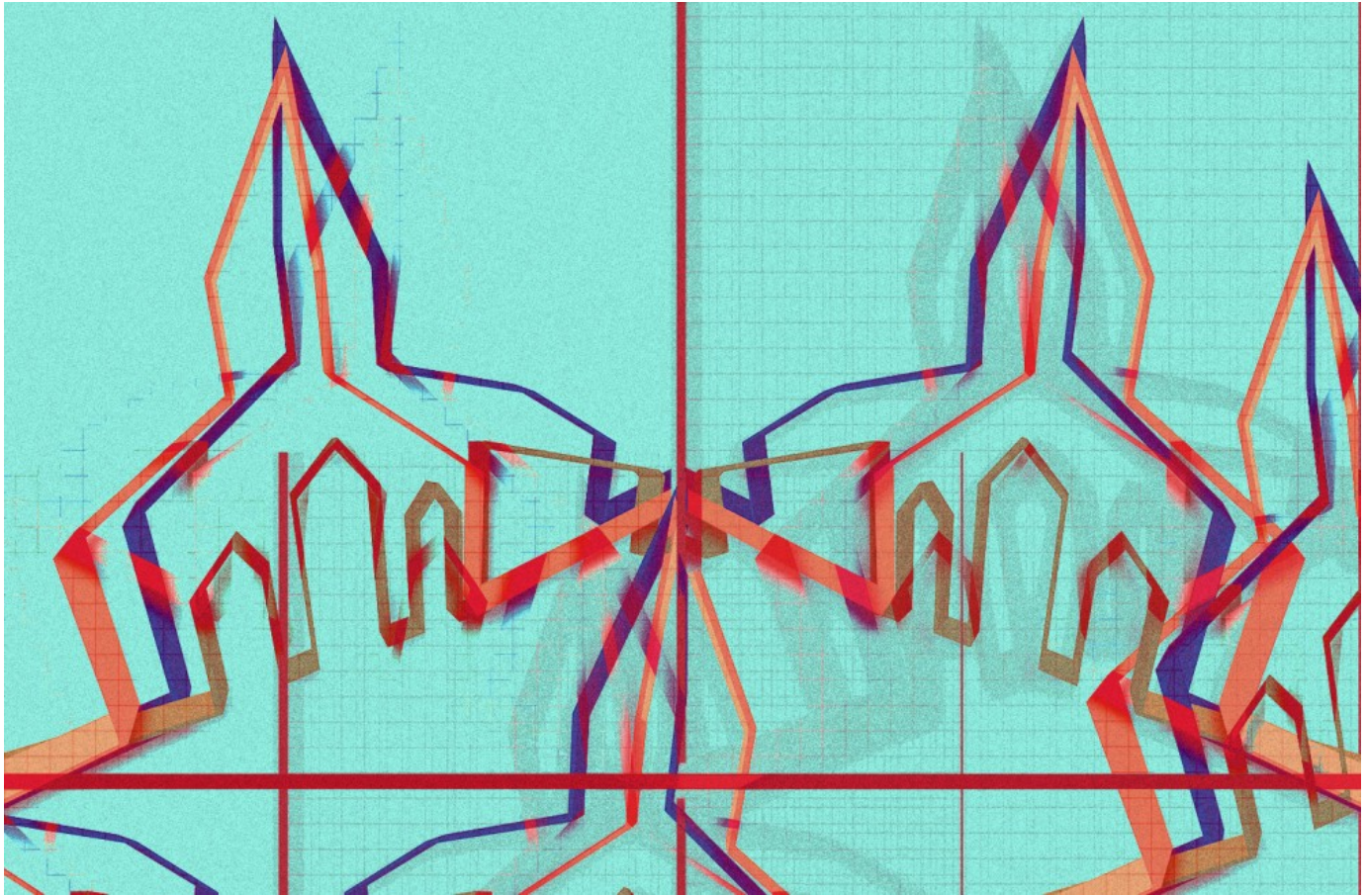


Three responses to church decline

What are we going to do? We have some options.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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(Century illustration)

It's widely rumored that organized religion is going down the drain. While the secularization thesis has been debated for decades, its main components are hardly controversial. Religion has reduced social power: its chief officers have less influence on political ideas and social norms, its language and habits no longer permeate the discourse of public life, and fewer people make collective worship and fellowship the rhythm of their week. Death no longer has a compelling hold on the public imagination: people still die, but usually not in the home or in their youth, and few

people are terrified of the prospect of eternal hell. Meanwhile, with the possible exception of minority faiths among recent immigrants, it's become increasingly difficult to socialize young people into a religion. It's not that religion adheres to egregious ideas so much as that the whole notion of being habituated into a committed community of ritual and tradition seems incongruous.

There's little that's specifically Christian about all this. Real as the church's failures are, most of its challenges it shares with other institutions associated with the pretechnological era. But in any case, in most congregations in the US mainline and the UK equivalent, a disproportionate number of the people are over age 65. The prospects for self-replication in 30 years' time aren't promising.

What are we to do about this? I see three main options.

First, assimilate to elements of contemporary culture that have largely crowded in to replace Christianity. When I do a talk or an interview, it's become commonplace for one of the questions afterward to be about self-care. The move to see "love yourself" as a vital third alongside "love God" and "love your neighbor" is essential and mature, but sometimes it seems like it has moved from one of three to the only one. Other such absorptions are self-realization (the goal of life is to maximize and fulfill your inner potential) and self-expression (everything inside us must come out, with our health and flourishing dependent on the extent to which we can externalize our creativity and desire). You could say the churches with the most adherents today take these cultural norms on board readily.

Sociologist Steve Bruce has observed, echoing earlier work by Bryan Wilson, that "in Europe, the churches became less popular; in the United States, the churches became less religious." A hyper-assimilation tactic would be to anticipate the next social innovation. Thus if AI is about to produce virtual companions that communicate to people more efficiently than tiresome and fitful other people, it won't be long before a religious expression sacralizes such robots and incorporates them.

Second, hold fast to the vestiges that used to mark the pillars of folk and public faith. In England this means local rituals like Rogation Sunday and Harvest or social norms like church schools and college chapels. The downside of this is that it risks characterizing faith as nostalgia and social conservatism; it's a world that's inexorably passing away. The upside is that there's a lot that's good about such a

world, and there are a lot of people still around who appreciate or can come to appreciate that good. So to address those people is still to retain an important social function.

Third, identify the things missing from contemporary culture and offer them in absorbing and attractive ways, making them readily available and reducing their strangeness. It's not hard to see what's missing in our self-actualizing culture: deep contemplation, true companionship, sincere dialogue across difference, an identity beyond self-expression, tangible and profound belonging. All such things have a significant place in historic Christianity, and many people are at least somewhat aware that their lives are impoverished without them.

I'm glad to say my own congregation, St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, has not experienced decline: our congregational life is as buoyant as it's been in 50 years. Our mission strategy is, in broad brushstrokes, a creative blend of options two and three above.

The visitor mostly notices option two. We have a glorious building, created precisely to emphasize the 1726 version of option two at a time when religion's role was to baptize the social order. We have traditional liturgy and music. We have countless classical concerts. We are an institution. We attract a lot of people who feel good about option two, who don't believe Christianity is discredited as a philosophical position or a social blessing, and who are drawn to a community that strives to do those things well with integrity, ambition, and dignity. But we've gotten a lot better and more agile at option three. The plethora of initiatives that have come forth in the last ten years are proving successful because they touch on things our society (and church) is missing and offer those things in unthreatening, hospitable, and relational ways. Finding a balance between options two and three offers breadth and depth, accessibility and profundity, something for others and something for oneself.

I appreciate that my context is unusual. It's a long way from the suburban, small-town, and housing project parishes I once served. It's also a long way from perfect. For example, we can be disproportionately scornful of option one. That's partly because the churches that have invested the most in it have often, in a curious way, matched it with conservative social attitudes that on closer inspection are an incongruous fit. But there are also elements of fear and taste and a different kind of conservatism in our reluctance to invest in option one. In many ways our commercial work has gone ahead of our congregational life in this area: the phenomenon of the

silent disco, in which people dance to music they're hearing separately on headphones, is an extraordinary witness to the transformation of a communal thrash into a private experience.

Perhaps the most remarkable turn of events, catalyzed by the pandemic, is the way that livestreaming has enhanced not so much option one—as we might have assumed, it being technological—but options two and three. Such developments should prevent us being judgmental about contemporary culture in general or technology in particular, because we've learned something about how to harness both for something deeper and richer.

Of course, we have no idea what lies around the corner. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, but the way the Holy Spirit makes Christ present to us seems to be ever changing. Half the fun lies in ensuring our imaginations are up to the task.