**Pastor’s Post #25: “MINISTRY TO THE ‘NONES’*”* (07/29/’17)**

When I use the word *nones* for today’s program, I don’t want you to think of the Roman Catholic religious order – spelled N-U-N-S, but rather of the group spelled N-O-N-E-S: Adults who do not identify with any religious group.

Now here it’s important to make a distinction that’s not always made in discussions of this topic (and there are many of them!). We should never speak of people as “non-religious”. Everyone is religious, because we are inescapably made in the image of God. People may speak of a “Higher Power”, or of “Spirituality”, or of “A sense of transcendence”, but all of these things are “religious” impressions, or “faith commitments.” Even an atheist has a faith commitment: He or she believes that there is no God. And as soon as we are in the realm of *beliefs*, we are in the realm of *religion*. I usually say that “Everyone is religious. The issue is: What’s the person’s religion?”

So, when we speak of the *nones* - spelled N-O-N-E-S – we are speaking of people who, for whatever reasons, do not identify with or are not affiliated with a particular religious group – a group like a Christian church, for example.

Our attention was drawn to this in 2014, in *The Religious Landscape Study* produced by the Pew Research Foundation. According to that study, *nones* then made up about 23% of US adults (although a recent Gallup poll puts that number somewhat lower). The group includes those who self-identify as atheists or agnostics as well as those who say their religion is “nothing in particular.” Again according to the study, this number had increased from 16% of US adults in 2007 – a 7% increase in as many years. Of this group, a full 65% said that “religion was not important in their lives”, and only 34% said that “religion” was “somewhat or very important in their lives.” (Keep in mind, again, that all people are religious in some way. These are people who are not affiliated with any organized religious group like a Christian church.) Shockingly, fully 1/3 of these *nones -* N-O-N-E-S – said they do not believe in God – up by 11% since 2007.

In population statistics, *nones* in the USA numbered over 36 million in 2014. That’s a massive “people group” for the Christian church to reach.

Why do people become *nones*?

As painful as it is to hear the reasons, we need to pay attention. We’re speaking about our neighbors, our co-workers, our relatives – perhaps even our own children. (The vast majority of *nones –* almost 80% - say they were raised as part of a particular religious group before they shed that identity in adulthood.)

Of the *nones* who have left their childhood faith:

* 49% say they just don’t believe that faith any more. They are disenchanted. They are not interested, or they don’t think they need “religion”. Their views have “evolved”, or they went through a crisis of faith. Many of these mention “science” as the reason for their rejection of the faith in which they were raised – especially the “science” they learned in college. One said, “Rational thought makes religion go out the window.” Another said, “I just realized somewhere along the line that I didn’t really believe it.” That’s 49% of the *nones* who have left the faith of their childhood.
* 20% dislike “organized religion”. They are against “institutional religion”. They believe that organized religion is about power and politics. And they see organized religion as a big cause of conflict in society. They are weary of the divisiveness, they see among religious groups. They dislike the preoccupation with money in too many established religious bodies. And the failings of religious leaders in things like sex-abuse scandals have turned them off to “the religious establishment.” That’s 20% of *nones* who have left the faith in which they were brought up.
* 18% are simply not sure of what they believe. They are unaffiliated with an established religious group, but they claim to be “religious.” They are “seeking” and they are “open minded”. Or they claim to be “spiritual”, but “not religious” – and by that they mean “not identified with a particular religious group”. Their views are vague, and usually poorly defined.
* 10% have just become inactive with respect to church life – or things like it. They no longer practice their faith. Many stopped attending religious services when they went away to college. They got into that habit. And they haven’t broken it. Some are honest enough to say that they are “too busy” for things like “church.”

And to make the picture seem even gloomier, religiously unaffiliated Americans are younger, on average, than the general public; and those of the *nones* who have entered adulthood in the last several years are even less committed to historic religious concepts and religious institutions than *nones* overall.

What’s the average age of the members of the church of which **you** are a part?

Now all of this, in itself, sounds very discouraging. But never forget that God is alive and at work! He tells us that *His truth endures to all generations*. The risen and reigning Jesus Christ promises to be *with us* until He returns at the last day of human history. The apostle Paul affirms (in the New Testament book of Ephesians, at the end of the third chapter) that the true and living God will get glory *in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations.* And the Gospel is still God’s power - his holy dynamite - unto salvation. I love to remind myself that in the 1960s the younger generation was given up as lost because of its rebellion and immorality – until God the Holy Spirit worked to convert many of us and bring fresh winds of revival.

God isn’t bound by statistics. He loves to surprise us with His gracious power and His powerful grace!

But we still have our responsibility to minister to the *nones* - N-O-N-E-S. That’s about 20% or more of the United States population. How do we reach them with the good news of Jesus Christ and His power to liberate people from sin, guilt, shame, doubt, unbelief, despair, and self-destruction? *Nones* need this good news like everyone else – in every generation.

How do we minister to the *nones*? That’s our topic for today’s *Visit to the Pastor’s Study.*

My guest today is a dear friend and fellow Gospel minister here on Long Island. John Yenchko is pastor of the North Shore Community Church in Oyster Bay, NY – a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America. Like the rest of us who serve in very secular metropolitan New York, we deal regularly with the *nones* - N-O-N-E-S. Pastor John Yenchko will draw from his experience to help us minister effectively to the *nones*.

Here’s a link to the full program:

Yours in the King of Kings,

Pastor Bill