



God Has Triumphed Over Loss:
A Round Table Conversation on the Latest Congregational Data
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Mark Ramsey: Hi, friends. This is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative here with my colleagues Jennifer Watley Maxell, Beth Daniel, and Adam Borneman. We've been reflecting on all sorts of things in church life, as we often do when we get together. Recently, we did a podcast where we interviewed Scott Thuma and Allison Norton of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. This is the second time in the last few months that we've had them on. They're certainly among the, uh, very small handful of data research entities that are really looking deeply and broadly about what the trends in church life. We commend the podcast to you.

The most recent tranche of data showed, to their own description, some very surprising things. They call it: "It's not a revival, but it's a recalibration." But there is growth in attendance. There is growth in the finances of most churches, in ways that they didn't totally expect. At the same time, they noted several things that both need watching, but probably need to be understood and see whether it fits in individual faith communities. One is that, during the pandemic, up to a third or more of people joined a faith community, because what they saw there was a group that was meeting their needs, that was innovative, that was experimenting with things.

And then, a couple years into the pandemic, as Scott said, most congregations hit the wall with change, and said, "That's it. No more. We're going to either stay here, or go back."

That confused new people, up to a third of the congregation, going, "Wait a minute. We joined this innovative dynamic group, and now, what happened?" That was one thing. Another thing they both talked about was: it is getting harder and harder for churches that are not large, by some standard, to do effective ministry, given all the demands on them financial, but also many other things.

And they both said, "That's a problem." Because, number one, not every church should be large. But also, in rural areas, we need churches, and they're not going to have the ability to be that. So that's just some of it. Let's start there, and just see what we're seeing and how we're viewing it and the people we're in touch with.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: Mark, as I'm listening to what you've laid out – which is very compelling – what I'm struck by is that last comment you made about it getting harder for churches that are not large to do ministry. And I'm wondering if that is somehow related to the fact that we've become so consumeristic in terms of how we view our congregants, in that, we say we're not consumer driven. We don't want people to consume when they come to church. We want people to connect. We want people to communicate, but then we're constantly shoving programs at them, like, "Here. Pick one. Pick one. Pick one." And so, I'm wondering what the connection might be between the need to provide these different consumer products for congregants (that require budgets and space and time), and are we missing something in terms of how we are forming our members? Are we forming them out of the church? Are we helping them to have this consumeristic idea and expectation of us, so that they're leaving? Or are we combatting that through the preaching and teaching of the Gospel as the life transforming force that it is?

Adam Borneman: I was relieved to listen to the podcast conversation, Mark, that you hosted with Scott and Allison. The reason I was relieved is because they corroborated a bunch of stuff I've been saying to our network for the past few months, only being about seventy percent sure that I was right about it. A lot of it has to do with some of the things Jennifer is mentioning, too, whether it's consumerism or something else, although I think that probably bears a lot of the weight. One of the things that I think we're seeing networkwide, and I definitely see here, uh, as Jennifer does, around Metro Atlanta, is that it just seems that, in our culture, it's a lower bar, and convenient for folks to, just, kind of, stop by the congregation that just has all the stuff for them to do for their kids. And I don't say that in a pejorative way as a moral judgment. I say as someone who can't wait to send their kids to the big Vacation Bible School, because I get free childcare for a week. I mean, I totally get that. But the problem is, it doesn't seem like you have the loyalty that might exist in a lot of smaller congregations, where the bar is a little bit higher, where it is a little bit more inconvenient. And I see that as a reflection of the culture at large, that we are increasingly a culture that's just looking for the quick fix, the convenient way. How can I just drop off my kids so I can go get my stuff done today? And, I don't know how to turn that corner in a lot of these places, to Jen's point, in terms of highlighting the need for deeper formation.

I think that may be one of the biggest challenges, really, for churches of all sizes, but especially those that are small to midsize to say, "If we're going to put all our chips in on Christian Formation and Discipleship in a culture that is driven by an attention economy and convenience," That's a tall order. And I'm not sure how we do that, but I see it everywhere.

Beth Daniel: What I loved about that podcast, despite all of the things that we're naming right now, is the headline was that they were cautiously optimistic about what was going on in the church. We do not need to point out that ministry's hard, particularly in smaller congregations, that all seem to be struggling in every way. But I don't think they said it was difficult for small churches to do ministry. What it said is that it was difficult for small churches to grow in terms of number metrics. And the actionable step in that was we have to be really clear about who we are, and why we gather, and what we do, and not try to compete with the bigger churches. But maybe there was an opportunity to cooperate, or even for several small churches to cooperate together. I think there was a warning: if we get competitive as small churches, we will lose. We can't do all those things. But if we recognize the Body of Christ as being, "Hey. There's a place for them, but there's also a place for us. What do we do well? What have we called to do? And, how can we join with others in a vision that is bigger than the survival of this congregation?" That has a kingdom vision. I think that was the way the optimism came in, and I think that should be a word of encouragement to those people who are laboring in churches, wondering why numbers are not going up. Be faithful in what you're doing, and look around as to how you can join with others who are being faithful in what they're doing, instead of doubling down that we're somehow in competition with them.

Mark: I once served a church that wanted to be a mega church. It was surrounded by a lot of mega churches, and they were a large church, but they aspired to be a stadium church, if you will. It was not all just chasing consumerism – though some of it was – some it was the yearning to spread the Gospel. But constantly, leaders in the congregation would say, "We have to be who we are" – to reinforce your point, Beth – "we have to be who we are. We're not that, and if we try to be that, we'll lose everything that makes this community unique." But also, it's theological underpinnings. Any congregation loses its theological identity, it becomes something else, but not a church.

On the other end of the spectrum: Dave Feltman (who has been one of our, just, key facilitators for over a decade) in rural Iowa, now retired; and rural Iowa is not an easy place to do ministry. And he cared for

so many churches in such an important, intentional way. And he said he was always drawn to the verse in John 13 that opens the farewell discourse. Jesus speaking: “Having loved his own who are in the world, he loved them to the end.”

I remember a lot of conversations saying, “We’re not trying to close churches.” But there is something we’re saying: “We are here. We are now. And we’re going to spread God’s love as far as we can see, and not worry about whether it’s a runway or a landing strip,” if you will. God’s love is God’s love, regardless of the time or the place.

Jennifer: Yeah. And when I hear you speaking, I’m gonna be quite honest: I’m, like, “Yes. And how much does that cost?” Because the cost of ministry is increasing exponentially. I’m saying that because, for me – to your point, Beth – I really like that first bit that Mark highlight, not a revival but a recalibration. And I think, in our community, that’s what we’ve been doing a lot of: recalibrating, and trying to figure out how do we continue to gather as the community here, and be really good stewards of the resources that we do have? And I think that that’s a conversation that we need to have more, particularly, when you raise the issue of partnering, people love to partner over ideas. People love the partner over programs. But when you talk about partnering economically, it becomes a whole different conversation. To be honest, that’s where a lot of churches are. Like, what does it look like to have these cooperative economics, where we come together to make sure that all of us have what we need to do the work that we’re called to do? How to do?

Mark: And Jennifer, what you’re saying, I would couple with what we know both from data, but also from the relationships we have, about the isolation of ministry by so many pastors. The cooperating, or the trying to come together and do some collaboration, to me, isn’t just programmatic (though it should be) or economic (which it’s going to have to be). To me, it also is a life raft to pastors who are just feeling like they’re out on a desert island by themselves. Colleagues are great. When you have people that you know you can trust and that you can share ministry with its ups and its downs, ministry gets a thousand times better. I think we’ve got to help congregations and their pastors see that, that it’s not a loss, but that’s hard.

Adam: It’s just gonna come off like a plug for our work, because it is: one of the number one reasons pastors join our cohort programs is they want to get outside of their bubbles, and they want to be around people different from them. They actually do want to connect and collaborate in some really unexpected and life-giving ways. And we should also assume that we have lay people who would feel the same way. And I wonder how many of our congregations, especially those ones that are small or mid-sized (but I would hope this goes for large congregations, too) is to make collaboration a point of ministry and mission where you are, and to say, “We are a congregation that looks at this whole community. It’s not just about our building. It’s not just about what happens through here to others, but it’s what God is doing around here.” I know there’s an element of that that is cliché; that we, kind of, have this talk all the time. But in terms of a congregation, based on Scott and Allison’s data, a congregation really prioritizing the language of collaboration, and how vital that is, is really intriguing to me.

Beth: And I keep going back to this word “recalibration” rather than “revival”, because this whole idea of being sure about who you are as the church, or ministry, and what God has called you to, does not mean you’re off the hook for being willing to change. The whole conversation about partnering, in any and every way, but also in the congregation itself, the research and the actionable steps that were mentioned in that podcast were very clear: that we have to be eyes wide open, that we can’t keep

saying, “Well, this is the way we’ve always done it.” “This is who we are” is very different than “this is the way we’ve always done it.” There has to be a willingness to change as people come into church and bring new ideas – not to become a completely different place, or have completely different beliefs, but to be open to God doing a new thing. Because, if we give up the idea that God is doing a new thing – not just out there, but in here – then we will close.

Jennifer: A few weeks ago, in conversation with Reggie Blount, we talked about this idea of ownership versus stewardship, and what it means when a church has a stewardship mentality versus an ownership mentality. And so, when you’re talking about the need to change, I think realizing that, sometimes, it’s not that we need to change just the policies or the programs or the practices, but it is the actual way that we view ourselves, and I think the way that we wield our influence in community, and the way we wield the power that we have. Each one of us, as a community of faith, has power and influence. And I think, sometimes, we don’t really realize that. And because we don’t realize it, we don’t wield that power in intentional ways. And so, looking at ourselves not as the owners of this building or this property or this place in the community, but as stewards who now get the opportunity to figure out: “What’s the best way to use what has been placed in our hands temporarily in a way that benefits most people, even if most of those people are outside of our church building, outside of the walls of our congregation?”

Adam: It occurs to me that one of the things we’re circling around here in our conversation is calling both for pastors and for congregations – and it was sort of a passing comment on the conversation with Scott and Allison. I believe it was Allison who said, “Well, you know, after the pandemic, some congregations just realized, ‘It’s time for us to die now.’ And others moved on.”

You know, one of the things we’ve seen our network is exactly that. We have seen some pastors and congregations realize, “This is not who we’re supposed to be; we’re not called to x, y, and z”, and a lot of pastors who moved on to different vocations and that sort of thing.

And at the same time, other pastors and congregations who have gone through the last few years of various elements – the turmoil– said, “You know what? This is really hard work, and we are more deeply called to it than we thought we were.” So, this whole thing about identity and collaboration and who you want to be as a small- mid- whatever- size church it is, a lot of it has to do with some theological investigation, some devoted investigation of who we are together, and what we’re called to.

Mark: And it’s important to say: anytime we talk about change, I don’t think people resist change. I think they’re afraid of loss. People will embrace change if they immediately see a benefit. But we all fear loss. And one of the themes of all our podcasts and our writing is: “Can we recognize the gifts that God gives us continually?” God knows about loss. God has modeled loss. God has triumphed over loss. And if we can devote ourselves to that sort of formational discipline, we’ve got a future. That’s not easy, but it’s not like we’re cast adrift having to figure this out on our own: calling and everything else. God is right there, putting wind in our backs, if we’ll just recognize it.