

US Jews change self-portrait

By Peter Smith
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Marc Linden, 27, grew up in a Reform Jewish congregation in Michigan, but since moving to Louisville, he hasn't joined a synagogue. He does, however, attend major religious services and is a member of a local Jewish civic group.

Amy Shir — with her non-Jewish husband — is raising their children in the Jewish faith and soon will celebrate their daughter's bat mitzvah.

Brian Wallace grew up in a secular Jewish household in New York but then, through a series of life crises, was drawn to the Orthodox Jewish practice. Now, he works to recruit other Jews to move to Louisville.

All three embrace their Jewish identity — but this isn't their parents' Jewishness.

As underscored in a major new survey, they are among those navigating a period of historic flux in how American Jews view themselves, their religion, their culture and how they affiliate with each other.

A growing minority of American Jews — including nearly a third of younger adults in particular — say they're not religious but continue to identify themselves as Jewish, according to the survey, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," released this month by the Pew Research Center.

Intermarriage rates also continue at high levels among younger Jews — 58 percent among Jews married this century.

And on the list of things that make someone Jewish, far more Jews chose such things as remembering the Holocaust, being moral and ethical, working for justice and even having a good sense of humor than such traditional markers as belonging to the Jewish community or observing religious law.

The survey estimated there are 6.4 million self-identified Jews — religious or secular, including children — a figure close to a 6.8 million estimate released recently by Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass.

Interpreting results

"That is good news for the Jewish community, and yet another denial of the gloom-and-doom forecasts that are forever predicting a decline in population," said Rabbi Joe Rooks Rapport of The Temple, Louisville's largest synagogue.

Rabbi Robert Slosberg of Congregation Adath Jeshurun said the survey reflects unprecedented opportunities in mainstream society for American Jews — in contrast to past cases of widespread prejudice. He quipped that the Pew report "paints a picture of a Jewish community experiencing and struggling with an onslaught of unprecedented freedom."

But Lee Shai Weissbach, a history professor at the University of Louisville and author of multiple books and articles on American Jewish life, said that while the trends reflect a decline in anti-Semitism, it's "hard to put a positive spin" on the numbers.

"For those of us who believe the rich Jewish culture is worth preserving in America and in the world generally, the fewer people that you have tightly connected to the Jewish community, the more of a danger it is that that culture will be lost," Weissbach said.

He said intermarriage is so pervasive that Jewish organizations have had to switch their approach from "how do you prevent it?" to what can be done to persuade both partners "to identify more with Jewish life?"

Shir said she and her husband, a cradle Catholic who now has no religious belief, regularly observe the Sabbath and other Jewish practices with their two children.

"The thing that disturbs me somewhat about the tone (of the report) is that that there's an implication that interfaith marriage is bad," she said. "I disagree with that. In my case it's been absolutely wonderful."

She echoed many of the top choices in the Pew survey for Jewish identity, saying her work in a federal anti-poverty program and in charitable activities reflects the core Jewish value of "tikkun olam," or repairing the world.

And learning about the Holocaust — Nazi Germany's systematic murder of 6 million Jews — "really affected me as a child," Shir added. "I said, 'Hitler's not going to kill my Jewish spirit.'"

The secular trend among younger Jews is hardly unique to that denomination. Nearly one-third of American adults under 30 said they had no religious affiliation, according to a 2012 Pew survey.

But many of the unaffiliated, Jewish or not, continue to believe in God, pray and take part in religious observances, the surveys said.

The local front

Louisville has long had a relatively small but highly active Jewish community. A 2006 survey estimated its population at more than 8,300.

Given that size, Shir said local synagogues should do a better job of coordinating youth activities and camps.

"In a community this small ... the leadership in the community could do a better job at getting the youth together more," she said.

The small Orthodox synagogue Anshei Sfard took an even more aggressive approach, sending representatives to a national Orthodox conference in hopes of encouraging Jews to migrate here, and in August it was host to a gathering of visitors who are looking at opportunities for jobs and housing here.

"Louisville offers a lot for people," said Wallace, a synagogue member helping to coordinate the effort. "It's very safe and clean, the housing is affordable, you can get anywhere you need to in 15 minutes."

Wallace grew up in a secular home. But as he and his wife struggled first with infertility and later with the loss of a child, they were increasingly drawn to the Orthodox Jewish faith — a lifestyle they found they could have in Louisville.

"I kind of came to the realization this is how I wanted to live," said Wallace, 36.

Revitalization efforts are underway across denominations, including the larger Reform and Conservative synagogues.

The Jewish Community of Louisville is offering the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, an intensive study of Jewish texts and traditions.

The Temple, meanwhile, has launched a program called TorahCorps, using iPad applications and other programs to encourage young people to continue studying Hebrew and religion past their bar or bat mitzvahs.

Teens are also encouraged to use low-tech guitars, drums and singing to lead worship services, said Ellen Shaikun, who teaches at The Temple's religious school.

"To be able to sit in a service where the kids are leading, you know your future is there, there's no need to worry about it," Shaikun said.

Report's key findings

Population*

Religious Jews: 4.2 million adults (1.8 percent of U.S. adults).

Non-religious, self-identified Jews: 0.9 million adults (0.4 percent of U.S. adults).

Children being raised religiously or culturally Jewish: 1.3 million.

Estimated Jewish population: 6.6 million.

**Generally defined as those who adhere to Judaism or who identify as Jewish by culture, ethnicity or ancestry.*

MORE FINDINGS

Religious or secular?

Born 1914-1927: Religious, 93 percent; not religious, 7 percent.

Born 1928-1945: Religious, 86 percent; not religious, 14 percent.

Born 1946-1964: Religious, 81 percent; not religious: 19 percent.

Born 1965-1980: Religious, 74 percent; not religious: 26 percent.

Adults born after 1980: Religious, 68 percent; not religious: 32 percent.

All adults: Religious, 78 percent; not religious: 22 percent.

An essential part of being Jewish is...

Remembering the Holocaust: 73 percent

Leading an ethical/moral life: 69 percent

Working for justice/equality: 56 percent

Being intellectually curious: 49 percent

Caring about Israel: 43 percent

Having a good sense of humor: 42 percent

Belonging to Jewish community: 28 percent

Observing Jewish law: 19 percent

Eating traditional Jewish foods: 14 percent.

Intermarriage among Jews married ...

Since 2000: 58 percent

1995-1999: 55 percent

1985-1989: 41 percent

1975-1979: 36 percent

Before 1970: 17 percent

Source: "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," 2013 Pew Research Center survey of 3,475 Jews across the country. Margin of error plus or minus 3.0 percentage points.

Faith that sustains

By Peter Smith
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ST. CATHARINE, Ky.

Downhill from a red-brick convent — topped with cupolas and adorned with Gothic stained-glass windows — a muddy lane leads to a pasture where cattle stand against the stiff breeze, one cow nuzzling her newborn calf.

In past generations, the Dominican sisters, who have been based at St. Catharine since the early 1800s, viewed this farm as primarily a means to an end — a source of food and cash-crop revenue to support their work in education and other fields.

But now they view preserving this small-scale farm — raising and selling beef free of steroids, growth hormones or antibiotics — as a spiritual mission in itself, as much as the prayers they offer daily in their historic motherhouse set amid the rural hills of Washington County.

"We tend to look at what are the needs of the times and how can we address those needs. Now we see that a need is to preserve farmland across our country," said Charlene Moser of Louisville, a Dominican Sister of Peace.

The Dominicans are far from alone. Across Kentucky, Indiana and beyond, religious organizations are increasingly taking stock of how they're handling their land — both as an ethical responsibility and as a model for other landholders.

St. Meinrad Archabbey in Spencer County, Ind., is reforesting nearly 400 acres of increasingly flood-prone bottomland once used for such cash crops as corn and soy.

The Abbey of Gethsemani in Nelson County, Ky., which shed its livestock holdings years ago, recently began raising chickens and pigs again.

Asbury University, an evangelical college in Jessamine County, Ky., uses a model farm to teach organic and other small-scale agricultural techniques to students who include prospective missionaries who can take their skills afar.

The Furnace Mountain Zen Retreat Center in Powell County, Ky., has set aside most of its 800 acres — which had been heavily logged by past owners — for reforestation.

"We approach what we do with the land with a certain amount of humility," said Jigetsu Osho, guest master at the Buddhist meditation center. "...We are mostly trying to not intervene very much but respecting the intelligence of the forest and its ability to restore itself."

In some ways, the efforts have a long pedigree. Pope Francis said he chose to take the name of the medieval St. Francis of Assisi in part because he was "a man who loved and protected creation." And religious groups and individuals have been involved throughout the environmental movement of the past half-century.

But these groups' recent activities also reflect concerns that have risen to the top of environmental and health agendas in the past few years — from carbon emissions to losses in arable land, local-food sources and access to fresh produce in urban "food deserts" where obesity is at epidemic levels.

The movement is relatively new, but participants are reporting small-scale anecdotes in which their modeling of sustainable techniques is spreading.

Members of an Asbury student team taught gardening techniques during a mission trip in Tennessee, while those working on a community garden at Crossroads Christian Church in Lexington are learning about organic methods they can use in their home gardens, participants said.

Conferences in recent months, such as the annual Festival of Faiths in Louisville and a recent gathering at the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville campus, have focused on how religious groups can, and should, set an example for sustainable land use — methods that promote the long-term health of the land, those who farm it and those it feeds.

"We practice good agriculture because that's what the sisters want," said Danny Ray Spalding, who has managed the St. Catharine farm for 29 years. "...You've got to believe in what you're doing."

And with growing consumer demand for more natural foods, other farmers are "wanting to get into this business," Spalding said.

At Crossroads Christian Church, a large nondenominational congregation in Lexington, members cultivate crops using sustainable techniques and distribute the produce for free in urban neighborhoods where fresh goods are scarce.

"It's really an outreach effort, a way for us to fulfill the calling we feel we were given spiritually to provide those basic needs for others," said Amanda Gumbert, a church member and volunteer.

In the 1970s, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Nelson County, Ky., sold its 400-acre dairy farm at its motherhouse. But the order recently has decided not to sell any more land.

"At the time, we didn't feel that we needed the land for our mission," Sisters of Charity members Susan Gatz, Teresa Kotturan and Carol Rogers said in reply to an email query. Now, the email said, "we realize that the land itself is a mission."

They carry that out on their remaining land in part by helping others enjoy it — keeping walking paths clear and lakes stocked with fish, using rain and lake water for crops and trees, and allowing much of the land to return to its natural state, saving costs and energy use on lawn mowing and other maintenance.

"We strongly believe the earth is a part of a holy creation, a universe that is mysteriously created by God and wonder-filled, and deserves our reverence and our care," the sisters said.

Such efforts have their benefits — and limits — said M. Scott Smith, dean of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, which has advised the St. Catharine Farm and has a growing sustainable-agriculture curriculum.

"Economic sustainability becomes a part of overall sustainability," Smith said. "Land can be preserved and untouched and still not be sustainably operated if it doesn't provide a living for the landholder."

Successful sustainable farming, he said, involves the intersection of the land's capabilities, the needs and values of its owners and their responses to outside pressures — from markets to regulations to community opinion. While farmers can learn from each other and model farms, "you've got very different goals for a religious organization that has land tenure versus young farmers trying to pay off a mortgage versus a retired farmer trying to live there in peace and quiet."

Sustainability efforts in the area

Here is a sample of area efforts by faith-based organizations to demonstrate sustainable land-use practices:

St. Meinrad Archabbey, Spencer County, Ind. — Teaches environmental sustainability to seminarians and lay students; began reforestation 384 acres of Anderson Valley bottomland in 2007 after years of flooding of croplands; uses fuel-efficient vehicle fleet; has abbey-wide recycling, including waste oil.

Dominican Sisters of Peace, Washington County, Ky. — Operates cattle farm with no antibiotics, steroids or hormones to serve members at St. Catharine motherhouse, college and customers; has own recycling-sorting center; raises seedlings for area farmers.

St. Catharine College, Washington County, Ky. — Catholic university opening new Berry Farming & Ecological Agrarianism Program to promote sustainable land use within a liberal arts curriculum.

Ursuline Sisters of Louisville — Planted rain gardens on its Crescent Hill campus in Louisville to prevent runoff and enable students to learn about gardening. Recycled much of former Marian Hall when it was recently demolished, allowing Habitat for Humanity and other groups to use salvageable parts.

Furnace Mountain Zen Center, Powell County, Ky. — Reforesting much of its 800-acre property.

Abbey of Gethsemani, Nelson County, Ky. — Raises chickens and pigs; cultivates selective growth in its surrounding forests; replaced oil fuel system with more efficient propane system.

Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Nelson County, Ky. — Stocks lakes with fish, maintains walking paths, uses rainwater and lake water for crops and trees and allows much of land to remain in natural state, saving costs and energy use on lawn mowing and other maintenance.

Passionist Community (Holy Cross Province), Louisville — Hosts Passionist Earth & Spirit Center next to monastery on Newburg Road, offering training in everything from gardening to meditation.

Mount St. Francis, Floyd County, Ind. — Dedicated much of its land as a nature preserve.

Local decline in Catholic school enrollment mirrors national trend

By Peter Smith
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Students from Holy Family School sat quietly before their school Mass on a recent weekday morning, the sunlight slanting through the tall sanctuary windows, illuminating their blue shirts, khakis and plaid skirts.

When Mass began, students took an active role, reading Scriptures and prayers, raising their hands during the priest's informal question-and-answer homily, and playing drums and shakers to upbeat hymns.

With about 165 students from kindergarten through eighth grade, the 89-year-old parish school on Poplar Level Road has kept operating — even as numerous smaller, historic parish schools in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Louisville have closed or merged.

"We're pretty solid this year," with a mix of steady tuition, new students and donors helping balance the budget, principal Beverly McAuliffe said.

But as she gave visitors a tour of the building — passing photos of larger graduating classes in generations past — McAuliffe spoke of needs ranging from window replacements to financial aid.

"It's just a constant challenge to try to make it work," she acknowledged.

Figuring out what works is a challenge the entire archdiocese is confronting amid dramatic shifts in its school landscape — which traces its roots back two centuries to pioneer schoolhouses around Bardstown and educated generations of immigrants in close-knit urban parishes.

In the past decade, enrollment has fallen 25 percent to 12,469 in the archdiocese's elementary (K-8) schools, which are mostly in and around Louisville and Bardstown.

Twenty of the 55 traditional elementary schools the archdiocese operated in 2000 have since closed or merged. Catholic schools no longer operate in Bullitt County or some older city neighborhoods, such as in western Louisville.

The archdiocese recently published a report on elementary enrollment trends, including an extensive survey of Catholic parents that found, among other things, that cost is a significant factor, as are weaker ties to their faith.

Archdiocesan leaders are now coordinating more formal discussions among parishioners and school boards, focused on how to turn the tide and ensure a future for its elementary schools.

Among the topics: whether to more aggressively switch from a mostly parish-based system to other formats — for example, a centralized school district or more regional academies such as those formed by several recent school mergers.

These kind of discussions are not limited to Louisville, said Brian Reynolds, chancellor and chief administrative officer of the Archdiocese of Louisville.

The enrollment declines here mirror a national trend — Catholic elementary enrollment in the United States is down by a quarter in the past decade, and archdioceses in older cities such as New York, Philadelphia and Chicago have shuttered scores of neighborhood schools founded generations ago to serve immigrants whose offspring have moved on.

"We would be wrong to think trends around the country are not going to affect us, too, so the question is, how do we make our schools accessible to the broadest number of people?" Reynolds said.

Growth in some areas

Some areas are bucking the declining-enrollment trend, including the fast-growing regions of the Louisville archdiocese, such as the eastern Jefferson County suburbs and Elizabethtown, where hundreds of students pack spacious new Catholic schools.

The nearby Archdiocese of Indianapolis has seen K-12 enrollment increase almost 1,600 to 23,547 in the past two years, said spokesman Greg Otolski.

While St. Mary's Church in New Albany recently announced it would close its school because of finances, Indiana's 2011 voucher law, allowing parents to get state subsidies for private-school tuition, is "making Catholic schools more affordable for people," Otolski said.

Some Archdiocese of Louisville schools are doing well.

St. Michael School in Jeffersontown, which launched in 1997 with a kindergarten and first grade, is now offering three classes per grade through fourth grade and two per grade through eighth. The parish, just off the Gene Snyder Freeway, has soared in membership amid new subdivisions and shopping outlets.

"Being small is wonderful," principal Sheila Marstiller said, recalling the early days. "Now we just have to do the same thing but on a larger scale."

Shrinking flock

The national decline in Catholic school enrollment mirrors a decline in child baptisms and reflects another of American Catholicism's current struggles — retaining new parents and other young adults. Catholic marriages and burials also are down.

Among local Catholic parents recently polled for the archdiocese who don't send children to diocesan schools, more than a fifth said they weren't committed enough to the faith to want their children educated in it.

That, church officials say, shows they need to be looking beyond school structures and budgets — to what Pope Benedict XVI calls the "new evangelization," creatively presenting the faith to alienated cradle Catholics.

While some people are rejecting teachings or other aspects of the church, "in most cases it seems to be adrift," Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz said.

"It's not because they oppose the practice of the faith," he said, but they often get busy or focused on day-to-day concerns. "They've literally fallen out of the habit."

Kurtz said many are spiritually searching, and schools can help evangelize both children and their parents.

The archdiocese already is renewing efforts to incorporate the church's catechism — or summary of core teachings — in schools, he added. "Part of our mission is to teach," he said.

Building on strength

Proponents say Catholic schools have many strengths — strong academic reputations, with good test scores and disciplined atmospheres where Catholic teachings and service projects are woven in.

The Louisville archdiocese, according to its archdiocese report, is tied for the third-highest percentage of Catholic schoolchildren per Catholic of any diocese in the nation — behind only Covington, Ky., and Jefferson City, Mo.

"The teachers are credentialed, but they also bring that dedication and commitment to overall ministry," added Leisa Schulz, superintendent of the archdiocese's schools.

The biggest challenge remains financial. About half of those Catholic parents surveyed who aren't sending children to Catholic schools said they couldn't afford it, and another fifth weren't sure it was worth it.

"I think our school would be packed if we didn't charge tuition, just because of the community," McAuliffe said.

The average tuition in the archdiocese is \$4,973 but varies by school, number of students per family and other criteria. Tuition starts at about \$5,300 at Holy Family and \$5,200 at St. Michael.

In past generations, Catholic schools were largely staffed by nuns and friars who were compensated in keeping with their vows of poverty.

Today, 97 percent of educators in American Catholic schools are lay people. Personnel costs, while below public-school levels, have risen.

Still, parents who send their children to Catholic schools say it's worth the sacrifices.

"We don't drive new cars. We have a '93 and a '98 automobile," said Shelly Junuzovic, the mother of a first-grader and a preschooler at Holy Family. "For us, education is our kids' top priority."

She and her husband, who both work full time, also receive some scholarship help from the Catholic Education Foundation, which provides more than \$2million annually in scholarships and other aid to Catholic schools and parishes.

"We're very blessed that there is help," she said.

Lara Norrenbrock of Fisherville, a mother of three children who are or will be attending St. Michael, said she and her husband grew up in Catholic schools and valued their weaving of education, faith and manners.

"Both my husband and I still are, 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir,' and we feel that's important," she said. "We want our children to grow up like that."

National trends in Catholic elementary education

Enrollment

2000: 2,013,084

2012: 1,440,572

Change: minus 28 percent

Schools

2000: 6,923

2012: 5,636

Change: minus 19 percent

Mean tuition

\$3,673

Source: "U.S. Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2011-2012: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing," National Catholic Education Association

St. Michael: Former upstart school booms in eastern Jefferson County

By Peter Smith
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When she was principal at the large St. Albert the Great School, Sheila Marstiller recalled, she sometimes went with her staff on faculty retreats to St. Michael Church — then a country parish in the woods of eastern Jefferson County.

Then she was asked to become principal of a fledgling school at St. Michael, launching in 1997 with 58 children in kindergarten and first grade.

The parish and school have since boomed along with its region of Jeffersontown, just off the Gene Snyder Freeway. Large new subdivisions like Saratoga Woods and Stone Lakes have cropped up, and "we knew we had arrived when the Kroger was built" next door, she said.

Now St. Michael has a gleaming state-of-the-art building with broad corridors, a well-lit library and large — and full — classrooms.

Some 550 students attend K-8 grades, with another hundred in pre-school. The full- and part-time faculty includes 39 teachers and 16 teacher assistants.

"We have a reputation for being open and welcoming," Marstiller said, which it has worked to maintain as that has grown. "We were putting people on a waiting list" until it began offering three classes in the lower grades. "We have not had to turn anybody away since."

While Catholic-school enrollment is down overall, that news seems hard to believe at a place like St. Michael — or other booming schools in eastern Jefferson County and Elizabethtown, where Catholics have transplanted to fast-developing communities.

"You realize the church is vibrant and very alive," said the Rev. Dick Sullivan, pastor of St. Michael. "A lot of people are still practicing their faith and looking to the church as a kind of home base."

Nikki Tyler, the mother of four boys at St. Michael, said her best friends remain her Catholic school classmates.

"I want my children to be able to carry those friendships through their lives," she said.

"I taught in the public school system," she added. "It made it very clear to me that I wanted my children in a Catholic school. The aspect of religion in school was huge."

The students can't even fit into the current St. Michael sanctuary for an all-school Mass — a situation that will change dramatically with the imminent completion of a large new sanctuary. That will enable classroom expansion into the old parish offices, allowing the school to reopen the science lab that was taken over by a regular classroom due to a space crunch.

Jack Gregg, 84, a parish member since its founding in the 1970s, volunteers every day at the school cafeteria to set out napkins and other items and trade fist bumps with the students.

"I've seen a lot of changes," he said. But "if you don't change, you go away."