

Session 2:

The Religious Landscape of the Pacific Northwest

GUIDING QUESTIONS What is religious life like in the Pacific Northwest? What organizations, influences, or spiritual impulses are characteristic? What questions of meaning shape life here?

BACKGROUND READING Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Religion by Region Series), edited by Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, AltaMira Press, 2004. Key chapters are “Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the Future: Religion in the None Zone” (Killen) and “Surveying the Religious Landscape: Historical Trends and Current Patterns in Oregon, Washington, and Alaska” (Killen & Shibley).

PREPARATION

- Handout (2 sides): *The Religious Landscape of the Pacific Northwest and Six Characteristics of Pacific Northwest Spirituality*
- Supplies: writing board or poster to present or record main points
- Candle and other items for altar/worship area
- Copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or other resource for reading and singing

GATHERING Ask people to share their name and whether they have been baptized, and if so, where they were baptized.
10 minutes

OPENING WORSHIP

- Light the candle in your worship area.
- Begin with a short prayer.
- Read Psalm 148.
- Read or sing ELW 771, “God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens”

5 minutes

WARMUP QUESTION Ask participants what they notice about religious or spiritual life in the Pacific Northwest compared to other places they have lived or visited. How is it the same or different? Bat this around a bit.
5 minutes

INTRODUCTION

15 minutes

Introduce this guiding image:

As salmon are heading down the Columbia River toward the ocean, they need to undergo a bodily change as they transition from fresh water to salt water. In the same way, the church needs to undergo changes as it moves west. Patterns that have been meaningful in the East and Midwest are not necessarily viable in the Northwest.

NOTE: Here is some background info on salmon for those who are curious. Time will probably not permit all these details to be shared in class.

What adaptations allow salmon to move from fresh to salt water and vice versa?

- Adaptations are **both behavioral and physiological** between environments.
- The challenge in salt water: Surrounding water is saltier than body fluids, so salmon lose water and gain too many salts.
- The challenge in fresh water: Body fluids are saltier than the surrounding water, so salmon gain too much water and lose critical salts.

Change #1: Drinking habits. In salt water salmon drink copiously to offset dehydration. In fresh water salmon drink almost nothing, to offset water loading.

Change #2: Kidney function. In salt water the kidneys produce a smaller amount of more highly concentrated urine to conserve water within the salmon. In fresh water the kidneys produce large volumes of dilute urine, to shed the salmon's excess water.

Change #3: Specialized cells in gills adjust the way they transport salts. In salt water they "pump" salts *out* of the salmon's blood and *into* surrounding water. In fresh water these same cells "pump" salts *out* of the water and *into* the salmon's blood. Basically this evens out salts so salmon gets the right amount.

Time course of the salmon's acclimation responses

"The behavioral (drinking or not drinking) and physiological changes a salmon must make when moving from fresh water to salt water and *vice versa* **are essential, but cannot be accomplished immediately.** Thus, when a young salmon on its seaward journey first reaches the saline water at the mouth of its home stream, it remains there for a period of several days to weeks, gradually moving into saltier water as it acclimates. During this time, it begins drinking the water it's swimming in, its kidneys start producing a concentrated, low-volume urine, and the salt pumps in its gills literally reverse the direction that they move salt (so that they're now pumping salt *out* of the blood and into the surrounding water).

"Likewise, when an adult salmon is ready to spawn and reaches the mouth of its home stream, it once again remains in the brackish (= less concentrated than full-strength sea water) water zone of the stream's mouth until it is able to reverse the changes it made as a juvenile invading the ocean for the first time."

(Found at http://www.unm.edu/~toolson/salmon_osmoregulation.html and http://www.biol.wvu.edu/hooper/H355-2_salmonlifehistory.ppt. Adapted.)

Read E.J. Klemme quote from handout and summarize characteristics of the Pacific Northwest religious landscape from front of that sheet:

- Little social support for religious institutions, which are not strong and never have been. There never was a “golden age” of church life here, as there was in other regions. Similarly, the region cannot be called “post-Christian” because it never was Christian.
- High mobility makes building community a challenge.
- The Pacific NW is an open religious environment, with many options for expression. People must make a conscious effort to choose and practice their faith.
- Religious participation is limited; only just over 1/3 are affiliated with a religious group. Point out details: just over another 1/3 identify but are uninvolved, and fully 1/4 of the population claim no religion (Nones).

Discuss. Does this analysis surprise you? In what ways does it coincide with your own experience of the Pacific Northwest, or life in your congregation? Where do most of your neighbors or peers fit into this picture of religious participation?

**SMALL GROUP
DISCUSSION**
20 minutes

Ask class participants to skim reverse side of the handout — **Six Characteristics of Pacific NW Spirituality** — or summarize the main points on a board or poster. Have groups of 3-4 discuss:

- Which of these characteristics do you see being most active or most influencing life in your community or congregation?
- What spiritual questions, impulses or hungers do you think lie behind these expressions?

Share back briefly with the large group.

**LARGE GROUP
TIME**
5 minutes

If there's time ...

In light of this conversation, ask participants to identify the gifts, yearnings and needs of people in this region. Record their thoughts and keep this list for future sessions. If time is short, give this question as homework. In future sessions, there will be a chance to reflect on how the church in the Northwest is or isn't responding to these gifts, yearnings and needs.

CLOSING PRAYER
5 minutes

Close with prayer, asking participants to name something about the Northwest for which they are thankful.

The Religious Landscape of the Pacific Northwest

In 1914, Professor E.J. Klemme of the Washington State Normal School in Ellensburg lamented: “*The people that builded [sic] this empire...[left] the Golden Rule beyond the Rockies, and they proceeded to do others before others could do them. In the East they were faithful church members; now they are not even church [at]tenders.*” According to Klemme, the fault lay with the geography itself: “*The ascent of the Great Divide seemed too steep for church [transfer] letters. The air of the Northwest seemed too rare for prayer. We have hurried forth to conquer the wilderness, but we have been conquered by it.*” — quoted by Patricia O Connell Killen¹

Most people in the Pacific Northwest do not participate in religious institutions and never have, making non-participation “normal” here. Fewer people belong to a religious institution than in any other region of the US:

- There is little social support for religious institutions, which are not strong and never have been. There never was a “golden age” of church life here, as there was in other regions. Similarly, the region cannot be called “post-Christian” because it never was Christian.
- High mobility makes building community a challenge.
- The Pacific Northwest is an open religious environment, with many options for expression. No single religious group dominates.
- People coming here must negotiate their own religious identities, and those who believe must make a conscious effort to choose and practice their faith.

Religious Affiliation in the Pacific Northwest

Only about 1/3 of the population is religiously affiliated, while about 2/3 are “secular but spiritual.” This is the opposite of the US national pattern.

- **A little over 1/3 (37%) are affiliated with a religious group**, that is, they belong to a religious tradition or community. This includes both active members and those who participate rarely. Nationally, 59.4% are affiliated with a religious group.
- **A little over 1/3 (38%) identify with a religious group** but are not involved in any way. They may say, “I grew up Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, or my family is...” but they themselves do not currently participate.
- **The remaining 1/4 (25%) claim no religion they are “Nones.”** That is, when asked “What is your religious tradition, if any?” they answer “None.” Nationally, the rate for “Nones” is 14.1%.

The “None” group is twice the size of the largest denomination here (Roman Catholics at 11.3% of the population). “Nones” are the fastest-growing “religious” group in the US and Pacific NW. A typical “None” in this region is spiritually inclined with no self-identified religious tradition or participation in a religious community. He is neither agnostic nor atheistic. She is mostly white, well-educated, middle class, a baby boomer, living in a metropolitan area with a spouse and no small children at home. Politically they are independent.

¹ Patricia OConnell Killen, “Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the Future: Religion in the None Zone” in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Religion by Region Series), edited by Patricia OConnell Killen and Mark Silk, AltaMira Press, 2004, p.9. This book is the source for all data in this handout.

Six Characteristics of Pacific Northwest Spirituality

1. Many people call themselves **spiritual but not religious**.
 - Don't want to be pinned down, open, fluid
 - Are open to seek and incorporate "new" practices, draw from multiple traditions
 - Individual spiritual experience is primary, as is private spiritual quest or journey
 - May seek intense emotional and physical experiences of the divine
 - "Secular but spiritual" expressions include New Age and nature-based spiritualities
2. **Rugged individualism** is alive and well.
 - Isolationism, independence, doing my own thing no matter what anyone else thinks.
 - The "conquering spirit" has implications for land use, resource extraction.
 - Correlates with wide open spaces and vast resources.
 - This is a challenge to community spirit or collective wisdom — people seek community, yet feel ambivalent about the constraints community entails.
3. The West is experienced as a **land of new beginnings and imagination**.
 - New beginnings and creativity correlate
 - Theme of starting over (again and again) with imagination
 - Rapid, uncontrolled change can be a liability
 - Question: from what are you changing and for what?
4. **Non-institutional** or **anti-institutional** tendencies influence religious life.
 - No single religious group or denomination dominates.
 - Creative and cooperative ecumenical/interfaith coalitions are necessary to amass political power and influence (examples: Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Oregon Faith Roundtable Against Hunger, Pacific Northwest Power and Light)
5. Open and ambiguous religious culture favors **religious extremes rather than moderation**.
 - On one hand, many practice an individual, wide-ranging, experimental spiritual quest.
 - On the other hand, many embrace a religious commitment that is clearly defined, emotionally significant, and often inflexible or rigid because it has been hard won.
 - This region is difficult for sturdy religious moderates, like mainline Protestants.
6. **Entrepreneurial and enterprising religious experiments** can thrive.
 - They view the "unchurched" population as an untapped market, souls needing salvation.
 - Predominantly non-denominational (example, Pentecostal, Foursquare).
 - Led by "sectarian entrepreneurs," charismatic personalities (example, Luis Palau).
 - Skilled at the use of technology and media; dynamic, entertaining.
 - Aggressive market-based economics, corporate strategic planning, innovation.
 - Promote strict behavior code; exclusivist, evangelical theology a subculture.