

Special Report: The American Church in Crisis

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Sunday's are quiet in today's America. Banks and businesses are closed. Rush-hour traffic takes a rest. Most Americans have the day off. But the reason for the "holi"day is no longer about anything holy for a growing number of people who don't attend weekend worship services.

Most of us suspect that fewer people are attending church regularly. We need look no farther than our neighbors' driveways on a Sunday morning. And daily, we're confronted with our increasingly individualistic, secular and narcissistic culture. Those in professional church work have heard the rumors: Membership in mainline churches is steadily declining. Organic churches are on the rise with people trading sanctuaries for living rooms. Even online faith communities are growing. But do we know what's really happening in the traditional Church? And to what extent that will impact the future of Christianity in America?

We lay out **seven facts about the American Church** that will likely surprise you. You'll hear from a host of church leaders, including Bill Hybels, Kirbyjon Caldwell, George Barna, Bob Coy, David Anderson and Wayne Cordeiro. Plus, we talk to author/apologist Josh McDowell about the growing faith crisis affecting the next generation. We hope the information and insights will spur you to discover what they mean for your church, the unchurched in your community and the Church as a whole. We have a map—perhaps it will help guide the next steps of our journey.

Here, we explore seven discoveries about the American Church and what they tell us about our ever-diversifying landscape and culture. What do these facts mean for your church?

1. **Less than 20% of Americans regularly attend church—half of what the pollsters report.**
 - Numbers from actual counts of people in Orthodox Christian churches (Catholic, mainline and evangelical) show that in 2004, 17.7% of the population attended a Christian church on any given weekend.
 - The actual number of people worshipping each week is closer to 52 million people instead of the pollster-reported 132 million (40%).
2. **American church attendance is steadily declining.**
 - In 1990, 20.4% of the population attended an Orthodox Christian church on any given weekend. In 2000, that percentage dropped to 18.7% and to 17.7% by 2004.
 - The most significant drop in attendance came at the expense of the Catholic Church, which experienced an 11% decrease in its attendance percentage from 2000 to 2004.
 - Next, and not far behind were mainline churches, which saw a 10% percentage decline.
 - Evangelicals experienced the smallest drop at 1%.
 - Ed Stetzer, missiologist and director of the Center for Missional Research at the North American Mission Board (namb.net) of the Southern Baptist Convention... recently finished a study on alternative faith communities, and found that a growing number of people are finding Christian discipleship and community in places other than their local churches. The study found that 24.5% of Americans now say their primary form of spiritual nourishment is meeting with a small group of 20 or less people every week. "About 6 million people meet weekly with a small group and never or rarely go to church," Stetzer says. "There is a significant movement happening."
3. **Only one state is outpacing its population growth.**
 - Hawaii, where 13.8% of the state's population (1.3 million) regularly attends church, was the only state where church attendance grew faster than its population growth from 2000 to 2004.
 - However, church attendance in Arkansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Tennessee—all of which have higher percentages of church attendees than Hawaii—was close to keeping up with population growth in the respective states (see U.S. map on page 50).
4. **Mid-sized churches are shrinking; the smallest and largest churches are growing.**
 - While America's churches as a whole did not keep up with population growth from 1994 to 2004, the country's smallest (attendance 1-49) and largest churches (2,000-plus) did.
 - During that period, the smallest churches grew 16.4%; the largest grew 21.5%, exceeding the national population growth of 12.2%. But mid-sized churches (100-299)—the average size of a Protestant church in America is 124—declined 1%. What were the reasons for the decline?
 - Stetzer agrees and adds that because today's large churches emphasize small groups and community, hoping to create a small-church feel, they offer the best of both worlds.
5. **Established churches—40 to 190 years old—are, on average, declining.**
 - All churches started between 1810 and 1960 (excluding the 1920s) declined in attendance from 2003 to

2004.

- The greatest attendance decrease in that period (-1.6%) came from churches begun in the 1820s, followed by the 1940s (-1.5%).
6. **The increase in churches is only 1/4 of what's needed to keep up with population growth.**
- Between 2000 and 2004, the net gain (the number of new churches minus the closed churches) in the number of evangelical churches was 5,452, but mainline and Catholic churches closed more than they started for a net loss of 2,200, leaving an overall net gain of 3,252 for all Orthodox Christian churches.
 - Perhaps most telling is the fact that from 2000 to 2004, a net gain of 13,024 churches was necessary to keep up with the U.S. population growth. In reality, that means rather than growing with the population, the Church incurred a deficit of almost 10,000 churches.
7. **In 2050, the percentage of the U.S. population attending church will be almost half of what it was in 1990.**

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