slavery movement.

"This was a case where religious enthusiasm was translated into political and moral consequences," Mr. Carlson said. "Sometimes I've thought that maybe we're in the middle of another great awakening.

"On the other hand, so much of what is happening [in religion] is what I call a 'negative battle.' A negative battle is simply trying to stop something from happening," in this case, gay ordination and gay marriage.

Can the mainline churches lift themselves back into a position of influence? Shaun A. Casey, an associate professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary, believes their weakened state works against them.

"The margin for effectiveness is really quite limited right now," he said.

Dr. Thumma said some of the same reasons that caused the mainline churches' fall from prominence - dropping attendance, polarizing debate, secularism -- prevent them from being a progressive force for Americans. It's a tough sell to the public anyway, he said, which today views religion as regressive.

Further complicating that effort is national church leaders' concern that any bold move could alienate significant numbers of members.

"From the denominational executive position, it's kind of survival mode," he said. "If you make a strong claim, you lose people. It requires the national leaders to be more cautious about what they say and about what they are going to stand up for.

"It's a cycle they're in that there are not too many ways to get out. To be prophetic means you're going to lose some profits."