

What **Must** Church Leaders Address in 2011?

By Bob Young

Because change so often happens slowly down at the church house, most church leaders feel little urgency in the decisions and directions they chart for the church. There is a value in having leaders who can rise above the fray and avoid reactionary responses. Such leaders provide stability and demonstrate spiritual maturity. However, a recent Barna report which reviews the past year suggests that the church must address some matters as soon as possible.

Church leaders must proactively develop a plan for helping members be more biblically literate.

Church members are woefully lacking in knowledge of the Scriptures. Even sadder is the inability of most church members to read and understand basic biblical texts. Barna says that the church is becoming less theologically literate.

Church leaders must develop and oversee a thoughtful plan for making certain that church members are exposed to meat and not milk—to principles and not to pabulum. While church leaders often delegate some of the task of feeding the flock, church leaders must proactively assist in developing a “feeding plan.” Sermons must wrestle with the hard questions of the text, demonstrate valid and deep Bible study, and show the pew how to study, reflect on the text, and make life applications. Bible classes and small group studies must do more than share opinions. Despite the importance of service (see #4 below), Christian action must not be allowed to substitute for solid Bible awareness—knowledge coupled with meaning.

Barna says that few adults believe that their Christian faith is meant to be the focal point of their life or to be integrated into every aspect of their existence. Research suggests that biblical literacy is likely to decline significantly in coming years without some corrective action. If so, the coming decade will be a time of unparalleled theological diversity and inconsistency.

Church leaders must lead the church to look outward and to overcome the tendency to become ingrown. Church leaders must proactively develop projects and activities that address the increasing spiritual isolation of the church from its community and from non-Christians. This includes numerous “entry point” and “come and see” activities and events which encourage members to issue invitations, and are planned to be visitor and guest friendly.

Barna says, “With atheists becoming more strategic in championing their godless worldview, as well as the increased religious plurality driven by education and immigration, the increasing reticence of Christians to engage in faith-oriented conversations assumes heightened significance.”

Church leaders must lead the church in understanding that the church does not exist to benefit and serve its members, but for others. The preaching and teaching diet must point outward continually while addresses internal matters that keep the church from serving others.

Church leaders must help the church balance spiritual principles and pragmatic solutions. The church lives in tension between what God wants us to know (what God has revealed) and the behaviors that grow out of the foundation of principles and values. Church leaders must proactively help the church redefine its ethical commitments (appropriate behaviors) to include more than coming to church and treating others right. Church membership must demand involvement in something besides weekly worship. Sometimes ethical actions do not benefit the Christian who is committed to following Jesus. In a world where education, career development, friendships, and travel are given highest value, the church must understand how to help people experience a

significant faith which is at the heart of fulfilling God's purpose for life and achieving the dreams God will bless. This return to spiritual principles as the foundation of what we do may include teaching spiritual reflection or meditation, and spiritual practices like contemplation, solitude, silence, and simplicity.

Barna says, "Practical to a fault, Americans consider survival in the present to be much more significant than eternal security and spiritual possibilities. Because we continue to separate our spirituality from other dimensions of life through compartmentalization, a relatively superficial approach to faith has become a central means of optimizing our life experience."

Church leaders must help the church find meaningful and biblically relevant options for participating in community service and world missions. With interest in service increasing, church leaders must develop plans for using the tremendous energy available. Church leaders must help members distinguish between serving others and serving self in such projects. Some Christians are involved in service projects or mission trips because it makes them feel good. Church leaders must develop programs that really have the potential to address the needs of the world—coupling benevolent concerns and spiritual.

Churches have a window of opportunity—to facilitate service as a long-term way of living and to provide people with the intrinsic joy of blessing others, while coupling such action with biblical perspective.

Church leaders must help the church address concerns about tolerance. Barna says that the postmodern insistence on tolerance is winning the battle for the minds of Christians. Biblical illiteracy coupled with lack of spiritual confidence has caused many to avoid making discerning choices for fear of being labeled judgmental. As a result, the church loses its message, its relevance, and its confident hope. It becomes one more service-oriented organization (among many); it becomes organization than living body. Finally, it loses its reason for being.

Unless church leaders help the church address this matter immediately, the church will become more and more accepting of a host of morally and spiritually dubious behaviors and philosophies. The church already suffers from an overgrown tolerance in its unwillingness to demand accountability. Church leaders must reassume their role as shepherds of the flock, seeking the straying, modeling accountability. The church in many places has only a minority who believe that objective truth and moral absolutes exist. Church leaders must help the church understand which fights are worth fighting, and which teachings are non-negotiable.

In summary, church leaders must help the members implement and live out their faith, both publicly and privately. The influence of the church on the surrounding culture has diminished because the church has come to depend on official programs rather than grassroots influences that spread across personal networks. The restoration of the image of the church in the minds of the community and neighbors depends on how individual Christians demonstrate faith in responding to life's opportunities and challenges. Does my life bear spiritual fruit?

Barna concludes, "Christian leaders would do well to revisit their criteria for 'success' and the measures used to assess it. In a society in which choice is king, there are no absolutes, every individual is a free agent, we are taught to be self-reliant and independent, and Christianity is no longer the automatic, default faith of young adults, new ways of relating to Americans and exposing the heart and soul of the Christian faith are required."