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## Church in a Time of “Unchurching”

[\*Church at San Damiano Courtesy of Franciscan Media\*](#)

*He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"*

*Simon Peter said in reply,*

*"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

*Jesus said to him in reply,*

*"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.*

*For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.*

*And so I say to you, you are Peter,*

*and upon this rock I will build my church....*

*Mt 16:15-18*



Christ's words to Peter, from Matthew's Gospel reading for the [21st Sunday in Ordinary Time](#), have been cited for centuries as foundational for the Christian church and its authority. Today, however, the very idea of church is a fraught concept for many believers.

"Why do I need a church?" many ask. Couldn't I simply be spiritual and a person of faith but jettison church and its all-too-human earthly institutions? Even if I might want to be Christian, couldn't I simply believe in the divinity of Christ, believe in salvation, read the gospels in light of my own conscience, and enjoy a one-on-one relationship with God? Have my own private religion, as it were?

Such thoughts may be increasingly common among Americans according to statistics. Rising antipathy, rising apathy, and combinations of both toward church are evident today in what has come to be called "the rise of the nones." About one-quarter of Americans in 2023 identify as belonging to no religion (the "nones"), an astonishing rise from a mere 5% three decades ago. The "unchurching" of America, moreover, cuts across every demographic and persuasion. It's evident among conservatives and liberals, every race, all income and education levels, every geographic region, and every age bracket. Churches in America are experiencing a staggering exodus of adherents.

Some of this erosion undoubtedly can be attributed to a loss of trust in church leadership after many terrible scandals. Yet, what is happening to church in America is happening to other social institutions as well.

Arguably, more and more Americans identify with a libertarian individualism wherein trust of rules and norms associated with any institution is suspect. Deciding right and wrong and all the big questions of human existence are imagined to be authentic only if they are private, individual choices. Apparently, many think that nothing could be more inauthentic than being part of a church.

The individualistic impulse at work in such thinking has other implications as well. Not only is trust in institutions like church on the decline, trust of those different from ourselves is also declining, often replaced by suspicion, fear, and even hostility. Maybe this is a result of our politics. Maybe it's social media and algorithms that reward self-interest. Maybe the uncertainty and rapidly changing conditions of our era – COVID, technology, globalization – drive us to withdraw into selfishness. It's likely impossible to know with any certainty.

Whatever the cause, what we do know is that Christ teaches otherwise. Christ invites us not to be of and for ourselves, but to be of and for others. From this essential Christian message, Franciscan theology comes to understand the human person properly as a being in relationship of service to God and to others. This message is demonstrated through the actions of FAN and its supporters.

It goes without saying that many things that happen under the banner of religion are at odds with Christ's call to be a church. It has always been so, even in the earliest days under the apostles. Peter, named in the Gospel passage we read this week as the "rock" upon which our church was built, still denied Christ three times in the dark hours before the crucifixion. Perhaps our faith charges all of us with the mission God laid upon St. Francis at San Damiano – to continually rebuild his church. Indeed, whatever the failings of the human institutions of our church, we are Christian only when we are in communion with God and other sojourners en route to salvation. That is to say, when we are a church.

Stephen F. Schneck, PhD.  
FAN supporter and former executive director

**Suggested Actions:**

Read the [Challenge of the San Damiano Cross](#) from Franciscan Media. Meditate on what it means to you and what is yours to do in this lifetime.

**Suggested Petitions:**

For all those seeking community, may the church be a welcoming, loving, and engaging answer to them. We pray...

For Christian churches, may their members long to be in relationship with God and one another as Jesus taught. We pray...

**Prayer:**

**May the church be a place of refuge and healing for those who are hurting, and a community of support and accountability for those who are seeking to grow in their faith. God, please help us to be mindful of the needs of all members of our community, to be proactive in meeting those needs, and to actively engage with each other.**

**Amen**

**Register Now for October Franciscan Justice Leadership Conference**

All those interested are welcome to join FJCs and other Franciscan-inspired justice-seekers from across the country for the first [Franciscan Justice Leadership Conference: Preserving God's Planet Together](#), October 13-16, 2023 in Washington, DC! [Early bird registration ends in two weeks](#) and spaces are limited!

FAN is pleased to join with the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (AFCU) to create an exciting **intergenerational** gathering, where we will strengthen our ability to bring our authentic voices to bear on the challenges facing our communities and common home.

With the urgency of climate change compounded by disproportionate effects on people of color and those in poverty, the conference will focus on an advocacy response to these interconnected issues through the lens of the Franciscan tradition. All are welcome.



## Join FAN at March on Washington Sat. Aug. 26

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other Civil Rights Leaders organized the pivotal March on Washington in 1963, and this year **FAN will participate in this year's 60th anniversary March on Saturday August 26 as part of our ongoing work** to help dismantle systemic racism. We will meet at the DC War Memorial with other faith groups for an Interfaith Prayer & Pizza event from 11am - 1pm before joining the march to the MLK memorial at 1 pm. [Click here to register!](#) More details to come on Thursday.



*It's Not A Commemoration, It's A Continuation!*

If you plan to be in DC, we would love for you to join us. [This is the final week to RSVP!](#)

## Roots of Migration: Guatemala Election

FAN Executive Director Michele Dunne, OFS is participating in a delegation of accompaniment to the people and faith leaders of Guatemala, which held a presidential runoff election August 20, with results expected this week. Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini invited the delegation to show solidarity with the people of Guatemala and their efforts to strengthen respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. [The Root Causes Initiative](#), a network of more than 300 civil and faith based organizations, organized





the delegation.

## Montana Youth Activists Prevail

A Montana judge has sided with 16 youth activists finding that the state violated their right to a "clean and healthful environment," which the state constitution guarantees. The activists, between ages 5 and 22, alleged the state's pro-fossil fuel policies contributed to climate change. "I know that climate change is a global issue, but Montana needs to take responsibility for our part," lead plaintiff Rikki Held, 22, testified during the trial. Similar cases have been brought forward by youth in other states (Florida, Utah, Virginia, [Hawaii](#)) but this was the first case to go to trial. Trial dates for the youth-led case [Navahine F. v. Hawai'i Department of Transportation](#), have been [scheduled](#) for June 24-July 12, 2024 at the Environmental Court of the First Circuit in Honolulu.



FAN has been following another case, Youth v Gov, and its activists since last year when we [held screenings](#) of the [documentary](#) explaining their federal case. For ways that you can advocate for youth climate activism, see [Our Children's Trust](#). To stay informed about creation-related advocacy opportunities from FAN, [sign up here](#).

## Catholic Charities Accepting Donations for Maui

*Photo courtesy of Reuters*

As the death toll from the wildfire in Maui continues to rise, many are wondering what can be done to help. [Catholic Charities Hawai'i](#) is accepting monetary donations ([online](#) or check) to support the people affected. As part of the largest private network of social service organizations in the United States, Catholic Charities will use **100% of your donation for victims of the Maui wildfires**. Donations via check can be made to "Catholic Charities Hawai'i." Please write "Maui Relief" in the memo section and mail it to: Catholic Charities Hawai'i 1822 Keeaumoku St. Honolulu, HI 96822.



## Franciscan Justice Circle Updates

*Pictured left: Susan Ayers, Michele Dunne, Deacon Ellen Adams*

*Pictured right: Susan Ayers (left) behind welcome desk*

FAN Executive Director Michele Dunne recently met up with two FAN members in Connecticut. Deacon Ellen Adams is an Episcopalian Deacon in the Third Order of the Society of St. Francis, and member of the CT/RI FJC involved in many justice activities such as with the



Creation Care Network of the Episcopal Church of CT, Homelessness & Housing Network and Faith Behind Bars and Beyond Network. Susan Ayers is a FAN member who is serving at the [New London Homeless Hospitality Resource Center](#) located in downtown New London, CT.

Please send us information or pictures of your work for justice, peace, and creation! To find out if there is an FJC in your area or for more information, [contact us](#).