

More Catholics Turning Over Protestant Leaf

Sojourn Community Church, a fast-growing baptist congregation in Louisville, Ky., is moving into the soaring gothic sanctuary once occupied by St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, a parish that has been closed since 1996.

Founded in 2000, Sojourn's restoration of the historic building highlights a century-long trend that has been overlooked by Catholics and Protestants alike.

Although books and articles have been written on the more recent trend of Protestants converting to Catholicism, this dynamic is a mere trickle compared to the losses the Catholic church has sustained in the last century.

"One out of every 10 Americans is an ex-Catholic," Thomas Reese notes in an April 18 article in the *National Catholic Reporter*. "If they were a separate denomination, they would be the third-largest denomination in the United States, after Catholics and Baptists. One of three people who were raised Catholic no longer identifies as Catholic."

Reese's article, which generated buzz and debate in the Catholic world, argued that the primary reason people leave the Catholic church for Protestantism is not disagreement with the church's doctrinal or social positions, but spiritual hunger.

"Their spiritual needs were not being met in the Catholic church and they found a religion they like more," Reese writes, citing a study by the Pew Research Center. "Eighty-one percent of respondents say they joined their new church because they enjoy the religious service and style of worship of their new faith."

Although not directed toward evangelicals, Reese's article is instructive to pastors and church leaders seeking to minister to former Catholics—as well as learn from the mistakes of the Catholic church. He highlights some of the more intriguing characteristics of those who leave:

- “Those who are leaving the church for Protestant churches are more interested in spiritual nourishment than doctrinal issues.
- “While the hierarchy worries about literal translations of the Latin text, people are longing for liturgies that touch the heart and emotions.
- “Catholics are leaving to join evangelical churches because of the church teaching on the Bible is a disgrace. Too few homilists explain the scriptures to their people. Few Catholics read the Bible.
- “If you do not read and pray the scriptures, you are not an adult Christian. Catholics who become evangelicals understand this.
- “Two-thirds of Catholics who become Protestants do so before they reach the age of 24.
- “The church must make a preferential option for teenagers and young adults or it will continue to bleed. Programs and liturgies that cater to their needs must take precedence over the complaints of fuddy-duddies and rubrical purists.”

The case of Sojourn Community Church moving into the defunct Catholic church should also be a reminder that Protestant churches are not immune to the spiritual decay that can lead to death. Many American and European cities feature once-thriving Protestant churches that have become nightclubs or restaurants.