IS A CHURCH BUILDING NECESSARY?

by Loren Seibold

I have a congregation that is reduced to just a handful of active members, none of them young. They're housed in a broken-down, maintenance-long-deferred church over a hundred years old. Bricks are falling off, a whole section of the building is separating so that squirrels and raccoons squeeze in, the stained-glass windows are falling out, we have damage from termites and black mold, and leaking roofs have left rusty spots on the old tin ceilings. It stinks - literally.

They know they can't continue on there, although thus far, we've not been successful in finding a buyer. But if we do sell it, what then?

There is almost a desperation in the congregation not to be without a building of their own. I've suggested house church, and renting a room from another church or organization. But even with such a weak congregation, having their own building seems to be their absolute minimum requirement. They'd rather continue in that horrible building, with two short pews occupied on the best Sabbath, than not have a building of their own. One of our church members discovered a little church building far, far out in the country - something that's been for sale for a long time, for the good reason that a congregation can't survive there - and they've decided to spend their capital there (provided they're able to sell) rather than be without a church home for even a short period of time.

I've pastored in every sort of church building, from the embarrassingly horrible to the brand-new multi-million-dollar envy-of-the-community building. In most of them I believe we've spent more board meeting time talking about church buildings and the money to buy and keep them up than we have talking about ministry. Large or small, buildings dominate church life. Planning, constructing and paying for a 6 million dollar church took countless hours of planning and work. On the other hand, we recently had a lengthy...
discussion in one church board about fixing the flush handle on the men's urinal, to which an elder responded with a lecture on how it uses too much water anyway, and that he had placed a styrofoam cup next to the sink for men to pour a bit of water into the urinal after each use. And, he scolded, whoever's doing it, quit throwing away the cup!

That's an hour of my life I'll never get back.

It's in those moments that I realize how easily we forget about the world "out there". We exist for our building, not for our ministry. We say we'd like other people to join us in to our building. Yet the church isn't designed to be especially hospitable for new people - like, what if they don't know the correct usage of the urinal cup?

I confess, after all these years of being a pastor, I have become heartily sick of spending so much time and money on church buildings, building new ones or maintaining old ones. These are structures we use only a few hours in a week. Congregations seem to define themselves by their building, not by their people. Take away the building, and who are we? Even start-up congregations that begin in rented spaces dream of having their own building. Yet I think it could be argued that buildings encourage our tendency to be a private club. They create a territory that's hard for strangers to enter. They gather us together rather than pushing us out in the world where we should be.

How important are church buildings to the work of Jesus? Vital, or a necessary evil? I don't know the answer, but I'd welcome some discussion.

MISTAKES WHEN CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

By Roger Hernandez

This week I had two conversations with leaders who are trying to improve and change their organizations - that is, their churches. While encountering some opposition in the process is normal, here are some things you would want to consider, as you consider changing the culture of your church.

When we arrive at a church/organization/new assignment, we sometimes make the following wrong assumptions:

Wrong assumption #1: People want the church to grow.

Everyone says they want to grow. Until you start changing the status quo. Then, not so much. We erroneously assume that people mean what they say, when they say they want their church to grow. Growth means changing some of what you have been doing, because if you continue doing the same things you have always done, you will be getting the same results you have always gotten. Take into consideration the following preferences in you church:

- Some prefer small. Power is addictive, and they fear that more people = less power.
- Some prefer same. They are used to what is. Comfortable. Known. Familiar.
- Some prefer previous. The previous pastor taught them his way, and his was the only way.

Wrong assumption #2: People want to follow you.

You may be the assigned leader, but you are not always the real leader. We assume that people will embrace your super visionary, earth shattering, demon-destroying ideas. But many just want to sing some familiar songs and hear a sermon that will put them to sleep, not to work. You want to build a Home Depot. They are perfectly fine with a corner Mom & Pop store.

Wrong assumption #3: People understand the cost.

Change is hard. When Jesus calls us, he bids us to die. That's no fun! There is a high cost for excellence. It costs people their power, control, familiarity and predictability. Usually the leader lives, breathes and sleeps ministry. People in the congregation have something we call 'lives'. The cost for a church member to be "all in" is high. Spelling out the cost, and reassuring them of the kingdom's purpose, in great detail, is a must.

Here is an assignment. If you have a board/team of any kind, ask these 2 questions and sit back and take notes. Resist the urge to correct, rebuke, fire back, or get defensive with the answer. Just listenand take good notes. Here are the questions:

- What would success look like, if we were to get there, in 3 years? Visualize for a moment what that looks like in: attendance, growth, worship, discipleship, children's ministry, youth involvement, finances. (Be as specific as you can in each area)
- What would success feel like, if we accomplish in 3 years what we have set out to do?
LET THE WOMEN BE SILENT

by Dave Gemmell

What about the texts used by some to silence women in the church?

Question #1: Because leadership positions in the Bible are typically occupied by males, should we even have females in leadership positions in the Adventist church?

Pioneers Interpretation

In the early days of the Adventist faith this argument came up occasionally by those who opposed this new denomination. "Seventh-day Adventist pioneers have always been supportive of women in ministry, all kinds of ministry including evangelism, preaching, departmental directors, colporteur ministry, whatever it is, Adventists were in favor of women in ministry” says Denis Fortin. Read More

READING FOR PASTORS

Good news for people of faith: attending religious service lowers the risk of depression. Quote: "The feeling is that if you belong to a religious organization, what you are really getting is just social support, nothing else. But it would appear it is something over and above that. Some ingredient of the religious experience other than behaviours, networks or attitudes alone probably contributes to the benefit. From the believers' perspective, they have recourse to divine assistance (even a personal relationship in Christian traditions) and thus are less likely to feel alone with the vicissitudes of life." 

Yet Barna is again reminding us that America is becoming post-Christian. Here's the latest research, and a marvelous infographic. Do you live in one of the nation's post-Christian cities?

Related: Craig Groeschel says that people aren't rejecting God, but the church. Is he right?

From one of my favorite bloggers, a commentary on Isaiah 40:31. Quote: "The female bald eagle can have a 7' wingspan and weigh up to sixteen pounds, the maximum legal weight of a bowling ball. She can also carry over four pounds of prey in her clenched talons. Assuming that circumstances have grounded an eagle, stopped it in its tracks, the most difficult part of flight is what Isaiah calls 'mounting up with wings.' The hardest part is taking off, regaining momentum.

A trend we've seen developing for a long time: donors want something meaningful to happen with their money, donors want something meaningful to happen with their money, and they want to know what it is.

LeadershipFreak always has good stuff, and here’s an outline on how to turn “can’t” thinking to “can do” thinking.

According to the NYT, evangelical Christians have shifted significantly on immigration, now favoring a more moderate approach.

Were early Christians really persecuted? Some historians say not as much as we used to believe.

TO THE POINT: PRAISE

"But the conceited man did not hear him. Conceited people never hear anything but praise."
- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

"The trouble with most of us is that we'd rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism."
- Norman Vincent Peale

"We would worry less if we praised more. Thanksgiving is the enemy of discontent and dissatisfaction."
- Harry A. Ironside

"I do not know whether anyone has ever succeeded in not enjoying praise. And, if he enjoys it, he naturally wants to receive it. And if he wants to receive it, he cannot help but being distraught at losing it. Those who are in love with applause have their spirits starved not only when they are blamed off-hand, but even when they fail to be constantly praised."
- John Chrysostom

"When virtues are pointed out first, flaws seem less insurmountable."
- Judith Martin

"Thou that hast given so much to me give me one thing more, a grateful heart: not thankful when it pleaseth..."
me, as if Thy blessings had spare days, but such a heart whose pulse may be Thy praise."
- George Herbert

"Make friends with the angels, who though invisible are always with you. Often invoke them, constantly praise them, and make good use of their help and assistance in all your temporal and spiritual affairs."
- Saint Francis de Sales

"Our dependency makes slaves out of us, especially if this dependency is a dependency of our self-esteem. If you need encouragement, praise, pats on the back from everybody, then you make everybody your judge."
- Fritz Perls

"The meanest, most contemptible kind of praise is that which first speaks well of a man, and then qualifies it with a But."
- Henry Ward Beecher

IDEAS, EVENTS, RESOURCES, ANNOUNCEMENTS

2013 Young Adult Festival of Worship, Saturday, April 20, 2013, beginning at 9:00 AM [CST], at Arlington Seventh-day Adventist Church, 4409 Pleasantview Drive, Arlington, TX 76017-1427. Centered on the theme, Jesus. All young adults can enjoy worship sessions, community service opportunities, seminars, and a 7:00 PM evening concert featuring awarding-winning recording artist, Christ August. The entire day is free except the evening concert which is $8/general admission and $12/VIP pass. For tickets and more information go to www.YGchurch.com. In addition to preferred seating at the evening concert, VIP passes offer young adults a discipleship resource bag, festival t-shirt, and lunch. The VIP passes have sold out in the past, so act now to reserve your tickets: http://www.itickets.com/events/300956/Arlington_TX/Chris_August.html

From Felix H. Cortez and the Adventist Theological Society: "We will have a Symposium titled ‘The Cross: A Symposium on the Atonement’ at the Loma Linda Campus Hill church on April 18-20. These scholarly meetings are open to the public and are free. All are welcome to attend. Major speakers include, Dr. Jiri Moskala, newly appointed Dean of the Andrews University Seminary, Drs. Richard and JoAnn Davidson and Dr. Roy Gane of Andrews University, and Larry Lichtenwalter, Dean of Middle East College Seminary. The meetings begin April 18, 7 p.m. and continue all day Friday and Sabbath. For a program you may go to the Adventist Theological Society website at atsjats.org.

Previous resource links:

- eGracenotes mobile app
- New PlusLine at AdventSource
- NY13
- Pastor’s convention, NAD Ministerial Department
- The Seven Campaign to stop child abuse
- Family Ministries Facebook page
- Andrews University Press, Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church
- General Conference International Field School of Evangelism
- NAD Theology of Ordination Study Committee
- General Conference Annual Council response to ordination without regard to gender
- Jesus 101 Biblical Institute with speaker/director Elizabeth Talbot
- Elder Ted Wilson’s book Almost Home
- The ADVENTISTS - 2, by Journey Films
- The Great Controversy Project e-newsletter
- Real Family Talk
- Interactive health program on Hope Channel

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What about the texts used by some to silence women in the church?

**Question #1: Because leadership positions in the Bible are typically occupied by males, should we even have females in leadership positions in the Adventist church?**

**Pioneers Interpretation**
In the early days of the Adventist faith this argument came up occasionally by those who opposed this new denomination. “Seventh-day Adventist pioneers have always been supportive of women in ministry, all kinds of ministry including evangelism, preaching, departmental directors, colporteur ministry, whatever it is, Adventists were in favor of women in ministry” says Denis Fortin.

Opponents to Adventism saw in this practice a violation of their understanding of scripture, a scripture that only allowed men to be spiritual leaders. Pioneers routinely dealt with this argument by explaining that these texts were culturally specific but not universally applicable. Fortin tells the story of a note that was passed around the crowd where Ellen White was speaking in Northern California tent meeting in March of 1880. The note asked the question of ‘why there was a woman speaking when the Bible says that women are not to speak in church.’ The note eventually made it to the platform where Steven Haskell fielded the question by saying that Paul’s advice was only addressing a local situation in one of Paul’s churches, and didn’t apply to all settings. The next day White reflects on the incident in a letter to her husband James and in the letter affirms Haskell’s interpretation of the text.

**Leaders in Bible Times were Mostly Men**
Although early Adventists rejected the male exclusivity argument in recent years it has resurfaced not from opponents of the Adventist faith but by a few within. They argue that from the first family, to the patriarchs, priests, kings, apostles and deacons, you find only men in leadership offices. Therefore, those who allow women to lead are unfaithful to scripture.

**He Will Rule Over You**
Yet today’s seminary professors largely reject that argument. Originally, according to Stan Patterson, in the Edenic family before sin, Adam and Eve served on an equal basis. Richard Davidson points out that the prediction that Adam would ‘rule over you’ in Genesis 3:16 was not God’s original plan, but rather a stop gap solution to allow Adam to be the umbrella or protector in order to deal with the disorder that had come as a result of sin. Because the context says that ‘your desire (sexual desire) shall be for your husband’ Davidson believes that this servant/leader role was limited to marriage and cannot be broadened to every male/female relationship. Therefore this passage does not address the role of women in ministry (unless one believes that all women are attracted to all men in the church).

While there are many strong female leaders in the Old Testament(see the article on women in the Bible) the majority of leaders are men. All three patriarchs were men; the twelve tribes of Israel are named after the male descendents of Jacob; and most of the kings were men (although there is one exception—Athaliah).

**Priesthood of Men**
But the role that is most strongly linked to spiritual leadership is that of the priesthood, held exclusively by men. Yet Richard Davidson argues that the male only priesthood was not God’s original intent. Going back to Genesis 1
Davidson says that the Hebrew words for 'till and tend' are the same words later used for the tasks of the priests in the sanctuary. In Genesis 3 the word for placing robes on them is the language of priesthood. He concludes that "the first priests were a man and a woman." In fact God desired all people to be his priests when he told them in Exodus 19:5 'you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy people.' God's original plan for Israel was that all, the entire nation, be priests." Unfortunately not everyone accepted that responsibility for holy living so another stopgap measure in which only a few were priests from one tribe, and from just one family in the tribe. Why only men and no women? Davidson says that God wanted to avoid the mess of the other eastern religions around them where priestesses were the 'wives of the gods,' and the king had sex with them in the temple. This would have been distracting for a priesthood that was focused mainly on dealing with the problem of sin.

**Priesthood of All Believers**
The story of the order of priesthood changes radically in the Christian era. John Lorencin observes that the Old Testament priestly order of mediation disappears and is replaced by Jesus Christ, the high priest described in Hebrews. All people are free to come before the high priest making a way for the New Testament church to return to God's original plan where all men and women who believe become priests. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:9 'you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood;' and John in Revelation 1:5,6 "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests." Today's pastors are not the equivalent of Old Testament priests, therefore the gender restrictions do not apply.

**New Testament Leadership Roles**
Even though the New Testament spreads the priesthood among all believers the leadership roles of the Elder and Deacon evolve. Although these roles are largely filled by men there is evidence that there were female elders and deacons. Junia is named as an elder in Romans 16: 7, Phoebe a deacon (the term deaconess does not occur in scripture) in Romans 16:1. Martin Hanna finds it interesting that the office of female elder actually continued in church history after the close of the biblical canon and was not abolished until the council of Laodicea in 364 AD. Today's pastors in the Adventist church have a job description similar to the elder of the New Testament; an office held mostly by men but included some women.

**Question #2: How can we allow women to serve as pastors when the New Testament only uses the masculine gender for leadership gifts?**

**Husband of one wife**
Paul in Titus 1:6 and again in 1 Timothy 3:1–6 uses only the masculine language as he lists the qualifications for elder. Some interpret this to mean that Paul intended to restrict the office of elder to men. And since the job description of elder is quite similar to the job description of today's Adventist pastor, such an interpretation would restrict the pastorate to men.

However such a strict interpretation is inconsistent with the rest of scripture where we find women in leadership. If taken literally the phrase 'husband of one wife' would eliminate all unmarried leaders including Paul himself. Furthermore the passage also speaks of elder's relationship to his children. Therefore if one were to follow the logic, no childless husband could be an elder.

A more plausible explanation given by Martin Hanna is that "It's not really talking about whether they should be men or women but rather the moral qualifications that ministers should have. They should be ‘one man’ kind of women or ‘one woman’ kind of men." In other words as fresher English translations such as the CEV say 'faithful in marriage'.

**Generic Masculine Language**
In fact the scripture is filled with generic masculine language. Hanna refers to the book of Genesis where God says
‘Let us make man in our own image.’ “That word translated ‘man’ is ‘Adam’. It's a masculine word, but it includes Adam and Eve.” He gives another illustration found in Deuteronomy 15:12 where Moses says ‘if you have a brother, a Hebrew woman or a Hebrew man, who becomes your slave, you must let him or her go free after seven years.’

Hanna believes that Paul does the same thing when he urges ‘brethren’ to seek spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12. In fact most contemporary translations use more inclusive language such as the NIV which translates it ‘friends.’ Darius Jankiewicz notes that the same word used for leadership in I Corinthians 12 is used in Romans 16:2 to describe the gift of Phoebe. He concludes that all of the gifts mentioned are available for both genders including gifts of leadership and governing.

Limitations on Women’s Leadership
There are however some statements in the New Testament that at least in some circumstances limit the role of women. The question is whether these statements have universal application for all times or places or perhaps they are applications of a deeper principle (see the hermeneutics article).

In I Peter 3:1–5 women are told that they are “to submit to their husbands.” Tom Shepherd explains that these are Christian woman married to pagan husbands. In the Greco Roman world woman were not only to submit to their husbands but they were to worship their husband’s gods as well. Peter is telling these woman that the best way to win their husbands is to submit to them but not to worship their gods.

"Peter actually takes and turns the power structure upside down by having the woman without a word win her husband to faith in Christ." Does this text disqualify women from spiritual leadership? Actually it does just the opposite. This empowers women to lead as servant leaders.

Women Should Remain Silent
Paul makes two statements about the role of women in church which have generated much discussion over the centuries. The first is I Corinthians 14:34,35 where he says that “women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” Should this text be applied universally for all women in all churches for all times? If so most Christians, including Adventists, are in violation of this teaching. A literal application of this text would ban women from teaching Sabbath School, reading the scripture, giving the mission report, participating in class discussion, and dozens of other talks by women in the church. The co-founder of the church, Ellen White, would have been in violation of this text from the inception of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

A bigger problem with a literal application of this text according to Angel Rodriquez is that such a narrow understanding would be inconsistent with the rest of the teaching of scripture including Paul’s own teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:5 where he does not ban women from praying or prophesying in church. What then was Paul getting at when he said that women should ‘remain silent in church’? Is there an underlying truth that is applied in a specific way to the church in Corinth?

The context of the passage suggests that there was a contentious spirit in the church and that women were contributing to the chaos by asking irrelevant questions or making ignorant statements. The word translated ‘to keep silent’ could also be translated ‘to keep still’ in the sense of not being too outspoken.

“In this case Paul proposed that women should not interrupt the teacher by asking disruptive questions; their education could also take place at home. In that more private setting they could ask their husbands questions and be properly instructed...The discussion was not whether women should preach or occupy important leadership positions in church, but about the proper attitude in church when instruction was being given,” writes Rodriguez.

Be Silent
A similar statement by Paul occurs in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 where he says that 'a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.'

Angel Rodriguez suggests that an examination of the word translated ‘to be silent’ provides a helpful insight. “The verb is used most of the time in contexts in which there are tensions and/or controversies. In a few others it implies that through silence an offensive behavior is avoided. The verb designates a way of speaking that disrupts social interaction; in other words, a specific type of silence and not necessarily the absence of all speech.”

This doesn't mean the absence of words but rather the absence of controversial speech. The idea is to provide an atmosphere of calmness and tranquility making real communication possible. In order to avoid problems, he exhorts them to "learn in quietness and full submission" to the teacher, something expected of a first-century disciple (male or female).

Paul is forbidding the speech of a student that disrupts the learning process, thus protecting the rights of others to hear and learn. The phrase "she must be silent" (verse 12) does not mean that she must remain speechless, but that controversial speeches are unacceptable, because they create unrest. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man.

The next phrase "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man" begs the question of whether this is to be taken literally and universally or if there is an underlying principle that is applied to Timothy's church in Ephesus.

The problem with the literal universal approach is that it would be inconsistent with the rest of the scripture where we find females teaching males. In Acts 18:25 Priscilla instructed Apollos in the way of the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 11:5 and 14:19 female prophets instructed the congregation. Why then did Paul say that “a woman is not to teach or assume authority over a man?”

Perhaps he didn’t say that. The word translated ‘authority’ in many English Bibles is used only in this one place in the New Testament. There are many other words Paul could have used had he wished to connote the meaning authority. However he needed a different, more nuanced word. The word he chose typically means 'to dominate' or to 'get the upper hand' when it is used elsewhere in Greek literature. Perhaps Ephesus’s cult of Artemis, where women played a domineering role in religion, influenced the Ephesian church and created a tension between the genders.

Linda Belleville writes "The women at Ephesus (perhaps encouraged by false teachers) were trying to gain an advantage over the men in the congregation by teaching in a dictatorial fashion. The men in response became angry and disputed what the women were doing. " Paul's solution 'Let a woman learn in a quiet and submissive fashion. I do not, however, permit her to teach with the intent to dominate a man. She must be gentle in her demeanor.' What is the principle behind this prescription? No man or woman, should ever have a domineering attitude in a church.

What about Ellen White?
Those who advocate for women clergy in the Adventist church point to the fact that the co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist faith, Ellen White, was indeed a woman. They find it ironic that any Adventist would have trouble with the concept of female pastors since White preached in churches throughout the world for decades.

In response, those who object to women pastors suggest that there was an exception made for Ellen White’s gender because she had the gift of prophecy. Deni Fortin does not find that explanation anywhere in the history of the Adventist church.

“None of our pioneers, James White, J.N. Andrews, Haskell, none of them made this an exception for Ellen White.
They never referred to her as having a special dispensation. Instead, they looked at these passages of scriptures, the two in particular, I Corinthians 14, and I Timothy 2, as having particular local application only and not universal application throughout time."
A major new study that tracked more than 12,000 Canadians over a period of 14 years has found that regular attendance of religious service offers significant protection against depression.

In an article published in the April issue of the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, researchers at the University of Saskatchewan write that incidence of clinical depression was 22% lower among those who attended religious services at least once a month compared with people who never attended.

"Significantly fewer monthly attenders reported having episodes or a diagnosis of depression," the authors write. "This ... suggests a protective effect of religious attendance."

Marilyn Baetz, head of the department of psychiatry at the University of Saskatchewan, co-wrote the study with Lloyd Balbuena and Rudy Bowen. In an interview she said the explanation for the effect remains something of a mystery.

The researchers controlled for the subjects' sense of "social support" — for example, whether they felt they had someone to confide in or felt loved — and found that religious attendance had an impact beyond the sentiment of belonging to a community.

"The feeling is that if you belong to a religious organization, what you are really getting is just social support, nothing else," Dr. Baetz said. "But it would appear it is something over and above that."

They also controlled for age, income, medical history, marital status and education.

The conclusion: there is an "unmeasurable" aspect of religious attendance that benefits worshippers, she said.

"Some ingredient of the religious experience other than behaviours, networks or attitudes alone probably contributes to the benefit," the authors write. "From the believers' perspective, they have recourse to divine
assistance (even a personal relationship in Christian traditions) and thus are less likely to feel alone with the vicissitudes of life."

The study drew on data from the longitudinal National Population Health Survey, beginning with 12,583 people who were not depressed in 1994, and following them to 2008.

’Some ingredient of the religious experience other than behaviours, networks or attitudes alone probably contributes to the benefit’

The researchers did not differentiate between different faiths, but Dr. Baetz said that in the baseline year, about 80% of worshippers would have been from Christian denominations.

Researchers said religious attendance lowered the risk of depression in a “dose–response” fashion: People who attended frequently had the least depression, those who attended occasionally were in the mid-range and those who never attended had the most.

The study found that people identifying themselves as spiritual but not attending religious service did not experience any health benefit. "It might be something about the organized component of religion that is the healthful component," Dr. Baetz said.

She began researching the connection between religion and health about 15 years ago and said at that time the questions she was asking were considered controversial. But she said the medical profession has become more accepting of the role of spirituality.

“Although in some ways we’re secular, in other ways, particularly when people are stressed and have health problems, you do tend to look outside yourself for other means of coping or support,” she said.

Of course there’s no guarantee that any individual will benefit from religious attendance. "And you can't really prescribe it," Dr. Baetz said. "But it’s interesting to see a 22% decrease in something that’s pretty common."

National Post

• Email: ghamilton@nationalpost.com / Twitter:
How Post-Christian is U.S. Society?

April 15, 2013 – The rise of the so-called “Nones”—the increasing percentage of adults who claim no religious affiliation—has been a much-discussed trend in American religion. Is the nation moving away from Christianity and other forms of conventional faith? To provide insight on this topic, Barna Group analyzed 42,855 interviews conducted in recent years, looking at 15 different measures of non-religiosity. In other words, the research explores the emerging post-Christian landscape of the nation.

Metrics of Post-Christian Culture

Currently, more than seven out of 10 adults describe themselves as “Christian” and more than six out of 10 Americans say they are “deeply spiritual.” Yet, just how deep do these labels go?

To shed light on this, the Barna team created an aggregate metric of post-Christian culture based upon 15 different measures of identity, belief and behavior. To qualify as post-Christian, individuals met 60% or more of the factors (nine or more out of 15 criteria). Highly post-Christian individuals met 80% or more of the factors (12 or more of these 15 criteria). These 15 factors are shown in the infographic below.
David Kinnaman, president and majority owner of Barna Group, explains the reasoning behind the post-Christian metric. "First, we wanted to expand the scope of secularization beyond what people call themselves. Faith-oriented self-descriptions are fine, but they are really only skin-deep in terms of understanding faith. In addition to identity, we also wanted to account for two other critical aspects of faith: belief as well as behavior.

“For decades, our research shows the variations of asking people about faith. For example, many self-described atheists also claim to pray to a deity. Long-time churchgoers often lack basic orthodox beliefs. People who effortlessly self-describe as ‘Christian’ may live like practical atheists in most other parts of their lives.

“Also, understanding secularization in the U.S. begins with realizing the enormous footprint of Christianity in this country. The Barna measure is designed to take an over-arching, aggregate view of society’s engagement with faith generally and Christianity specifically. While Barna Group interviews all U.S. adults in our polling, regardless of their faith, we have a unique vantage point on measuring engagement with Christianity. Therefore, our measure looks at the degree to which the nation is post-Christian.”

Post-Christian Totals

Based on Barna’s aggregate metric, nearly two-fifths of the nation’s adult population (37%) qualifies as post-Christian. This includes 9% of Americans who are highly post-Christian—lacking engagement in 80% or more of the measures of belief, practice or commitment. And another one-quarter is moderately post-Christian (28%), without engaging at least 60% of the factors.

Barna’s study includes a ranking of the nation’s largest 96 markets, from most to least post-Christian. The big picture is that the leading post-Christian markets are in the Northeast and in the West. The gap between the most post-Christian city (Albany, NY) and least (Shreveport, LA) is 63% to 12%, respectively. These city-by-city rankings can be found at the company’s new website www.cities.barna.org.

HOW POST-CHRISTIAN IS YOUR CITY >
Generational Change
The differences by generation are striking, and they suggest a less “Christianized” nation in the decades to come. The younger the generation, the increasingly post-Christian it is compared with its predecessors. Nearly half of Mosaics (48%) qualify as post-Christian compared with two-fifths of Busters (40%). One-third of Boomers (35%) and one-quarter of Seniors (28%) are post-Christian. These patterns are consistent with other studies that show the increasing percentage of “Nones” among younger generations.
What the Research Means

David Kinnaman, the author of *unChristian* and *You Lost Me*, put the findings in context.

1. It is inadequate to look simply at one feature of religion to assess things like secularization. It is increasingly necessary to have aggregate indicators—that is, multi-dimensional research—that describe the rich and variegated experience of spirituality and faith. Additional study of post-Christianized culture, secularization and the “Nones” phenomena are necessary; Barna Group’s is just one glimpse of this trend.

2. Understanding the nation’s post-Christian profile gives an important viewpoint on the population’s spiritual, moral and social future. There is a debate happening about how much the country is secular versus faith-oriented and whether this changes as people get older. The Barna data reminds observers that most Americans remain connected in some way with Christianity. Yet, the influence of post-Christian trends is likely to increase and is a significant factor among today’s youngest Americans.

3. Our research suggests that most of the efforts of Christian ministries fail to reach much beyond the core of “Christianized” America. It’s often much easier to work with this core audience, than to focus on the so-called “Nones.” The data give evidence that some cities—and younger generations—are more Gospel-resistant than the norm. In part, Christian leaders have to realize that many efforts fall short because they imagine the post-Christian population is hanging on its every word. New levels of courage and clarity will be required to connect beyond the “Christianized” majority.

Twitter: @davidkinnaman / @barnagroup

About the Research

Every year, Barna Group interviews thousands of U.S. adults and tracks dozens of theologicaltm factors among the nation’s population. This report is based on 42,855 random, representative interviews conducted among U.S. adults of all faith backgrounds from 2005 through 2012.

If you’re interested in learning more about the Barna: Cities project, please visit www.cities.barna.org.
Definitions
The level of irreligion in America depends on how you measure it. And the vitality of faith in America is much more than simply how people label themselves. Barna Group tracks the following 15 metrics related to faith, which speak to the lack of Christian identity, belief and practice.

post-Christian = meet at least 60% of the following 15 factors (9 or more factors) highly post-Christian = meet at least 80% of the following 15 factors (12 or more factors)

1. do not believe in God 2. identify as atheist or agnostic 3. disagree that faith is important in their lives 4. have not prayed to God (in the last year) 5. have never made a commitment to Jesus 6. disagree the Bible is accurate 7. have not donated money to a church (in the last year) 8. have not attended a Christian church (in the last year) 9. agree that Jesus committed sins 10. do not feel a responsibility to “share their faith” 11. have not read the Bible (in the last week) 12. have not volunteered at church (in the last week) 13. have not attended Sunday school (in the last week) 14. have not attended religious small group (in the last week) 15. do not participate in a house church (in the last year)

About Barna Group
Barna Group (which includes its research division, the Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. It conducts primary research, produces media resources pertaining to spiritual development, and facilitates the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries.

Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each update on the latest research findings from Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna website (www.barna.org). Additional research-based resources are also available through this website.

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How Post-Christian Are We?

63% of Americans rank as low on the Barna Group's post-Christian scale.

37% of Americans are highly or moderately post-Christian. (Meeting at least 60% of the factors listed above.)
YOUNGER GENERATIONS ARE INCREASINGLY POST-CHRISTIAN

Based on the Barna metrics, each generation of Americans is increasingly post-Christian compared to the previous one.

- Highly Post-Christian
- Post-Christian

16% (part of 48%)
Mosaics
(ages 18-28)

11% (part of 40%)
Busters
(ages 29-47)

08% (part of 35%)
Boomers
(ages 48-66)

05% (part of 20%)
Seniors
(ages 67+)

09% (part of 37%)
of Americans qualify as highly post-Christian
(meeting at least 80% of the factors listed above)

SOURCE: BARRA GROUP, N=42,855 U.S. ADULTS | WWW.BARNA.ORG
The Most Post-Christian Cities

The Most Post-Christian Cities

Where does your city rank?

Where you live may say something about what you believe. These are the top 15 post-Christian cities in America, defined based on the percentage of the population that meets at least 60% of Barna Group’s post-Christian metrics. (See below or visit www.barna.org for a detailed definition.)

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Post-Christian Metrics:

The level of irreligion in America depends on how you measure it. And the vitality of faith in America is much more than simply how people label themselves. Barna Group tracks the following 15 metrics related to faith, which speak to the lack of Christian identity, belief and practice. Read more of Barna Group’s research on the “Nones,” secularization and post-Christian America.

**Post-Christian** = meet at least 60% of the following 15 factors (9 or more factors)

**Highly Post-Christian** = meet at least 80% of the following 15 factors (12 or more factors)

1. do not believe in God
2. identify as atheist or agnostic
3. disagree that faith is important in their lives
4. have not prayed to God (in the last year)
5. have never made a commitment to Jesus
6. disagree the Bible is accurate
7. have not donated money to a church (in the last year)
8. have not attended a Christian church (in the last year)
9. agree that Jesus committed sins
10. do not feel a responsibility to “share their faith”
11. have not read the Bible (in the last week)
12. have not volunteered at church (in the last week)
13. have not attended Sunday school (in the last week)
14. have not attended religious small group (in the last week)
15. do not participate in a house church (in the last year)

SOURCE BARRA GROUP, N=42,856, U.S. ADULTS, WWW.CITIES.BARRA.ORG

**Additional Table:**

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SOURCE BARRA GROUP, N=23,018, U.S. ADULTS, WWW.BARRA.ORG
Groeschel: "People Aren't Rejecting God But the Church"

LifeChurch.tv's pastor Craig Groeschel says faith in general in this country is not waning -- it's faith in the church that's declining.

In an article addressing recent statistics showing the number with no religious affiliation on the rise, LifeChurch.tv's pastor Craig Groeschel insisted that faith in this country isn't waning — it's faith in the church that's declining.

In the Fox News article, Groeschel wrote, "Interestingly enough, though the number of those religiously unaffiliated is increasing, there is little to no trend in the number of those who express atheist or agnostic beliefs. People aren't saying they don't believe in God. They're saying they don't believe in religion. They are not rejecting Christ. They are rejecting the church."

Groeschel explains that people in America today are increasingly put off by labels that might carry with them emotional baggage from past hurts by the church or organized religion. "I've struggled with what people think of my label: pastor," he writes. But when one man boldly told Groeschel he didn't like religious people, Groeschel responded in agreement. "I explained that religion is about rules, but being a Christian is about relationship."

Groeschel was quick to say that he's not against the church — "obviously, I'm part of one" — but rather believes that "to reach people no one is reaching, we have to do things no one is doing." In other words, we don't change the message but rather how the message is presented.

"We have to discover our 'altar ego' — and become who God says we are instead of who others say we are," writes Groeschel.

It was Christmas Break, and a dozen volunteers and I were in the building working on the “Under One Roof” project. I was looking for a roll of duct tape in a large box that has been in the corner of my office since mid-August when we moved back into our building. Along with the tape, I found an object wrapped in paper towels with a rubber band around it. I studied the thing in disbelief—not wondering what it was but amazed that half-a-year had passed since I’d last seen it.

I had put this object in that box at 6:00 PM, June 29, 2012. How could I possibly remember that exact point in time?

Just a few weeks before that date, all the teachers had been asked to turn in their keys and remove their classroom belongings by June 20th. With the help of dozens of parents and students, the classrooms were empty and four storage units a half-mile away were packed from floor to ceiling. The task took three days, but we met the stated deadline, and we were trusting God to direct our path between then and September. There is no earthly way to explain the peace and good spirit that the staff had as we stepped into the summer of 2012, but never did we better understand 1 Peter 5:7, “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” I will admit, however, that the school was sadly quiet for the next nine days as the office staff packed and wrapped up the loose ends of the 2011–2012 school year.

On that last business day of the school’s fiscal year, Friday, June 29th, the office staff had offered to stay and help me pack what little remained, but I assured them I was almost done and could roll out my last boxes on a kitchen cart. That final hour was quiet until the custodian stepped in to remind me he was scheduled to lock up and code out at 6:00. He and I were the last to leave the building that night, and it felt strange not knowing when or whether ever I would return.

That’s how I remember what time it was when I wrapped the thing in paper towels. That’s how I knew it had been a half-a-year since I had seen it.

The six months seemed a blur until I pulled off the paper towels and stared down at my found treasure. It was the blue coffee mug I used for more than 4,500 days since my first week at Calvary Christian Schools in July of 2000.

My wife Julie bought it for me the week we moved to Michigan. One glance at its image and inscription and you’ll understand why she knew the then-new administrator of the Calvary Eagles needed it on his desk.

Isaiah 40:31 (ESV)

31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.
You all know the passage, but I'd like to share some thoughts about the first three verbs in that verse: *wait, renew,* and *mount up.*

Most translations imply that *waiting* is active not passive; it is doing not dreaming. In this sense, we *wait* not like restaurant patrons waiting for their meal but like the waiter who is “*waiting on*” tables. This kind of *waiting* is about service. Believers are those who wait upon the Lord with hope and expectation that what God says He will do. It is waiting in obedience to "occupy ‘til He comes." (Luke 19:13)

The second verb is *renew.* The promise that our strength can be renewed implies that it can also be depleted. The truth is serving others can be exhausting. Some may ask, "What about the promise in the second part of the verse that says, ‘They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. Doesn’t that mean that we will never get tired while serving the Lord?” I don’t think so. Even well-trained runners are exhausted after “pressing on toward the mark.” (Philippians 3:13–15) I don’t think the word weary implies physical exhaustion as much as complete mental or emotional fatigue. In other words, being weary is not being tired from what you’re doing—it is being tired of what you’re doing. Weary is a dangerous place to be; it is dark and pathless valley cluttered with quit and overshadowed by the bad decisions of centuries past.

It is for this reason the Apostle Paul encourages us not to "grow weary in well doing." (Galatians 6:9) He is not saying “Never tire yourself for a worthy cause” but rather "Never become tired of the cause." It is healthy to be spent at the end of a hard day or a hard week. Such tiredness is to be expected in service. It is why God created the seventh day to rest. He knows we need recovery time... renewal time. Sometimes we need a change of pace.

This pattern of work and rest, anticipation and reward, is also implied in the second part of Isaiah 40:31. If you can’t run another mile, then walk instead, but don’t stop. Don’t faint. Regroup. Refocus... *ReNEW* your strength... then carry on. That is what my coffee mug says. The verse implies a pattern of exertion and renewed strength.

This brings us to the third verb of Isaiah 40:31: *mount up.* The female bald eagle can have a 7’ wingspan and weigh up to sixteen pounds, the maximum legal weight of a bowling ball. She can also carry over four pounds of prey in her clenched talons. Assuming that circumstances have grounded an eagle, stopped it in its tracks, the most difficult part of flight is what Isaiah calls “mounting up with wings.” The hardest part is *taking off,* regaining momentum.

Mounting up, and up in search of the wind or an updraft takes non-stop effort—it is more grueling than graceful. There is a big difference between “mounting up with wings” and soaring. To the observer, it’s like the Olympic contrast between watching the 200 meter butterfly in a churning pool and a 700’ ski jump from a snowy slope.

There are over 7,200 feathers on a bald eagle, the largest being those used for lift and thrust on the wings and maneuvering on the tail. Imagine the strength it takes to power those 7’ wings and raise the weight of a bowling ball to altitudes above 10,000 feet (over two miles up in the sky). Our favorite pictures of eagles show them soaring at that height. Wings outstretched in effortless flight—like that poster behind the coffee mug above or this one below.

From high in the air an eagle can swoop down at 35 MPH, and use the speed to regain its former altitude. As
Newton put it, “A body in motion tends to stay in motion.” But from ground level... from a stand-still... “mounting up with wings like eagles” is hard work, but the hope of soaring gives strength to weary wings. Someday we may share more of the details of lessons learned and God's provision in those six months that my mug went missing, but for now let us take Isaiah 40:31 to heart. We have soared and will soon soar again, but for six months we have been in the hard-work phase. Never have so many supporters been doing so much for Calvary Christian Schools. We are waiting on the Lord, but not idly waiting. We are fully occupied, serving Him with hope and anticipation. We will not grow weary of the effort but when we need to catch our breath, we will change our pace, renew our strength, and not faint. We will press upward toward our high calling and will give Him the glory when in His time we soar.

With that in mind, let us turn our thoughts from the little mug on my desk toward much bigger things.

On behalf of the School Board, staff, consultants and many supporters now assisting CCS, allow me to give you a sneak preview of a billboard that you will soon see at two locations on the main highways near our school:

Tom Kapanka, CCS Administrator
Missy Sherburne: Donors want to know where their money is going

April 25, 2013

April 9, 2013 | Thirteen years ago, Charles Best, a teacher in the Bronx, came up with a simple idea for how he and other public school teachers could raise money to fund classroom projects. He created a website where teachers could post their requests and donors could contribute money to fund them.

Since then, DonorsChoose.org has raised more than $174 million from individuals, corporations and foundations for classroom projects all across the nation. Recognized by Fast Company magazine as one of the 50 most innovative companies in the world, DonorsChoose.org has lessons to offer all nonprofits and other organizations.

Two of the most important, said Missy Sherburne, chief partnerships officer for DonorsChoose.org, are transparency and accountability. Donors today want their giving to be targeted, and they want to see results right away, she said.

"Typically, nonprofits say they've got X campaign coming up and ask people to give X hundreds or thousands of dollars, or tens of dollars, and later you hear how successful the campaign is," she said. "That's probably attractive to certain donors, but I think it's probably less attractive to a lot of younger donors, who, because of the crowdsourcing initiative, want to know now."

Nonprofits should think about how to package what they do in a way that people can understand and how to forge connections that build ongoing relationships.

"Transparency and accountability are really, really critical," Sherburne said.

As chief partnerships officer, Sherburne leads a staff responsible for raising money from corporations and foundations. She served previously as the executive director of DonorsChoose.org North Carolina and South Carolina, and before that was the North Carolina executive director of Teach For America.

Sherburne spoke with Faith & Leadership while at Duke recently for a conference on sustainable business and social impact at the Fuqua School of Business. Paul Sansone of Better World Books also was a speaker. The following is an edited transcript.

Q: What do you do at DonorsChoose.org?

DonorsChoose.org is a website where public school teachers post projects they want to do, and then individuals, corporations and foundations fund them.

We have two revenue streams. One is individuals who come to the site and say, "I want to give $5 to this class project to take kids to China, or for a classroom rug for a kindergarten class."

Then there are corporations and foundations that want to support projects either in a geographic region or in an area or subject that matters to them, such as technology or the arts.

The team that I work with builds those partnerships with corporations and foundations. We make up about 60 percent of the organization’s funding, and individuals who fund projects through the website account for about 40 percent.

We’re a twelve–person team, and we’re charged with building partnerships with corporations and foundations all across the United States, ranging from Starbucks to Kia to Sonic Drive–In.

Q: DonorsChoose started as one person’s small idea and grew exponentially. How important were these
corporate partnerships in growing the organization, in bringing it to scale?

They were absolutely critical. One fuels the other.

For instance, in a partnership with Facebook, they give a DonorsChoose.org gift card to their clients and partners every holiday season, like a gift card you’d get to Amazon or The Gap or any retail store.

What does that do for DonorsChoose.org? It introduces thousands of people who wouldn’t have necessarily known about DonorsChoose.org to the site. The two -- partnerships and growth -- are absolutely inextricably linked. We couldn’t do one without the other.

In our partnership with Starbucks, for example, when you go into a Starbucks and you’re logging onto their network, you will see local DonorsChoose.org projects that are in the vicinity of that Starbucks store. That fuels people coming to the site, saying, “Oh wow, I didn’t know about this,” and being introduced to DonorsChoose.org.

One fuels the other. They go hand in hand. Our growth plan is very much based on both of those revenue streams growing -- growing the individuals but also growing the corporate and foundation partners at the same time. So they’ve absolutely played a critical part.

Q: How is DonorsChoose.org itself funded?

When someone goes to the site to fund a project, they have a choice at the checkout to dedicate a portion of their donation -- generally, 15 percent -- to help fund our operations. Over 90 percent of donors choose to do that, which we’re really proud of.

Ever since Charles Best, our founder and CEO, started the organization, we’ve been transparent about our cost structure. That optional donation to support our operations is what has enabled us to go to companies and not ask for help keeping the lights on but to say, “Our partnerships are all about how you, Kia, or you, Chase, can have a direct impact in your community by supporting local projects.”

Q: Do the corporate partners also donate toward the organization’s expenses?

The individuals have a choice. When a company partners with us, beginning at the $10,000 level and up, it’s not optional, and we make that clear to them. We absolutely need that donation, because we have staff members who work really closely with them.

Q: DonorsChoose.org is based on a brilliant, simple concept, but lots of organizations have brilliant, simple concepts that never flourish. Beyond a great idea, what’s the key to the success of DonorsChoose.org?

Obviously, the great idea plays a huge role. But beyond that, I think it’s ultimately the leadership and getting the right people in the organization to make sure that you drive that big idea beyond that startup phase.

I attribute a lot of that to Charles, but I also attribute it to us being really thoughtful about who we are as we’ve grown -- who we are and what kind of person is going to be successful at our organization, regarding both the skills and work environment they need to do their best. Someone might be phenomenal at another organization and look great on paper but might not be the right fit for us.

Charles operates with a tremendous sense of humility, which is woven throughout the fabric of our organization. But it’s also a place where people can take risks, and I think that’s unique, particularly for a nonprofit. It has helped position us to be where we are today.

Q: What are the key lessons that other organizations can learn from DonorsChoose.org?
I absolutely think there are things that others can apply. The importance of transparency and making sure that donors understand where dollars are going and packaging it in a way that makes sense.

Typically, nonprofits say they've got X campaign coming up and ask people to give X hundreds or thousands of dollars or tens of dollars and later you hear how successful the campaign is. That's probably attractive to certain donors, but I think it's probably less attractive to a lot of younger donors who, because of the crowd sourcing initiative, want to know now.

I encourage organizations to think about how to package what they do in a way that folks understand. What has allowed us to be successful is the partnership piece. We absolutely build a partnership that's based on having a relationship and understanding the value of that relationship.

Our individual donors hear from us immediately after they've made an online transaction. It's hearing back from the teacher, it's getting pictures, it's forging all of our connections online.

What often happens in a traditional nonprofit is you write a $100 check, you might get a nice tax deduction letter saying, “Thank you so much for your gift.” Whereas at DonorsChoose.org, if you make a $100 contribution, you feel like you're getting so much.

I would encourage nonprofits to think about how they can forge that type of connection in a way that isn't too labor-intensive. I think at DonorsChoose.org, you feel valuable if you're giving, hearing back from us and from the teacher, or getting pictures or thank-you notes and seeing those online from the teacher.

Transparency and accountability are really, really critical.

**Q: As the organization has grown, has it ever been tempted to expand beyond that core mission?**

Since we launched in 2000 and expanded in 2003, plenty of organizations and people have come to us and asked, “Will you expand to X or Y or Z?” And a couple of years ago, we really explored whether we should be expanding the model either internationally or to another nonprofit sector outside of public schools. But as an organization, we made the decision that until we were serving 100 percent of high-poverty schools in the U.S., we had not accomplished what we had needed to accomplish.

We made a decision to let other sectors and folks know that we were not expanding our model. We will graciously and generously talk to folks who want to learn about DonorsChoose.org. We're happy to share insights we've learned along the way, but we’re focused on making an impact on 100 percent of high-poverty schools in the U.S. and getting to the day where we're delivering, in any given school year, $100 million worth of resources and experiences to those schools.

This year our goal is to deliver close to $50 million, so we've got a ways to go before we hit this big, hairy, audacious goal of $100 million.
Seven Simple Steps From Can't to Can

Every organization has “can’t do” people in it. Their first words are no, can’t, or won’t. Successful leaders change can’t to can.

Real influence:

Coercion creates conformity; influence transforms.

Incompetent leaders pressure; skillful leaders influence.

Inept leaders use power, authority, and position to intimidate. Influential leaders move people from can’t to can by changing what people believe, think, and feel.

Seven steps:

1. Stop pressuring people to change. You can’t change someone only they can. Peter Senge wisely said, “People don’t resist change, they resist being changed.”
2. Go back to rule number one until you believe it!
3. Give acceptance to gain acceptance. Their beliefs come before yours. Listen to understand. Understanding isn’t a contest; acceptance isn’t agreement.
4. Pull back when they pull back. Create space for change. Pressure creates resistance.
5. Identify and agree on a core point of resistance. State a sticking point. Do they nod in agreement?
7. Ask, "What’s the next step?" after “Yes.”

“Yes” changes the brain.

Resistance:

Pressured people explain reasons it can’t be done and why it won’t work. Their brains are busy defending “no.”

People who believe it won’t work find reasons it won’t work.

Changing Thinking:

The moment someone says, “Yes, we can fix this,” their thinking irresistibly, inevitably changes. “Yes” shifts brains from can’t or won’t to can and how.

You can’t say, “Yes, we can fix this,” without also thinking how.

No:
What happens when they say, "No, we can't fix this?" Find "yes" somewhere else. Ask, "Is there something we can fix?"

Only an UNbullied "yes" changes can't to can.

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*The first time I saw, "Can we fix this?" was in, "To Sell is Human," by Daniel Pink.
For Evangelicals, a Shift in Views on Immigration

By JULIA PRESTON

ORLANDO, Fla. — In the pews of the First Baptist Church of Orlando, where thousands of evangelical Christians gather on Sundays to worship and sing, a change of heart is happening on the once toxic issue of immigration.

Two years ago, national evangelical leaders began to speak out in favor of legislation to give legal status to immigrants in the United States illegally. Now, as Congress is about to start a debate on overhauling the immigration system, conservative Christians, once inclined to take a hard line on immigrants they viewed as lawbreakers, are consulting their Bibles and coming around to the pastors’ view.

“I feel I would be representative of a typical longtime Baptist, one who grew up in the Baptist Church, who was raised in an evangelical family, and I would identify myself as a conservative Republican,” said Jay Crenshaw, 36, a lawyer in Orlando who attended a service at the megachurch last Sunday. “And I can tell you how much my views have changed.”

For Mr. Crenshaw, as for many evangelicals, the rethinking came as a result of personal encounters with immigrants in church who were trying to navigate the maze of the nation’s immigration laws — in his case, a Colombian friend who turned out to be here illegally.

“It seems something’s broken about the system,” Mr. Crenshaw said.

The shift among evangelical Christians could have a powerful effect on the fight in Washington, as Republican lawmakers, including many who have opposed any amnesty for illegal immigrants, look to see how much they can support measures to bring those immigrants into the legal system without alienating conservative voters.

Evangelical leaders, seeing the opportunity to expand their influence on a social issue beyond abortion and same-sex marriage, have broadly united this year behind a path to citizenship for immigrants in the country illegally. They are conducting an ambitious push to sway Congress, including ad campaigns on Christian radio stations in five states, meetings with lawmakers and a challenge to churchgoers to pray every day for 40 days using Bible passages that speak of welcoming the stranger.

On Wednesday, evangelical pastors will converge on Washington for a day of prayer and lobbying on Capitol Hill.

Guiding the campaign is a coalition called the Evangelical Immigration Table, which includes the top pastors of more than two dozen evangelical denominations and at least 20 heads of Christian colleges and seminaries. “It is very remarkable the degree to which there is consensus,” said Galen Carey, the vice president of government relations for the National Association of Evangelicals, an umbrella group for the churches. No prominent pastor has spoken out against the immigration effort, although some pastors of the largest churches have remained silent.

Accord has been less broad among the faithful. In a poll released in March by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution, white evangelical Protestants were the least likely of the religious groups surveyed to support a path to citizenship for immigrants here illegally, with 56 percent of them favoring that approach. Among Hispanic Catholics, the group expressing the most support, 74 percent said they would allow those immigrants to become citizens. Only 41 percent of white evangelicals who identify with the Tea Party supported a path to citizenship, according to the survey.

But many pastors in largely white churches have been spurred to action on immigration by preachers in Hispanic and immigrant churches, who have seen rapid growth in their congregations and have ministered to many followers who spoke of living in fear because they lacked legal papers.

For the Rev. David Uth, the head pastor of First Baptist Orlando, there was no mistaking the evolution of his traditionally
white congregation, as he discovered in recent years that immigrants speaking at least 32 different languages had flocked to his doors. Mr. Uth is one of the pastors going to Washington this week.

His church offers ministry in seven foreign languages, with simultaneous translation of Sunday services in Spanish and Portuguese and a separate Brazilian service on Sunday evenings.

“The stories out there in the pews are stories of people from all over the world who have made friends and who have become close with people here,” Mr. Uth said after his service last Sunday. “I think that’s why there’s movement in this church, there’s momentum, there’s an openness to try to do something to address their needs.”

Mr. Crenshaw said his views started to shift when his Colombian friend, a white-collar professional who had been living in Florida for years, asked for help after being arrested for driving without a license. Mr. Crenshaw said he realized that his friend, an active church member who was supporting his mother and a brother, could be deported.

“The tension is compassion on one hand and rule of law on the other,” said Mr. Crenshaw, who went with his friend to court, where the matter was resolved without drawing the attention of any immigration authorities.

“Once you’ve walked with someone and put a face and family behind the immigration issue, it very much personalizes it,” he said. “You do find yourself with a lot of compassion.”

Stewart Hall, 70, a member of First Baptist Orlando for more than three decades, said his views changed gradually, as he moved to sit in pews near the rear of the church where immigrants new to the congregation chose to pray. “It occurs to me that if Jesus was sitting next to me, he would not care whether they were illegal or legal,” he said.

“Take me back 10 years ago, and I had this really hard outer shell about it,” Mr. Hall said. “Line ’em up and shoot ’em, and by that I really meant pack them up and get them out of here.”

But, he said, “my walk with Christ has softened my view.”

While advocating a path to citizenship, a set of principles created by the Evangelical Immigration Table reflects conservative values, calling for tough enforcement measures to secure the borders.

Matthew Soerens, an organizer of the prayer campaign, said that more than 700 churches nationwide had asked for some of the 75,000 bookmarks the coalition is distributing, which serve as guides to Bible passages to study during the 40-day challenge.

The campaign also encourages evangelicals to meet with their federal lawmakers to show their support for those who favor changing immigration laws and to prod those who do not, especially Republicans.

Senator Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican who is part of a bipartisan group of senators writing an overhaul bill, has received visits and calls to his Florida offices. Mr. Rubio said he welcomed the activism.

“Faith-based leaders help remind us that we are dealing with real human beings here with God-given dignity,” he said.

Representative Ander Crenshaw, a Republican from Jacksonville who has firmly opposed any amnesty for illegal immigrants, agreed to have lunch last week with a delegation from evangelical churches in his city. Travis Trice, one of those attending, said Mr. Crenshaw, an Episcopalian who is unrelated to Jay Crenshaw, had agreed to pray on the issue.

Representative Crenshaw said afterward only that he was meeting with many groups to hear their views. “With an estimated 11 million individuals residing in the country illegally,” he said, “it is clear that United States immigration policy is badly in need of reform.”
April 25, 2013

Christ was persecuted, but what about Christians?

CNN examines the tumultuous early years of Christianity in a special narrated by Liam Neeson. Watch “After Jesus: The First Christians,” Sunday at 8 p.m. ET.

By John Blake, CNN

(CNN) – She walked into the Roman arena where the wild beasts awaited her. She trembled not from fear but from joy.

Her name was Vibia Perpetua. She was just 22, a young mother singing hymns as the crowd jeered and a lion, leopard and wild cow encircled her.

One of the beasts attacked, hurling her to the ground. She covered an exposed thigh with her bloody robe to preserve her modesty and groped in the dust for her hair pin so she could fix her disheveled hair.

And when a Roman executioner approached Perpetua with a sword, her last words before collapsing were aimed at her Christian companions: “Stand fast in the faith, and love you all one another and do not let our sufferings be a stumbling block to you.”

Millions of Christians worldwide will celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus on this Easter Sunday. But the story of how the church rose to prominence after Jesus’ death is being turned upside down.

According to a belief passed down through the centuries, the church grew because of Roman persecution. The blood of Christian martyrs such as Perpetua became “the seed of the church,” said third-century church leader Tertullian. It’s the Hollywood version of Christianity reflected in epic biblical films such as “Ben-Hur” and “The Robe.” Vicious Romans relentlessly targeted early Christians, so the story goes, but the faith of people like Perpetua proved so inspiring that Christianity became the official religion of Rome, and eventually the largest religion in the world.

But that script is getting a rewrite. The first Christians were never systematically persecuted by the Romans, and most martyrdom stories – with the exception of a handful such as Perpetua’s – were exaggerated and invented, several scholars and historians say. It wasn’t just how the early Christians died that inspired so many people in the ancient world; it was how they lived.

“You had much better odds of winning the lottery than you would have becoming a martyr,” says Joyce E. Salisbury, author of “The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence.”

“The odds were pretty slim. More people read about martyrs than ever saw one.”

Do Christians have a martyr complex today?

The debate over exactly how many Christians were persecuted and martyred may seem irrelevant centuries later. A scholarly consensus has indeed emerged that Roman persecution of Christians was sporadic, and that at least some Christian martyrdom stories are theological tall tales.

But a new book by Candida Moss, a New Testament professor at the University of Notre Dame, is bringing that message to the masses.
Professor Candida Moss, author of "The Myth of Persecution," says most stories of Christian martyrs were fabricated. Moss says ancient stories of church persecution have created a contemporary cult of bogus Christian martyrs. She says too many American Christians are acting like they're members of a persecuted minority, being thrown to the lions by people who simply disagree with them.

She cited former Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum. Romney claimed last year that President Barack Obama was waging a "war against religion," and Santorum said the gay community "had gone out on a jihad" against him. Other Christians invoke images of persecution when someone disagrees with them on controversial issues such as abortion or birth control, says Moss, whose "The Myth of Persecution" was recently released.

The problem with invoking persecution is it implies your opponents are evil – and no common ground can be found with evil, Moss says.

"When someone is persecuting you" she says, "there is no room for dialogue."

Others say Moss' claim is dangerous.

People such as Perpetua did die because of their beliefs. The first Christians were tortured, reviled and held in contempt by Romans – and their example helped the church grow, they say.

The Rev. Robert Morgan, author of "On This Day in Christian History: 365 Amazing and Inspiring Stories about Saints, Martyrs and Heroes," says it's true that some of the accounts of martyrdom were "undoubtedly embellished" and that many of the persecution stories were "handed down in an atmosphere of confusion and pressure."

Still, being a Christian in the first century was a risky move – persecution was significant. Jesus and most of his apostles were executed, he says.

"To deny the history of the movement is a way of attacking the movement," Morgan says.

Some opposition to contemporary Christians is indeed evil, Morgan says. Christians are being killed today in places such as Nigeria and North Africa.

"Christians do not have a victim's mentality," Morgan says. "They take their stands, they know what they believe and they do good in this world. They are the ones who have established orphanages, hospitals and charitable institutions. For some reason, there's this animosity against them."


The Easter message itself is a story of martyrdom – Jesus, unjustly executed by the Romans. The idea that Christians are at war with demonic forces in the world is reflected throughout the New Testament, says Bryan Litfin, a theology professor at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

"If Jesus was just a soft moral teacher who taught us to love one another and petted little babies, the Romans
wouldn’t have crucified him,” Litfin says. “Jesus is a polarizing figure, then and today. The early Christians weren’t foisting a narrative out of the blue about being martyrs."

'Like the action heroes of the ancient world'

If the first Christians pictured themselves as waging war against the world, the martyrs were their version of the Navy SEALs. They were the elite Christians who inspired and united others of their faith.

There was a purpose behind spreading stories of persecution: Nothing brings a new group closer together than a common enemy, Moss says.

“The idea that you are persecuted forges a concrete identity,” Moss says. “It really solidifies your sense of group identity.”

The stories of Christian persecution were so popular that they spawned a market during the first centuries after the crucifixion. The places where martyrs were born and died became early tourist stops. Towns competed with one another to draw rich pilgrims seeking martyr memorabilia, Moss says.

“People would go and buy the equivalent of a T-shirt,” Moss says. “You’d have all these little combs with saints on them that people would buy, and lamps with saints on them. People would also buy fruit from trees that grew in the vicinity of martyrs’ graves. Of course, the prices were completely jacked up.”

Church leaders began to embellish and invent stories of martyrdom to inspire the faithful but also to settle theological feuds, Moss says. If, say, a bishop wanted to denounce a rivals’ theology, he spun a story in which a martyr denounced the same doctrine with his last breath, Moss says.

“Martyrs were like the action heroes of the ancient world,” Moss says. “It was like getting your favorite athlete endorsing your favorite brand of soda.”

But how often did Romans force Christians to endure torture or die for their faith? Christianity took roughly 300 years to conquer Rome. The emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 and gave Christians religious freedom. Christianity became the official religion of Rome by the end of the fourth century, scholars say.

For the first 300 years of the church, Christians were often ridiculed and viewed with contempt. But Roman leaders spent about “less than 10 years” out of the first 300 actually persecuting Christians, Moss says. There are only six reliable cases of Christian martyrdom before A.D. 250 out of “hundreds of stories,” including Perpetua’s, she says.

Many scholars have greeted Moss’ contention that Roman persecution of Christians was exaggerated with a shrug. They say it was common knowledge in the academic world.

“There weren’t that many Christians who were persecuted,” says Gail O’Day, dean of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity in North Carolina. “When you actually read the Roman historical records, the Christians just weren’t that important to them. Most Christians just got along with empire.”

When Roman persecution did occur, though, it was vicious. The Emperor Nero covered fully conscious Christians with wax and used them as human torches. Other Christians were skinned alive and covered with salt, while others were slowly roasted above a pit until they died.

Perpetua’s passion

One of the most famous martyrs was Perpetua.

She lived in Carthage in North Africa (modern-day Tunisia) and was arrested in March 203 with four others as they
Perpetua's father visited her in prison, begging her to think of him and renounce her faith. The Roman Emperor Septimius Severus had decreed that any new conversion to Christianity would result in death.

History remembers Perpetua because she kept a diary during her imprisonment. It's called "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity" (Felicity was a slave girl arrested with Perpetua). It's the oldest-sviving document from a Christian woman. The emotion in the diary is almost unbearable. Perpetua describes the pain of leaving her infant son, who she was still nursing. She describes a prison visit from her weeping father, who kissed her hands while trying to get her to renounce her faith.

A narrator picks up the story in the diary after Perpetua was sent to her death. He says in the diary that Perpetua's faith was so inspiring it caused the prison's warden, a man called Pudens, to convert. The narrator also describes Perpetua's death.

While she was imprisoned, Perpetua says God gave her visions to reassure her. After one, she wrote:

"I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil. But I knew that mine was the victory."

You can't discount the power of such stories, even if persecution "wasn't extremely common," says Litfin, the Moody Bible Institute professor.

Persecution was central to the rise of the early church, he says.

"How many people in your church would have to be pulled out and executed and tormented for it not to have a tremendous effect for many years on your memory and self-perception," Litfin says. "The early Christians are not foisting a narrative out of the blue about being matyrs."

**The early Christians' secret weapon**

Other scholars say it wasn't simply persecution that helped the church grow. Instead, they say, Christians had a secret weapon.

The martyrs may have gotten all the press, but it was ordinary Christians who got it done by the way they treated friends and strangers.

Life in ancient Rome was brutal and nasty, says Rodney Stark, author of "The Triumph of Christianity." Stark's well-regarded book gives one of the most detailed descriptions of the early church and ancient Rome.

Forget those antiseptic portraits of Roman cities you see in biblical moves such as "The Robe." Roman cities were overcrowded, raw sewage ran in the streets, people locked their doors at night for fear of being robbed and plagues were rampant. Soap had not yet been invented, Stark says.

"The stink of the cities in the summertime must have been astounding," Stark says. "You would have smelled a city miles before you got to it."

Christians stood out because they created a "miniature welfare state" to help the less fortunate, Stark says. They took in infant girls routinely left for dead by their parents. They risked their lives to tend the sick when plagues hit and others fled in terror. They gave positions of leadership to women when many women had no rights, and girls
as young as 12 were often married off to middle-aged men, he says.

Ordinary Romans might have thought Christians were odd but liked having them for neighbors, Stark says.

“If people had really been against them, I don’t think they would have grown like they did,” Stark says.

Christianity became so popular that when Rome did unleash one of its sporadic waves of persecutions, the empire couldn’t stop the church’s momentum, Stark says.

“If you knocked off a bishop, there were 20 guys waiting to be bishop,” Stark says.

Christian belonging, not blood, is what drew many people, another scholar says.

The Easter story of a risen savior wasn’t distinctive in Rome’s competitive religious marketplace. Dying for one’s beliefs wasn’t considered heroic; it was expected in the Roman world, says Selina O’Grady, author of "And Man Created God: A History of the World at the Time of Jesus."

The early church, though, was radically inclusive. First-century Rome was undergoing globalization. The peace of Rome had made travel easier. People left homes and tribal ties for Rome. The empire was filled with rootless and excluded people: immigrants, traders, slaves.

The Christian message offered guidelines for living in this strange new world, she says.

“Its universal message, its proclamation of equality, unconditional love, offered everyone in the Roman Empire a new family, a new community, and a way to live,” O’Grady says.

Roman rulers eventually found reasons to support the church, she says.

The Christian message of obeying earthly masters – “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s” – reduced the potential for social unrest, O’Grady says.

“Christianity told the poor and lowly that their status was noble and that there would be recompense in the afterlife,” O’Grady says. “It was a wonderful recipe for creating good, obedient Roman subjects.”

A turning point for the early church was the conversion of Constantine. Scholars still debate Constantine’s motive. By that time the empire was rife with division, and Christians had become a major political bloc with members in the highest reaches of Roman society, says Stark, the sociologist.

“Constantine was interested so much in church affairs for the rest of his life, but I don’t think there’s a reason to not think he was a sincere Christian,” Stark says. “But he was also an egomaniac and an emperor.”

The growth of Christianity was too complex to be attributed to any one factor – whether it be Constantine, persecution or Christianity’s message of compassion and inclusion, Stark says.

“I don’t think there was a primary reason,” he says. “It was a collection of things. It was all part of a package.”

Wrapped in that package, though, were the persecution stories of people such as Perpetua.

Today, churches have been named after Perpetua; films and graphic novels have been made about her life. She is considered a saint.

Her words still inspire. People still read her diary. There’s probably a Christian somewhere in the world now facing danger who is taking courage from Perpetua’s ordeal.
One passage in Perpetua’s diary is particularly luminous.

Perpetua stopped keeping her diary just before she was sent into the arena. No one knows for sure what she felt when she faced her moment of death, but she did write what she expected to see afterward.

She wrote that God gave her a reassuring vision while in prison. In the vision, she saw a great bronze ladder ascending to heaven. At the foot of the ladder was a great serpent surrounded by swords and knives.

Perpetua said she ignored the serpent and climbed the ladder. When she arrived at the top, she saw a great garden and a white-haired man in shepherd’s clothing milking a sheep. He was flanked by thousands of others Christians dressed in white.

“And he raised his head and beheld me and said to me: Welcome child.”

The man gave Perpetua curds from the milk of the sheep, and she said it tasted sweet.

She then wrote:

“And I took it with joined hands and ate it up: and all that stood around said, Amen.”

Centuries later, millions of people who look to Perpetua are still saying amen.