

A look at the future of church attendance in America

# Empty Pews, Signs of Hope

DAVE OLSON *Second in a two-part series*

In part one of this series, which appeared in last month's *Companion*, we looked at church attendance trends in the U.S., noting that while pollsters have reported that 40 percent of Americans say they go to church each week, only about 18.7 percent actually show up in the pews on any given week.

If current trends continue, things are about to get much worse. While the U.S. population grew by 13.2 percent from 1990 to 2000 (an average of 1.2 percent per year), total church attendance grew by only 3 percent (or 0.3 percent per year). From 2000 to 2004 the U.S. population growth grew by a slightly slower rate—4 percent (1 percent a year)—while church attendance growth grew by 0.8 percent (0.2 percent a year).

By 2020, only about 14 percent of Americans will go to church. By 2050, that figure will drop to less than 10 percent. In his recent book, *Revolution*, George Barna predicts participation in a local church will be replaced by “the personal ‘church’ of the individual,” a change Barna seems to endorse.

In order to avoid that fate, I believe the church in America will have to make some fundamental changes. They involve not embracing new programs, new technology, or new paradigms, but

instead turning back to the Scriptures and allowing the teaching and kingdom vision of Jesus as expressed in the Gospels to shape our future. We will also have to admit our failings and commit ourselves to revitalizing our existing churches and planting new churches that reflect the kingdom.

## Turning back to Jesus

In his book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N.T. Wright describes how Jesus's teaching in the parables transformed the lives of those who heard them.

“The parables functioned the way all [good] stories function, by inviting hearers into the world of the story,” Wright says. “They were designed to break open worldviews and to create new ones, encouraging listeners to identify themselves in terms of the narrative. To see the point of the parable was to make a judgment on oneself. The parables were, therefore, like the apocalyptic genre to which in some sense they belong, subversive stories, told to articulate and bring to birth a new way of being the people of God.”

What was the mission and message of Jesus? He came to save people from their sin. He came to destroy the power of Satan and deliver people from bondage. He came to establish the people of God (the church), who would model

the kingdom of God on earth by exhibiting both unconditional love and bold truth and letting God's values rule among and through them. He acted this out by welcoming, inviting, calling, and summoning followers (regardless of social status, ethnicity, gender, or previous reputation) who would become the new people of God to live in intimate connection with Jesus and each other.

Jesus came to change the culture of our sinful and selfish world by insisting on the intrinsic value of each person and their equality before God, by advocating righteousness, justice, compassion, and mercy, extending from our personal relationships to the social contracts that govern how nations treat people and other nations. He acted this out by challenging the culture of the earthly principalities and powers (both religious and political), seeking to incarnate the values of the kingdom of God here on earth.

The American church needs to refocus on the message and mission of Jesus, and allow that message to reshape our ecclesiology—how we “do church.” This transformation should

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happen on four different levels.

**Love God—the transformation of the individual.** This means allowing God to replace our self-centered worldview, where I am the only thing that matters most, with a kingdom worldview, where God and God’s kingdom becomes our first priority. This transformation takes place through the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Love one another—the transformation of the church culture.** A second level is transforming your church culture into a community based on love for one another. This kind of community is characterized by humility, truth, and *agape* or selfless love.

**Love your neighbors—the transformation of the church’s community.** The message and mission of Jesus needs to flow into your community, both through words and acts of love.

**Loving your world—the transformation of the world.** Once we hear the message of God’s love and have our lives transformed, we go out in mission to the rest of the world, helping create indigenous expressions of the gospel in every culture.

### **Why churches decline**

These are difficult times for older churches. As a whole, attendance in churches forty years and older declined

from 1990 to 2000. In addition, when grouped by decades, beginning in 1840 and ending in 1960, existing churches started in each decade experienced a decline. (Interestingly, churches started before 1840 experienced attendance growth.)

In his book, *The Breakout Church*, Thom Rainer says that most churches in decline refuse to admit they have problems until it’s too late. “One of the key reasons many churches today are in a slow but deadly path of erosion,” he writes, “is the failure of the people to accept that the church is in trouble and that immediate changes are needed.”

There are a number of reasons why existing, older churches are experiencing decline. Here are four of them.

**In most existing churches, social systems are functionally closed.** People do not have room in their lives for new people. They are not looking for new friendships, so there’s no place for newcomers to plug into the relational life of a church. Church plants know that newcomers are their lifeblood—if new people don’t come into the congregation, the plant will die. But an existing church can function for years without bringing in large numbers of new people. This dramatically limits the church’s growth potential.

**The boomer-church bust is coming.** Just as churches in first-ring suburbs (those immediately next to a city) have declined, so too will boomer churches. They will experience some of the same difficulties as churches started immediately following WWII. As the members of a church become demographically older than their surrounding community, their effectiveness will decrease. This will show up in dated facilities, outdated ministry styles, and declining energy in the congregation.

**Middle-sized churches are being squeezed.** Middle-sized churches (150-400 in attendance) cannot provide the scope of ministries and ministry ex-

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cellence that large churches can, and often they cannot provide the intimacy and family feeling of a small church.

**There is no crisis until there is a financial crisis.** As churches age and decline, a number of factors emerge to help them survive financially. Older adults tend to be more financially committed to the church and often have more expendable income. Older churches often receive bequests. Older churches also often have well-honed skills of cutting back budgets to the bone, so they end up having just enough money to pay the bills. This apparent fiscal health can mask a church's true condition.

### Keys to church revitalization

There is no easy solution to the problem of declining church attendance. But the following three factors seem most critical in helping a church turn around.

**Empowered pastoral leadership.** I recently talked to a denominational official and asked what he had learned in the last few years about church revitalization. "It doesn't work," was his answer. When I followed up on his response, I found what he meant was that an external program usually does not

help a church unless there is strong pastoral leadership in the church. Here's a simple definition of that person—a godly and gifted pastor who can lead the church in both outreach and spiritual formation.

**Improved congregational health.** Churches can sometimes resemble dysfunctional families where well-meaning individuals or families control the decisions of the church, effectively keeping the church system closed with little ability to change and grow. The critical ingredient in a healthy family system is open, constructive communication. Helping a church move from dysfunction to health can be a precursor toward growth.

**Planting churches.** Every church in America was once a new church plant, though many have forgotten that. The same vision that brought those churches into existence can be recaptured and used to bring new churches into existence.

In an address at Princeton Divinity School, Brian McLaren urged mainline church leaders and seminary professors to start as many new churches as they could, even if many of the new churches had "little chance of success." Why? Because, he said, "New churches

innovate, and old churches imitate."

New churches, McLaren said, can be laboratories, where new approaches to "doing church" can be tried, where old practices can be re-invented, and where pastors and leaders can try creative approaches without fear of anyone saying, "We never did this before."

There is a synergy between church planting and healthy, growing established congregations. My research has shown that denominations that effectively plant new churches have much healthier established churches and creative ministry energy flows back and forth between them.

Ultimately, church-attendance behaviors are an expression of what we believe most deeply. America's church-going behaviors should cause us to suspect that the church does not really believe strongly enough in the message and mission of Jesus.

Jesus did not call his disciples to join the "personal church of the individual," but instead to join the body of Christ in living out his message of love and salvation, and to take that message to our neighbors. He called us to love one another, to live out the gospel, and to take that message to our communities and to all the people of the world. □

## Six Encouraging Signs for Older Churches

- 1) Urban life has been experiencing a renaissance in the last ten years, and many urban and first-ring suburban churches are seeing growth. There are renewed ministry opportunities for these churches.
- 2) Postmoderns have a much greater need for historical roots and symbols than boomers did. This takes advantage of the strengths of many existing churches, which can use their traditions in a spiritually attractive manner.
- 3) Some younger Christians, turned off by megachurches, are looking for smaller church communities (under 200) where they can build authentic relationships. Smaller churches should put their natural community-building skills to good use.
- 4) The smallest (under 50 in attendance) and the largest (over 300 in attendance) existing churches are experiencing growth.
- 5) Populations in rural and small town zip codes grew by 10 percent in the last decade, giving more opportunity for ministry.
- 6) There is a synergy between church planting and existing church growth. Denominations that are above average in church planting tend to have stronger existing churches, while denominations that do not plant many churches are seeing much more erosion.