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When Deaths Outnumber Births — The Parable of Pittsburgh

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Demography is not destiny, but that claim is not, humanly speaking, far off the mark. The pattern of populations and social behaviors will establish the character and contours of any civilization. For this reason, any major change in the population is significant, and the more unexpected the change, the more significant its impact.

Thus, Americans should take a close look at the fact that in a handful of major metropolitan areas, deaths now outnumber births. In times past, this would have indicated a major catastrophe such as famine, plague, or war. But with regard to these cities, the causes include nothing to do with famine, plague, or war.

The New York Times reports that Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a symbol of this new development. As the paper reported in its May 18, 2008 edition, this development is significant indeed.

From the report:

Hospitals are closing obstetrics wards and converting them to acute care. Local governments and other social service providers are adjusting to the emergence of entire neighborhoods where the average age is soaring, and private foundations are awarding scholarships to retain students and attract new ones.

In Pittsburgh, public school enrollment plummeted from about 70,000 two decades ago to about 30,000 and continues shrinking by about 1,000 a year.

“At a certain point the school system becomes no longer viable,” said Grant Oliphant, the new president of the Pittsburgh Foundation, which is overseeing a program that provides college scholarships worth up to \$40,000 for any student who has attended the city’s public schools since the ninth grade and graduates from high school with a grade point average of at least 2.0.

This report is certain to surprise many Americans — those unaware of the looming demographic crisis faced by many American communities. Some of these citizens are probably aware of the collapsing birthrates in Europe and Japan, but thought that American exceptionalism would ensure that no similar development would reach American shores.

Those same citizens are also probably unaware that America’s birthrate just slightly above base population replacement is sustained at that level only by the higher reproduction rates of new immigrants — to whom we should be grateful for representing their hopes by having children.

The situation in Pittsburgh is complicated by factors including economic shifts and a general loss of population. But when all things are taken into consideration, this means that Pittsburgh will see more funerals than baby showers. A community cannot survive that imbalance for long. Warnings of such developments as a collapse of the schools are not projected all that far into the future.

And Pittsburgh is not alone:

Other metropolitan areas, too, are teetering on the brink of natural decrease.

In the 1990s, deaths outnumbered births in only four metropolitan areas with more than 250,000 people, and three of those were in the South. Since 2000, 10 metropolitan areas — half of them outside the South — have suffered a net loss of population to natural decrease.

In three other areas hurt by vanishing industry, Buffalo-Niagara Falls and Utica-Rome in upstate New York, and Duluth, Minn., deaths exceeded births in at least one year in this decade.

The collapse of birthrates is a sign of huge social and moral transformations. Schools are called into question, but so are churches and other institutions. Falling church statistics across denominational lines are, to a significant degree, traceable to falling birthrates among members. This trend was first visible within the mainline Protestant denominations, but is now visible among Evangelicals, including the Southern Baptist Convention.

Pittsburgh is becoming a parable of population loss for the rest of the nation. Will anyone take notice?

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