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# When Will They Ever Learn? Mainline Decline in Perspective

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The Episcopal Diocese of Newark, New Jersey has the distinction of once having been led by none other than Bishop John Shelby Spong, who has managed to push heresy into the twilight zone by suggesting that the church must move even beyond theism. Not satisfied with denying the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ, and other major doctrines, Bishop Spong was determined to deny a personal God as well. Now, the diocese is seeking a new bishop once again. There's a story here.

*The Record* and the *Herald News*, newspapers serving northern New Jersey, report: *The Episcopal Diocese of Newark, for years the epitome of liberal Protestant Christianity in America, acknowledged Thursday in an unusually candid report that it has suffered a steep slide in membership and needs a bishop who can revitalize its struggling parishes. The diocese, which covers seven northern New Jersey counties including Bergen, Passaic, Hudson and Morris, has lost nearly 24,000 congregants, or 46 percent of its membership, since 1972. That's nearly three times the average decline in the Episcopal Church nationwide, the report said.*

Under liberal church leadership, the diocese has lost over 40-percent of its membership — almost 24,000 members. Anyone concerned?

The report, *Signs of Grace in the Diocese of Newark*, notes: *Our Church membership continues to fall. We are not inviting the vast population in which we live. We are not welcoming the Christ in many of our neighbors who think we are exclusive, irrelevant, passé or boring. For some we are too radical. In trying to maintain vital congregations, reduced membership exhausts some, as they work desperately to make dwindling congregations function. Some congregations become lifeless and unfeasible. All of this has a negative impact on our diocesan life.*

This is the pattern found throughout liberal Protestantism — at least what's left of it. The mainline denominations have been losing members by the thousands for decades. Many of these churches have become so theologically inclusive, politically liberal, and doctrinally confused that there is no compelling reason for anyone to join anyway. After rejecting biblical authority and embracing theological relativism, these denominations now find themselves adrift and in decline. Sadly, they reject the one way out of their crisis — a return to biblical authority, Gospel preaching, and theological orthodoxy. Though brave orthodox congregations remain in most of these denominations as islands of truth in an ocean of confusion, the trajectory of these denominations is, for the most part, steadily to the left.

Don't expect the Diocese of Newark to look for an evangelical bishop to lead them out of their decline. According to the press release about their bishop search process, this diocese is determined boldly to go where no church body has gone before. Consider this statement: *We encourage nominations of persons of both genders, all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and of all sexual orientations. All sexual orientations?* This could get interesting.

