Even America's Largest Denomination Is Bleeding Members: Is It Too Late?

Further erosion of membership within America's largest denomination, Southern Baptist, shows a larger trend of churches losing [bleeding] members. Byron Barlowe believes the answer may not be more programs, even evangelism programs.

Many wonder about the state of the Christian Church in the U.S. How is it doing? Is it holding steady or shrinking? At Probe, we are constantly monitoring this vital question, doing raw-data-level cultural research.

We got another indication recently that the Evangelicals in America are on their way down like Catholics and Mainline Protestants have been for years. At this rate, the Church may drop into relative obscurity—or at least become a small subculture. Read on despite your denominational (or churchless) background because American culture is morphing under all our feet. The ripple effects are only beginning.

Just before this post was written, the Southern Baptist Convention was gathering to address topics like the ongoing decline in America's largest Protestant denomination. Top of the agenda: despite adding around 500 new congregations, it is bleeding membership and baptisms which indicate a declaration of faith (Baptists call it "believer's baptism" as opposed to other branches of Christianity which baptize infants). According to Christianity Today, the SBC just "reported its largest annual decline in more than 130 years—a loss of 236,467 members."{1}

The negative numbers just keep coming. "The denomination is down to its 'lowest baptisms since 1946; lowest membership since 1990; lowest worship attendance since 1996,' according

to historical analysis from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. 'The true bad news is that when you put last year in the context of all previous years, it indicates the SBC is in the midst of a decline that shows no signs of either slowing down or turning around,' said Chuck Kelly, the seminary's president."{2}

The Southern Baptists are not alone and not the first Christians to see such a disheartening trend. Churchgoers are voting with their feet in alarming numbers. Are they, in part, being pulled away by unbelievers who want nothing to do with church? Probe has researched deeply the "rise of the Nones," referring to the fast-growing segment of the nation who do not affiliate with Christianity on surveys. They mark "None" when it comes to which faith they claim. These politically and ethically "moderate" or "liberal" folks are not atheistic or hostile to religion. They simply don't think about it. And as someone quipped, the opposite of good is not evil, it's indifference.

It seems that some of the former believers among the Nones are likely represented by the two of five Americans who believe that "when it comes to what happens in the country today, 'people of faith' (42%) and 'religion' (46%) are part of the problem."{3} More likely, the general malaise regarding eternal destiny or religion of the non-affiliated Nones has infected tepid churchgoers in a silent, insidious way. The spirit of the age whispers, "Meh, go to church? Not relevant. No one believes that stuff anymore. At least I don't have to go to church to believe it."

Yet, efforts to make the faith culturally relevant have often fallen flat. Christian talk show host Janet Mefferd wonders what's gone wrong with Southern Baptist churches in this regard. She wryly asks, Wasn't the infusion of more cultural conversation, increased societal sensitivity led by Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission Russell Moore supposed to plug the leak, staunch the flow of members out of Southern Baptist

churches? Weren't closed-door conversations with gay rights leaders designed to open the church doors to those who feel marginalized? Formal denominational statements on Earth care and animal rights were supposed to turn things around, says the conservative and Baptist-friendly Mefferd. "What happened? I don't know. But more evangelism and less conversation would be in order."

Mefferd echoes Southern Baptist strategists and leaders. "It's clear that evangelism and discipleship are waning," Thom Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, an SBC affiliate which produces the [Annual Church Profile] report being discussed. "I don't believe it is due to the lack of opportunities, though. Instead, there is a lack of engagement."

Yes, evangelism and discipleship are central to the Great Commission and are undeniably tiptop biblical values, commands really. However, we no longer live in a milieu where agreed-upon notions of sin and evil exist-or even that such truth claims could possibly be valid for all. Simply launching new evangelism campaigns and standard discipling programs doesn't seem to work anymore. Massive work on the worldview level, including apologetics to challenge underlying misinformation and beliefs, coupled with winsome and culturally engaged and convinced Christians are vital to even getting the gospel a hearing. My work on campus tells me that you must establish absolute truth before any claim to Christ's offer is anything other than "he said, she said, just what grandma believed."

So maybe the issue isn't membership rolls and baptisms, though these are helpful measures. Forget church growth programs with the lowest-common-denominator appeal using culture-copycatted branding. Joyful and hopeful Christ-followers with studied answers to common objections will make an eternity of a difference. We see this happening now.

Pollster-turned-activist George Barna and his namesake Barna

Group “collaborated on the 2014 book Churchless to further examine the nation’s unchurched community.” Co-author and Barna Group President David Kinnaman commented on the phenomenon that a growing number of Americans don’t attend church but used to do so. “This fact should motivate church leaders and attenders to examine how to make appropriate changes—not for the sake of enhancing attendance numbers but to address the lack of life transformation that would attract more people to remain an active part.”{4}

Pastors and laymen alike, perhaps the studies by The Barna Group and others are right: it’s time to dispense with programs that speak only to us, stop relying on “professional Christians,” and become the informed, sacrificial, calling-driven, supernaturally joyous ones the Lord Jesus saved us to be. Now that’s relevant! Build that and they may just come back.

Notes

1. Smietana, Bob, “As Church Plants Grow, Southern Baptists Disappear”, *Christianity Today*, accessed 6-13-2017, www.christianitytoday.com/news/2015/june/southern-baptist-decline-baptism-church-plant-sbc.html
2. Kate Shellnutt, “Hundreds of New Churches Not Enough to Satisfy Southern Baptists”, *Christianity Today*, accessed 6-13-2017, www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/june/southern-baptist-convention-churches-baptisms-sbc-acp.html
3. Stone, Roxanne, Editor-in-Chief, “Who’s (Still) in Church”, BarnaTrends 2017: What’s New and What’s Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture, 150.
4. Stone, 148.