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The State of the North American Church

Joel Comiskey

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As I talked with my friend Don Otis about the state of the church in North America, our conversation quickly turned to the state of the North American church. We both started talking about recent research that points to a troubled North American church bombarded with materialism, secularism, and immorality. It wasn't long before the name of George Barna, the leading researcher on the North American church, entered our conversation. Don said, "As I read Barna, I get the impression that he's very discouraged."¹

"Those are my thoughts exactly," I responded.

Barna, more than any other person, has diligently uncovered what is happening in the North American church scene through hard, factual research. This article combines Barna's research, the research of others, and my own personal observations to paint a clearer picture of the North American church.

Not in Kansas anymore

When we think of the mission field, we often hear exotic names like Timbuktu or Borneo. For too long we've considered going "over there" to do missions. It's now time to realize that the mission field is North America.

North America has so many unchurched people that it's now one of the mission targets of Christians who live in other countries. North American culture, in fact, could be more accurately described as "pre-Christian." Leonard Sweet, professor at Drew University, says, "Only two countries have more nonbe-

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lievers than the US: India and China. The US is the third largest mission field in the world.”²

The general North American population has increased by 15% since 1991. Yet in that same period, the number of people who do not attend church has increased by 92%—from 39 million to 75 million.³

It’s humbling, yet true, that the North American church is no longer the center of Christianity, as it once was. Bill Easum, respected church consultant, says, “Maybe we’re more blessed with bigger incomes, but by every other standard most Christians around the world outshine us.”⁴

When I travel and speak overseas, I often receive more encouragement than I give. I come back filled with hope because of the spiritual power and vitality that I see and experience. When the plane lands in North America, however, I realize that I will face another, harsher reality. I describe it as a *lack of forward momentum*. The church seems stalled in its tracks.

The North American church desperately needs another great awakening to keep it from sliding into the same obscurity that the church in Europe is already experiencing.

Population explosion—church implosion

Often we define church growth by whether a few congregations are growing, rather than looking at the overall church in the nation. It’s easy to point to certain mega churches and imagine that North America is exploding with church growth. Statistics, however, point to another reality.

The reality is that there is an overall decline of church growth in North America—even though some mega churches are exploding. Tom Clegg and Warren Bird, in their excellent book *Lost in America*, say, “The explosion of megachurches and other fast-growing congregations has masked the impact of an overall discouraging and negative trend: In the past fifty years, U.S. churches have failed to gain an additional 2 percent of the American population.”⁵

The western world is the only major segment of the world in which Christianity is not growing.⁶ Church attendance in North America continues to drop, going from 60% after World War II to 49% in 1991 and just over 40% today—although some experts say that Americans are over-reporting their church attendance and the real number is closer to 24%.⁷ Whether people are overstating their church attendance or not, we know that there has been a steady decline in attendance and membership in the past sixty years.

Though church attendance is declining, the proportion of

those who say they have no religion rose from 9% to nearly 14% between 1993 and 2002. During that same period, the proportion of those who said they belonged to other religions—including Islam—increased from 3% to 7%.⁸ Members of non-Christian world religions don't live "over there" anymore; Muslims, Buddhists, and Sikhs live and work along side Protestants and Catholics here in North America.

Much has been written about the proliferation of mega churches in North America.⁹ Though we should rejoice in church growth, the reality is that much of the mega church growth is transfer growth—which suits the consumer-shopping mentality of an entrepreneurial society. The fact that some churches are growing rapidly while attendance as a whole is declining should cause us to wonder whether the mega church phenomenon is working. The facts indicate that

- 81% of U.S. churches are either plateaued or declining in attendance
- 18% of U.S. churches are growing primarily by transfer growth
- 1% of the churches are growing by conversion growth¹⁰

Eddie Gibbs, professor at Fuller Seminary, writes, "Measuring results in terms of increased attendance at worship services and other church-related activities creates a premature sense of achievement. . . . Is one church winning people simply at the expense of other congregations that do not have the resources to compete on equal terms in the religious marketplace?"¹¹

Conversion growth is just not occurring much in the U.S. Roughly half of all churches do not add one new person through conversion growth.¹² Clegg and Bird write, "In America, it takes the combined efforts of eighty-five Christians working over an entire year to produce one convert. At that rate, a huge percentage of people will never have the opportunity, even once, to hear the gospel in a way they can understand it from a friend they trust."¹³

I don't claim that the cell church strategy offers a quick fix. I do believe, however, that it offers the best solution for sustained growth in both quality and quantity. The cell church approach makes it possible for all believers to be involved together in reaping the harvest (see chapters three and five of my book *Cell Church Solutions* or go to <http://www.cellchurchsolutions.com/articles/worldwide/NorthAmerica.htm>)

Beyond church attendance

My wife was sharing with one lady who said, "If I go to church, I want a big church where I can sit in the back and no

one knows me." My wife invited her to our cell group in Moreno Valley. The lady said, "No, I don't do small churches. Sorry. I just like the big, impersonal ones."

Someone has said that the ABCs of the North American church are *Attendance, Buildings, and Cash*—a sad indictment of a church that has lost its way. Larry Crabb, author and psychologist, says, "The future of the church depends on whether it develops true community. We can get by for a while on size, skilled communication, and programs to meet every need, but unless we sense that we belong to each other, with masks off, the vibrant church of today will become the powerless church of tomorrow."¹⁴

One typical U.S. church that I've worked with experienced rapid growth when Pastor John came to the church in 1989 and focused his church on attracting a crowd on Sunday morning. Between 1989 and 1993, Sunday attendance climbed from 200 to 500. The pastor, however, never prioritized disciple making—even among the staff members. The staff and church geared up all week for the Sunday crowd. In 2001, when the pastor left, the crowd had already shrunk back to about 200.

Gibbs wisely says, "To the extent that worship degenerates into spectatorism, boredom will eventually set in. The seeker-sensitive model requires a continuous flow of creativity in order for the entertainment factor to be sustained. Smaller, resource-strapped churches soon run out of ideas and their performance level is often embarrassingly amateurish and lacking in audience appeal."¹⁵ Audiences tend to drift to the next show in town. In the situation mentioned above, what seemed like great church growth (500 people attending the Sunday service) disappeared when a better church service in town siphoned off the apparent growth (back down to 200).

Frequent church closures

When my own denomination meets for its annual council gathering, the positive reports of new church plants and spectacular growth are touted, and the failures are quietly ignored. This is human nature and part of the way we act and think. The fact is, however, that three times as many churches in America are closing (approx. 3750 per year) as are opening (approx. 1350 per year).¹⁶

Church planting is necessary for the church to stay relevant in the twenty-first century. I believe strongly in the need for church planting in North America. We need pioneers who are skilled at friendship evangelism, prayer, and leading a cell group. Cell ministry is the perfect breeding ground to prepare

new pastors and ministers.

Fog in the pulpit

Satan knows that infecting the church with a deadly virus won't happen with one injection. The virus is introduced gradually through unbiblical preaching. Liberal teaching sprinkled with half truths confuses the hearers, causing them to stray from God's path.

Surveys indicate that 50% of the pastors in the pulpit today *don't* have a biblical worldview.¹⁷ That is, only 50% of the pastors in North America are committed to the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize.¹⁸

The Christian divorce rate continues to spiral out of control—even atheists are less likely to become divorced. The next generation will reap the dysfunctional results, since the next generation is the product of broken families.¹⁹

What saddens my heart is that various “model” churches seem to grow through high performance techniques, shorter sermons, and less worship. I call this “Christianity light” to attract non-Christians. One pastor near where I live joined the bandwagon to get non-Christians into church by advertising that for one month the theme of his preaching would be the rock group The Beatles. I didn't ask how he planned to make this the theme of his sermons.

Barna wisely says, “The church is fighting a losing battle by trying to become more comfortable and more attractive to the world around them. . . . Church events cannot effectively compete with what the world has to offer. The only thing the Church can provide that no one else has is a life-changing, practical encounter—and on-going relationship—with the living God and with people transformed by similar encounters.”²⁰

Materialism

The economy in North America is the envy of the rest of the world. Financial prosperity, mixed with the lure of easy credit card payments, has allowed people to spend more money on a wide variety of adult toys. American advertisers excel in convincing people of their need to buy the latest gadget.

Many churches, often unwittingly, have succumbed to the god of personal pleasure and affluence. Twenty-five years ago Dr. Francis Schaeffer warned of the danger that the Church would eventually adopt the two “terrible values” of “personal peace and affluence.”

Schaeffer's warning has regrettably become the reality in the North American church. In spite of incredible prosperity in North America, only one out of ten born-again believers actually tithe, and statistics indicate that the more money a person earns, the less he or she is willing to give to the Lord.

It's my conviction that only prayer, fasting, and repentance will overcome this malady. Church strategies, whether cell church or any other strategy, can't change a person's propensity for materialistic greed. Only God can. I believe that God Himself gave us the remedy for change in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

All of us in North America need to humble ourselves before God, crying out to him for mercy, healing, and revival. The church can't go forward on its feet until it learns to go forward on its knees. The only way that Christianity can truly make an impact in North America is through the power of God manifested through the fervent prayers of His people.

Hopeful signs

Small-group involvement

More and more people throughout North America are taking the time to join a life-giving small group. Participation in small groups that focused on prayer, Bible study, and fellowship shot up from 11% in 1994 to 26% in 2004. There seems to be a new excitement in small-group ministry—especially in the western part of the U.S. where small-group involvement jumped 136% in the past ten years.

Other church-oriented activities, however, didn't grow at all. Barna even says, "The findings might indicate that we are entering a new era of spiritual experience—one that is more tribal or individualized than congregational in nature."²¹

People are wanting to experience their Christianity, like they do everything else. Increasingly, people are unwilling to sit while the preacher performs. The pulpiter who can attract great multitudes is becoming less and less relevant in an age of decentralization, quick movement, and rapid deployment. Perhaps we should take more of our lessons from the church in China, which is rapidly spreading in the homes of members.

Worldwide church explosion

Jesus is Lord of His church, and God is doing amazing

things in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Dr. Philip Jenkins, distinguished professor of history and religious studies at Penn State University, says that in just twenty years, two-thirds of all Christians will live in Africa, Latin America, or Asia.²² We in the west need to rejoice in this fact, while humbly admitting that the center of gravity for church growth has shifted from the western church to the non-western world.

Mission effort in America

We're on a mission field, and this should refocus all of us ministering in this land. We need missionaries right here, right now. God is looking for church planters and pastors who are willing to study North America the way missionaries study a foreign culture. When Jesus saw multitudes swarming around him, he said to his disciples, "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:35). Christ's strategy was always to make disciples rather than to attract the multitude. If the church is going to make an impact in North America, new strategies are needed to make disciples, deploy them, and send them out as harvest workers. Cell church ministry offers exciting possibilities for those doing ministry in North America.

Writer

Comiskey, Joel. Dr. Comiskey holds a Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary in Intercultural Studies. He is an expert on the cell church movement, and has written widely on this growing aspect of church growth.

NOTES

1. A friend of mine who is superintendent over some 70 Methodist churches in southern California took a week-long doctoral course with George Barna at APU. He said, "George [Barna] is very discouraged—perhaps even depressed over the state of the North American church. It is an easy state to enter. Perhaps this is what Jeremiah felt."

2. Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), p. 50.

3. George Barna, "Number of unchurched adults has nearly doubled since 1991," Accessed on Wednesday, May 5, 2004 at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=163>. Barna's definition of unchurched: "not having attended a Christian church service, other than for a holiday service, such as Christmas or Easter, or for special events such as a wedding or

funeral, at any time in the past six months." The proportion of those in this category has risen from 21% in 1991 to 34% today.

4. Tom Clegg and Warren Bird, *Lost in America: Helping Your Friends Find Their Way Home*, as quoted in *Journal for the American Society for Church Growth*, Spring 2001, p. 68.

5. Tom Clegg and Warren Bird, *Lost in America: How Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door*, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc, 2000), p.33.

6. Clegg and Bird, *Lost in America: How Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door*, pp. 25–27.

7. Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed Faith versus McWorld* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 135. The statistics here represent the U.S. church. Canadian church attendance is much lower.

8. "Poll: Protestant majority in U.S. eroding Dropped from 63 percent to 52 percent in a decade," © 2004 The Associated Press. Accessed on Tuesday, July 20, 2004 at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5465761/>.

9. The June 2004 edition of *Outreach* magazine highlighted the proliferation of mega churches in the U.S. The article says that the phenomenon of churches with attendance of more than 3000 is exploding in the U.S.

10. USA Today, October 23, 1997 as quoted in McRaney, *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, p. 81.

11. Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 41.

12. Clegg and Bird, as quoted in *Journal for the American Society for Church Growth*, pp. 58–59.

13. Clegg and Bird, as quoted in *Journal for the American Society for Church Growth*, p. 60.

14. As quoted in Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church* (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), p. 13.

15. Gibbs, *Church Next*, p. 154.

16. Clegg and Bird, as quoted in *Journal for the American Society for Church Growth*, p. 61.

17. George Barna report, Accessed on Wednesday, January 14, 2004 at <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=156&Reference=A>. Of the nation's 320 000 Protestant churches, more than 42 000 are Southern Baptist and more than 35 000 are United Methodist; these two denominations alone account for roughly one-quarter of all Protestant churches in the U.S. The Southern Baptists had the highest percentage of pastors with a biblical worldview (71%) while the Methodists were lowest among the seven segments evaluated (27%). Among the other segments examined, 57% of the pastors of Baptist churches (other than Southern Baptist) had a biblical worldview, as did 51% of non-denominational

Protestant pastors, 44% of pastors of charismatic or Pentecostal churches, 35% of pastors of black churches, and 28% of pastors leading mainline congregations. The most intriguing finding relates to theological training. Educationally, the pastors least likely to have a biblical worldview are those who are seminary graduates (45%). In contrast, three out of five pastors who have not attended seminary operate with a biblical worldview (59%).

18. "The most important point," Barna argued, "is that you can't give people what you don't have. The low percentage of Christians who have a biblical worldview is a direct reflection of the fact that half of our primary religious teachers and leaders do not have one."

19. Clegg and Bird, as quoted in *Journal for the American Society for Church Growth*, p. 67. New findings by Barna, "Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians," September 8, 2004. Accessed on Wednesday, September 08, 2004 at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=170>. "A new study released by The Barna Group, of Ventura, California, shows that the likelihood of married adults getting divorced is identical among born again Christians and those who are not born again. The study also cited attitudinal data showing that most Americans reject the notion that divorce is a sin."

20. George Barna, "Number of unchurched adults has nearly doubled since 1991," Accessed on Wednesday, May 05, 2004 at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=163>.

21. George Barna updates, accessed on March 01, 2004 at <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=159&Reference=A>

22. Dale Hurd, "A Tidal Wave of Christianity," CBN News Sr. Reporter. Accessed on Monday, August 02, 2004 at <http://www.cbn.com/CBNNews/News/030819a.asp>.