

**Barna Report (June 2009): Americans Open to Exploring New Ways of Experiencing God
Summarized and posted by Bob Young
May 2010**

A Barna report documents and explains what many churches already know and are experiencing. Finding and practicing religion through traditional churches is less and less popular. Our society has entered a time of individual personal exploration of “new approaches to marriage, communications, sexuality, education, and more”, including how people pursue their faith and how they relate to God and other people of faith.

What People Are Saying about Their Faith

88% of American adults say that “my religious faith is very important in my life.”

Any significant decline in spirituality or religiosity is overstated. Faith is not going away (or even diminishing significantly) despite media releases which suggest the demise of traditional faith practices and beliefs. Nine out of ten adults say that their faith plays a meaningful role in their life. Nothing on the horizon suggests this is likely to change in the foreseeable future.

75% say they sense that “God is motivating people to stay connected with Him, but in different ways and through different types of experiences than in the past.”

There is a growing sense of release from traditional religious practices in this country. People are suggesting that they want more of God and less of the stuff that gets between them and their relationship with God. This “stuff” often includes traditional church experiences.

45% say they are “willing to try a new church.”

Almost half of Americans are open to changing their church home, demonstrating their lack of connection with their present faith community and their desire for a more significant connection. This may reflect an increasing lack of loyalty to both organizations and personal relationships and a growing sense that there is always something better available if one can simply find it.

64% say they are “completely open to carrying out and pursuing their faith in an environment or structure different from a typical church.”

Two out of three adults say they are not tied to a conventional church setting as they seek to experience and express their faith, but are willing to explore new contexts, processes and structures.

50% say “a number of people I know are tired of the usual type of church experience.”

Survey respondents not only indicated their willingness to change churches or to consider different forms of church experience. Half of all adults said they are aware of a willingness to experiment on the part of others who are tired of the common church experience.

71% say they are “more likely to develop my religious beliefs on my own, rather than to accept an entire set of beliefs that a particular church teaches.”

Levels of distrust toward churches, church leaders and organized Christianity have been growing over the past two decades. Such distrust, along with a heightened independence of Americans and the increased access to information that has characterized the past decade, may have contributed to the current situation where a large majority of adults feeling responsible for their own theological and spiritual development. Other studies have shown an inclination

for people to view a local church as a supplier of useful guidance and support, but not necessarily a reliable source of a slate of beliefs that they must adopt.

What This May Mean for Traditional Churches

In light of this report, what are appropriate responses by the church? (These are merely my observations and possibilities as I contemplate the survey results.)

- Churches are not attracting many new adherents.
- Churches that are growing usually do so by attracting new members from other churches.
- Churches may need to face the fact that loyalty is no longer a major reason people attend a certain church.
- Few churches are having a significant impact on the unchurched segment of society.
- Churches are not going to grow significantly by doing church better.
- Churches may be able to grow by simplifying church life.
- Churches may have to consider parallel structures that are non-building focused, such as house churches, cell churches, and SIMPLE church structures.
- Churches may have to give up on integrating the parallel structures into the building-centered model.
- Churches may need to evaluate their typical church experience to see what is biblical and what is traditional.
- Churches may need to demand personal faith and faith development (personal responsibility for faith) rather than pushing dogmatic belief systems on unthinking folks.
- Churches may need to renew their emphasis on spirituality lived out in daily life.

Changes Are Already Happening

The report results—that Americans are more and more inclined to find and practice faith outside the structures and context of traditional churches—can be understood better by observing of some things that are already happening in our society and in our world.

Barna suggests that what we are seeing is a spiritual makeover that is already taking place in America. About 7% of adults attend a house church in a typical month, seven times more than a decade ago. The number of people who rely upon marketplace ministries for spiritual experiences is about half of the number who attend a conventional church service during a given month. Millions of adults are increasingly reliant on faith-based media for religious experience and expression. These represent a major realignment of religious behavior in the last decade. The rapid growth of the house church and simple church movement is especially significant.

A new book, co-authored by Barna and simple church pioneers Tony and Felicity Dale (*The Rabbit and the Elephant*), discusses the growth of the simple church movement and describes home-based churches as one place people are seeking faith experiences that are dynamic and genuine. *The Rabbit and the Elephant* describes the experience of the Dales in initiating a house

church and explains what they have experienced and learned in the process. Major points in the book include the following.

- how simple churches and conventional churches grow in different ways and with different methods
- the forms of accountability which help simple churches function
- facilitating and measuring success in a living, organic environment
- the different types of leadership required in conventional and simple churches
- the outreach and reproducibility models that characterize simple churches