The State of The Church in America: When Numbers Point To A New Reality

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Before you dismiss research as unimportant, read this. If facts are our friends, then it's time we listen to them for the good of the Church in America. |
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Although I am no longer head of Lifeway Research, I continue to believe that research is critical for understanding the macro picture of culture and trends today. In fact, at the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, we are partnering with LifeWay Research for ongoing project, and also rolling out some new missiological research projects.

I wrote an article in the current issue of Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ) on what exactly is happening in North American churches today in regards to growth, decline, etc. We will share this in a three-part series, followed by on addendum on Catholicism (that was not in the EMQ artice). In Part One today, I look at the big picture of the state of Christianity in America. In Part Two and Three I will go deeper into specific sectors of the Church and look at how we move forward.

In the meantime, let me also encourage you to get a subscription to EMQ if you don't already have one. There are 52 years of cutting-edge pieces related to missions which will equip you to fulfill your role in the Great Commission.

The polls are in and the news is bad for the Church in America.

Christianity *is* on the decline, Americans have given up on God, and the "Nones"—those who have no religious ties—are on the rise. It is indeed true that parts of the Christian Church in America are struggling, while a growing number of Americans are far from God.

As the former head of a research firm that studies the church and culture, I often tell pastors and other Christian leaders that "facts are our friends." Surveys and other polls are a bit like running a series of tests during an annual physical. The scale, stethoscope, and blood tests don't lie. There is no positive spin on your increased weight, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.

Research data gives us a realistic picture of our health—rather than the overly optimistic view we'd prefer.

What the Numbers Tell Us (If We Will Listen)

So what do the numbers tell us about the Church in America?

Overall, the Church's influence on Americans is beginning to fade. A growing number of Americans have given up on God—or at least on organized religion. They have become "Nones," a term popularized by Pew Research. And their numbers are growing.

Pew's 2007 Religious Landscape study, which surveyed 35,000 respondents, found that about 16% of Americans claimed no religious affiliation. By 2015, that number had grown to 23%, almost one in four Americans.

Gallup, another well-respected national firm, gives a wider view of the rise of the Nones. In 1967, Gallup found that about 2% of Americans—or 1 out of every 50—claimed no religious preference. By 2014, that number had grown to 16%, or about 1 in 7.

Pew has also tracked the decline in the percentage of Americans who claim to be Christians. In 2007, Pew found that about 8 in 10 Americans identified as Christians. That number dropped to 7 in 10 in 2014—a statistically significant change in a relatively short time. Pew also found that less than half of Americans (46.5%) now identify as Protestants for the first time in American history.

The Pew data demonstrates a consistent and noteworthy increase among Americans who are disconnected from faith. If this trend continues, and we have every reason to believe that it will, this portion of society will become increasingly prominent and perhaps even become a majority.

These studies show that American religion is in a period of slow decline, says Mark Chaves of Duke University: "None of this decline is happening fast, and levels of religious involvement in the United States continue to remain very high by world standards. But the signs of decline are unmistakable."

Pew's findings have led some to forecast the complete collapse of Christianity in the United States. The data, however, implies a more complex reality. Frankly, there is no credible research showing that Christianity is dying in America despite the flashy headlines we often see.

Instead, American religion is simultaneously growing and in decline. Fewer people claim to be Christians, but churchgoers—those who regularly attend services—are holding steady in some segments, and thriving in others.

America the Devout?

To gain further perspective, let's look at Pew's data alongside data from the General Social Survey. The GSS, which began in 1972, is particularly helpful for tracking trends in religious belief and practice.

Some background: the GSS uses a classification of religious tradition commonly known as RELTRAD, which was devised with both doctrinal and historical changes in religious groups in view. This classification system is particularly helpful as we look deeper at the data and seek to understand the nuanced reality of American religion.

For example, after seeing recent polls, including Pew's data, some concluded that the number of churchgoers has collapsed. When we look at the GSS, however, a different picture emerges. The GSS shows only a slight decline among frequent churchgoers. In all likelihood, that decline will be reversed as the data returns to the mean. This should hardly be categorized as a collapse, and in no way affirms popular doom and gloom predictions.

Church attendance data over time is important here. In 1940, 37% of Americans said, "yes," when asked by Gallup if they had been to church within the last week. In 2015, almost the same number—36%—said they'd been to church. Hardly a collapse; reasonable people, as Chaves described them, don't need to disagree when the facts are this clear.

What's more, according to the GSS, we find a stable percentage of the Protestant population attending church regularly—no prodigious drop in Protestant church attendance. Instead, over the past 40 years, the share of Americans who regularly attends a Protestant church has only declined from 23% to 20%.

The reality is that the United States remains a remarkably devout nation. Taken as a whole, about 4 in 10 Americans claims to go to church weekly. Further, more than 138 million Americans—or 44% of the population—belong to a congregation, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives.

Still, not all segments of the church have fared as well. Some are thriving, while others are experiencing significant change. In Part Two of this series on Wednesday, we will examine several different segments of the Church, with help from religion researchers Christian Smith (Notre Dame), Greg Smith (Pew Research), Byron Johnson (Baylor), Gordon Melton (Baylor), and Mark Chaves (Duke).

The State of The Church in America: When Numbers Point To A New Reality, Part 2

Before you dismiss research as unimportant, read this. If facts are our friends, then it's time we listen to them for the good of the Church in America. |

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We are currently going through a three-part series on the state of Christianity in America. In Part One, I looked at the big picture. In Part Two (today) and Part Three (Friday), I go deeper into specific sectors of the Protestant tradition and look at how we move forward.

This series can be found in the latest issue of Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ). I encourage you to get a subscription to EMQ if you don't already have one. There are 52 years of cutting-edge pieces related to missions which will equip you to fulfill your role in the Great Commission.

Mainline Protestants

Mainline Protestants (those in the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA], Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], American Baptist Churches, United Church of Christ [UCC], and The Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) have fared poorly in recent decades. While Christianity overall is not dying in America, Mainline Protestantism is getting closer. According to the GSS, 28% of Americans identified with a mainline church in 1972. By 2014, that number had dropped to 12.2%.

A recent report from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) corroborates this trend. The report looked at church statistics from 2002 to 2013. The denomination reported net membership losses each year. In 2002, the denomination shrank by 41,812 members. This number peaked in 2012 when they reported a net loss of 102,791.

Other Mainline denominations faced similar declines due to several factors, including aging membership, falling birthrates, a lack of theological clarity, and a shortage of new churches. Mainline Protestantism as a whole is hemorrhaging and is facing an existential crisis. If the current trajectory continues, some Mainline denominations could cease to exist in the next four to five decades.

Evangelicals

Evangelicals have remained steady for the most part, according to the polls. The GSS found that evangelical affiliation and reported church attendance peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, then declined, then rebounded. In 1972, 17.1% of Americans self-identified as evangelical. In 2014, this percentage increased to 22.7. Similarly, the number of Americans regularly attending church increased from 7.9% to 12.5%.

Evangelicals are experiencing both a success story and a "glory days of old" story. The success is that more Americans identify as evangelicals, and that more people attend evangelical

churches. But evangelicals remain uncertain about the future. There's essentially a "The Sky Is Falling" fear that forecasts doom for the future. Christian Smith of Notre Dame refers to this trend as "Evangelicals Behaving Badly with Statistics."

The fact is that more than one-third of Americans are evangelical by self-identification. Furthermore, evangelicals attend church now more than ever. The 2014 GSS reported that in the last two years of the study, a greater percentage of evangelicals were attending church than any other time in the last four decades. Fifty-five percent of evangelicals attend church nearly every week. According to the Pew data, about half of American Christians claim to be evangelical or born again. According to Greg Smith of Pew Research:

Evangelical Protestantism constitutes the largest single religious tradition in the United States. Currently, one-quarter of U.S. adults identify with evangelical Protestant denominations. The share of Americans who identify with evangelicalism has ticked downward slightly in recent years (from 26% in 2007 to 25% as of 2014), but the number of evangelicals in the U.S. grew over this period. Today, about 62 million U.S. adults identify with evangelical Protestant denominations, up from 60 million in 2007. Evangelicals, unlike Catholics or Mainline Protestants, have also benefited when people switch their religious identity. There are 1.2 adults who have converted to evangelicalism after having been raised in another faith (or no faith) for each person who has left evangelicalism for another religion (or no religion).

Still, there are challenges. Christian Smith of Notre Dame suspects evangelicals, especially white evangelicals, may decline in the future:

(Evangelicalism) grew long term in part because it had higher fertility by adopting birth control more slowly than mainliners and partly because it was attractive to many more Americans as a faith. It seems that many internal divisions that have always been in evangelicalism are growing stronger and more clear, less able to keep in the background. Also, internally, in its culture, evangelicalism seems to have become so acculturated that it has some growing identity crises, I think.

Internal division, an identity crisis, and lower birthrates may lead to a decline among evangelicals in the future. Also, just as mainline Protestants found their way into evangelical fellowships, many of them—and their children—may find their way back to other traditions, if even for a short time. Still, the evangelical movement has shown surprising resilience, say researchers Byron Johnson and Gordon Melton of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor:

Southern Baptists have declined, but overall Evangelicalism is showing the largest growth in American religion. This important and fascinating story has been almost completely overshadowed by the preoccupation of the supposed rise of the Nones.

Johnson and Melton argue that many of the Nones are attending non-denominational churches, another overlooked segment of the church.

Three More Vital Trends

In addition to vital trends associated with Protestants and evangelicals, there are three more vital trends that are necessary to make sense of America's religious landscape.

1. The rise of non-denominational churches. The growth of nondenominational churches is often overlooked in analyses of U.S. religious data. These are congregations that are not affiliated with national church organizations like the United Methodist Church or Assemblies of God. The rapid growth of these churches demands attention. For example, the majority of the 100 largest churches in the U.S. are nondenominational. Soon, the largest evangelical 'denomination' will be nondenominational.

2. The stability of historic African-American churches. Historically, African-American churches and denominations have continued to report steady numbers overall. These include denominations like the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, and the Church of God in Christ, which emerged during segregation. Historic African-American churches tend to hold similar beliefs to evangelical churches, but do not prefer to use the evangelical label.

Pew Research has found that about 7% of Americans identified with a historically African-American Church in 2009, and a similar number (6.5%) in 2014. The largest among these churches comes from charismatic and Pentecostal expressions, says Johnson and Melton from Baylor.

In terms of theology, members of historical African American churches more often resemble evangelicals than other traditions. Although, the two groups often disagree politically, as Smith points out,"When it comes to religious beliefs and practices, members of the historically black Protestant tradition appear to have much in common with those in the evangelical tradition. For example, 85% of adherents of the historically black Protestant tradition say religion is very important in their lives (as do percent of those who belong to evangelical denominations). Fully 85% of members of the historically black tradition believe the Bible is the word of God (as do 88% of evangelicals). Eight-in-ten members of the historically black Protestant tradition say they pray every day (as do 79% of evangelicals). Indeed, nearly three-quarters of members of historically black Protestant denominations say they think of themselves as 'born-again or evangelical' Christians.

3. Erosion of the "Christian middle." We are not seeing the death of Christianity in America, but we are seeing remarkable changes. Culture is shifting and the religious landscape is evolving. But, instead of the funeral of a religion, at least in part we are witnessing the demise of casual and cultural Christianity. And that is not necessarily a bad thing.

On Friday, we will take a look at the "Nones," as well as three categories of self-identifying Christians. In the meantime, read Part One and browse the EMQ archives.

The State of The Church in America: When Numbers Point To A New Reality, Part 3

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This is the last in a three-part series on the state of Christianity in America. On Monday, we looked at the big picture. On Wednesday, we looked at Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, and some important trends. Today, we look at a growing segment: those that have no religious affiliation.

This series can be found in the latest issue of Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ). I encourage you to get a subscription to EMQ if you don't already have one. There are 52 years of cutting-edge pieces related to missions which will equip you to fulfill your role in the Great Commission.

The (Formerly Christian) Nones

The Nones, as we discussed earlier, are on the rise. Almost 1 in 4 Americans now claims to have no religious affiliation. That number will likely grow in the years to come. About a third of Millennial Americans, according to Pew, are now Nones. And they are disassociating with every segment of the church, although at differing rates.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. I believe it's a sign that we are clarifying what it means to be Christian in America. Most of us realize that although about three-quarters of Americans check the "Christian" box when filling out a survey, they are not all genuine followers of Jesus. For many, the idea of being Christian and American are one-in-the-same. Or they claim to be Christian because they aren't Jewish, or Hindu, or Muslim, or Buddhist. But the Church defines "Christian" differently than culture at large, and the distinction is an important one to make.

I believe it is helpful to distinguish those who profess Christianity into three categories: *cultural*, *congregational*, and *convictional*.

1. Cultural Christians. The first category is made up of people who believe themselves to be Christians simply because their culture tells them they are. They are Christian by heritage. They may have religious roots in their family or may come from a people group tied to a certain

religion, such as Southern Evangelicals or Irish Catholics. This group makes up around one-third of the 75% who self-identify as Christians—or about a quarter of all Americans.

2. Congregational Christians. The second category is similar to the first, except these individuals at least have some connection to congregational life. They have a home church they grew up in and perhaps where they were married. They might even visit occasionally. Here again though, we would say that these people are not practicing any sort of real, vibrant faith. They are attendees. This group makes up another one-third of the 75%—or about a quarter of all Americans.

3. Convictional Christians. The final group is made up of people who are actually living according to their faith. These are the people who would say they have met Jesus, He changed their lives, and since that time their lives have been increasingly oriented around their faith in him. Convictional Christians make up the final third of the 75%—or about a quarter of all Americans.

Interestingly, since 1972 and according to the General Social Survey, the percentage of convictional Christians in the U.S. population has remained generally stable, if we see regular church attendance as a marker of such conviction. On the other hand, mainline Protestantism has declined, while other areas within evangelicalism have grown slightly to offset that loss.

Conclusion

The numbers of people who are committed Christians—those who are practicing a vibrant faith—are not dying off. That's a myth that no real researcher believes. However, that does not mean that the Church is not being challenged. It is, and it is being more clearly defined.

Research tells us that Convictional Christians are not leaving the faith. Instead, the "squishy middle," as I like to call it, is being compressed. At least part of this is because Christians now find themselves more and more on the margins in American society—not persecuted, but no longer central. As such, people are beginning to count the cost.

Indeed, American Christians won't disappear, but they will increasingly be neighbors with Americans who are more disconnected from organized religion, and from a shared religious memory. Instead of seeing the research as bad news, let's embrace the challenges before us and step into this new cultural reality with fresh ways to engage the Nones and others around us.