

Spiritual Academy
Forming Christian Vocational Spirituality
- A Spiritual Movement to Rebuild the Church -

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But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
To him be glory both now and forever! Amen (2 Peter 3:18 NIV).

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared
to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,
for whose sake I have lost all things.
I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:8 NIV)

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1. Understanding the Problem today's Christians confront

American Church Growth and Decline

American churches confront a crisis, and church leaders are anxious for the future because the church has been declining since the 1960s. An economic boom in the 1950s resulted in a Christian church boom.¹ However, the religious boom of the 1950s shifted to a decline in the early 1960s (Figure 1).² The decline of the church continues even though the population increase from 1990 to 2000 was the largest 10-year increase in U.S. history.³

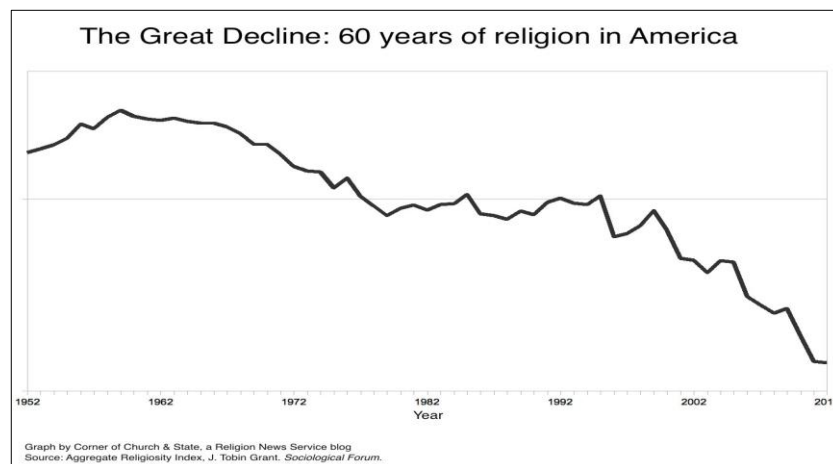


Figure 1

Over the last sixty years, American churches have lost much: manpower, financial resources, ministries, self-confidence, hope for the future, spiritual identity, and

¹ In this period, going to church every Sunday was typical. According to a Gallup report, the highest historical level of church attendance was about 47 percent of the U. S. population on an average Sunday in 1955 and 1958. The church became a town community center where families spent the weekend, people made friendships, and community culture was produced and shared. Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 1-2.

² J. Tobin Grant, "The Decline: 60 years of religion in one graph": <https://religionnews.com/2014/01/27/great-decline-religion-united-states-one-graph/>.

³ While 1990 to 2000 was the largest decade increase, the U.S. population doubled from 150 million in 1950 to 300 million in 2010. Hobbs, Frank and Nicole Stoops, *U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Special Reports, series CENSR4, Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, U.S. Government Printing Office (Washington, DC, 2002). 11-12.

spiritual authority. It is not surprising that the church is anxious about their own crisis. At this point, we must ask some practical questions: What is most important in all that churches have lost? What is the biggest problem underlying the churches' crisis?

New Trend: Religiously-unaffiliated Americans

With the decline of the church, the number of religiously-unaffiliated Americans has rapidly increased. The religiously unaffiliated is now the largest religious group in America. According to a Public Religion Research Institute report in 2022, 38% of Americans ages 18–29, 32% of those ages 30–49, 20% of those ages 50–64, and 17% over age 65 are religiously unaffiliated (Figure 4).⁴

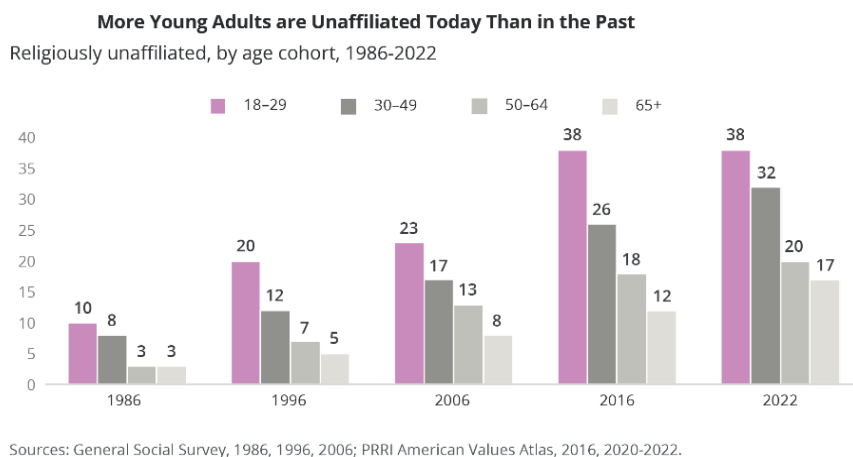


Figure 4

In Pew Research Center surveys, unaffiliated Americans are those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular.” Religiously-unaffiliated Americans tend to be less religious than Americans who belong to a religious tradition, but they are not wholly secular. They retain a religious sense. Their type can be categorized as spiritual but not religious. Robert C. Fuller, the professor of Religious Study at Bradley University who analyzed the American religious identity in his book *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, wrote that American people tend to prefer “private” spirituality rather than “public” spirituality. According to Fuller, 54% of Americans believe that churches and

⁴ <https://www.prri.org/spotlight/prri-2022-american-values-atlas-religious-affiliation-updates-and-trends/>

synagogues have lost the spiritual part of religion.⁵ The religiously unaffiliated feel spiritual sensibilities, but they do not join the church community. This rejection of church communities suggests that churches have lost the authenticity of Christian spirituality.

Loss of Christian Spirituality

At the peak of the American church boom in the 1950s, Paul Tillich, a German-American systematic theologian, wrote an article called “The Lost Dimension in Religion” for *The Saturday Evening Post*, the most popular magazine in America at the time.

If we define religion as the state of being grasped by an infinite concern, we must say: man in our time has lost such infinite concern. And the resurgence of religion is nothing but a desperate and mostly futile attempt to regain what has been lost.⁶

In the 1950s, Paul Tillich already thought that Christian churches had lost the deep spiritual dimension. He recognized that the Christian religious trend was not spiritual even though American churches were quickly growing and appeared to be vital. Tillich, in his theology, disagreed that the church boom of the 1950s was a spiritual resurgence. According to Tillich, American churches flourished without the deep spiritual dimension. In other words, even in the 1950s, American churches had already lost the deep dimension of Christian spirituality.

Finding Hope for the Church

Once again, I ask the central questions for this project: What has the church lost? What must the church recover?

I submit that the church has lost the original Christian spirituality rooted in Jesus’s heart in the New Testament and that the church must recover Christian vocational spirituality from Christ Jesus alone. Therefore, my suggested solution is a project to form Christian vocational spirituality— A Spiritual Movement to Rebuild the Church.

⁵ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 5.

⁶ *The Saturday Evening Post*, vol. 230, no. 50 (June 14, 1958): 29, 76, 78-79; reprinted by permission of *The Saturday Evening Post* (copyright 1958 by the Curtis Publishing) in Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 1. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) xiv.

This project will offer practical outcomes like the following.

1. Restoring the original Christian spiritual source (Jesus in the New Testament).
2. Understanding the whole of the Christian life (Christian vocation).
3. Building the structure of Christian humanity (being born again in the Spirit).
4. Responding to the American religious trend of “Spiritual, but Not Religious” (using modern language to express Christian spirituality).
5. Rebuilding the church community through building Christian vocational spirituality (becoming the living body of Christ Jesus).

2. How Do We Proceed?

Spiritual Academy: Going to Galilee to Meet Jesus

1) The church is the school for the kingdom of God. The church must become the living body of Christ Jesus through learning from Jesus: “The church is Christ's body. It is filled by Christ. He fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:23 NIRV). To be the church is to be the actualization of Jesus’s spirituality through being Jesus’s disciples, Jesus’s followers.

2) Church members must have an attitude of discipleship. Jesus calls his disciples, his followers, “Come to me, ... and learn from me, ... and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29). Church members are the pupils (disciples) for becoming Jesus’s followers (true Christians). They learn a new way, Jesus’s way, by learning from Jesus in Galilee. “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” (Philippians 3:8-9).

3) Both schooling and rebuilding require time. Compulsory education in the USA requires 12 years. Jesus’s own disciples show us that it can take three years to experience spiritual understanding. Even then, the Christian self must continue growing and developing over one’s full lifespan. “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

The Curriculum of the 12-week Spiritual Academy

The spiritual academy of the church begins with a process of education and training for 12 weeks.

- Understanding the problems which the church confronts in the secular world (weeks 1-2).
- Understanding human beings: the original essence and potential of humanity (weeks 3-4).
- Understanding Jesus as the most excellent way for human beings (weeks 5-6).
- How to build a spiritual relationship with Jesus (weeks 7-8).
- How to build Christian vocational spirituality (weeks 9-10).
- How to build the vocational church (weeks 11-12).

This curriculum aims 1) to clearly reconstruct each individual's faith as Christian vocational spirituality according to the original sources of Christian faith (focusing on Jesus). Through this process, individual Christians can build a solid construction of Christian faith and an integrated and centered Christian life;

2) to clearly reconstruct the church spirituality according to the original vocation of the church as the living body of Christ Jesus. Through this process, church members can participate in Christian communal spirituality as the Christian vocational church. Individuals can breathe spiritual oxygen from the communal spirituality, and they can share their blessings with others;

3) to clearly reconstruct the structure of the church community according to the original vocation of the church. Through this process, the church community can become a vocational and spiritual community which is different from a social institution, a volunteer society or a community center. This process leads the church community to walk with, work with and follow Jesus.