

1 out of every 5 churches may end up permanently closing because of the pandemic.

That isn't the prediction of Chick Little worried that one acorn means the entire sky is falling. It is a prognostication from David Kinnamon, a well known Christian pollster, whose data reveals some troubling trends.

According to his findings, the pandemic has been a double whammy: people's relationships with churches are weakening and their worship habits are changing. Since last March, the virus has prevented Christians from belonging to their congregations in the same way. The usual activities of church life that bring people together - worship, fellowship meals, Bible studies, social activities - have been disrupted. As worship moves online, geography is no longer a limitation. People can worship almost anywhere and many are attracted to larger churches that have more bells and whistles than what their local congregation can offer.

The result is likely to be church closures, as the biggest and strongest get bigger and stronger while the smallest and weakest close their doors. The market is going to do its thing.

When you combine this disruption with other disturbing trends, it is easy for pessimism to grow. Other surveys reveal that fewer and fewer people are calling themselves Christian or seeing the value in religious community. Those who still claim the label and profess the faith increasingly want church to happen on their terms, participating when convenient but otherwise checking out from leadership and involvement.

A lot of these troubling dynamics are new. The technology that makes virtual worship possible hasn't existed for most of the church's history. The extreme individualism of our society and the consumerist attitudes it fosters - my needs must be met or I'm out the door - are a sharp break with the more communal practices of the early church and the contemporary practices of other cultures. And the pandemic is a once-in-a-century event, something most of us will hopefully never experience again.

But a lot of this isn't new at all. The church has always existed in circumstances that required adaptation and threatened extinction.

“We have this treasure in jars of clay,” is how the Apostle Paul describes his ministry of preaching the Gospel and planting churches. Clay pots are fragile. They can be broken. And when they fall apart, they lose their ability to carry the treasure. He understood - and he wanted his readers to understand - that they needed to cherish what was given to them. They had to hold it gently, so as not to break the pot and lose their treasure.

This religious lesson was driven home for us in a secular way by what transpired at our nation’s Capitol this past week. On a day that was supposed to symbolize what was best about us - a country where power is peacefully transferred and the continuity of government endures - violence erupted. Pipe bombs were found. Rioters at the doors of the Capitol chanting in unison for the hanging of the Vice President. The elected leaders of our government were forced into hiding by insurrectionists who entered with zip cuffs indicating they were looking to take hostages. “They could have killed us all,” is how South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham described what occurred.

In the House gallery where differences are supposed to be settled by debate, guns were drawn by law enforcement. Those protecting the building were hit with barricades and attacked with chemical agents. One valiant officer died after he was hit on the head with a fire extinguisher. The efforts of those defending the building and coming to the rescue were courageous and heroic but they also meant much, much more. For they were not just saving lives and protecting property. As the DC Chief of Police put it, “what we did was restore democracy for all of America.”

The things we love and value and depend upon are fragile. Our physical health can suddenly deteriorate. Relationships that we thought were secure can quickly fall apart. Governments collapse and the liberties they secure disappear. And churches, like ours, that exist to teach the ways of Jesus to his followers and proclaim the Gospel to the world can find their beautiful buildings shuttered and their vibrant witness hallowed out.

These things we cherish are not guaranteed. They are not self-sustaining. They can break down and disappear, leaving us to lament what we had and wonder how we lost it.

My worries are not about the Gospel itself. The Spirit will sustain a witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. My fears are about the witness of the

American Church - what we offer the world in God's name - at this moment.

You have heard me preach sermons challenging what is heard in many other pulpits. I have suggested that messages of self-help and self-indulgence fail to follow Jesus' demand of self-denial and neglect the responsibility to love our neighbor. I have denounced the so-called "prosperity gospels" that deny the reality of suffering we face in our lives and fail to reflect on the meaning of the cross. I have challenged ideologies that transform healthy patriotism into idolatrous nationalism, replacing proper worship of God with the improper worship of country.

Our church, our denomination, our tradition is far from perfect but we strive - along with many others - to be a corrective to these distortions of the Gospel. We are trying to preserve this treasure we carry in clay jars.

I know this congregation feels fragile to many of us right now. My inbox and voicemail is filled with notes of concern related to our ministry of the pandemic. Some of you are looking at other churches doing more in person activities and worried our members will be drawn to other places. Others are noticing churches that are completely virtual and fear we are putting this body at risk by meeting for worship, keeping our food pantry open, and holding other limited activities.

Over these next few weeks, I am going to ask us to shift that anxiety we all feel - anxiety that is being felt by every pastor and every church I know - onto a different question. While the short term realities of the pandemic are not going to change, the long term future of this church is an open question. It can be almost anything.

It can be a story of decline and despair, with dwindling attendance and involvement that leads to an eventual closure a few decades from now. That story is a very familiar one across the landscape of American churches.

That story can also be one of renewal and creativity once our society is able to re-emerge from the pandemic. It can be a story of putting our financial resources to work, of building new relationships across this community, and continuing to offer our distinctive witness of celebrating communion each week, baptizing believers who make the decision to follow Jesus, celebrating the role of women in church leadership, protecting

the sacredness of human conscience, practicing a congregationalist polity, and honoring the other characteristics that make First Christian distinctive.

The thing about fragility is that it demands responsibility. Fragile things that are left alone, that are ignored, that are neglected will fall apart. Fragile things that are cared for, nurtured, and protected will retain their beauty, will serve their purpose, will continue to hold their treasure.

Fragility is seen as a weakness but that's the wrong way to understand it. Fragility is all about strength. It demands commitment, devotion, investment. The church only breaks if we drop it.

But the strength fragility requires of us is different. It isn't about overwhelming power in a moment. It is about perseverance over time. An ability to not let the struggles and passion of the short term distract us from what matters to us over the long run.

After all the chaos at the Capitol this week had mercifully ended, a lot of clean up was required. A legion of janitorial workers - who are made far less than members of Congress and don't get a vote in what happens under the Capitol Dome - were left to rectify the destruction and desecration caused by the mob.

Among them, was Congressman Andy Kim. Still in suit and tie - still wearing his official Member of Congress pin that lets him freely roam the Capitol's halls - Rep. Kim stayed until the wee hours of the morning, removing debris and scrubbing floors on his hands and knees.

He didn't have to be there. Given the fear and tragedy experienced that day, nobody would have blamed him for going home. But he stayed, he said, out of his love for the Capitol and his love for the country.

He knew what the fragility of this moment required and he refused to leave the necessary work up to others.