

## **Denominational Decline: Will the Churches of Christ Follow? Reflection and Response to a Barna Survey**

By Bob Young

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A December 2009 Barna report (*"Report Examines State of Mainline Protestant Churches"*) has been churning in and returning to my mind. In reading the rather dismal survey results concerning the state of six major mainline denominations (the survey considers the American Baptist Churches in the USA; the Episcopal Church; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the Presbyterian Church (USA); the United Church of Christ; and the United Methodist Church), a question comes to my mind: "What should we conclude about our own status, church health, and identity?" My purpose is to overview the results of the Barna report and compare those results to the situation of churches of Christ in the U.S. today. [The Barna report available at [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).]

### **History: 50 Years of Decline**

In the middle of the last century, the Protestant landscape of America was dominated by major mainline denominations. Since then, the six mainline churches in the Barna survey have fallen on hard times, declining over 10%, from over 80,000 churches to about 72,000 today. Growth among evangelical and Pentecostal churches, combined with shrinking mainline groups, has diminished these mainline churches to just one-fifth of all Protestant congregations today. In the past fifty years, mainline church membership has dropped by more than one-fourth. Adult church attendance shows that only 15% of all U.S. adults associate with a mainline church today.

While churches of Christ grew during the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1950-1975), the plateau and decline which has occurred since has been well documented by Dr. Flavil Yeakley, especially the continual decrease in the number of congregations and adherents in the traditionally strong "Bible Belt". The experience of churches of Christ over the 50 year period is not exactly like the experience of the mainline denominations, but it appears that we may be following closely in their footsteps.

### **Survey: 10 Years of Non-Growth**

The Barna report surveys changes in the mainline churches over the past decade. Over the past decade, attendance at a mainline church on any given weekend has remained stable, ranging from 89 to 100 (attendance per congregation). One reason the average has remained steady is the population growth of the United States; mainline churches attract just enough newcomers to maintain attendance levels similar to the years when the nation's population was smaller. One must note, however, that current attendance is lower than during the heyday of the mainline groups. Demographics suggest that the mainline churches may be on the precipice of a period of serious decline unless remedial steps are taken. In the past decade there has been a 22% drop in the percentage of adults attending mainline congregations who have children under the age of 18 living in their home. The proportion of single adults has risen, now representing 39% of all adult attenders (a number driven higher by a rise in the number of divorced and widowed adherents).

The numerical decline also relates to the difficulty mainline churches have had in attracting young adults. While young adults (25 or younger) are 6% of the national population, they are only 2% of all adults attending mainline churches. The statistics show that about one-quarter (27%) of American adults are 60 or older, but 35% of mainline attenders are 60-plus.

Another hurdle for the mainline groups has been attracting minorities as they struggle to reach Hispanics and Asians. While Hispanics make up 16% of the US population, they are only 6% of the mainline population. The failure to add substantial numbers of Hispanics is significant, given the rapid increase of the Hispanic population and the outflow of Hispanics from Catholicism to Protestant churches in the past decade. Most Hispanics leaving Catholicism for another faith community are settling into evangelical or Pentecostal Protestant churches.

There is another reason for the decline of mainline churches: just one-third (31%) of mainline adults believe they have a personal responsibility to discuss their faith with people who have different beliefs.

These factors—the graying of the church, inability to reach and retain young adults, absence of minorities, and decreased evangelistic fervor or commitment—seem to have parallels in the churches of Christ. It is true that there are exceptions and bright spots, but the description is not far afield for many congregations of the churches of Christ.

### **Challenges for the Future: Commitment and Loyalty**

According to the survey, money is increasingly a problem, especially in smaller congregations. With only about 1000 congregations of churches of Christ larger than 300, the challenge of maintaining buildings and paying salaries is more and more difficult. Even with rising budgets, expenses often exceed income. The challenge has become more apparent during the recent economic downturn. The graying of the church has helped soften the impact and delay the accounting, but eventually the problem will become acute. Chances are good that the upward patterns will not continue.

The Barna report outlines the financial problem in the mainline denominations: “One reason (*for the future financial challenge—Bob Young*) is the relative decline in the household incomes of mainline adherents. During the past decade, the educational achievement of mainline congregants has plateaued while the median household income level has suffered. In 1998, the median income was 12% higher than the national average, while in 2008 the median among mainline households was 2% lower than the national norm.”

A bigger worry than money is the decreasing engagement of members with church life. Stable weekly attendance figures hide the underlying problem of softer commitments. For example, members attend church services less frequently than they used to. Volunteerism in mainline churches is down by 21% since 1998. Adult Sunday school involvement has also declined by 17% since 1998.

This concern is mirrored in churches of Christ that report decreased attendance (as a percentage of Sunday morning worship attendance) at Bible school and on Sunday nights and Wednesday evenings. Sunday morning worship attendance is down in many churches, but often unseen is that the percentage of members on the roll who attend regularly is also down.

Evidence of decreased commitment is also reflected in that a minority of mainline attenders is involved in any type of personal discipleship activity. Less than half contend that the Bible is accurate in the life principles it teaches. Only half say that they are on a personal

quest for spiritual truth. When asked to identify their highest priority in life, only 9% identify some aspect of faith as their top priority.

I have not seen published research statistics on these items among members of churches of Christ, but anecdotal evidence suggests that members of churches of Christ are less committed than in times past to personal Bible study and prayer. [We would likely come out better than the survey results concerning the truth of Scripture and our desire to pursue and find truth.]

### **Conclusion**

That many congregations of the churches of Christ have the same characteristics as the declining mainline denominations is not proof that the church is a denomination. The purpose of this article is to raise awareness and identify specific areas in which churches should seek to take remedial steps.