

Decline of the NIC and What We Might Do About It **March 2, 2016**

To:

Report to the Conference Board of Laity
Arnold Rivera, Conference Lay Leader

Author:

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Introduction

This report is based on the presentation I made to the NIC Conference Board of Laity, First United Methodist Church of Elgin, February 27, 2016. After my presentation there was substantial discussion by the board. Arnold asked me to put my recommendations in writing, which is what this report is. The slides used in the presentation are given in the Appendix.

Background

We have two data sources that are very different: The Pew Research Center data, published May 2015, which are the result of 31,071 individual responses to phone interviews. That data is representative of the major demographics of our country, including region, age of respondents, and gender of respondents. The second data source is the average worship attendance, AWA, of the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church, NIC-UMC. The NIC data have been scaled to the Pew axes (% vs. year). A straight line was drawn between the two Pew data points for the years 2007 and 2014. This was done for reference. See Slide02.

Discussion

These two data sources are very different yet the results are surprisingly similar. We can vaguely say that we've known about this decline for a decade or longer, but these two data sets quantify this decline, which lends itself to more targeted and effective problem solving. This correspondence between the two data sets is consistent with underlying causes that are substantially the same for our country and for the NIC. I submit that before we can take corrective action we must first understand the real underlying causes.

What might be some of the causes? My hypothesis is that there are common and strong cultural causes for the downward trajectory of the NIC. A satisfactory description must explain the negative trajectories for both Pew & NIC, it must explain why it occurred when it did, and it must be consistent with observations of opinion leaders in the NIC.

My explanation seems to satisfy these criteria. Cultural changes that have occurred since about 1980+/- 10 years when these trajectories started to become negative include (1) more technology in our daily lives, (2) increased expectations for our standard of living & comfort, (3) easier access to information, games, entertainment, communications, news, & options, and (4) the changing psychology and sociology associated with changes #1 - #3. All four overlap each other and all four can easily lead to a reduced interest in the UMC.

What can we do about this decline?

The suggestions in this section are meant to provide a background for the eight suggested steps below. Arnold Rivera and the BOL did not agree to take any actions during this meeting associated with this report.

The laity of our conference can choose to (a) do nothing, to (b) follow the lead of others, or to (c) take the lead on this most critical problem. I suggest that our laity, led by Conference Board of Laity, opt for (c) and take a leadership, proactive, results oriented role. Here's how we can do that.

To solve almost any challenging problem we must first understand the main drivers or causes. The full suite of causes will likely include cultural causes such as the four mentioned causes above and there will likely be causes within our own churches, including preaching.

Seek out and listen to lead pastors of thriving churches. Dialogue with them. Look for patterns. Organize and summarize those conclusions. Connect the recommendations of these lead pastors with their understanding of the problem. What has been shown to work? There will be actions for everybody, including clergy, laity, and the decision makers of our conference.

Identify time-based goals. Identify metrics to determine progress toward those goals. The metrics must be verifiable, not subjective, and not based on opinions. Identify an action strategy where each results oriented action has an owner, a due date, and an expected result. From time-to-time share the results with the team. Get serious about results.

When an action does not yield the desired results, identify another, replacement action for the overall plan. From time-to-time make midcourse corrections.

Eight actions that might be taken by the Conference Board of Laity

Please keep in mind that Arnold Rivera and the BOL did not agree to any specific actions in this meeting associated with this report. This list of eight specific action items are given here for consideration and do not imply any decisions by the BOL.

1. Dialog with the Bishop and Cabinet. Get their support and agreement to make a good faith effort to implement the results of this laity based effort. Due date: March 31, '16. Owner: Arnold Rivera.
2. Appoint a laity task force, including budget, to carry out the assigned tasks of this project with highest quality. Due date: April 30, '16. Owner: Arnold Rivera.
3. In consultation with the Bishop and Cabinet, identify 30 churches in the NIC area that are growing and thriving. These churches are not necessarily NIC-UMC churches but they do need to be main-line Protestant churches as defined in the Pew Report. The criteria for selection will include representation of all the major demographic units of the NIC. Due date: May 31, '16. Owner: Chair of the task force.
4. Prepare a common list of interview questions for the Lead Pastors of step #3. Questions would be of this type (but not limited to this list): In your opinion what are some of the main causes for the decline of main-line Protestantism in the USA as detailed in the Pew Report? What are some of the main causes for the decline in AWA in churches in the community you serve? What are some of the programs and methods you use that are particularly helpful for your thriving church? How much difference does high quality preaching make? Please elaborate on that. What other factors are important to lead a growing thriving church in the community you serve? Of the factors we've discussed which ones are most important and which ones are of lessor importance? Due date: July 31, '16. Owner: Various task force members that are assigned to each thriving church.
5. Digest the results from step #4. This can be done in a number of ways including brain-storming. The basic idea here is to organize the information from step #4 for maximum impact in subsequent steps. Due date: September 30, '16. Owner: An assigned task force member to organize the information and the whole task force to collectively evaluate the source information. This will likely take several meetings and many communications.

6. Prepare a report, based on step #5, which is action oriented, results based with metrics and due dates. Identify in the report possible alternative actions that might be taken if the primary recommended actions do not have the desired results. Due date: October 31, '16. Owner: Chair of the task force.
7. Communicate the report from step #6 to the Bishop and Cabinet. They have already agreed to make a good faith effort to implement the results of this laity based effort (Step #1). The Bishop transparently shares with the task force the Bishop and Cabinet's action oriented, results based, plan to address this critical issue of the decline of main-line Protestantism, especially in the NIC. Due date: November 30, '16. Owner: Chair of the task force and the Bishop.
8. The NIC implements the plan identified in Step #7. Results are evaluated against predetermined metrics. Changes are made in the action plan, if need be, so that the overall plan is more effective. Laity, Bishop and Cabinet, and clergy all actively participate in the plan. The results are transparently reported at Annual Conference 2017. Due date: May 31, '17. Owner: Chair of the task force and the Bishop.

Appendix. Slides Used in Presentation

Title: Decline of the NIC and what we might do about it

Presenter: Al Brunsting, Ph.D.-physics

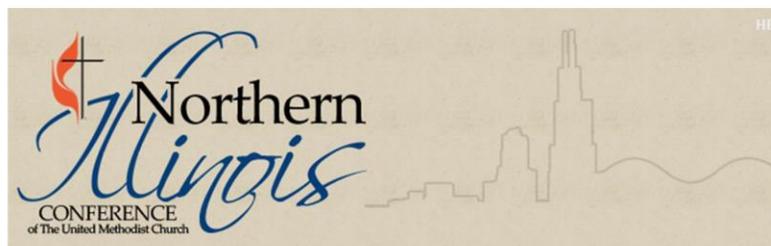
Conference Board of Laity Meeting

Northern Illinois Conference, United Methodist Church

First United Methodist Church of Elgin

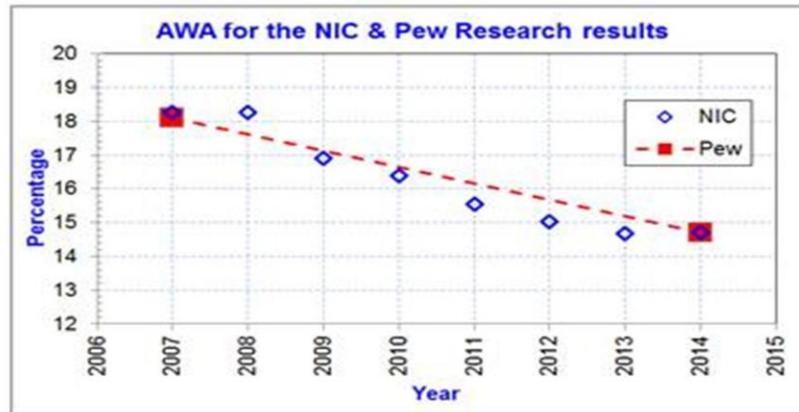
217 Division St. | Elgin, Illinois, 60120

February 27, 2016



Slide01

Pew Res. Cntr., May '15. Decline of Christianity, USA.
Natl rep. phone survey, 35,071 adults. Mainline Protestants declined from (18.1%, 2007) to (14.7%, 2014) for the total USA population.
Q: How do these Pew results compare with average worship attendance (AWA) in the NIC of the United Methodist Church? Here is the answer:



Slide02

Discussion: NIC AWA closely tracks the Pew data.

Data sources are very different: Pew results come from a telephone survey asking respondents to self-identify with a certain religion or "none". The NIC AWA data come from actual attendance in NIC worship services.

Conclusion: Both trends are likely due to common causes:

Changing national culture

- More technology in our daily lives.
- Increased expectations for standard of living & comfort.
- Easier access to information, games, entertainment, communications, news, & options. Who needs church?

Slide03

What can we do about this decline?

- Understand the main and underlying drivers. This would likely include drivers in our culture and within our churches. Almost certainly there will be multiple significant causes and origins.
- Seek out and listen to lead pastors of thriving churches. Dialogue with them. Look for patterns. Organize and summarize those conclusions. Connect the recommendations of these lead pastors with the results from #1. What has been shown to work?
- Actions for everybody, including clergy, laity, and the decision makers of our conference.

Slide04

What can we do about this decline? [continued]

- Identify time-based goals. Identify metrics to determine progress toward those goals. The metrics must be verifiable, not subjective, and not based on opinions.
- Identify an action strategy where each results oriented action has an owner, a due date, and an expected result. From time-to-time share the results with the team. Get serious about results.
- When an action does not yield the desired results, identify another, replacement action for the overall plan. From time-to-time make midcourse corrections.

Slide05

Discussion

- What are the next steps?
- What is the time line?
- What are the actions & who owns them?
- What are the roles for laity, clergy, & decision makers?
- What are the metrics & associated goals?
- Get serious about real results.

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Slide06