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Inherent in that question is the assumption that they must change in order to go on living. But what does it mean to change in a positive and faithful way when your Sunday attendance is about 25 people on a good day, and the village in which you live is made up of weekenders from the city and from upstate who are using their summer homes in the village for getting away from the usual routines including attending church.

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But there are no pipe or electric organs, no pews, no vestments, no hymnals, none of the trappings of traditional church life. Just an emphasis on the people who are there and the ties that bind their lives in a Christian seeking and finding that is meaningful to them.

I’m reminded of the early days of Christianity when the first of the disciples had been worshipping in the synagogue and the Gentile converts came and they found that they were not welcome. So those early Christians began meeting in house churches in homes and catacombs, any place where they felt they could be safe and still break bread and hear the scriptures, and be together in the new life that they were creating.

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So what worries me is not so much the ability of the church to adapt to changing styles of worship and spirituality. I see evidence that the church is doing that in many ways already.

What concerns me is the growing number of people who identify as “nones”, not as members of a Roman Catholic religious order, not that kind of nun, but the growing number of people who were sampled in a recent Pew poll on religion in America who marked their religious preference as “none.” They are the “nones” that I am talking about.

We used to call them “the unchurched,” which made them sound a little zombie-like, as if they hadn’t swallowed the pill or gotten their indoctrination yet. But in reality these are more the people who have looked at the church and rejected it, or want nothing to do with it. They are folks whose parents questioned authority, all organizational authority, and found it lacking, so they have never been in church, never known church school, never worshipped in a church on a Sunday morning on a regular basis.

They are also many young people who have looked at the church and found it lacking. They see our internecine battles on sexuality, that the church is still talking about gay people and gay marriage and are all hung up on it, when they themselves resolved that issue long ago and moved on. If the church is still talking about that, then especially those who are young adults assume there is nothing much in the church that is relevant to their life since that matter is a no brainer to them. To their eyes, we are fighting a battle that will some day make many in the church look and sound a lot like the old film clips of George Wallace and Bull Connor and Strom Thurmond defending segregation.

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Putnam, Phyllis Tickle, and Harvey Cox among others have the answers for us. They try to explain the decline of the mainline church, and even the evangelical church today which is also experiencing losses in numbers.

Maybe we are, as Phyllis Tickle says, going through a cycle that we see every 500 years in the church. Maybe we are, as Putnam suggests suffering the inevitable outcome of the shock of the 1960’s. Maybe Harvey Cox is right and we are in the third period of a three era change that has been unfolding over time: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and now the Age of the Spirit.

But one thing we should remember as we explain the change that is taking place around us in the culture and in the church and that is that decline in church attendance and identification with congregational life has happened before. William McLaughlin argues in his book *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, that American Church life is cyclical, it waxes and wanes around periods of revival and awakening.

Historian Timothy Smith challenged McLaughlin, believing that there was a constant amount of evangelical energy in all periods of American history. Sometimes it surged, sometimes it was submerged, but it never went away.

Regardless of whether you take McLaughlin’s revivalist-awakening view, or Smith’s constant perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that we are in a time of decline in the mainline church, in which if something does not change there will be continuing disintegration of the Christian church and even religious life altogether.

It has been worse than this before. The late Robert Handy, Union’s Seminary’s eminent church historian, described the period between 1925 and 1935 as the lowest point in church life in American history.¹

There are reasons for this. People were disillusioned by the horror that they had seen in World War I. The economic depression raised doubts about our self understanding and about the prosperity associated with God’s blessing. There was a breakdown of confidence in moral and ethical respect for the great Protestant industrial scions of that era. The emergence of modernism built on the backdrop of a scientific worldview that offered new explanations to understand life, like Darwinism challenging the beliefs of Biblical fundamentalism. People became disillusioned with the church, felt the church had failed them, and Handy calls it “that bleak period.”

Some might say that we are in a bleak period now as well. But I would like to suggest that we are simply in midst of the woods where the blue blazes on the trees are not as well marked as they once were. Yes, there is denominational decline, and diminishing attendance in worship, and fracturing in our denominations. The modernist-fundamentalist debate has morphed into its next stage which is really a continuation of the debate about whether science and culture and church can co-exist, and in what ways? We ask new questions about authority in the church, and how do we determine what is truth? It is a dense forest and it is hard to see where the trail is leading.

But that is our work in the church today, to be the church in an in-between era. A time for slowing down and making sense, as well as making ready for a new weaving of life and of the church. We are not so much in a time of decline or of bleak despair watching the sun set on the church, unable to change, but rather sorting out what we have
been carrying for a long time and deciding what is essential, what we will take with us, and what no longer speaks as effectively.

We are considering the discoveries of science and medicine and technology and the impact of social networking and a new globalism and the breaking down of old structures that we see in the Middle East and in Asia, the building of a world community and the interplay between world religions. There is a great deal of movement and change, implosion and explosion, and we have not yet discovered in the church how to adapt to such rapid change.

In the meantime, some very important things have been happening outside of the church which have made the church never more needed than in the years ahead. The vast explosion of knowledge and information, for instance, has made us hungry for wisdom.

The constantly changing culture has made us eager to develop roots.

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I think the time is already upon us when the change that is before the church will be to open the doors to a rising generation of meaning seeking adults and children and make more accessible the meaning that they are seeking. And this is not so much a matter of writing more contemporary hymns for use with synthesizers and guitars. It’s not necessarily streaming worship services live on the web. Nor is it adopting the world’s values and culture and meanings. I suspect that eventually the materialism and narcissism and superficiality of the next thing that our culture so craves will be exposed for the vapid nature of its being.

In fact, I wonder if perhaps the church is about to be rediscovered. The meanings and values and truths that the scriptures uphold newly treasured, and the community of believers who are the church will be found to embody what is most desirable and necessary for a good life.

The church is called to be faithful in this time of transition and to stand ready for a new weaving; called to do what it has always done when it is most faithful: to worship God with thanksgiving and praise, to witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed, to perform acts of healing and hospitality in the church and community, to pray without ceasing, to continue to study the scriptures with an open heart and an open mind, to keep its rooms ready for guests who may not stay long but who need to come for respite from time to time, to be gracious in its welcome, to sort out what is essential from what is urgent, while doing what is necessary, to build a community that is so closely knit that they bear one another’s burdens and rejoice in one another’s rejoicing, never allowing that closeness to prevent anyone from joining in and becoming a part of that community.
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It has been worse than this before. The late Robert Handy, Union’s Seminary’s eminent church historian, described the period between 1925 and 1935 as the lowest point in church life in American history. There are reasons for this. People were disillusioned by the horror that they had seen in World War I. The economic depression raised doubts about our self understanding and about the prosperity associated with God’s blessing. There was a breakdown of confidence in moral and ethical respect for the great Protestant industrial scions of that era. The emergence of modernism built on the backdrop of a scientific worldview that offered new explanations to understand life, like Darwinism challenging the beliefs of Biblical fundamentalism. People became disillusioned with the church, felt the church had failed them, and Handy calls it “that bleak period.”

Some might say that we are in a bleak period now as well. But I would like to suggest that we are simply in midst of the woods where the blue blazes on the trees are not as well marked as they once were. Yes, there is denominational decline, and diminishing attendance in worship, and fracturing in our denominations. The modernist-fundamentalist debate has morphed into its next stage which is really a continuation of the debate about whether science and culture and church can co-exist, and in what ways? We ask new questions about authority in the church, and how do we determine what is truth? It is a dense forest and it is hard to see where the trail is leading.

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In fact, I wonder if perhaps the church is about to be rediscovered. The meanings and values and truths that the scriptures uphold newly treasured, and the community of believers who are the church will be found to embody what is most desirable and necessary for a good life.

The church is called to be faithful in this time of transition and to stand ready for a new weaving; called to do what it has always done when it is most faithful: to worship God with thanksgiving and praise, to witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed, to perform acts of healing and hospitality in the church and community, to pray without ceasing, to continue to study the scriptures with an open heart and an open mind, to keep its rooms ready for guests who may not stay long but who need to come for respite from time to time, to be gracious in its welcome, to sort out what is essential from what is urgent, while doing what is necessary, to build a community that is so closely knit that they bear one another’s burdens and rejoice in one another’s rejoicing, never allowing that closeness to prevent anyone from joining in and becoming a part of that community.
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That little church of 39 members is struggling. It is only open in the summer for a dozen Sundays. Many of the long time and most loyal members are dying off, and they are asking themselves a question this summer that they addressed to each of their summer preachers. The question was, “Can organized religion adapt to change?” Twelve sermons on one topic. It’s a life and death question in Rensselaerville, and other places too.

Inherent in that question is the assumption that they must change in order to go on living. But what does it mean to change in a positive and faithful way when your Sunday attendance is about 25 people on a good day, and the village in which you live is made up of weekenders from the city and from upstate who are using their summer homes in the village for getting away from the usual routines including attending church.

Their question about organized religion is a loaded question for a number of reasons. For one thing those two words “organized” and “religion” are enough to turn away anyone under the age of 40 as an irrelevant topic, dated, out of touch with the real world, and of no importance to them. Barbara Wheeler who also is preaching in that series this summer entitled her sermon: “Organized? Religion?”

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We might add that the thing that most characterizes the contemporary Protestant church of today is its disintegration, declining numbers, diminishing foreign missions, and waning influence. Whether it be Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians or Unitarians, even Roman Catholics (if you discount immigrant numbers) every major religious community in this country is declining.

I belong to a clergy group which includes three Muslim Imams, and even they are saying that the number of young adults who are mosque worshippers is dwindling. Similarly, one prominent rabbi in New York City said of his congregation, “the synagogue for our youth is like ‘your grandfather’s Oldsmobile.’”
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“Organized religion” is out of favor these days, especially among younger adults. What is valued is the more spontaneous, the contemporary, that which borrows from pop culture and music; and the more relaxed and informal the religious expression, the more attractive that expression is.

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Or maybe the service is a blending of classical and contemporary music alternating between Ave Maria and a Taize chant. Free spirited is the word that comes to mind. Organized religion, but organized for the spontaneous, the unexpected, the spiritual (whatever that means) but not necessarily the religious per se if religion is synonymous with classical and formal and structured.

Most of you know Emily Scott, our former director of family music ministries who left us this past spring in order to devote full time to the new congregation that she has founded. She was awarded a grant by the Lutheran Church (ELCA) to develop St. Lydia’s a ministry that she initiated in Brooklyn. It’s a dinner church of mostly young adults who prepare a common meal, are seated at tables, and who worship on Sunday and Monday evenings around the food that they have prepared. And each week that meal leads to a celebration of the Eucharist. There is singing, there is an exploration of scripture; a meditation and sharing of responses from those gathered, and then the bread and wine are lifted up and consecrated, and people share in the unity of their oneness in Christ.

But there are no pipe or electric organs, no pews, no vestments, no hymnals, none of the trappings of traditional church life. Just an emphasis on the people who are there and the ties that bind their lives in a Christian seeking and finding that is meaningful to them.

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Inherent in that question is the assumption that they must change in order to go on living. But what does it mean to change in a positive and faithful way when your Sunday attendance is about 25 people on a good day, and the village in which you live is made up of weekenders from the city and from upstate who are using their summer homes in the village for getting away from the usual routines including attending church.

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We might add that the thing that most characterizes the contemporary Protestant church of today is its disintegration, declining numbers, diminishing foreign missions, and waning influence. Whether it be Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians or Unitarians, even Roman Catholics (if you discount immigrant numbers) every major religious community in this country is declining.

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“Organized religion” is out of favor these days, especially among younger adults. What is valued is the more spontaneous, the contemporary, that which borrows from pop culture and music; and the more relaxed and informal the religious expression, the more attractive that expression is.

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Or maybe the service is a blending of classical and contemporary music alternating between Ave Maria and a Taize chant. Free spirited is the word that comes to mind. Organized religion, but organized for the spontaneous, the unexpected, the spiritual (whatever that means) but not necessarily the religious per se if religion is synonymous with classical and formal and structured.

Most of you know Emily Scott, our former director of family music ministries who left us this past spring in order to devote full time to the new congregation that she has founded. She was awarded a grant by the Lutheran Church (ELCA) to develop St. Lydia’s a ministry that she initiated in Brooklyn. It’s a dinner church of mostly young adults who prepare a common meal, are seated at tables, and who worship on Sunday and Monday evenings around the food that they have prepared. And each week that meal leads to a celebration of the Eucharist. There is singing, there is an exploration of scripture; a meditation and sharing of responses from those gathered, and then the bread and wine are lifted up and consecrated, and people share in the unity of their oneness in Christ.

But there are no pipe or electric organs, no pews, no vestments, no hymnals, none of the trappings of traditional church life. Just an emphasis on the people who are there and the ties that bind their lives in a Christian seeking and finding that is meaningful to them.

I’m reminded of the early days of Christianity when the first of the disciples had been worshipping in the synagogue and the Gentile converts came and they found that they were not welcome. So those early Christians began meeting in house churches in homes and catacombs, any place where they felt they could be safe and still break bread and hear the scriptures, and be together in the new life that they were creating.

Lots of churches these days are opting for rock music and power point illustrations and pastors with Hawaiian shirts, and I predict that that look and style will
likely be very recognizable and datable in the history books on this period in American religious life somewhere ages and ages hence, at least as recognizable as the beehive hair style on women in the 1950’s and early 60’s. As much as tattoos will likely identify the age of the elderly, sixty years from now, in comparison to the un-inked skins of the then 20-somethings who will find their grandparents body decorations and piercings (if they still have them) as odd footnotes on a freer time in American history. Nothing changes so much as change.

So what worries me is not so much the ability of the church to adapt to changing styles of worship and spirituality. I see evidence that the church is doing that in many ways already.

What concerns me is the growing number of people who identify as “nones”, not as members of a Roman Catholic religious order, not that kind of nun, but the growing number of people who were sampled in a recent Pew poll on religion in America who marked their religious preference as “none.” They are the “nones” that I am talking about.

We used to call them “the unchurched,” which made them sound a little zombie-like, as if they hadn’t swallowed the pill or gotten their indoctrination yet. But in reality these are more the people who have looked at the church and rejected it, or want nothing to do with it. They are folks whose parents questioned authority, all organizational authority, and found it lacking, so they have never been in church, never known church school, never worshipped in a church on a Sunday morning on a regular basis.

They are also many young people who have looked at the church and found it lacking. They see our internecine battles on sexuality, that the church is still talking about gay people and gay marriage and are all hung up on it, when they themselves resolved that issue long ago and moved on. If the church is still talking about that, then especially those who are young adults assume there is nothing much in the church that is relevant to their life since that matter is a no brainer to them. To their eyes, we are fighting a battle that will some day make many in the church look and sound a lot like the old film clips of George Wallace and Bull Connor and Strom Thurmond defending segregation.

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Putnam, Phyllis Tickle, and Harvey Cox among others have the answers for us. They try to explain the decline of the mainline church, and even the evangelical church today which is also experiencing losses in numbers.

Maybe we are, as Phyllis Tickle says, going through a cycle that we see every 500 years in the church. Maybe we are, as Putnam suggests suffering the inevitable outcome of the shock of the 1960’s. Maybe Harvey Cox is right and we are in the third period of a three era change that has been unfolding over time: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and now the Age of the Spirit.

But one thing we should remember as we explain the change that is taking place around us in the culture and in the church and that is that decline in church attendance and identification with congregational life has happened before. William McLaughlin argues in his book *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* that American Church life is cyclical, it waxes and wanes around periods of revival and awakening.

Historian Timothy Smith challenged McLaughlin, believing that there was a constant amount of evangelical energy in all periods of American history. Sometimes it surged, sometimes it was submerged, but it never went away.

Regardless of whether you take McLaughlin’s revivalist-awakening view, or Smith’s constant perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that we are in a time of decline in the mainline church, in which if something does not change there will be continuing disintegration of the Christian church and even religious life altogether.

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They are also many young people who have looked at the church and found it lacking. They see our internecine battles on sexuality, that the church is still talking about gay people and gay marriage and are all hung up on it, when they themselves resolved that issue long ago and moved on. If the church is still talking about that, then especially those who are young adults assume there is nothing much in the church that is relevant to their life since that matter is a no brainer to them. To their eyes, we are fighting a battle that will some day make many in the church look and sound a lot like the old film clips of George Wallace and Bull Connor and Strom Thurmond defending segregation.

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Maybe we are, as Phyllis Tickle says, going through a cycle that we see every 500 years in the church. Maybe we are, as Putnam suggests suffering the inevitable outcome of the shock of the 1960’s. Maybe Harvey Cox is right and we are in the third period of a three era change that has been unfolding over time: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and now the Age of the Spirit.

But one thing we should remember as we explain the change that is taking place around us in the culture and in the church and that is that decline in church attendance and identification with congregational life has happened before. William McLaughlin argues in his book Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform, that American Church life is cyclical, it waxes and wanes around periods of revival and awakening.

Historian Timothy Smith challenged McLaughlin, believing that there was a constant amount of evangelical energy in all periods of American history. Sometimes it surged, sometimes it was submerged, but it never went away.

Regardless of whether you take McLaughlin’s revivalist-awakening view, or Smith’s constant perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that we are in a time of decline in the mainline church, in which if something does not change there will be continuing disintegration of the Christian church and even religious life altogether.

It has been worse than this before. The late Robert Handy, Union’s Seminary’s eminent church historian, described the period between 1925 and 1935 as the lowest point in church life in American history.1

There are reasons for this. People were disillusioned by the horror that they had seen in World War I. The economic depression raised doubts about our self understanding and about the prosperity associated with God’s blessing. There was a breakdown of confidence in moral and ethical respect for the great Protestant industrial scions of that era. The emergence of modernism built on the backdrop of a scientific worldview that offered new explanations to understand life, like Darwinism challenging the beliefs of Biblical fundamentalism. People became disillusioned with the church, felt the church had failed them, and Handy calls it “that bleak period.”

Some might say that we are in a bleak period now as well. But I would like to suggest that we are simply in midst of the woods where the blue blazes on the trees are not as well marked as they once were. Yes, there is denominational decline, and diminishing attendance in worship, and fracturing in our denominations. The modernist-fundamentalist debate has morphed into its next stage which is really a continuation of the debate about whether science and culture and church can co-exist, and in what ways? We ask new questions about authority in the church, and how do we determine what is truth? It is a dense forest and it is hard to see where the trail is leading.

But that is our work in the church today, to be the church in an in-between era. A time for slowing down and making sense, as well as making ready for a new weaving of life and of the church. We are not so much in a time of decline or of bleak despair watching the sun set on the church, unable to change, but rather sorting out what we have
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We are considering the discoveries of science and medicine and technology and the impact of social networking and a new globalism and the breaking down of old structures that we see in the Middle East and in Asia, the building of a world community and the interplay between world religions. There is a great deal of movement and change, implosion and explosion, and we have not yet discovered in the church how to adapt to such rapid change.

In the meantime, some very important things have been happening outside of the church which have made the church never more needed than in the years ahead. The vast explosion of knowledge and information, for instance, has made us hungry for wisdom.

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I think the time is already upon us when the change that is before the church will be to open the doors to a rising generation of meaning seeking adults and children and make more accessible the meaning that they are seeking. And this is not so much a matter of writing more contemporary hymns for use with synthesizers and guitars. It’s not necessarily streaming worship services live on the web. Nor is it adopting the world’s values and culture and meanings. I suspect that eventually the materialism and narcissism and superficiality of the next thing that our culture so craves will be exposed for the vapid nature of its being.

In fact, I wonder if perhaps the church is about to be rediscovered. The meanings and values and truths that the scriptures uphold newly treasured, and the community of believers who are the church will be found to embody what is most desirable and necessary for a good life.

The church is called to be faithful in this time of transition and to stand ready for a new weaving; called to do what it has always done when it is most faithful: to worship God with thanksgiving and praise, to witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed, to perform acts of healing and hospitality in the church and community, to pray without ceasing, to continue to study the scriptures with an open heart and an open mind, to keep its rooms ready for guests who may not stay long but who need to come for respite from time to time, to be gracious in its welcome, to sort out what is essential from what is urgent, while doing what is necessary, to build a community that is so closely knit that they bear one another’s burdens and rejoice in one another’s rejoicing, never allowing that closeness to prevent anyone from joining in and becoming a part of that community.
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likely be very recognizable and datable in the history books on this period in American religious life somewhere ages and ages hence, at least as recognizable as the beehive hair style on women in the 1950’s and early 60’s. As much as tattoos will likely identify the age of the elderly, sixty years from now, in comparison to the un-inked skins of the then 20-somethings who will find their grandparents body decorations and piercings (if they still have them) as odd footnotes on a freer time in American history. Nothing changes so much as change.

So what worries me is not so much the ability of the church to adapt to changing styles of worship and spirituality. I see evidence that the church is doing that in many ways already.

What concerns me is the growing number of people who identify as “nones”, not as members of a Roman Catholic religious order, not that kind of nun, but the growing number of people who were sampled in a recent Pew poll on religion in America who marked their religious preference as “none.” They are the “nones” that I am talking about.

We used to call them “the unchurched,” which made them sound a little zombie-like, as if they hadn’t swallowed the pill or gotten their indoctrination yet. But in reality these are more the people who have looked at the church and rejected it, or want nothing to do with it. They are folks whose parents questioned authority, all organizational authority, and found it lacking, so they have never been in church, never known church school, never worshipped in a church on a Sunday morning on a regular basis.

They are also many young people who have looked at the church and found it lacking. They see our internecine battles on sexuality, that the church is still talking about gay people and gay marriage and are all hung up on it, when they themselves resolved that issue long ago and moved on. If the church is still talking about that, then especially those who are young adults assume there is nothing much in the church that is relevant to their life since that matter is a no brainer to them. To their eyes, we are fighting a battle that will some day make many in the church look and sound a lot like the old film clips of George Wallace and Bull Connor and Strom Thurmond defending segregation.

Young adults in the church are changing what they expect of worship and what they need. They are coming for community, for roots, for spirituality yes, but not for doctrinaire Christianity delivered from a lofty chair or pulpit, and certainly not exclusively for Presbyterianism.

If any of those things become a part of their experience in the church community, well and good. But like many churches in New York City and other urban centers, we, at First, have experienced a growth in the number of young adults who attend worship, couples who have their children baptized, and join the church itself. This is counter to the denominational trends, the church in the larger more suburban and rural settings of the country. And we are not a church that has a blended worship service or a finger on the pulse of pop culture.

Interestingly enough, it is great sport today to analyze, explain, quantify, and interpret the decline of mainline church attendance. Dorothy Butler Bass, Robert
Putnam, Phyllis Tickle, and Harvey Cox among others have the answers for us. They try to explain the decline of the mainline church, and even the evangelical church today which is also experiencing losses in numbers.

Maybe we are, as Phyllis Tickle says, going through a cycle that we see every 500 years in the church. Maybe we are, as Putnam suggests suffering the inevitable outcome of the shock of the 1960’s. Maybe Harvey Cox is right and we are in the third period of a three era change that has been unfolding over time: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and now the Age of the Spirit.

But one thing we should remember as we explain the change that is taking place around us in the culture and in the church and that is that decline in church attendance and identification with congregational life has happened before. William McLaughlin argues in his book *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, that American Church life is cyclical, it waxes and wanes around periods of revival and awakening.

Historian Timothy Smith challenged McLaughlin, believing that there was a constant amount of evangelical energy in all periods of American history. Sometimes it surged, sometimes it was submerged, but it never went away.

Regardless of whether you take McLaughlin’s revivalist-awakening view, or Smith’s constant perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that we are in a time of decline in the mainline church, in which if something does not change there will be continuing disintegration of the Christian church and even religious life altogether.

It has been worse than this before. The late Robert Handy, Union’s Seminary’s eminent church historian, described the period between 1925 and 1935 as the lowest point in church life in American history.¹

There are reasons for this. People were disillusioned by the horror that they had seen in World War I. The economic depression raised doubts about our self understanding and about the prosperity associated with God’s blessing. There was a breakdown of confidence in moral and ethical respect for the great Protestant industrial scions of that era. The emergence of modernism built on the backdrop of a scientific worldview that offered new explanations to understand life, like Darwinism challenging the beliefs of Biblical fundamentalism. People became disillusioned with the church, felt the church had failed them, and Handy calls it “that bleak period.”

Some might say that we are in a bleak period now as well. But I would like to suggest that we are simply in midst of the woods where the blue blazes on the trees are not as well marked as they once were. Yes, there is denominational decline, and diminishing attendance in worship, and fracturing in our denominations. The modernist-fundamentalist debate has morphed into its next stage which is really a continuation of the debate about whether science and culture and church can co-exist, and in what ways? We ask new questions about authority in the church, and how do we determine what is truth? It is a dense forest and it is hard to see where the trail is leading.

But that is our work in the church today, to be the church in an in-between era. A time for slowing down and making sense, as well as making ready for a new weaving of life and of the church. We are not so much in a time of decline or of bleak despair watching the sun set on the church, unable to change, but rather sorting out what we have
been carrying for a long time and deciding what is essential, what we will take with us, and what no longer speaks as effectively.

We are considering the discoveries of science and medicine and technology and the impact of social networking and a new globalism and the breaking down of old structures that we see in the Middle East and in Asia, the building of a world community and the interplay between world religions. There is a great deal of movement and change, implosion and explosion, and we have not yet discovered in the church how to adapt to such rapid change.

In the meantime, some very important things have been happening outside of the church which have made the church never more needed than in the years ahead. The vast explosion of knowledge and information, for instance, has made us hungry for wisdom.

The constantly changing culture has made us eager to develop roots.

The fascination with the novel and the concomitant loss of history in our lives has made us long for context.

The scientific and technological overload that washes over us has made us lonely for meaning.

The disparity in wealth, the 1% and the rest of us, have made us re-examine what is for which we hope.

The excess of facts has made us yearn for mystery.

I think the time is already upon us when the change that is before the church will be to open the doors to a rising generation of meaning seeking adults and children and make more accessible the meaning that they are seeking. And this is not so much a matter of writing more contemporary hymns for use with synthesizers and guitars. It’s not necessarily streaming worship services live on the web. Nor is it adopting the world’s values and culture and meanings. I suspect that eventually the materialism and narcissism and superficiality of the next thing that our culture so craves will be exposed for the vapid nature of its being.

In fact, I wonder if perhaps the church is about to be rediscovered. The meanings and values and truths that the scriptures uphold newly treasured, and the community of believers who are the church will be found to embody what is most desirable and necessary for a good life.

The church is called to be faithful in this time of transition and to stand ready for a new weaving; called to do what it has always done when it is most faithful: to worship God with thanksgiving and praise, to witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed, to perform acts of healing and hospitality in the church and community, to pray without ceasing, to continue to study the scriptures with an open heart and an open mind, to keep its rooms ready for guests who may not stay long but who need to come for respite from time to time, to be gracious in its welcome, to sort out what is essential from what is urgent, while doing what is necessary, to build a community that is so closely knit that they bear one another’s burdens and rejoice in one another’s rejoicing, never allowing that closeness to prevent anyone from joining in and becoming a part of that community.
That is, practically speaking what I think it is to bear witness to the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

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