

How come more people don't go to church?



It may not be the reason you think.

The Rev. Stephen Fichter understood just how dominant a role sports has assumed in the culture when a family told him they would be out of town Good Friday to Easter Sunday to attend their child's volleyball tournament.

"It's truly sports that has become like the religion" for many people, said Fichter, a researcher and the pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Haworth, N.J.

From youth travel teams to big-time national festivals such as the Final Four, sports have been making increasing inroads in the busy lives of many Americans. Some scholars even trace the evolution of sports from pastime to a form of civil religion to now having become almost a folk religion.

And it is having an impact on religious groups, which report increasing difficulty convincing families that are willing to spend half a day traveling to a 9-year-old's softball or soccer game to make time for worship services.

Some congregations are meeting the challenge by offering alternative service times and their own sports teams and programs. But many despair of their ability to compete in a culture increasingly consumed by athletics, with its multi-million dollar idols and its own sacred relics. Witness the Babe Ruth jersey that sold last year for \$4.4 million.

In a study of 16 declining congregations in the U.S. and Canada, the reason most cited by clergy and members for falling attendance was the secularization of Sunday, with many identifying children's sports as most responsible. Researcher Stephen McMullin of Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia reported the findings in the current issue of the *Review of Religious Research*.

"(Parents) will make sure Johnny goes to sports, but when it comes to church, I've just seen it over and over again, and even in our own congregation, the families that have children in sport will sacrifice church for the sake of their son or daughter's sports program, so sports is another huge reason why our church is declining," one pastor said.

There were few Easter Christians, individuals who show up for worship one or two days a year, among the earliest followers of the faith.

Facing penalties “like hanging — that tends to clear the head,” the Rev. Aidan Kavanagh, the late liturgy professor at Yale Divinity School, dryly observed.

Christians in the United States no longer need fear persecution for missing services. Demanding schedules, many of which revolve around youth sports, are the new competition for congregations.

Fichter surveyed 341 Catholics in one congregation who reported attending only on Easter and Christmas. He said he thought many people would cite disagreement with church teachings or negative experiences. But only 7 percent of respondents gave either of those reasons.

More than two-thirds said the reason they attend only twice a year was that they were too busy with other commitments. Sixteen percent admitted they were lazy. Fichter reported the findings at the joint annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association.

Deacon Greg Kandra