

Column

Despite a decline in recent years, 210 million Americans continue to identify themselves as Christians, according to data collected in 2021. Of this number and in every community, there will be those who embrace the faith in various degrees of intensity.

There will be quite a few nominal Christians, people who so designate themselves 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). These may attend services on major holidays and may even contribute financially.

There will be others who are sporadic Christians. These go through periods of various degrees of faithfulness in 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 of their children – get in the way and cause their level of commitment and enthusiasm to wane. At some point in the future, they may come back and resume their old level of commitment . . . at least until some other distraction comes along.

There will be still others who might be called hardcore. 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 on high!

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 larger of the three, would represent nominal Christians; the middle one, sporadic ones; and the one in the center, the smaller of the three, the hardcore group.

The job of the parish minister is not to disparage members of any of these three groups. Rather, it is by good example and faithful teaching to draw those on the outside of the circle inward towards the center.

At this point, we might insert a still fourth circle into our ring, this one, the smallest of all, representing the intentional Christians, Christians

who not only follow Jesus faithfully but who seek to do so more fully and deliberately as each day passes.

Fortunately, we have not been left in the dark as to how to go about this task. Things that foster growth and take us to the nucleus include:

Prayer – We are told in Scripture to pray without ceasing, meaning that our whole life should be lived in an attitude of prayer. Prayer, of course, encompasses more than mere “asking”. Asking has its place but so does thanking, confessing, praising and waiting.

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. Everyone who names Christ’s should be both 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. Each step we take—no matter how small—moves us closer to the center, that center being nothing more or less than the heart and mind of Christ, the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy,

perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Collect for Ash Wednesday)

*The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church,
Blue Ridge.*