

Related articles:

Is America facing a “post-Christian future?”
(page 36)

Living Lutheran,
April 2018

Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide

Is America facing a “post-Christian” future?

By Robert C. Blezard

Data from pollsters and sociologists agree that the church occupies a smaller, less-prominent place in our culture than it did even a generation ago. Some are even using the term “post-Christian” to describe our current situation. What does that mean for Lutherans, and how can we respond positively?

Exercise 1: Post-Christian?

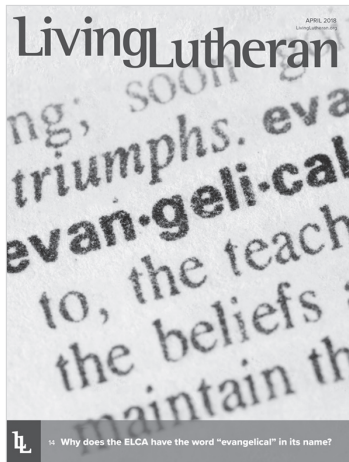
The term “post-Christian” has been used to describe our culture, or at least parts of our nation where Christianity is arguably less influential than it used to be.

- How do you understand the term “post-Christian”? How do you think it is used and understood by the Barna Group and others?
- Discuss the influence and role that the Christian faith played in our culture from the 1960s to today. What has changed? Why?
- In the last 30 years, which has changed more: the church or our culture? Explain.
- For what reasons could our country still be called a Christian nation? What evidence do you see of our faith’s influence and role in the wider culture?
- For what reasons could your state and community still be called “Christian”? What evidence do you see of our faith’s influence and role in your state and community?
- Is “post-Christian” a fair term to describe the present or emerging culture of our nation, your state and community? Why or why not?

Exercise 2: Christian decline

In surveys conducted by the Barna Group and others, fewer people in our country report affiliating with a church or describe themselves as Christians.

- In your opinion, what are the major factors for the decline of Christianity in our nation? What’s different today than yesteryear?
- In what specific ways has the decline of Christianity been apparent in North America? What have you personally observed?



Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **Is America facing a post-Christian future?** *continued*

- In your community, what are the negative implications of Christianity's decline? For your congregation? For you?
- If we are surrounded by more and more people who don't know Jesus and haven't heard the good news, how might this be an opportunity for congregations to reach others? How does it make our Christian witness all the more important?

Exercise 3: Church in change

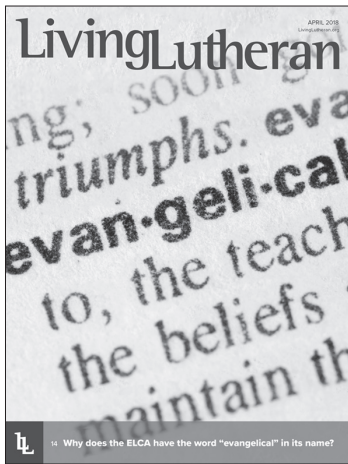
The last 20 years have brought enormous changes to our culture and our world.

- How well has the church in general, as well as your congregation, kept pace with these changes?
- To what degree is the decline in the church due to it not keeping up with cultural change?
- If churches aren't keeping pace, is it because they are unwilling or because they are unable?
- What role does each of the following factors play in the church not keeping up with social change: lack of resources; lack of courage; lack of imagination; lack of faith? How would you rank them?
- Which is more the church's role: to change with the culture, or to be a change-agent in the culture? Explain. Which has the church traditionally been? What is it now? Why?

Exercise 4: Early Christians

The earliest Christian churches flourished despite great odds. Christians were a tiny minority in a culture that was mostly Jewish and pagan. And Christians were even persecuted by Rome.

- Up against the powerful Roman Empire on the one side and the centuries-old Jewish religious establishment on the other, what obstacles did the first Christians face in organizing, spreading their message and simply surviving?
- When the ragamuffin leader of the tiny Christian movement was arrested, convicted, hanged on a cross and killed, for what reasons could opponents reasonably expect that the movement was dead once and for all?
- What was it that enabled the early church not only to survive but to actually succeed?
- What do today's churches still have that the early churches possessed? How are we using it? How can we do better?



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod.



He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **Is America facing a post-Christian future?** *continued*

Exercise 5: Your future?

Our culture may be facing a post-Christian future, say the data and the social scientists.

- Does that mean you have to face a post-Christian future?
- Does your congregation necessarily have to be post-Christian?
- In whose hands is the future of your spiritual life and that of your congregation?
- What gifts and tools has God given you and your congregation to work with? How are you using them? How could you use them more effectively?
- What is God's preferred future for you and your congregation?
- How does God help congregations and people to lead, guide and inspire them to a bright future?



Is America facing a “post-Christian” future?

Lutheran witness in the country’s most and least “post-Christian” cities

By Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

In July 2017, the research firm Barna Group released “The Most Post-Christian Cities in America,” a report based on surveys of 76,505 adults in 100 American cities. The results? Portland-Auburn, Maine, ranked as the “most post-Christian” city (57 percent of respondents identified as “post-Christian”); the “least post-Christian” city was Shreveport, La. (12 percent “post-Christian”).

The numerical decline of most Christian denominations in the U.S., and the growth of so-called “nones” who don’t claim any religious faith, isn’t news to most rostered ministers or people in the pews. Many beloved congregations have shrunk or closed. Statistically speaking, younger generations feel less and less connected to the church. Are we facing a “post-Christian” future?

How should Lutherans read reports like this one—as an alarm bell or a wake-up call? What do trends teach us about the challenges and opportunities of being the church today?

Who is “post-Christian”?

It’s important to read surveys carefully, not only to respond to the conclusions but also to notice which questions are being asked. Through interviews, the Barna study determined “post-Christian” identity by judging responses according to 16 points of Christian belief and practice.

Some points, such as “do not believe in God”

and “disagree that faith is important in their lives,” seem clear-cut. Other criteria, like “have never made a commitment to Jesus,” “not born again” and “disagree that the Bible is accurate,” define Christianity primarily through the lens of religious conservatives rather than from Lutheran and other traditions. The latter might answer “we are Christians because Christ makes a commitment to *us* in our baptisms”; might not have had an adult conversion (“born-again”) experience; and might describe the Bible as theologically accurate but not literally inerrant.

Interviewees were also assessed on whether they had prayed, read the Bible, volunteered at church, attended Sunday school or joined a religious small group *in the last week*—criteria that might exclude those who participate regularly, but not weekly, in these activities. Does a week’s lapse in Christian practice, or a difference in theological understanding of baptism or the Bible, make someone “post-Christian”?

The report also doesn’t indicate whether members of non-Christian faiths were part of the sample. These participants would likely answer “no” to most of the 16 criteria. It’s no doubt accurate to say these American neighbors aren’t Christian, but it makes very little sense to call them “post-Christian.” It’s also problematic to call any entire American city “post-Christian” (or, for that matter,

“Christian”) when in fact, religious diversity has always been a reality of American life.

Still, one thing is clear: Christian faith in the U.S. can no longer be taken for granted (if it ever could). What the numbers and labels don’t address are the deeper questions of why people left the church, or how they find their identity and purpose in a “post-Christian” culture. What can the church learn from listening to the stories behind the statistics?

Lutheran in Louisiana

Erik Gronberg, bishop of the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod, cautioned against making sweeping generalizations about the culture of his region’s communities. “Is it a ‘churched’ culture in the sense of inviting clergy to pray over city events or hearing Christian radio? Yes. In terms of seeing the majority of people in worship every Sunday? No.”

Gronberg fears that a title like “most Christian city” might lead Lutherans elsewhere to assume there is no fruitful ministry to be done in these communities, but that isn’t the case. “If we believe there is value to the Lutheran Christian confessional witness to the gospel, can we share this in a way that goes beyond a certain worship style or culture?”

The bishop has found that a gospel of grace is still a much-needed message in highly culturally Christian areas. “We have a deep theology of welcome and inclusion by God: God loves you, period,” he said. “The message that God is actually for you and not against you can be a radical message.”

Living in a highly Christian but minority-Lutheran context can make Lutherans more purposeful about their identities. “In Shreveport you are Lutheran on purpose,” Gronberg observed.

Still, he added, “if Lutherans aren’t the dominant cultural voice . . . it encourages partnerships and offers the opportunity to be prophetic” on issues such as women’s leadership in ministry and welcome of LGBTQ+ people.

Lutheran in New England

“The reality that people [here] are not connected to church [is true],” said Maria Anderson-Lippert, until recently the interim pastor of St. Ansgar Lutheran Church, Portland, and mission developer for Arise Portland, which serves mostly young queer adults. “Most of the people I meet maybe grew up going to church but left for a number of reasons . . . and I have met more people out here than ever before who didn’t grow up with any religion.”

Anne Roser, who served in New Hampshire for more than 15 years before becoming interim pastor of First Lutheran Church, Portland, finds that

throughout New England “the issues are the same. We are in the second generation of people who haven’t been raised in the church.”

Arise Portland grew from Anderson-Lippert’s conviction that “it’s unrealistic to expect that people are just searching for a church,” but that at the same time, “there is a longing and searching for something deeper: meaningful relationships and asking big questions.”

Arise strives to meet these needs through a monthly “holy potluck,” a book club, and a “Pints and Perspectives” small-group conversation in a local pub. Using open language and inviting diverse perspectives helps “people who have been hurt by the church or who have never found a religion that made sense” to feel welcome, she explained.

Roser agreed: “We are called to spread the love of Christ and there are many ways to do that, not just ‘how we’ve always done it.’ It takes Christian imagination, understanding people in context and experimentation.”

Although most of the families who use First’s highly rated preschool and child care programs are not regular churchgoers, an “Ashes-to-Go” station on Ash Wednesday was a success. This led Roser to conclude that “people respond when the church responds to what they need—not just catering to them, but proclaiming grace where they are.”

Post-Christian or most Christian?

For at least some Lutherans in Shreveport and Portland—and for many of the rest of us too—being Lutheran in North America today means living among neighbors who may not share our traditions, faith language or understanding of the world. This reality can be challenging, but doesn’t have to be discouraging.

For Roser, the inability of the church to keep doing “what we’ve always done” can spur the church to become “a place of safety and welcome, and love—a *public* place.” In a post-Christian world, she said, the heart of Christian faith can be rediscovered in the question: “How do we proclaim who Jesus is for people, this message that is good news for them and gives them hope?” **L**

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab. See the full Barna Group report at barna.com.



Meghan Johnston Aelabouni is an ELCA pastor studying full-time for her doctorate. She and her family live in Fort Collins, Colo.