

Column

It is hard to say how many Christians there are in the United States. For one thing, there is no one definition of what constitutes a Christian. Faith communities differ as to who's in and who's out. So, the best we can do is to go with how people identify themselves. According to a 2021 poll, that number was 332 million.

No doubt out of this number, there will be quite a few nominal adherents. They would check this box because their parents were church members or perhaps because they were raised in a Christian culture and are not members of some other faith community (Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim). Some of these may attend services on major holidays and may even contribute financially.

A second group might be classified as sporadic Christians. They go through periods of attending services of worship and doing Christian things, but they often get distracted. The pressures of modern life – such things as work and sporting events – get in the way and cause their level of commitment and enthusiasm to wane. At some point in the future, they are likely to come back and resume their old level of commitment . . . at least until some other distraction comes along.

A still third category is made up of hardcore adherent. These are at church every time the doors open. They serve on boards, teach classes, work on the grounds and buildings, give generously of their financial resources and witness faithfully in word and deed to those outside the walls of the church. What would any pastor or minister do without the hardcore? They are manna from heaven!

If we were to depict these three types of Christians pictorially, we might do so by drawing three concentric circles.

The one on the outside, the largest of the three, representing nominal Christians; the middle one, sporadic ones; and the one in the center the hardcore group.

We might even want to insert a bold-face dot at the very center. It would represent believers who are not only hardcore but intentional. They not only follow Jesus faithfully day by day but are always looking for ways to do so more fully. In the words of an old hymn: “MORE about Jesus would I know, MORE of His grace to others show; MORE of His saving fullness see, MORE of His love who died for me.”

The job of the Christian minister is not to disparage people in the outer circles, but rather, by good example and sound teaching, to draw them closer to the center.

Fortunately, there are practices which the Christian minister can commend which will help bring this movement toward the center about:

Prayer – Jesus instructed His followers to ask the Father in His name. J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), the first Bishop of Liverpool writes helpfully: "Let prayer in the name of Jesus be a daily habit with us every morning and evening of our lives. Keeping up that habit, we shall find strength for duty, comfort in trouble, guidance in perplexity, hope in sickness, and support in death."

Study – scripture contains the admonition: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” "Study" here means more than the academic activity of taking information into our minds. It does not however preclude this. Every Christian ought to be a Bible reader and a Bible doer.

Public Worship – The writer of Hebrews admonishes his readers: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” Christianity is not a solo sport. God calls us as individuals, but He calls us into a community, or more precisely, a family. Growth in the Christian life comes from both word and sacrament in the fellowship of other believers.

Giving – Jesus in the Gospels says more about material possessions than He says about any other subject. We give of our material resources – not in order to earn, merit or deserve God’s favour, but as a response to love. Someone has rightly said, “Stewardship is what we do after we say, ‘I believe’.”

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it is a beginning. May “more” be what we seek for ourselves and what we commend to others.

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter, Book of Common Prayer)

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