

A BIBLICAL AND RELEVANT WAY TO REACH YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

The church's influence in America and the world is decreasing, yet America and the world's population is on the rise. What is the church to do? Church planting is not fixing the problem, and neither are the currently existing model churches. The only way to turn around America's church is the only method the Bible recommends—discipleship. In this article, you will see that the best way to reach young adults is not by flashy programs, the best worship, or by dropping a denomination's name from the church title. The best way to reach young adults is by using the younger senior adults in your church. This article explores who they are and how they can be used to turn your church around.

We've messed up. We've blown it. Not only is Christianity's influence in the U.S. declining, but also the religious unaffiliated are on the rise.¹ This is not something that has happened overnight. It has been coming for many years. Even though Christianity is the largest worldwide faith group, in North America and Western Europe those calling themselves Christian are losing their influence. However, all is not lost; we can rectify the situation. To do so, the church must be proactive and intentional in evangelism and discipleship or church growth.

¹ "Nones, on the Rise," Pew Research: Religion & Public Life Project, last modified October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

In an effort to regain and grow Christian influence, denominations are planting churches. Although planting churches is a viable way to combat existing church growth issues, planting churches does not solve Christianity's bigger problem—generational and cultural divides. If the church's problems are not resolved, then new plants will ultimately repeat the same mistakes.

National research has revealed an issue that focuses on two of the largest generations of our time—Millennials and Boomers. Each of these generations is so fundamentally different that they are deemed to be separate cultures and meet all the qualifications of being considered so.² Each culture stamps its ideas, beliefs, values, actions, behaviors, expectations, work ethics, and traditions on the world in which they live.³ The reason Christianity is losing its influence in the world today is that neither generation seems to desire to reach across their cultural divide and try to understand the other.⁴

The best way to grow Christianity's influence in the world is by focusing evangelistic and discipleship efforts on the group that can make the most impact globally—the Boomers. The best way, however, to motivate them to desire church growth and reach across their cultural/generational line is not by teaching them a new program alone, even though training is important. The best way to promote church growth is by casting a vision that ignites an internal flame of God's redemptive plan for the local church. This flame will become the driving force that leads people to become ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors of Christ, imploring people to return and pursue God.

To cast a vision of church growth (evangelism and discipleship), churches must lead their congregation to understand the current state of Christianity in the world. We must look at the global, national, and local statistical state of Christianity. These statistics will reveal the current trends and realities affecting today's church.

More than 84%⁵ of the world's population (7,224,765,230 people)⁶ is affiliated with a religious group. Christianity is the largest group (Chart 1).⁷

² Peter C. Brinckerhoff, "Understanding the Different Cultures of Different Generations," The Bridgespan Group, 2014, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Leadership-Effectiveness/Lead-and-Manage-Well/Understanding-the-Different-Cultures-of-Different.aspx#.U1nN914s8x4>.

³ Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church: Understanding Models of Ministry for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 98-102.

⁴ Brinckerhoff.

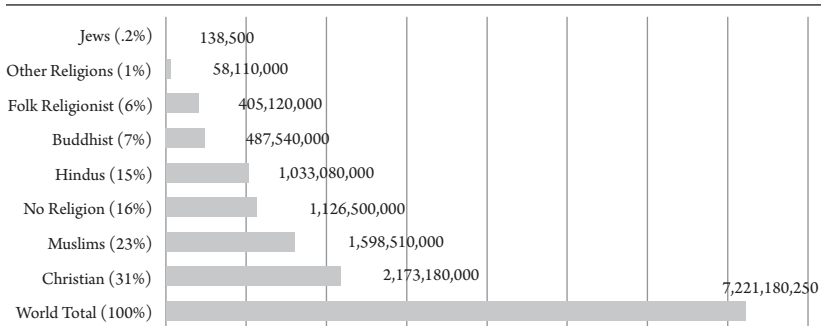
⁵ "The Global Religious Landscape," Pew Research: Religion & Public Life Project, December 18, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

⁶ "World Population by Religion," Worldometers: Real Time World Statistics, accessed April 7, 2014, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>.

⁷ Adapted from "World Population by Religion."

CHART 1

World Religions



Christianity has quadrupled in the last 100 years, from 600 million (1910) to more than 2 billion (2010).⁸ However, the world's population has more than quadrupled from 1.8 billion (1910) to 6.9 billion (2010). As a result, Christians make up about the same portion of the world's population today (32%) as they did a century ago (35%). In other words, Christianity's growth is not keeping up with the population growth.⁹

Four theologically diverse groups represent Christianity. Catholics (50%) are the largest group, followed by Protestant, Orthodox, and other groups,¹⁰ such as Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses¹¹ (Chart 2).¹² These groups are divided into numerous subgroups. Movements such as Fundamentalism, Pietism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, and the Holiness Movement cross these denominations and form even more groups.¹³ Globally, there are approximately 42,000 different Christian denominations.¹⁴

Protestants include thirteen different faith groups (Chart 3).¹⁵ Those classified as "other" is the largest group. This group, however, is made up of independent, nondenominational, and other groups that are very small or

⁸ "Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project, December 19, 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "World Population by Religion."

¹¹ "Global Christianity."

¹² Adapted from "World Population by Religion."

¹³ "List of Christian Denominations," Wikipedia, accessed April 9, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_denominations#cite_note-3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Christian Movements and Denominations," Pew Research: Religion & Public Life Project, December 19, 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-movements-and-denominations/#defining>.

CHART 2

Global Christianity

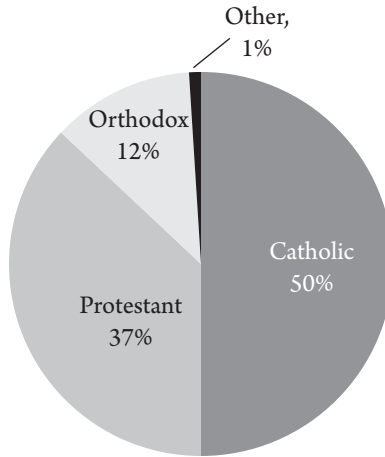
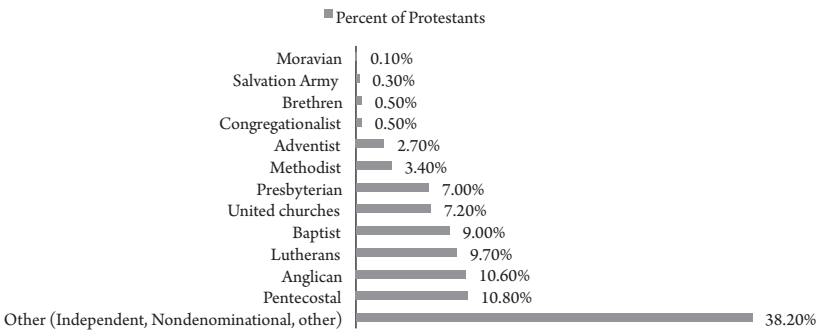


CHART 3

Global Percentage of Protestant Denominations



difficult to classify. Protestants can be divided into three major groups—the revisionists, the moderates, and the evangelicals.¹⁶ Revisionists adjust and revise the Word of God to reflect upon and support their personal experiences. They do not want to be offensive to the world. Moderates feel that a person's position on societal sin, such as homosexuality and gay marriage, is

¹⁶ Trevin Wax, "The Gospel Coalition, The Fault Lines Before the Evangelical Earthquake," *Kingdom People: Living on Earth as Citizens of Heaven Blog*, April 2, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax/2014/04/02/the-fault-lines-before-the-evangelical-earthquake/>.

not an essential point of theology. They believe we can differ in these areas, as we differ on baptism or the work of Holy Spirit, as long as we are unified in our love for the world and each other. Evangelicals believe the Bible is clear in its teaching.

Ultimately, evangelicals assert that the entirety of the Bible is essential and should be the final authority on living the Christian faith. Other groups, while agreeing on the essentials of the faith, choose to not uphold the Bible in the non-essentials of the faith. The essentials of the faith refer to those beliefs necessary for salvation; the non-essentials of the faith refer to those beliefs that are non-essential to salvation.

While the Catholic faith dominates global Christianity, Protestants dominate Christianity in the United States. Protestants represent 48% of the U.S population.¹⁷ However, over the past five years, Protestants have dropped from 53% to 48% of the American people. The unaffiliated, atheist, agnostic, and those who identify themselves as no religion, have increased from 15.3% to 19.6% (Table 1).¹⁸

The Hartford Institute of Religion Research indicates there are 350,000 religious congregations in the United States.¹⁹ They also report that approximately

TABLE 1
Religious Affiliation in the U.S.

GROUPS	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	07-12 CHANGE
Christian	78	77	77	76	75	73	-5
Protestant	53	52	51	51	50	48	-5
Catholic	23	22	23	23	23	22	-1
Mormon	2	2	2	2	2	2	-
Orthodox	1	1	1	1	1	1	-
Other Faith	4	5	5	5	5	6	+2
Unaffiliated	15.3	16	16.8	17.4	18.6	19.6	+4.3
Atheist	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	2.2	2.4	+0.8
Agnostic	2.1	2.3	2.6	2.6	3	3.3	+1.2
Nothing	11.6	11.9	12.4	12.9	13.4	13.9	+2.3
Don't Know	2	2	2	2	1	2	-

¹⁷ "Nones, on the Rise."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Fast Facts about American Religion," last modified June 11, 2013, Accessed March 10, 2014, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#numcong.

314,000 (90%) of those congregations are Protestant.²⁰ Interestingly, Christianity Today reports that 85% of the religious congregations in the United States are plateaued or are declining in attendance.²¹ Although, the numbers are inconsistent with Hartford Institute, Christianity Today would estimate that the total number of congregations plateaued or declining is approximately 340,000 bringing their total religious congregations to 400,000.²²

In addition to the churches that are plateaued or declining, 3,500 to 4,000 churches die each year in the United States.²³ Fortunately, recent studies show that church planting has increased from 1,500 new churches per year in 1988²⁴ to 4,000 new churches per year in 2010.²⁵ Therefore the Kingdom of God is growing by approximately 500 churches per year. Also, these calculations would indicate that only 5% of the churches in America are plateaued or growing.

My home state of North Carolina is not performing any better. North Carolina is the tenth most populated state and is located in the southeastern United States. Forty-eight percent of the state identifies itself with a religious group, and 19% are identified as Baptist.²⁶ The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the largest Baptist denomination in the state.²⁷ North Carolina Baptist (SBC) is made up of 78 associations and about 4,300 churches.²⁸ According to the 2013 North Carolina Baptist Press, the SBC increased the number of churches by 270, but membership declined by more than 100,000 people. Membership has declined .7%, and attendance has declined 3.1%.²⁹

²⁰ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Fast Facts about American Religion."

²¹ Christianity Today: Leadership Journal, "Back from the Brink: A Leadership Special Report," last modified June 13, 2013, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2005/fall/8.24.html>.

²² Christianity Today: Leadership Journal, Fall 2005: Turnaround Churches, Volume 26, Issue 4, p.1, "Back from the Brink: A Leadership Special Report," last modified October 1, 2005, accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/fall/8.24.html>.

²³ Win Arn, *The Pastor's Manual For Effective Ministry* (Monrovia CA: Institute for American Church Growth, 1988), 41.

²⁴ Win Arn, *The Pastor's Manual For Effective Ministry*, 41.

²⁵ Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2010), 1.

²⁶ "North Carolina Population, 2013," World Population Statistics, August 20, 2013, <http://www.worldpopulationstatistics.com/north-carolina-population-2013/>.

²⁷ "History," North Carolina Baptist, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://www.ncbaptist.org/index.php?id=760>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Marty King, "Churches Increased in SBC in 2012," Baptist Press, June 5, 2013, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=40451>.

North Carolina is comprised of 100 counties. Cleveland County (population of 98,078), where I grew up and currently live, is one of them. According to the 2010 ARDA (Association of Religion Data Archives) county membership data, there were 36,854 SBC members (Table 2).³⁰ However, the Greater Cleveland County Baptist Association (GCCBA) 2012 annual minutes reported the county association had 24,151 affiliates.³¹ The discrepancy of the ARDA's and GCCBA's membership may be due to the difference in collecting data. ARDA's membership numbers include congregational members, their children, and others who regularly attend services. In contrast, the GCCBA's membership includes only those who have been baptized or who have joined through statement of faith.

ARDA also stated that from 2000-2010, even though 13 Baptist churches had been added to our association, the Greater Cleveland County Baptist Association (GCCBA) lost 5,881 members.³² According to the 2012 GCCBA minutes, there were 475 baptisms (Table 3).³³ Twenty-seven percent of the baptisms were from three churches, and the rest (73%) were from 89 churches. Out of the 89 churches that make up 73% of the GCCBA, each of them only baptized between 0–22 persons per year.

The SBC reported that U.S churches contributed \$481,409,086 to its cooperative program (missions) during the years 2011–12 to support

TABLE 2

Cleveland County Faith Groups

Groups	Congregations	Members	%
Southern Baptist	104	36,854	37.50%
Evangelical Not Southern Baptist	58	7,143	7.30%
Mainline Protestant	48	9,411	9.60%
Black Protestant	22	5,291	5.30%
Catholic	2	991	1.01%
Orthodox	0	0	0%
Other	3	960	0.97%
Un-churched	–	37,627	38.40%
Total:	237	98,277	100.08%

³⁰ “County Membership Report, 2010,” Association of Religion Data Archives, accessed April 2, 2010, http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/37/rcms2010_37045_county_name_2010.asp.

³¹ “Uniting Congregations in Missions and Ministry: 2012 Annual Session,” Greater Cleveland County Baptist Association, Inc.

³² “County Membership Report.”

³³ “Uniting Congregations in Missions,” 126–128.

TABLE 3

Greater Cleveland County Baptisms

Congregations	Total				
	Baptisms	Ages 9–11	Ages 12–17	Ages 18–29	Ages 30–59
89	475	218	101	45	111

church growth.³⁴ North Carolina alone contributed \$29,821,985 to these causes. These monies helped to plant more than 1,000 evangelical churches, baptize 333,341 new believers, and train 16,000 pastors, missionaries, and church leaders.³⁵ As great as these statistics are, they have not been enough to keep up with the global population increase. Therefore, it can be said that North Carolina Baptists have only helped maintain Christian influence, not grow it.

Much needs to be done for Christianity to grow. For starters, church members must be willing to discuss and confront the barriers in their churches that have created problems. Once these barriers have been addressed and removed, churches must boldly move forward to be the church that Jesus created—a church that not only understands the need for church growth, but also implements church growth strategies.

Who is leaving today's church and why? One group that is leaving is the Millennials (born 1980-2002). Nearly six in ten (59%) of these young people attended church as a child. However, they later decided to leave the church. As a result, the un-churched segment has increased in the last decade, from 44% to 52% of Americans. Of the Millennials that are leaving the Christian faith, 30% identified themselves as unaffiliated, and a third said they have no religion.³⁶

It is interesting to note, Millennials desire a mentor and coaching relationship with those that are much older.³⁷ However, many Millennials

³⁴ "The Cooperative Program, 2012," Southern Baptist Convention, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.sbc.net/cp/>.

³⁵ "History of CP Distribution Between the SBC and All State Conventions, 2014," Southern Baptist Convention, Contributions by State Convention, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.sbc.net/cp/statecontributions/>.

³⁶ Sandi Villarreal, "Study: 20 Percent of U.S. Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," *God's Politics* (blog) by Jim Wallis and friends, October 9, 2012, <http://sojo.net/blogs/2012/10/09/study-20-percent-us-adults-have-no-religious-affiliation>.

³⁷ Miranda Green, "Millennial Workers Want Flexibility and Membership from Skeptical Managers," *The Daily Beast Blog*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/09/03/millennial-workers-want-flexibility-and-mentorship-from-skeptical-managers.html>.

are choosing not to have older adults mentor or coach them in anything. When asked why, many explained that instead of experiencing a community of older Christians who exemplify Jesus in their relationships to others, the older Christians are “judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, and too involved in politics.”³⁸ This has led many to believe what Brannan Manning proclaimed, “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”³⁹

While some Millennials are deciding to leave Christianity, some senior adults have never chosen to be a part of it. Some of the reasons senior adults have given for not becoming Christians are, “I didn’t think I needed Jesus,” “I resisted the legalistic approach I saw in my church,” “No one shared the Gospel with me,” or “I didn’t understand how to be saved.”⁴⁰ The top two reasons senior adults gave for not attending church are, “I find God elsewhere” (40%), and, “Church is not relevant to me personally” (35%).⁴¹

In 2007, the Barna Group conducted a random sample of 2006 adults (over 18) and concluded that one out of every three adults (33%) is classified as un-churched, meaning they have not attended a religious service of any type during the past six months.⁴² Currently in America, there are approximately 73 million unchurched adults and over 100 million unchurched people, adding the children and youth.⁴³ To put that amount into perspective, “If these people were a nation to themselves, they would be one of the twelve most populated nations.”⁴⁴ Other research found that “only 2/3 of those calling themselves Christian are actively involved in a local church... 30% identified as Protestants are not on any church roll... and, 40% are not active in their church of membership.”⁴⁵

The reasons many Christians have decided to leave the faith are roughly the same reasons Christianity is losing its influence. People, the world over,

³⁸ David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 29–30.

³⁹ Brennan Manning, Introduction to the song, “What If I Stumble?” on DC Talk’s 1995 album, *Jesus Freak*.

⁴⁰ Arn, *White unto Harvest*, 60.

⁴¹ “Americans Divided on the Importance of Church,” Barna Group, March 25, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/661-americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church#.U0Xz3141kx4>.

⁴² “Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million in the U.S.,” Barna Group, March 19, 2007, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/107-unchurched-population-nears-100-million-in-the-us#.UyrlKtw1kx4>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Arn, *White unto Harvest*, 30.

are confused with who Christians are. The confusion stems from the reality that what many Christians say they believe is not consistent with how they live their personal lives. Pew Research asked over 1000 people from various countries about the importance of their faith. Their research revealed that in the United States, 50% view their faith as their most important asset. Other nations viewed their religion with much less importance (Chart 4).⁴⁶ This same research also revealed that many people hold their national and political views equal to or more important than their Christian view (Chart 5).⁴⁷

CHART 4

Importance of Religion: U.S. / Western Europe

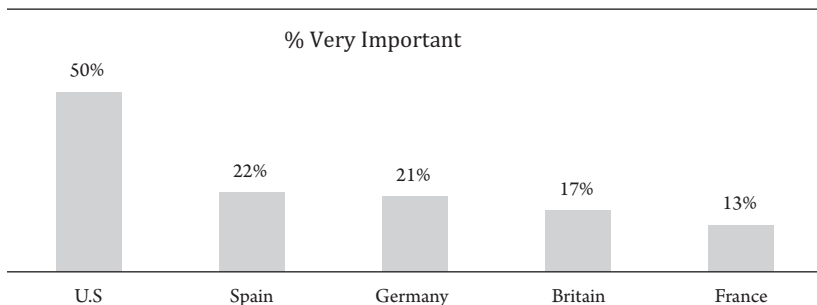
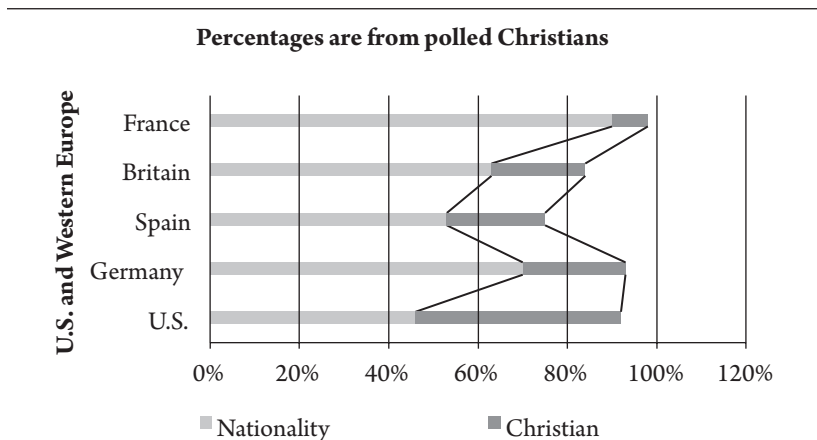


CHART 5

Christians Identify With Nationality vs. Christianity



⁴⁶ “The American-Western European Values Gap,” Pew Research: Global Attitudes Project, November 17, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

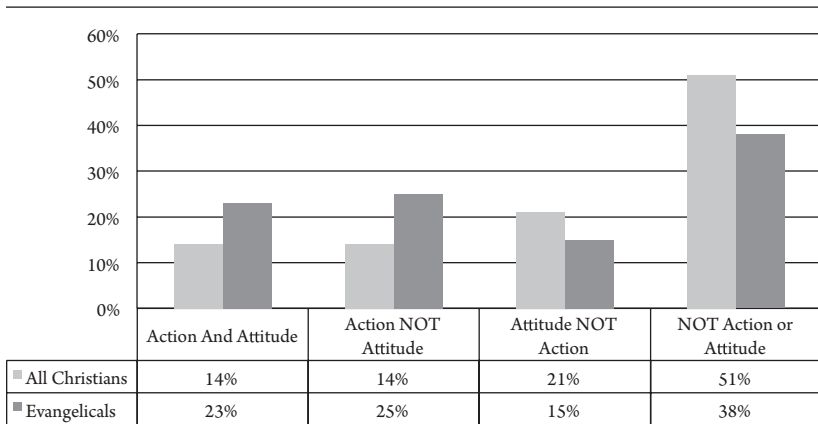
In 2013, Barna Research further explored Christians’ actions and attitudes in relationship with community. Sadly, their findings indicated that “instead of exemplifying the qualities of Jesus, like empathy, love, and a desire to share their faith with others,” they found a “Pharisaical, self-focused, hypocrisy” among those professing to be Christians.⁴⁸ This same Barna study found that, despite not being perfect, the evangelical group, out of all other Christians, is most like Christ (Chart 6).

The one area that evangelicals did not perform well in is the “attitude not action” category. This is why Kinnaman says, “Evangelicals are often targeted for claims of hypocrisy; the unique ‘sin’ of evangelicals tends to be doing the ‘right’ thing but with improper motives.”⁴⁹ Barna’s study also revealed that evangelicals that are age 67 and older, Christians with a conservative political ideology, and men are less likely to have both Christ-like actions and attitudes.⁵⁰

From this research, one could conclude that many Christians have a meaningless faith. Pew Research and the Barna Group both indicate there is little if any connection between a Christian’s faith and lifestyle. It would seem that most do not know what it means to be a biblical Christian and have deduced being a Christian to someone who made a decision at some time in his life to accept Jesus, and it is nothing more than that.

CHART 6

Self-Assessment Of American Christians



⁴⁸ “Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees?” Barna Group, April 30, 2013, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/611-christians-more-like-jesus-or-pharisees#.U0aRvV41kx4>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

The inconsistencies of previous generations' words and actions have done little to convince Millennials to be obedient to God. No one will ever convince others of God's transforming power if the results are not evidenced in his own life. Possibly the reason for this inconsistency in older generations' words and actions are because they have not experienced Jesus' transforming work in their own personal lives and/or are not honest about life's hardships.

The bottom line for Christians is that Millennials are leaving the church in droves, and many senior adults have not and are not making a commitment to Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, over time, each generation has seemingly become less and less interested in being a part of the church community or the Christian movement.⁵¹ This is not to point the finger at today's senior adults, but each generation is a product of those who came before them.

The church has been become a place where people go to church rather than be the church.⁵² Those holding offices have been more about holding to their power and positions and taking care of their personal needs that they have lost their mission of reaching others.⁵³ In fact, many Christians' habits, traditions, and lack of faith have become so ingrained in their minds and hearts that they no longer know the difference between tradition and Scripture.

The attitudes and actions of these individuals who call themselves Christians, but are not Christ-like, are hurting the influence of the church and are preventing church growth. It is obvious that the church has misunderstood the whole concept of church growth, as well as what constitutes church growth. Unfortunately, senior adults who do not have a biblical understanding of church growth are leading the existing model church in America today.

What needs to be done in the church today? The answer to growing Christianity's influence in the world is by moving followers of Jesus Christ from merely making a decision to accept Jesus, to becoming a lifelong disciple of Jesus, seeking to evangelize the lost. Unfortunately, discipleship has slowly become a lost reality in the church today. The apostle Paul would have viewed a decision to follow Christ without becoming a disciple of Christ much like he would have viewed unicorns—it simply does not exist in the New Testament. Interestingly, when Jesus recruited the apostles, the decision they made was not a one-time decision to accept Jesus' teachings,

⁵¹ "Survey—A Generation in Transition: Religion, Values, and Politics among College-Age Millennials," Public Religion Research Institute, April 19, 2012, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/04/millennial-values-survey-2012/>.

⁵² Edward H. Hammett with James R. Pierce, *Reaching People under 40 while Keeping People over 60* (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2007), 76.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.

but a daily commitment to follow his way and submit to his authority. This is where the Christians of today and yesterday have missed it; many have decided to accept Jesus as the Messiah, yet they have not submitted to his Word, the Bible.

Over time, generation after generation has become less moved and affected by the Bible and thus have veered off the Christian path. If the church does not soon implement a church growth discipleship ministry plan, our churches, today and the generations to come, will find themselves even further from the truth of Scripture. The model Christians should use for discipleship and to increase its influence, is the model of Jesus.

Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 28:16–20 to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded.” As the disciples went into the world, they would help hold one another accountable to the way of Jesus that they had previously committed themselves to. Of course, this method and experience is known as discipleship.

Discipleship is the process of “moving a person from the self-absorbed decision to one whose mission is focused on helping others understand who they are in Christ and helping them make disciples of others.”⁵⁴ Scripture is clear on the methodology of discipleship. Adults are to teach (read disciple) the younger generations, and the younger generations are taught to look to the older generations for wise counsel and moral example (Titus 2:3–5).

This biblical discipleship model is best seen and lived through an evangelical faith. Evangelical Christians believe God created the universe and rules today in the world and in the lives of believers. They believe Jesus lived a sinless life, and they have committed themselves to him as Savior and Lord of their lives. They believe eternal salvation is through grace, not works. The promise of that salvation is life for eternity in heaven when they die.

Evangelicals’ faith is important in their lives. They believe the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches and is important in making daily decisions. They also believe that Satan exists, but because of Jesus’ power in them, they can resist his temptations. Through this practice of submitting to God and his Word and resisting Satan, the Christian is transformed into the likeness of Jesus, the process called sanctification.

Evangelicals believe it is their responsibility to share the Gospel of Jesus to others. However, the responsibility that they have is not what motivates them for church growth. Their love for God and the Gospel of Jesus compels them to go forth into the world.

⁵⁴ Neil Anderson, *Discipleship Counseling* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003).

Antoine de Saint-Exupery once said, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”⁵⁵ Likewise, if we want to grow the church, we must teach seniors to long for the vastness of God’s redemptive plan for the church in the world. In other words, we must cast a vision that leads seniors to a longing for a different kind of church.

If Christians are going to build their influence in the world, a church growth discipleship plan must be implemented in the church. This plan should begin with a target group of people who are not only positioned to influence church growth, but also have the greatest potential to influence current and future leaders. Therefore, the church should target the younger senior adults, the Boomer generation, through a discipleship process to implement change.

The Boomers are one of the largest generations who not only have the standing to influence their peers and the older generation, but also are in the position to influence and mentor future generations. By focusing efforts on making senior adults ministers of reconciliation, we are positioning and empowering them to evangelize, disciple, and equip others. The result is that senior adults will influence today’s younger generations and influence today and tomorrow’s leaders with the biblical principles of church growth.

Senior adults, specifically Boomers, are best positioned to make the greatest impact in the world; thus, we need to know who they are so we can best evangelize and disciple them for church growth. Who are today’s senior adults? Senior adults represent two major generations, the Greatest Generation, made up of the G.I. Generation (1901–1924) and the Silent Generation (1925–1945), and the Baby Boomers (1946–1964). Collectively these three groups represent 13.7% of the total U.S. population, or 43 million people (Table 4).⁵⁶ Even though 4,550 G.I.’s are dying each day, 5,600 Boomers are celebrating their 65 birthdays and are joining the ranks of the senior adult group.⁵⁷ These numbers represent an actual increase of 1,050 senior adults per day. By 2030, senior adults are projected to increase from 43 million to over 70 million people in America (Table 4). By 2020, senior adults are predicted to increase to 55 million people.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Antoine de Saint- Exupery, accessed April 23, 2014, <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/antoinedes121261.html>.

⁵⁶ “A Profile of Older Americans, 2013,” U.S. Administration on Aging, accessed March 11, 2014, http://www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/2013/3.aspx.

⁵⁷ “Aging in the United States—The Church’s Response,” United Methodist Church, adopted 1988, revised and adopted 2000, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=4&mid=839>.

⁵⁸ “A Profile of Older Americans.”

TABLE 4

Who are the Seniors?

Generation	Year born	Today's Name	Age in 2012	Number in U.S. in 2012 ⁵⁹	% U. S. Population 2012	Projected 2030 ⁶⁰
Baby Boomer	1946–1964	Young Old	65–74	24 million	7.6%	38.7 million
Silent Generation	1928–1945	Older	75–84	13.3 million	4.2%	24.5 million
G.I.'s	1901–1928	Oldest Old	85+	5.9 million	1.8%	8.7 million

In my own state of North Carolina, there are 1,347,869 over 65-year-old residents, which make up 13% of the total population of the state.⁶¹ By the year 2030, it is predicted that there will be over 2 million seniors representing 17.8% of North Carolina's total population.

This statistical data tells us much about this group of people, but to understand them, we need to know about them. Humans are a part of the animal kingdom, and like every animal in the world, there are practices, habits, etc. that make that animal unique. Such is true of people, and thus is true of senior adults. We need to understand their history, struggles, challenges, values, lifestyle, and practices that make them unique in order to best evangelize and disciple them.

HISTORY

The G.I. Generation was born during the economic boom called the Roaring Twenties. As this generation grew older, life was interrupted by the stock market crash, followed by the Great Depression. A quarter of the work force lost their jobs. Life became more about surviving and trying to maintain financial status. Many lost their homes and land because they could not pay their loans. When life did not seem as though it could get any worse, World War II began.

Following this generation came the Silent Generation. Many of this generation were born right before or during WWII. In their attempt to over-

⁵⁹ Adapted from "The Older Population," Administration on Aging, accessed March 11, 2014, http://www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/2013/3.aspx.

⁶⁰ Adapted from "The Next Four Decades: The Older Population in the United States, 2010–2050," Administration on Aging, accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/DOCS/p25-1138.pdf.

⁶¹ Ibid.

come the influence of the Depression and war, many sought status, power, and achievement. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt brought jobs, capital to the economy, and educational opportunities. Although this group was not old enough to fight in WWII, many fought in the next war America was a part of, the Korean War.

The G.I Generation and the Silent Generation are known as the Greatest Generation, for both generations are known for their economical growth to the country. Although the G.I. Generation lost much of their wealth and status, their achievements have greatly affected our society today. Ultimately, the Silent Generation built back and better what the G.I. Generation lost. They are known for their great innovations—space programs and vaccines for polio, whooping cough, tetanus, and tuberculosis.

Baby Boomers are the largest generation of the twentieth century and are known as post-World War II babies. Their lives are marked by memorable events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, political and racial unrest, sexual liberation, Cold War, Vietnam War, Watergate, President Nixon's resignation, inflation, gasoline shortage, space exploration, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. This generation was the first to grow up with television, transistor radios, rock and roll music, the Beatles, and Motown.

VALUES

The Greatest Generation worked to live. Most of the men fought in a war, while the women held things together by working in factories. Many children were forced to work; therefore, labor restrictions were passed forbidding children, under the age of fourteen, from forced labor.

Following the war, as the men went back to work, they formed unions. Desiring stability, this generation was loyal to the company that hired them, respected authority, and was known to follow rules even if the rules did not make sense. They valued hard work and discipline. They fought for better wages, benefits, and working conditions, and their reward was a job well done.

Governmental leaders brought them out of the war and brought jobs; therefore, this generation placed their trust in the government. They believed the government would provide safety and security for their future. They believed that as they got older, they would receive more authority and seniority. This led them to highly respect their seniors and the traditional leadership model, that longevity equals position. This generation wore suits and ties everywhere. In fact, evidence of this value is seen today in their perception of what type of dress is appropriate.

Baby Boomers, on the other hand, lived to work. They equated work and position with security and self-worth. Their strong work ethic, combined with a competitive attitude, created financial success and opened many

doors for formal education. Many earned degrees while holding full-time jobs, which promoted them to better positions and gave them perks and prestige.⁶² Unlike the Builders, who worked for a job well done, Boomers sought money, title, and recognition.

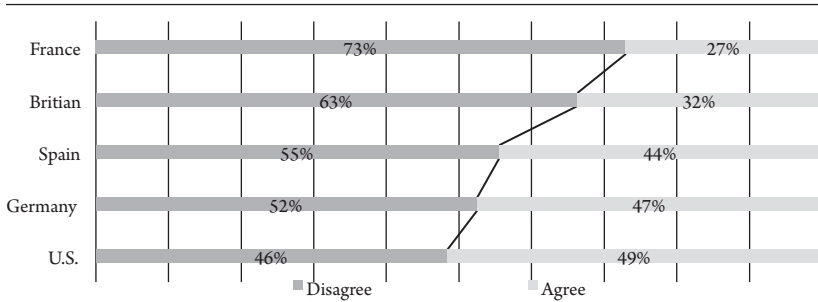
Because of their work ethic, many became very successful, which led them to become confident, independent, and self-reliant. While they often questioned authority, they were loyal to their careers. Their loyalty to the company led many of them to make good incomes and acquire great wealth.

The Greatest Generation and Boomers vary a great deal when it comes to worship style. The Greatest Generation prefers “quietness, hymns, expository sermons, pastoral prayer, organ/piano, formality, predictable pace, and soft music.”⁶³ However, Boomers prefer “talkative, praise songs, how-to sermons, various people praying, guitars/drums, casual, fast pace, and loud music.”⁶⁴

This difference in worship style has proven to be a problem when churches have looked to meet the needs of their members. Interestingly, Pew Research polled 1000 Americans (Chart 7) to survey their view of their culture. Even though opinions on cultural superiority are less prominent now than what they have been in the past, at least half of older Americans think that their culture is superior to others.⁶⁵ This thinking has carried over to other areas in their life, such as church, and has brought about issues,

CHART 7

Cultural Superiority Among Nations



⁶² Sally Kane, “Baby Boomers,” About.com: Legal Careers, 2014, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://legalcareers.about.com/od/practicetips/a/Babyboomers.htm>.

⁶³ Gary McIntosh, *Make Room for the Boom or Bust* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming Revell, 1997), 18–21.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “The American-Western European Values Gap,” Pew Research: Global Attitudes Project, February 29, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/#religious-vs-national-identity>.

such as worship wars. This has greatly hurt the church's influence and witness in the community.⁶⁶

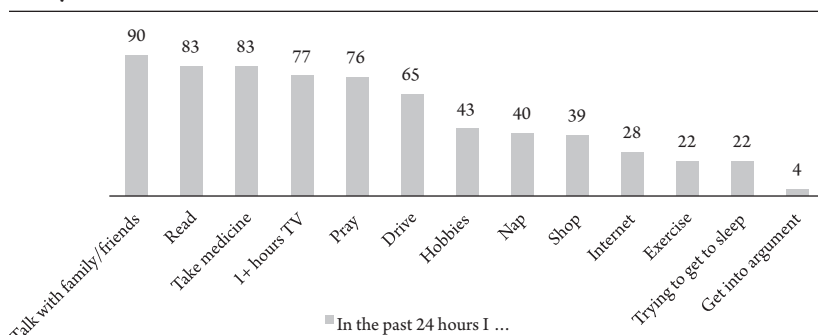
LIFESTYLE

At the end of their careers, the Greatest Generation was more likely to retire and sit down for the long haul, to grow gray and feeble. Most spent enough time overseas during the war that they are content to stay at home. In fact, when Pew Research asked senior adults what they spend their day doing, many responded that they spend their days talking with family and friends, reading, and taking medicine (Chart 8).⁶⁷

Even though the growing old in America study (Chart 8) indicated that seniors spend their days at home, other facts indicate that Boomers' retirement is quite different. In fact, if there was ever a time to be born, Baby Boomers were born at the right time. Jobs were plentiful, and incomes were high. Their salaries they made afforded them many essentials as well as extra luxuries in life, such as second homes, boats, country club and YMCA memberships, etc. As an added bonus, most of the Boomers' jobs included retirement programs, such as Social Security and other benefits, which allowed some to retire early. In fact, by the time many had become fifty, their wealth and success led them to increase their consumerism of frivolous items, which began to be referred to as having a "midlife" crisis.⁶⁸

CHART 8

Daily Activities of Older Adults



⁶⁶ Neil T. Anderson and Charles Mylander, *Extreme Church Makeover* (Ventura CA: Regal Books, 2005), 63.

⁶⁷ "Social & Demographic Trends, Growing Old in America: Expectations vs. Reality," Pew Research, June 29, 2009, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2009/06/29/growing-old-in-america-expectations-vs-reality/>.

⁶⁸ "Baby Boomers," Wikipedia, accessed April 10, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baby_boomers.

This generation fought for what they believed. In 2011, when Boomers were reaching retirement age, our nation experienced an economic crisis, the greatest since the Depression. Because of the crisis, many Boomers lost value in investments, are delaying their retirement, and some may never be able to retire.

Despite many of the recent economic struggles of America, Boomers have not given up on living and being active. They have an attitude, “You’re only as old as you feel.” After retirement, some have even gone back to school to learn new skills—the skills they never had time for before, such as crafts, writing, computer skills, etc. This has led some to take on second jobs or careers.

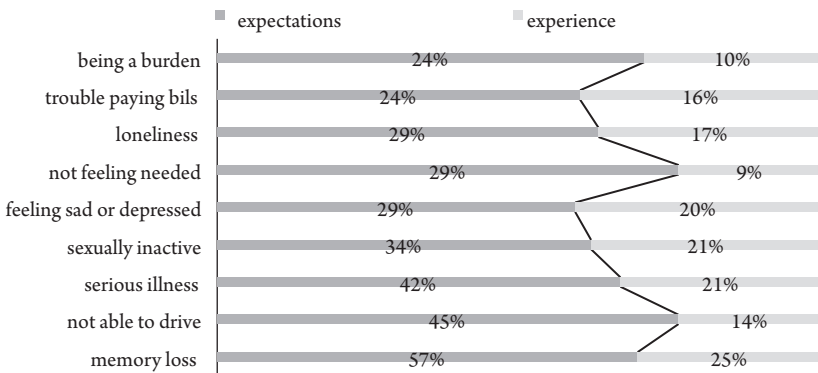
STRUGGLES

In 2009, Pew Researchers interviewed almost 3,000 seniors. Their findings revealed that aging may or may not be what it is perceived to be. Challenges and struggles accompany aging. Senior adults, however, report that they experience these challenges at a much lower rate than expected (Table 5).⁶⁹ This is not to say that life is easy. In fact, many of the benefits they had looked forward to never happened (Table 6).⁷⁰

While many senior adults over 65 are healthy, vibrant, strong, and have a positive outlook on life, this is not the case for all. Some face major struggles. Today’s seniors are reaping the consequences of lifestyle choices. Diabetes,

TABLE 5

Challenges of Aging: Expectations vs. Experience

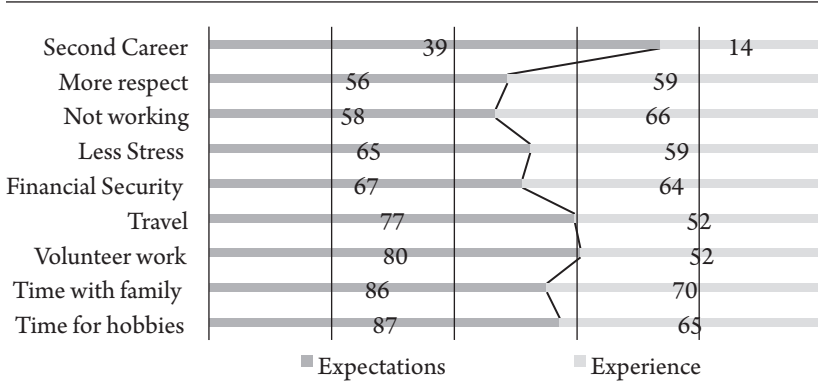


⁶⁹ “Growing Old in America.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

TABLE 6

Benefits of Getting Older



high cholesterol, obesity, heart disease, and lung disease are among the health risk of older adults.

In North Carolina alone, over 14,000⁷¹ senior adults are on a waiting list to receive extra services. Unfortunately, fifty percent of this group will need long-term care. Needing care for normal aging is one thing. Senior adults, however, seem to be most concerned about getting Alzheimer’s disease. The number of those over 65 with Alzheimer’s disease in North Carolina has increased 31% in the past 10 years and is expected to increase 69% over the next 20 years.⁷²

Another issue that senior adults are facing is elder abuse. Elder abuse refers to any knowing, intentional, or negligent act by a caregiver or person that causes harm or risk to vulnerable adults. Abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, exploitation, emotional abuse, abandonment, or self-neglect.⁷³ Other struggles include family challenges of caring for their aging parents, supporting their adult children, raising their grandchildren, and estate planning and issues.

Lastly, loneliness can be a concern. It has been said that all seniors are interested in, is someone to sit on their front porch and listen to their problems and complaints. In reality, what seniors want is someone to listen to

⁷¹ “Aging Adults,” North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry: NCBAM, 2009-2014, assessed March 13, 2014, (<http://www.ncbam.org/aging/main>).

⁷² “6 Statistics to Know: The Changing Face of America,” North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry: NCBAM, 2009-2014, accessed March 28, 2014, http://www.ncbam.org/promos/6_statistics_to_know.

⁷³ “What is Elder Abuse?” U.S. Administration on Aging, http://www.aoa.gov/AoA_programs/Elder_Rights/EA_Prevention/whatIsEA.aspx.

them as they share their feelings and thoughts concerning their fears and to remind them of God's promises.⁷⁴

PRACTICES

The older seniors get, the less active they become. Research has shown that when seniors reach seventy, their activity begins to decrease. Obviously, the downside of growing older affects everyday life. Despite one's chronological age increasing, however, their mindset and practices do not have to change. A Pew Research survey indicated that all seniors actually felt better and even younger than their chronological age would indicate.⁷⁵ This same study found that many seniors wanted to live until 89, 20% said they would like to live into the 90s, and 8% said they would like to live past 100.

Boomers are very much alive, and they are not afraid of change. Specifically, AARP indicates that Boomers are quick to adapt to change, evidenced in their quickness to buy into, to name a few, "Starbucks, iPods, Facebook, and President Obama."⁷⁶ Furthermore, "Boomers believe that it is never too late to change careers, to change appearances, to change physiques, to change economic classes, to change hair colors...to reinvent one's personality, to learn Dutch, or to start rock climbing."⁷⁷ With this outlook on life, nothing would be more powerful than for a generation of Boomers to become honest and transparent about not only the messy reality of life and culture, but also about their faith.

CONCLUSION

Despite 4000 churches being planted each year, and the new Christians gained, Christians have failed to substantially increase the church. The reason for this is that previous generations have not understood basic church growth principles and therefore, have not worked to implement them in their church. As a result, churches are dying, and the rate at which Christianity grows is not proportionate to the global population growth.

For the church to move from keeping up with the population growth to increasing their percentage of the population, the church must move past practicing passive and unorthodox Christianity. Leaders must become

⁷⁴ Wendy Minton Edwards, "Call for Christian Caregiving," January 2, 2013, http://www.ncbam.org/spirit/entry/call_for_christian_caregiving.

⁷⁵ "Growing Old in America."

⁷⁶ Joe Queenan, "Not Your Father's Retirement," AARP, January 4, 2011, http://www.aarp.org/personal-growth/transitions/info-01-2011/not_your_fathers_retirement.html.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

intentional in making disciples, specifically among senior adults/Boomers. Nothing would be more powerful than for a generation of senior adults to become honest and transparent about the messy reality of life, culture, and faith.

Creating a strategy to disciple senior adults in church growth principles will not be easy and implementing the strategy will be even harder, but it is a necessity if the church wants to most influence future generations. For this to viably take place, church leaders must decide that senior adults are still valuable to the church and choose to prioritize this group in their discipleship efforts. Implementing a senior adult church growth discipleship strategy and plan, however, will begin to reverse decades of unchristian living and the decreasing Christian influence in the world.

About the Author

Matthew Costner is a pastor and church growth consultant. He is a D.Min. student concentrating on Church Growth and Multiplication at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University and is a consistent itinerant preacher all over the south and in Northern Ireland. He has written previously for *Neue Quarterly*, a Relevant publication, on church turnarounds. The most notable article was entitled, "Restart: The Uphill Battle of Rejuvenating a Dying Church ... and Why It's Worth It." To contact him, please email him at matthew.costner@gmail.com.