

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Where Have the Churches Gone? From the 'Faithfull' to the 'Nones'

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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During the 1950s it was almost impossible to walk more than a city block in my old neighborhood without encountering a church. Catholic churches, Protestant churches, and even a Jewish temple. They were all jammed together in the old neighborhood. And they all seemed to be doing well. My bayfront neighborhood was not unique. Erie was a “holy city” filled with churches, and most were connected to ethnic and immigrant enclaves.



Kingsley United Methodist Church is now shuttered

St. Andrew Church and school at West Seventh and Raspberry streets, for example, had Portuguese, Italian, and Scottish identities, serving as a social center for those and other Catholics neighbors. Just a block from St. Andrew, at West Seventh and Cascade streets, St. Mathew Lutheran Church served a largely German community, were Erie's largest immigrant group. But St. Mathew was not the only Protestant church in the neighborhood. Two blocks south on West Ninth Street was a Methodist church (Kingsley) at Cranberry, and a Presbyterian church (Sarah Hearn) at Cascade. Astonishing: four thriving churches crammed into six city blocks. And there were more. Moving east to Liberty Street was a Protestant church between Ninth and 10th streets,, and a Jewish temple at 10th Street. There was also a Catholic chapel on the West Eighth Street Villa Maria campus, which was well attended by locals, as well as a Church of God on Cherry Street. There was a Finnish Lutheran church on Second Street between Cascade and Plum streets, and just a few blocks south in Little Italy were two other Catholic churches, St. Michael and St. Paul.



The congregation of the once bustling Anse Hesed synagogue at West 10th and Liberty streets moved to a much smaller building in Millcreek Township.

Sadly, all that is left of most of these once-powerful churches is a series of door signs describing their closures. Where did they all go? What happened? Beginning with St. Andrew, once a magnet for the Roman Catholic population of Erie's relatively high-end west side, was cannibalized by the creation of a new, modern church just a short distance west. St. Jude and its companion school (Our Lady's Christian) culled the most prosperous families from St. Andrew, leaving that church-school complex reeling from enrollment and revenue losses. In retrospect, it seems that Erie's Catholic Diocese could have been more thoughtful in its planning, but the priests who were making strategic decisions during the post-World War II population boom had no training in demographics, city planning, or other business matters. They, like so many other planners during the 1950s, were lulled into assuming that population growth would continue forever. It did not.

The Catholic system was confused by geometric growth (Catholics had more babies), an attempt to correct some wrongs created by early 20th century immigration, and a tendency to include a grade school with each new church as it was built. As of 1900, approaching the peak of U.S. immigration, non-native born Americans made up 15 percent of the population with Irish-Catholics alone numbering more than 2 percent. The largely Protestant U.S. culture was accused of vilifying immigrants, connecting them with disease, ignorance, and laziness. To protect themselves from this general attitude, Catholic dioceses made the decision to build and sustain their own school systems, which were almost always connected to parish churches. Catholic officials were motivated to provide school

systems to counter the anti-Catholic bias that permeated the United States in the early 20th century. During the 1870s, President Ulysses Grant accused Catholic churches and schools of preaching superstition, ambition, and greed. "If we are to have another contest in the near future of our national existence, I predict that the dividing line will not be Mason's and Dixon's, but between patriotism and intelligence on one side, and superstition, ambition, and ignorance on the other," Grant said in an address to the Society of the Army of the Tennessee on Sept. 29, 1875.

By 1920, there were 6,500 Roman Catholic schools in the United States, according to census figures. This number reached 12,000 by 1965 (serving 5.6 million students). That wild growth and its associated costs were unsustainable and could only be managed by staffing schools with the generosity of orders of Catholic sisters. There were about 60,000 sisters teaching in American Catholic schools by 1920. To make this happen some "corners were cut." One common concession was the use of "cadet teachers," which was a common practice in Erie. Young women who had either begun the process of becoming sisters or had officially expressed an interest in doing so were sent to advanced summer-school education classes after only one year of college, and in most cases, their commitment to teaching was rewarded with free college tuition.

Cadet teachers were sometimes placed in classrooms as teachers after their first year of classwork, where they were carefully monitored by more experienced mentors. Frequently they were assigned to teaching-assistant roles, but sometimes they were placed in charge of classrooms. If they were not given their own classrooms during their first year, they often were placed in charge of classrooms after a second or third year in the cadet program. Given the size of the classes and the large numbers of female grade school students during the 1940s and 1950s, it was not difficult to recruit girls interested in launching teaching careers, especially given the added incentive of discounted or free college tuition. For young girls in Catholic schools, leadership modeling provided by classroom teachers, who were almost always religious sisters, presented a powerful incentive. Teaching was an entryway to a life of service as well as an attractive career.

While there have been criticisms of the cadet teaching system and its propensity for placing young and inexperienced women who had not yet completed college degrees in parochial school classrooms as teachers it should be noted that most of the girls selected for this role were highly motivated and dedicated. While it seems in retrospect that placing such young women in charge of grade school classrooms was less than ideal, in most cases, cadet teachers with ongoing mentorship and supervision proved to be exceptional classroom managers and teachers.



Gone but not forgotten, St. Andrew alumni include former Gov. Tom Ridge



Tom Ridge is a proud product of St. Andrew and its cadet teaching

My school, St. Andrew, staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph, was a classic example of a school that used the cadet program to hold things together. The Sisters of St. Joseph, which staffed the school, operated an elementary and high school as well as a women's college with an education program that could be tapped to train young teachers. The cadet program not only helped sustain the school but also provided a pipeline for new sisters.



Sister Phyllis Hillbert, at left, shown here at her current assignment in Erie's Little Italy Neighborhood Network, began her Sisters of St. Joseph career as a cadet teacher in 1957.

Not only did population demographics conspire to undermine the plans of the Erie Catholic Diocese, which faced similar issues in other parts of the city, but the late 1900s witnessed a major shift in church attendance. Losses of parishioners significantly impacted both Catholic and Protestant churches. Slowly but surely, one church after another found itself unsustainable. Even though most did not have to deal with the costs of attached schools, the Protestant churches in my old neighborhood also began to fail.

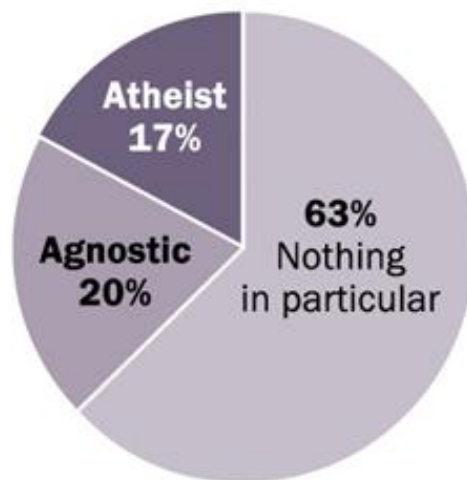
The city, like the rest of the country, has experienced a major reduction in church attendance. And in Erie, where small neighborhood churches had popped up during the growth period, most of the smaller, and especially the ethnic churches, have closed. The reduction in church attendance has involved every religion (except for Mormons), and according to New York University's Scott Galloway, faltering attendance at neighborhood churches has been exacerbated by the growth of evangelical megachurches.

Television evangelists, such as Jimmy Swaggert and Joel Osteen, have pointed the way to a new marketing-driven approach that revolves about giant television

screens, popular music, and well-crafted homilies. The trend toward a few highly successful megachurches has reached Erie in the form of institutions like “First Assembly,” which has almost 7,000 Facebook subscribers. According to Galloway, about 60% of Americans who regularly attend church services currently go to a megachurch (congregations with more than 2,000 members) a trend that has helped to hurt smaller churches.

The 1960s was a perfect storm for small neighborhood churches: Population was falling; people were moving out to suburbs; attendance was falling; and of the fewer people who were going to church, a large number were being driven to megachurches. Between 2000 and 2024, American church attendance (weekly) fell from 42 to 30 percent of the population. For Catholics, it was from 45 to 33 percent. A few years earlier, in 1959, average attendance had been 50 percent.

In recent polling, the Pew Research Center has noted the emergence of a new religious designation, “None.” The new category is attributed to annual survey respondents who answer “none of the above” to the survey question asking religious affiliation. After watching that answer grow from a few percent to almost 30 percent over a decade, Pew noted that if “Nones” were their own religious denomination, it would be the largest in America. Nones currently outrank Catholics (22% of the population), the traditionally largest designation in the country.



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 31-Aug. 6, 2023.
Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe"

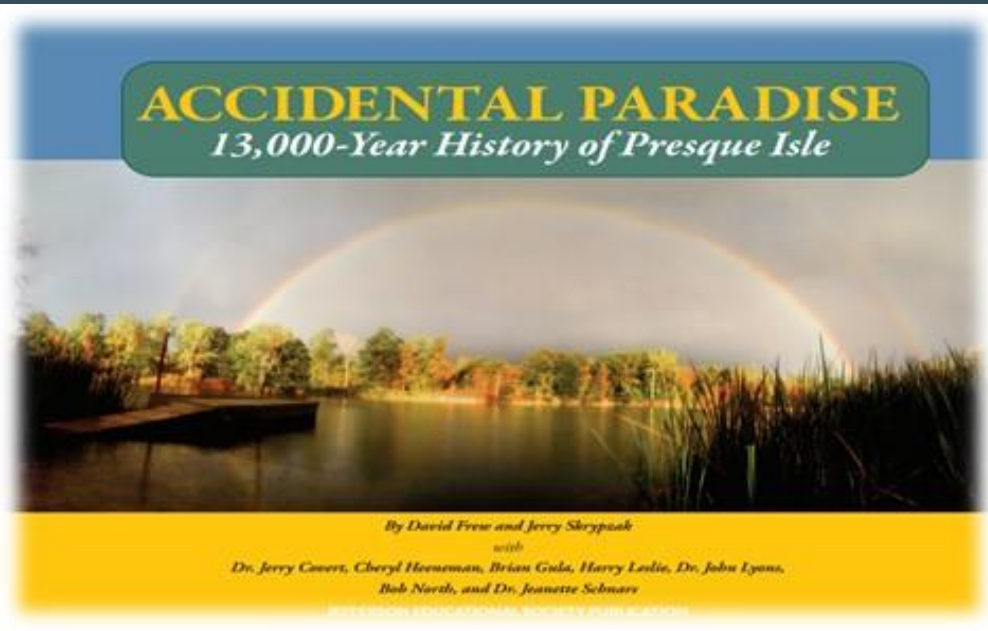
On a positive note, the availability of once-used inner city church buildings is providing an interesting new real estate opportunity for creative homebuyers.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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