

The concern on the other end

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I ran into an older friend of mine at the gym the other day. I hadn't seen him in a little while. He recently had some significant health problems, but is now well on his way to recovery. For a man in his early eighties, he's doing remarkably well.

During our little chat, my friend found a way of indicating to me that he was feeling great, not necessarily physically, but because he had finally freed himself from the shackles of organized religion. Although his wife still attends worship occasionally (not at the church I serve), he's officially done with the church. Our brief conversation (he was on his way out; I was on my way to class) didn't provide much in the way of explanation. But, it was fairly clear that this was something that he's been wanting and now, perhaps because of his illness or his advancing years that have offered a new-found courage (though I really don't know), he's happy to be rid of his attachment to church.

For someone who is not only still connected to the church but serves as a pastor, it was yet another depressing little moment. It's one thing for people to leave, it's quite another when they seem so gleeful about it. It's also one thing to deal with the nonexistence of certain people, it's quite another to witness actual flight from church.

But, this is something I've been noticing for a while. It's not just about older people getting older and more frail, unable to attend worship or participate meaningfully, it's that more and more active and able-bodied older people are disengaging.

It turns out that we in Maine, being the hip trendsetters that we are, are right in the middle of (or perhaps at the forefront of) a national trend. In the recently released Pew Research Center study *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, the news was not just about millennials at the center of the religiously unaffiliated movement (the "nones"), the study also contained significant information about older Americans.

The Pew study found that between 2007 and 2014 the percentage of the "Silent Generation" (born between 1928 and 1945) who identified their current religion as

“atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular” rose from 9 percent to 11 percent. For the Baby Boomers, the percentage rose from 14 to 17.

This isn't really news here in Maine, but it's still troubling. It's especially troubling since those are the groups who live here. Out of all of the states in the U.S., Maine has the lowest proportion of population under the age of 18, so perhaps we can cut ourselves a little slack when we notice the absence of young families in church. But Maine has the highest proportion of population in the Baby Boomer category, so their increasing absence of is something that we really can't ignore.

In all of this, we are not just talking about people who haven't been exposed to organized religion during childhood (like many millennials). The Baby Boomers (and the Silent Generation) are actively leaving the church, disengaging, freeing themselves. And, like my Silent Generation friend I ran into at the gym, they seem to be quite happy doing so.

It's yet another depressing moment, not to mention a difficult one. For those of us still within the fold, it's getting to be tough to absorb all of the news that is coming at us—even though it really isn't news. We see it. We feel it. We know it. Yet, we would prefer not to.

The challenge is to refrain from fretting about those who have left and, instead, to ponder why those of us who stay, stay. It is in that pondering that I am sure that we will find what we need: the courage to join my older, gleeful friend and admit that it's over, or the grace to be the church in new, bold, and marvelous ways.

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