

TAKE THIS CHURCH AND ... DT 34:1-12

The U.S. religious marketplace is extremely volatile, with nearly half of American adults leaving the faith tradition of their upbringing to either switch allegiances or abandon religious affiliation altogether, a new survey finds. The study released the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life is unusual for its sheer scope, relying on interviews with more than 35,000 adults to document a diverse and dynamic U.S. religious population.

While much of the study confirms earlier findings — mainline Protestant churches are in **decline**, non-denominational churches are gaining and **the ranks of the unaffiliated are growing** — it also provides a deeper look behind those trends, and of smaller religious groups.

"The American religious economy is like a marketplace -- very dynamic, very competitive," said Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum. "Everyone is losing, everyone is gaining. There are net winners and losers, but no one can stand still. Those groups that are losing significant numbers have to recoup them to stay vibrant." The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey estimates the United States is 78 percent Christian.

More than one-quarter of American adults have left the faith of their childhood for another religion or no religion at all, the survey found. Factoring in moves from one stream or denomination of Protestantism to another, the number rises to 44 percent. One in four adults ages 18 to 29 claim no affiliation with a religious institution.

"In the past, certain religions had a real holding power, where people from one generation to the next would stay," said Penn State University sociologist Roger Finke, who consulted in the survey planning. "Right now, there is a dropping confidence in organized religion, especially in the traditional religious forms." Having a four generation Baptism is rare but we need more.

"It does seem in keeping with the high tolerance among Americans for change," Lugo said. "People move a lot, people change jobs a lot. It's a very fluid society." The religious demographic benefitting the most from this religious churn is those who claim no religious affiliation. **People moving into that category outnumber those moving out of it by a three-to-one margin.**

The majority of the unaffiliated — 12 percent of the overall population — describe their religion as "nothing in particular," and about half of those say faith is at least somewhat important to them. Atheists or agnostics account for 4 percent of the total population.

Affiliation swapping

With Protestants, changes in affiliation are swelling the ranks of nondenominational churches, while Baptist and Methodist traditions are showing net losses. Membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) fell by 69,381 in 2008. This is a continuing a trend that began in the mid-1960s. According to the Research Services office of the General Assembly Council (GAC), the 2008 decline was the PC(USA)'s largest numerical and percentage net membership loss since Presbyterian reunion in 1983. Almost 104,000 people joined the PC(USA) last year, but that

good news was more than offset by the 34,101 Presbyterians who died, the 34,340 who were members of the 25 congregations that left the PC(USA) for other denominations, and the staggering 104,428 who were removed from the rolls with no record of them joining any other church. At Presbytery were heard that while we started some 300+ church we closed 650 and more.

Our text is about seeing life from God's viewpoint. Not all things are explainable to us, but all things are redeemable with God. Not all experiences work out for us, but as scripture says, "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Rom.8:28. If you want to find real meaning in your life, make your life mean something to God and for good. Get on with what's yours to get done. Find the path the Lord has set for your feet. Get your sights set on the good choices and make something memorable happen. Don't waste another moment worrying about what might not get finished. Do your part and leave the rest to the Lord. God does not call us to be successful, just to be faithful. An old married couple, celebrating their 50th marriage anniversary that was featured by a local newspaper. The couple was known to never fight and when asked for the secret to their marriage, the wife began. "Fifty years ago, during our honeymoon, my husband and I went on a trip through the Grand Canyon on horseback. As we were riding, my husband's horse tripped and they took a hard fall. My husband got up, looked at the horse, and said, "That's one." We continued riding on, and the horse tripped again. My husband got up, looked at the horse, and said, "That's two." We continued riding but again the horse tripped. This time, my husband got up, pulled out a gun, and shot the horse dead. Bewildered, I angrily shouted, "What the heck is wrong with you?!" Putting the gun away, he looked at me and calmly said, "That's one." That's a joke. Success in marriage is actually about freely giving our spouse our love and faithfulness.

What we want to see today is God gives us our role and our position, our duties and destiny, and it is up to us to be faithful to them **NO MATTER WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE PC(USA)**. We do not need to force our future existence onto to others by threats and promises to hurt one another.

We shouldn't be floundering around, searching back and forth, and getting lost as to who we are and what we are supposed to do. If we are off track like this then we need to get right with God and ourselves because the Lord has a place and a purpose for you. Now of course there are going to be times in our lives when things aren't so clear. We struggle to find the right person for ourselves or the right job for our passion. This is the way it goes. But these are transitions, and just take us a matter of time to figure out. What we don't want to do is to fight against who the Lord is asking us to be. Don't struggle against your call. Stop fighting the direction of your God-given passion. Trust the Lord to direct your steps so that you may have peace of heart and a faithful life, and all the blessings that come with them.

It's been said, "Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in one lifetime" Reinhold Niebuhr. Not even Jesus accomplished his own ministry in one life—it took his resurrected life after his death to complete his personal journey. Moses came as close as anybody might, and still he didn't get to step a foot into the Promised Land. He led them out of Egyptian slavery and guided them through the wilderness and the various difficulties of their life together in those trying times. He taught them all the instruction or law that the Lord gives them as the means for life. He interceded for them when they did not keep the commandments; he reprimanded them when they complained to him and

to the Lord about their condition. He is truly the servant of the Lord. There is nothing more for him to do except to lead the people into the land. But that is the one thing Moses won't do. Right at the beginning of Deuteronomy we are told this extraordinary fact. At one point, the book says it's because God is angry with the people. We are also given a glimpse into Moses' feelings as he pleads with the Lord to see the beautiful land God is giving. But still no deal. All he can do is climb to the top of Mt. Nebo and look upon the land as far as his eyes can see. That's as close as he will ever get. Of course if anybody should have gone into the land, it was Moses. In his death we see an unfulfillment of the highest order, a cutting short of a life and the goal of that life toward which it has been directed. But that is to look at things from our eyes. The simplest truth is that Moses' work is finished. He has fulfilled his life's mission, his God-ordained destiny, and received the blessings of one who is the servant of the Lord. He has guided the people safely to receive the promise of a land that God promised first to Abraham. The people also have the word of the Lord Moses taught. His work continues even though he leaves them. His impact remains even after he is gone. This is how it is for all of us. Some may leave a larger impact, but we all have the opportunity of living so that our works for God and good continue beyond us. **Life goes on ... so get on with your life.**

There is an old story of a West Virginia kid who went to college at a prestigious eastern university that we kids growing up in Appalachian culture were told over and over again. The mountain kid really had no business attending there except that his father was so proud of his academic achievements and his dad had worked overtime in the lumber mill in his home town of Wheeling, West Virginia, to pay for his college. Oh, he had some scholarship, but there were books and room and board. AND he discovered you really weren't anybody unless you pledged a fraternity, and not just any fraternity, but it had to be one of the elite ones. One of the best ... and they wanted him. So he called his dad and asked for the extra money to pledge a fraternity ... oh, and he was going to need a whole new wardrobe, too. And his dad, who never set foot on a college campus, was so excited to hear about his college exploits, and the money wasn't a problem. So it all worked out fine. He had so many friends he didn't go home for Christmas, and when spring break came along he called his dad and asked for money to go south to the beach. Everybody was going. After all, it wasn't that much money and he would get a job in the summer and pay his dad back. But while he was on the beach in Florida he got an urgent message that his dad had a serious heart attack. He hurried home to West Virginia, but when he got there his dad was ... already gone. A few of his dad's best friends from the plant were gathered together in the waiting room. As they sat talking in somber tones, he recognized them and they recognized him. One man, Wilbur, his dad's very best friend, gave him a strong embrace, and as they walked away, he handed the young man a pile of neatly folded clothes and a pair of shoes—his dad's overalls and work boots. He sat there in the waiting room holding his father's clothes when he noticed the boots. Each had a huge hole in the bottom. His father worked in boots with holes in them. His dad, who always seemed to be able to ante up the money to pay for his son's khaki slacks, crisp oxford shirts and penny loafers, his dad, had holes in his own boots. And then he thought of the lumber mill and the heat of the building and the floor, and the holes in his dad's boots and what that would have meant. His dad's feet would have burned from the heat of the lumber mill floor while he labored for his hourly wage to provide for him. And the pain

was just too much. He cried at the magnitude of his father's gift even as he cried in shame at his own preoccupation and lack of appreciation. It would be a long time before he could think of his father without tears coming to his eyes. This story is really about the father, what he did because of who he was, in his own eyes and in God's eyes.

Things aren't always what we would want them to be, but that's life as God gives it to us. What is our life is the real question, or I should say, what is our real life is the question. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it is your duck, your life. It may not be the one you ordered, but God is still in it, and God is still expecting you to be in it, for God and good. Look, it's like the church choir that was putting on a car wash to raise money to pay their expenses for a special trip. They made a large sign: CAR WASH FOR CHOIR TRIP. On Saturday, business was good for awhile but by 2 o'clock the skies clouded, the rain poured, and there were hardly any customers. Finally, one of the women had an idea. She printed a very large poster that said: WE WASH (Then an arrow pointing skyward) GOD RINSES. We get dirty and we also wash but God rinses and resurrects. Gayle Williams died recently. Who was she? She was the 34-year-old British woman who was murdered by the Taliban while she was walking to work in Kabul. Gayle worked for Serve Afghanistan. Serve Afghanistan helps young boys and girls who have lost limbs to land mines and bombs. Think of Princess Di, but someone who lived among those poor children. Gayle was also Pat Williams daughter. This is what this mom said about her daughter. "Gayle was serving a people that she loved, and felt God called her to be there for such a time as this. We know her life was blessed and she was a blessing to those around her. No one could have asked for a more humble daughter with a more loving heart. She died doing what she felt the Lord had called her [to] and she is definitely with him." Looking at the world from God's eyes gives us such a great hope and perspective on anything and everything that comes our way.

We can't change the fact of life's disappointments any more than Moses could. Sometimes we'll walk the detour on life's highway; sometimes our journeys will be left unfinished, according to us. But no matter what we can trust God with our time, our work, our effort, our lives, our faithfulness. God blesses in more ways than we will ever know our faithfulness to him. Make your life count for the kingdom. MAKE IT COUNT FOR THE PC(USA) BUT MAKE IT COUNT FOR OUR CHURCH. IF YOU CAN'T THEN INVITE SOMEBODY WHO CAN. GET UP AND GIVE THEM YOUR SEAT. GOD CAN DO AMAZING THINGS WITH CRAZY PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO LOVE MORE AND DO MORE AND GIVE MORE FOR THE SAKE OF HIS KINGDOM.

SOMETIMES I THINK NO ONE CARES ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THIS CHURCH BUT ME AND I KNOW THAT IS NOT TRUE. WE CANNOT REPRODUCE THE PAST. THE CONTEXT OF THIS CHURCH HAS CHANGED AND WE HAVE TO CHANGE WITH IT AND BECOME A MULTI-CULTURAL CHURCH. IF YOU CARE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO HELP?

SO WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO? TAKE THIS CHURCH AND WHAT? SHOVE IT, OR SERVE IT? WORK IT OR WRECK IT? BE A PART OF IT OR TAKE IT APART ONE GRIPE AT A TIME? I THINK GOD WANTS US TO TAKE THIS CHURCH AND SAVE IT. HOW ABOUT YOU?