

Most Americans who say they go to church never get there.

Good Intentions, Empty Pews

DAVE OLSON

First in a two-part series

As you drive along Algonquin Road toward Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, on a Sunday morning, a uniformed police officer directs traffic, waving worshippers into the church's entrance. Once in the church's parking lot, the traffic team, dressed in matching vests, coordinates parking. Once inside the church's massive atrium, an army of greeters and volunteers welcomes visitors, point parents to Promiseland to drop off their children, and directs people to the main auditorium. Inside the 7,000-seat worship space, a worship band leads the congregation in spirited, high energy singing, followed by a message delivered by a pastor whose image is projected on a massive video screen, so that everyone can have a view. The church and its satellite campuses draw more than 20,000 people on a single weekend.

This scene is repeated in hundreds of megachurches across the U.S. While all are not the size of Willow Creek, there are at least 1,200 megachurches (with attendance of at least 2,000), according to Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary.

The success of megachurches like Willow Creek, The Potter's House, Saddleback, and Lifechurch give the impression that church attendance is booming in America. But beneath the shadow of the megachurches is another story; one of declining participation in that most basic of Christian practices—Sunday morning worship.

COLD, HARD FACTS

When it comes to church attendance in the United States, there's good news, and then there's bad news.

The good news is that, according to polls by Gallup and Barna, at least 40 percent of Americans surveyed say they go to church each week. That means on any given week, 132 million (out of 302 million) Americans ought to be in worship.

The bad news?

Every week, more than 70 million of those worshippers are missing from church.

According to a new report in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* by C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, the actual number of people worshipping each week is closer to 53 million. (And that figure includes about 1.6 million non-Christian worshippers.)

Why the difference?

While Gallup and Barna asked people if they went to church, Hadaway and Marler started counting church attendance figures. In doing so, they took the advice of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said that if you want to know how religious someone is, "don't ask him—observe him."

While the difference between polling results and the Hadaway and Marler report sounds shocking, those of us who have been studying church attendance patterns aren't surprised. Over the past fifteen years, I've been collecting statistical data on churches (consulting at times with Kirk Hadaway,

who is a researcher for the Episcopal Church) and have come to the same conclusions.

A little simple math can confirm the accuracy of the 52-million worshiper figure.

The average attendance of a Protestant church (adults and children) in the United States is 124 (the median is 70). There are about 278,000 Protestant churches in America. That means about 34.4 million people attend a Protestant church on a weekend. There are 21,000 Catholic parishes, with an average attendance of 792 per parish on a weekend. That's 16.6 million people attending mass. (The other major group, Eastern Orthodox churches, has about a million worshippers.) Those 52 million attenders equal a little over 17 percent of the U.S. population.

Why should attendance numbers matter? Because they show that a shrinking number of people are participating in that most basic Christian tradition—the weekly gathering together for worship, teaching, prayer, fellowship, and Holy Communion.

Christ spoke the words of life, and a church service is the most prominent place where people hear those words of life spoken. When fewer people attend church, fewer hear the words of life. Fewer hear the gospel for the first time. Fewer take the sacraments. Fewer children hear of God's love for them. Fewer marriages are put back together. Fewer teenagers find a listening ear. Fewer people glorify God and enjoy him forever. It should be a question



The Halo Effect

Following the 1996 U.S. presidential election, pollsters found that 58 percent of people surveyed claimed to have voted. However, voting totals showed that only 49 percent eligible voters actually took part in the election. The difference between what people tell pollsters and their actual behavior is sometimes referred to as the “halo effect.” The halo effect often occurs in polls about religion or sex—when people’s answers are intended to make themselves look better to their peer group.

In a 1999 *Sociology of Religion* article, researchers Penny Long Marler, C. Kirk Hadaway and M. Chaves wrote about their observations of the halo effect when it came to church attendance patterns. “Religious behavior was found to be misreported,” they wrote, even by the members of a conservative, Bible-belt church. Most of the misreporting was by church members who considered themselves to be among the most active members of the congregation. Americans over-report socially desirable behavior and under-report socially undesirable behavior.”

Does this mean people are intentionally misleading to pollsters? Probably not. Very few people attend churches every week—and miss worship when travels, work, or illness keep them away. People who answer the question “yes” probably mean they think they typically attend on a Sunday.

According to Marler and Hadaway, “Misreporting apparently is not caused by memory lapses, but instead results from active church members reporting behavior that is consistent with their perceptions of themselves as active churchgoers.”

Researchers use the term “regular attender” to refer someone who participates in worship on an active, consistent basis. A common definition for regular attender is someone who attends at least three out of every eight services. (Between 23 and 25 percent of Americans fit this category. Somewhere between 45 and 50 percent are members of a congregation.) □

that matters deeply to Christians.

When confronted with these figures, church leaders, scholars, and lay people often take one of three responses.

The first is the Chicken Little response: “It’s bad out there. Real bad. Things are heading south fast.” The worse it seems, the more alarming the statistics, the happier these people are because it proves their point and their point of view—the world is going to hell in a hand basket. (This often is the response of evangelical churches, leaders, and pastors.) This has led to a variety of church urban legends.

- “In the 1990’s, 100,000 churches closed in the United States” (Sorry, the right number is more like 32,000.)

- “No county in the United States

increased in church attendance in the 1990s.” (Actually, the Christian Church grew faster than population growth in 795 of the 3,141 counties in the U.S.)

Another response is the ostrich response: “We’re not doing that bad. Really, we’re not. In fact, we’re doing quite well, all things considered. If it weren’t for bad demographics and low birth rates, we’d be doing great.” In this response, people expect the church to decline—and take pride in that the decline isn’t worse. If a business, school, hospital, or other human institution were to take that approach, it would

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be guaranteed to face a future of decline, and should expect to go out of business soon.

The third response is the regal one: “It really does not matter to us. We are the church of Jesus Christ. The gates of hell will not prevail against us. We do not pay attention to mundane matters such as attendance.” What happens here is that little public discussion happens about attendance and its significance to the church, either within or without the church.

Instead, I want to suggest a different approach, which involves asking four questions:

What is really happening to us?

What is the “inside the numbers” story?

Why is this happening?

What can we do to turn this around?

First, let’s look at what is happening in three main branches of American Christianity: the Catholic Church, the mainline church, and the evangelical church.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church has some good news. Membership in America is increasing (because of Hispanic immigration). And the honor accorded to Pope John Paul II at his funeral has shown that a deeply committed Christian can have a tremendous impact in the world.

In the midst of this good news is the sobering reality. The abuse scandal has rocked the church. The number of priests is declining and the average age of priests is getting higher. Perhaps the most troubling issue for the Catholic Church has been the decline in the percentage of Catholics attending Mass. This decline began in 1963 after Vatican II. While the decline has been slow and steady over the last forty years, in the last three years attendance loss has accelerated.

Here are the facts:

In 2000, 17.3 million Catholics attended Mass on any given weekend. By 2003, that had declined to 16.5 million.

In 2000, 27.9 percent of Catholics attended Mass on any given weekend. By 2003, that had declined to 25.5 percent.

The decline can be seen especially in six metropolitan areas that are considered Catholic strongholds:

	<u>2000</u>	<u>2003</u>
Boston	397,069	336,888
Philadelphia	371,937	351,156
Chicago	561,000	527,901
Milwaukee	207,610	192,043
Cincinnati	221,740	208,217
Cleveland	279,819	254,234

There is also a very significant geographical divide in the attendance decline of the Catholic Church. Churches in the East and the Midwest are seeing strong decline in attendance. Catholic churches in the South and the West are staying virtually even in attendance.

Why is this happening to the Catholic Church? Here are three observations.

Traditional loyalties to the Catholic Church are diminishing in the areas where it has been historically the strongest. These have been the urban areas of the East and Midwest regions. The loyalty of each successive generation is diminishing.

The abuse scandal has taken a toll in trust and confidence, especially among more nominal Catholics. Will church attendance rebound as the abuse scandal retreats to the past? Preliminary evidence from 2004 says no.

The shortage of priests is a critical problem in the American Catholic Church. In 1990 there were 1,004 Catholics for every priest. In 2000 that number was 1,328. In 2003 that number was 1,496. In the Dallas Archdiocese it is an astounding 6,552 Catholics per active parish priest! While many priestly roles can be taken by lay workers, the lack of contact with a priest is bound to have a negative impact on Mass attendance.

MAINLINE PROTESTANTS

The decline of the mainline Protestant churches started in 1965, and has continued ever since. But attendance

loss has not been nearly as dramatic as membership loss. In the 1990s, attendance in mainline churches declined by only 1.9 percent. A very different trend line is apparent from 2001 to 2004. In the last four years, attendance loss has accelerated to a rate eight times faster than was experienced by mainline churches in the 1990s.

Here are the facts:

In 2000, 9.5 million people attended mainline worship services on any given weekend. By 2004, that had declined to 9.1 million.

In 2000, 3.4 percent of the American public attended a mainline church on any given weekend. By 2004, that had declined to 3.1 percent.

Why is this happening to the mainline church? Consider these observations.

The mainline church is populated with older churches, and those older churches are declining consistently and across the board. The average mainline church that was started before 1960 declined in attendance by 2.5 percent in the last year.

Mainline denominations, which went on a church planting spree in the 1950s, have severely cut back on starting new congregations. (Nine out of every ten new Protestant churches are started by evangelicals.)

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

Catholic theologian and writer John Richard Neuhaus says that “in the many worlds of evangelical Protestantism today there is enormous vitality.” Yet in the midst of much vitality there are reasons for concern.

Here are the facts:

In 2000, 25.3 million people attended evangelical worship services on any given weekend. By 2004, that had grown to 26.9 million.

In 2000, 9 percent of Americans attended an evangelical church on any given weekend. By 2004, that had increased to 9.1 percent.

However, growth rates in evangelical churches have slowed. In 2003 the Assemblies of God saw an atten-

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dance growth rate of only 0.7 percent and its membership actually declined. The Southern Baptists have grown at slightly under 1 percent per year from 2001 to 2004 (not quite keeping up with population growth). Conservative Lutheran denominations (Missouri and Wisconsin Synods) are seeing numerical decline.

Why is this happening to the evangelical church? Here are three observations:

The evangelical churches fulfill the two fundamentals of growing denominations—established evangelical churches remain stable and evangelicals start many new churches (although with very uneven success).

Evangelical groups have many more large churches than do mainline denominations. (More than 95 percent of Protestant megachurches are evangelical.) Large churches are the second strongest growth factor in the American church.

However, for the evangelical church to keep up with population growth, it would need to plant twice as many new churches as it currently does, as well as learn how to help them grow better.

One last challenge: the white evangelical church is increasingly becoming an upper-middle class, suburban phenomenon, creating a church that is separated by geography and by class. Because of this, the evangelical church has become silent about how affluence can silence a part of the gospel message.

THE MEANING

What does all this information tell us about our American culture? On the simplest level, it strongly implies that American people are becoming less and less interested in being active participants in Christian churches. It tells us that we need to have a honest discussion about what is truly happening, and think about what that means for our ministry both today and in the future.

In part two (next month), we start the discussion of where to go from here. □