Earlier this week, several of us attended our Presbytery meeting in Manhattan. The Presbytery of Northern Kansas is in the process of searching for a new General Presbyter who will function as our chief executive officer and provide leadership for the 62 congregations that make up the Presbytery. I am a member of that search committee, and at the meeting, I made a brief presentation on behalf of the search committee.

Times of transition are a challenge for any organization, including and especially churches. Our Presbytery is looking for a candidate to lead us in a time of discernment and discovery. The churches of Northern Kansas need to look faithfully and prayerfully toward the future of the Presbytery. We need to honestly identify and address the coming opportunities and challenges.

The majority of our congregations have less than 50 people in worship each week. Many are located in rural communities that are experiencing significant decline in population and jobs. Even our largest congregations, including this one, are seeing decreases in membership, attendance and budgets. The road ahead will not be the same as the road we have recently traveled. The question we must ask is: where is God calling us as the Presbyterian presence in Northern Kansas?

That process, it seems to me, is one that is facing nearly every congregation in North America these days. These have not been the most encouraging of times for the churches that dot our neighborhoods. A recent Pew study showed that the traditional mainline congregations have seen a 4% decline in attendance between 2007 and 2014.¹ (Those mainline churches would be the Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and other names that are more familiar to all of us.)

But it is not just the mainliners who are struggling. The Southern Baptists have reported loss of members. As Diana Butler Bass, someone who studies religious trends in America, notes, “if the Southern Baptists are losing members, then we know this is a problem.” Even several mega-church that bring thousands to worship each week are seeing a sharp decline in membership.

Recently, two new churches in Lawrence that began worshiping over the last three to four years, have decided to close their doors. You may recall receiving advertisements in the mail for the East Lake Community Church. Those who started this congregation came with an experienced model for planting new churches and had the financial backing from their mother church back in Washington State. Last Sunday was their last service of worship. New Church Lawrence is a United Methodist project supported by the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, and the Kansas Conference of the United Methodist Church. They will conclude their services later next month.

Both of these start-ups had resources, a creative and energetic staff, and a style of worship and service that would attract young adults and college students. Yet with all of that, they made a decision that they could not succeed in this community.

We may be able to see the problem, however, no one has that one idea or solution or way that will turn this situation around.

Our readings this morning about Paul’s ministry in Corinth made me think about the challenges facing congregations today and into the future.

Corinth was one of the most important cities of ancient Greece. The population of Corinth was 250,000 free persons with an estimated 400,000 slaves.² It was a major political, commercial and cultural center in the 1st century. Located on a narrow isthmus, Corinth featured two great harbors that brought great wealth to the city. Trade throughout the Mediterranean brought items such as spices from India, silk from China, linen from Syria, timber from Italy, and wine and

TEXT:
Acts 18:1-4
I Corinthians 1:10-18
olive oil, fruits and vegetables from the fertile fields of Corinth.iii Small boats could be lifted up on wooden carriages and hauled over the four miles from sea to sea. Heavier cargo would be unloaded, transported overland and reloaded at the next ports. Meanwhile, Corinth levied taxes on everything that passed through its territory. Hence came the nick-name for the city: ‘wealthy’ Corinth.iv And with trade came sailors and with sailors came, shall we say, a lively night life. Corinth was the original “sin city.”

Starting a new worshiping community in Corinth was hard work.

At our presbytery meeting this week, we heard from Tracey King-Ortega, our regional director for Presbyterian mission in Central America. In her sermon she said, when we engage in mission, we often find ourselves in the place that makes us the most uncomfortable. But being in mission is the essence of being a Christian.

But there was another strategic value of Corinth. Merchants carried goods throughout the Mediterranean, but they also facilitated communication. In the decades before we all discovered Facebook, Twitter and blogging, the primary means of sharing news was letters, and letters were carried by merchant ships to far off ports. Paul realized that if he could establish a church in such a prominent transportation hub, it would be a gateway for the Gospel to other places along the Mediterranean.

Paul arrived in Corinth in the year 51, shortly after the great meeting of the Apostles and Elders at the First Ecumenical Council of Jerusalem that we looked at last Sunday. Along with his companions Silas and Timothy, Paul stated a new Christian community there, which became a benchmark for the future ministry of Christianity into Europe and beyond. Together their success laid the foundation for the next era of the Christian Church.

There was an interesting article on the future of religion posted late last week on The Huffington Post. It made the point that religion in America looks far different today than at any time in history.v The article began by pointing out that fifty years ago this month, TIME Magazine had a front cover story that posed a provocative question: Is God Dead?

TIME was reporting on the decline of religion in America that was already apparent in 1966. Declining church attendance is not a new phenomenon. In the current article in Huffington, the author suggests that while traditional religious affiliations are declining, spirituality, religion’s “free-spirited sibling”, appears to be as strong — if not stronger — than ever. She proceeded to identify some trends that are evident in American contemporary culture.

The number of Americans who said they believe in God has decreased over the last fifty years and the pace of decline is even more pronounced among the millennial generation, those young adults that every church wants to recruit. At the same time, though, interest in spirituality has gone through the roof. The term “spiritual but not religious” has emerged in recent years to describe how more and more Americans identify themselves.

People are still seeking spiritual peace and well-being and hold a reverence and wonder about the universe and the creation order. Earth Day, which we celebrated this weekend, is almost a “religious” holiday to the spirituality crowds. The difference is, many people don’t see those needs met in the Christian tradition.

Meanwhile, Americans can sample an array of religions in their own communities. A few years ago, Harvard Professor, Diana Eck, conducted a seminal study of the religious practices, beliefs and traditions among the American population. Her book is called the New Religious America, and in it, she makes the claim that America has become the most religiously diverse nation in history.vi

This is not a new trend. America saw a dramatic increase
of immigrants following changes in our immigration policy in 1965. New families from the Middle East and the Far East came to America, practicing faiths other than Christianity and Judaism. Today, there are more Buddhists in America than there are Episcopalians. This remarkable change helped spark a great interfaith renaissance in America.

There are a number of other cultural trends that have an impact on America’s religious and spiritual landscape, which are identified in the Huffington Post’s article, and in Diana Eck’s research and in other resources. But in the midst of all this angst about the shrinking of the church is one salient fact to bear in mind: the number of people attending congregations and synagogues is roughly the equivalent of the numbers who have done so throughout America’s history. The post war baby boom and astonishing growth of America’s church is the 1950’s was the exception to the rule, not the norm. The norm has always been sustained stability and incremental growth. What is happening today, as one reporter put it, may not be so much of a collapse as it is a clarification. People are not is ditching religion, but rather they are finding more flexibility and creativity in practice and belief.

So what do we do? Perhaps we do what Paul did. We step forward into God’s future. While we remain faithful to our God, we discern the changes and trends, and we look for ways to serve our neighbors beyond the walls of this building.

Mark Boroughs was a seminary classmate of mine. He went on to be a professor of Church History and Wesley Seminary and Andover-Newton School of Theology. I asked him one day what started him on his faith journey. He said he remembered sitting in church next to his father. He was too young to know what was going on, but he could tell that what was happening in worship was very important to his dad, and before long it became important to him.

That is a small example of an important principle: sharing the good news with Generation Next.

This sermon delivered by
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iii “Paul in Corinth: In the Footsteps of Paul,” PBS Documentary.

iv Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, Paul in Corinth.

v “American Religion Has Never Looked Quite Like It Does Today.” By Antonia Blumberg, Associate Religion Editor, The Huffington Post, April 15, 2016.


vii Huffington Post, op cit.

viii Emma Green, “American Religion: Complicated, Not Dead, A new survey suggests that more people of all ages are choosing their own beliefs.” The Atlantic.com, May 12, 2015.