

All of my evidence is anecdotal

By [Diane Roth](#)

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Which is to say: all I have is stories.

I noticed a young family gone absent from worship. She is a gifted musician and actress; they have two young children. She did a benefit concert here once full of wonderful musical numbers; all the proceeds went to cancer research. I had been somewhat connected with them and eventually found her on facebook, where I noticed that her religious affiliation was "atheist."

Oh.

We had several facebook chats, where she was open about she and her husband's conversations, and that they discovered that "they didn't really believe in a personal god." Later on, I noticed she had changed her religious designation to "humanist"; I asked her if that was a somewhat "kinder, gentler" version of atheism, especially since I knew that several members of her family were pious Christians. I thought there was a slight online grin there.

A young couple is sitting in my office. They want to get married. They are extremely nice, interesting, earnest people. He's a special education teacher, I remember, who considers himself a role model for at-risk kids.

They are sitting in my office, having completed the pre-marriage inventory that I offer. We are talking about Spiritual Beliefs, which is one of the categories on the inventory.

"We don't believe that you have to go church to be saved," they tell me. They say it with a slight bit of embarrassment, as it is Sunday,

after church, and I am wearing a collar, and until about 15 minutes ago, I was leading worship. But it's only a slight bit of embarrassment.

The thing is, if the sentence is exactly the way they said it, "I don't think you have to go to church to be saved," I don't disagree with them. I don't think you have to go to church to be saved, if you put it in those particular words. The sentence makes going to church sound like part of a salvation check-list, and going to church like taking castor oil or eating your spinach. Good-for-you, they say, but somehow unpleasant. (Which I suppose it is, for some people.) There's the problem with the words "have to", but there's also a problem with the words "Go to church", rather than "go to worship." It makes church sound like a place you spend a little time to fulfill your religious requirement, rather than a community of people who are committed to listening to God and following Jesus.

Saturday, I met with a couple of women who want to join our congregation. Mostly, we just had a conversation, although I gave them each a copy of Daniel Erlander's book [Baptized, We Live](#). And a copy of Luther's Small Catechism. They asked questions; we talked about a few of the fundamentals of what it means to be Christian, and Lutheran. I offered my favorite part of the catechism, which is Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Creed (on the Holy Spirit), "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith...."

"You're here because the Holy Spirit called you," I offered. "At least, according to Luther."

"That's what we think," they both said.

Last Wednesday, I heard a little bit of a presentation by Diana Butler Bass. The title of her lecture was, "The Great Religious Recession",

and was taken from her forthcoming book, [Christianity after Religion](#). She did a lot of research and told stories about the decline in esteem for religion all over the world, including here. A lot of what she said rang true. Though it is not true that Christians are a persecuted minority in the United States, it is true that the religious climate is changing, that culture is more skeptical and less friendly to religion in general.

There are days when it can get discouraging.

But somehow I think that the Holy Spirit is still around.

But, all I have is stories.

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