Inspirational Quote

God is attracted to weakness. He can't resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need Him. Our weakness, in fact, makes room for His power.

-Unknown

Prayer Petition & Praise

Norma Sahlin, wife of Monte Sahlin, passed away. Monte is a long time youth ministry advocate and researcher. Please remember to lift him and his family up in prayer.

Personnel Change

Japhet De Oliveira, current head chaplain of Andrews University has accepted a call to be the new Senior Pastor for the Boulder Colorado Seventh-day Adventist Church. He is leaving Andrews University after faithfully serving for over 7 years. More Info: Visit mcsda.org

Ministry Seekers

Oswald Walker: Is seeking personal, public, and media evangelism, community outreach, and Bible work Oswald is an xperienced Christian millennial radio host and youth
evangelism trainer. Oswald is also the founder of Profound Meditations (profoundmeditations.org). More Info: Contact Oswald Walker

**Ministry Opening**

**Korean Sahmyook University:** Looking for a non-Korean, English speaking, world church oriented theological/pastor/evangelist. Official General Conference Interdivision Employee. More Info: Contact Clifton Maberly

**Youth Worker:** Looking for a Task Force youth worker for next year (Approx. Sept - May) at the church in Kirkland Washington. Close to graduating from undergrad or a seminary student preferred. More Info: Contact Tim Peterson.

**Missionary in South Korea:** Seize the opportunity to do missions for youth & young adults while teaching English, and earning income. More Info: Contact Justin Yang.

**Christian Radio Station Office Manager:** Looking for an individual to work as task force worker in Twin Falls, Idaho; and to act as liaison with churches and represent the station. More Info: Contact Brian Yeager.

**Youth Pastor:** Looking for a Youth Pastor to lead and organize an effective youth program in Fresno, California. Bachelor's degree, theological education, and experience working with teens required. More Info: Contact Rod Turley.

**English Ministry Pastor:** The Dallas/Ft. Worth Korean SDA Church is looking for a bilingual (Korean/English) English Ministry pastor to lead a congregation of 30-40 members. More Info: Contact Michael Chong

**Youth and Bible Worker:** Student Missionary or task force worker needed for Urban evangelism in Benton Harbor, Michigan. More Info: Contact Pastor Taurus or James Murdoch

**Adventist Resources**

**2014 Forever Faithful International Camporee:** February 1st is the last day for the theme song contest. Enter to win 2 free tickets to the Camporee. More info: Contact cye.org

**Summer Camps:** There are great things happening at summer camps and thousands of young people make decisions for Christ every year. More Info: Visit adventistcamps.org
Free Resources for Sabbath School: Adventist Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Read Full Article by dropbox

The Living It APP is here: A new app for people involved in public high school ministries. Now you can keep the Living It resources you love with you at all the times, right there in your pocket! More Info: Visit Living It

Non-Denominational Resources

How will God fund your ministry? To help you identify options for funding your ministry’s vision, watch these free webinar recordings from ECCU and hear from the experts. More Info: Visit eccu.org

What if Starbucks marketed like a church? Watch the video or click this link.

Adventist National / International Events

Just Claim It 2014, February 12-15, Miami Florida More info: Visit jci4.org Sponsored by the NAD Youth Ministries Department

Adventist Campus Fellowship Institute 2014 May 16-25, Locations TBA More info: Visit Campus Catalyst

FFIC Oshkosh Walk-Around and orientation - everyone welcome, April 22, 2014. More Info: Contact Vern Byrd


Research and Surveys Provided by Institute of Church Ministries

Trends Among Growing Churches: Some reflections on the largest and fastest growing U.S. churches. Read Full Article by Christianity Today

Evangelicals Now Have More Competition for Hispanic Catholic Converts: Read Full Article by Christianity Today.

Why Do Conversions at Black Church Plants Peak After Three Years? First significant study of new African-American churches prompts discussion. Read Full Article by Christianity Today
Miscellaneous

**The State of the Church In America:** Hint: it's not dying. Read the [Full Article](https://christianitytoday.com) from Christianity Today.

**Wrongful Love:** Students sue when Christian school expels them for “lesbian behavior”. Read [Full Article](https://christianitytoday.com) from Christianity Today.

**My Cross to Wear:** Christian icons are back in fashion. Read [Full Article](https://christianitytoday.com) from Christianity Today.

**Grants For Youth Newsletter:** See all the available grants. [Read Full Article](https://christianitytoday.com)

**Humor and Jesus:** See what a massive survey of the U.S. Jews reveals about U.S. Christians. Read [Full Article](https://christianitytoday.com) from Christianity Today

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Spam
Not spam
Forget previous vote
The following article is located at: http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/september/sacrifice-is-trending.html

Trends Among Growing Churches: Some Reflections on the Fastest Growing and Largest U.S. Churches

Large and fast-growing churches make sacrifices for the kingdom of God.

Ed Stetzer  [ posted 9/24/2013 ]

Outreach Magazine just released their Outreach 100 issue for 2013. LifeWay Research does the research for this issue. I was particularly encouraged to see the list focus especially on fastest growing churches. You can subscribe to the magazine here. Here is my article with a bit of analysis of some of the fastest-growing churches in America.

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Each year at LifeWay Research, we work together with Outreach Magazine to create the Outreach 100 listings of the country’s Fastest-Growing and Largest Churches. On one hand, these lists are one of the most anticipated things we do each year. People seem to eagerly await the lists so they can learn from these churches about what God is doing to build his kingdom across the United States. On the other hand, there are those who complain about the lists. They seem to think this is a way of exalting "big churches" in an effort to make them look better than the churches that are not on the list, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Remember folks: facts are our friends.

I love to learn. I have spent a significant portion of my adult life in the classroom, either as a student or as a professor. These lists feed our hunger to learn as we evaluate the temperature of the churches we study in an effort to learn more about the ways God is working. I hope these lists encourage you and challenge you. I hope, like me, you read them and celebrate the ways God is working. I hope they challenge you to think through your own strategy to reach your community with the gospel.

On this year's lists, we noticed many of the same trends we've seen in the past. Among the recent trends, we continue to see multisite churches becoming more and more common. Among the 100 Largest churches, we find only 12 have a single campus (although one church did not report how many campuses it has). On the Fastest-Growing list, the number with a single campus is much greater—42, reflecting close to a split in the number of churches that do and do not have multiple campuses.

Some once believed this move to grow via multiple campuses was a temporary trend, but it appears to be a trend that's here to stay. While it was once the domain of only the largest churches, we now see smaller churches deploying the same methodology. What's interesting to me is the number of churches that utilize a multisite methodology and are also committed to church planting. The two are definitely not exclusive of one another. I think this may have something to do with the missionary heart of these churches.

SACRIFICE IS TRENDING

As we come to these lists each year, we look for three things: a characteristic trending across the church spectrum; something
that stands out as unique; and something that may fly a bit under the radar and yet is surprisingly influential among growing churches.

This year, as my team processed the data, we saw something that excites me and is thoroughly biblical. What's more, it's something in which every church can engage. Something in which every church must engage if it wants to reflect the character of God as a church body: self-sacrifice.

Growing churches are showing a great commitment to multiplying themselves, as we see in the discussion about multiple campuses, and this commitment to multiplication often creates a need for sacrifice. Sacrifice is inherent to the experience of every growing believer—and every growing church.

In another research project we conducted, the Transformational Discipleship Assessment, we learned that growing disciples share a number of common characteristics. Chief among them are: "Obeying God and denying self," "Serving God and others" and "Exercising faith." None of these should come as a surprise, but I think it's important to note that churches are made up of disciples. When these disciples are growing to be more like Jesus, the churches they are a part of reflect these same characteristics.

This growth in maturity is reflected in many of the churches that are also growing numerically at a rapid rate. This is a great thing! It's encouraging that many of the Fastest-Growing Churches are often churches willing to sacrifice. We want to share a couple of these specific stories with you this year.

THE STORY OF A CHURCH THAT MISSED THE LIST

The first story is of a church that didn't even make the list. While that may seem strange, you should know the only reason it didn't make the list is because it took an important, sacrificial step to advance God's kingdom. That step hurt it in the short term but is already leading to incredible kingdom growth. I'm confident you'll hear its name again in the future.

Beach Church, a United Methodist congregation in Jacksonville, Fla., was experiencing exciting growth as it attempted to reach its community. In 1997 it decided to add a contemporary service and saw immediate growth. It exceeded 1,000 in worship and watched as God did surprising things among within the church.

This growth continued for a few years, until it experienced a pastoral change in 2002. Jerry Sweat joined the church as the new senior pastor and recognized the church wasn't effectively reaching the 18- to 30-year-olds living near the church. In an effort to reach out to them, the leadership team added an additional service, one that would meet at 11:22 each Sunday morning. It named the new service 1122.

Originally, the church intended for this new service to be led by a rotation of preachers from its staff. It soon realized its youth pastor, Joby Martin, was uniquely gifted for this role, and he began to assume primary leadership for the new service; it exploded with growth. While Beach Church was already a good-sized church, the new service attendance outnumbered the church's combined attendance at other services.

Through a series of events, the leadership contemplated how to handle space issues, scheduling issues, staff issues and so on. After much prayer and counsel from their denominational leaders, the leadership of Beach Church decided to relaunch its church while simultaneously launching the 1122 service as an entirely separate congregation.

It's important to understand this was not a church split. It was a selfless, sacrificial decision to see the kingdom grow. Pastor Jerry Sweat describes it this way:

"This was all about ... multiplying the mission of reaching people for Christ and raising up disciples. And then when everything began to shake at the joints and when everything seemed to be falling apart, always reach out ... to the mission. That was our true north in the whole thing."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

This intentional decision, of course, brings up many questions. How are the separate churches going to be financed? Where will...
they meet? Which congregation will the various church members decide to join? How will the staff be directed? Will new staff be required? We could go on and on. While these questions can seem a bit overwhelming, Beach Church and the 1122 service, which became The Church of Eleven22, walked through the process deliberately and prayerfully.

They decided they would add the staff they needed during the transition. For almost a year, they operated with two separate staffs. They worked together on a capital campaign, raising substantial dollars. This combined capital effort helped renovate new space for The Church of Eleven22 and helped pay off debt for Beach Church. It also created resources to help fund unexpected expenses during the transition.

Ryan Stone, who serves as the lead ministry pastor at The Church of Eleven22 under Pastor Joby Martin’s leadership, said they felt like they were accidental church planters, responding to God's movement.

It’s incredibly encouraging to see Beach Church nurture this kind of kingdom growth, even though the church knew that giving away the 1122 service would potentially mean it would see a decrease in attendance and financial support. This is the kind of sacrifice a maturing Christian embraces.

WHAT HAPPENED?

After almost a year of preparation, Beach Church and The Church of Eleven22 relaunched and launched, respectively, on the same Sunday. Prior to their launch Sunday, they typically averaged around 2,200 people, combined. On their launch Sunday, however, they saw 4,200 people attend their services.

In the weeks following, Beach Church did see a substantial decrease in its total numbers. Its sacrifice was real. And yet, in response to its faithfulness, in the year since the relaunch, it’s seen a 37 percent increase in its worship attendance.

The Church of Eleven22, meanwhile, continues to see God do amazing things. On its launch Sunday, attendance topped 3,000, and on Easter Sunday of this year, its first Easter as a church, it saw well more than 5,000 people in attendance.

There is one additional aspect of sacrifice you should know about, though, and that is the denominational sacrifice involved. The Church of Eleven22 was launched out of Beach Church, a United Methodist congregation, but The Church of Eleven22 is not a Methodist congregation. It is a nondenominational congregation that also affiliates with Acts 29 (a church planting network which has some different theological expressions).

In a remarkable display of partnership, these churches served together to see the kingdom grow, even when they had to sacrifice to do so, and God is honoring their faithfulness. I love what Pastor Jerry Sweat had to say about this faithfulness:

"This was always a kingdom advancement. We continued to say over and over again that kingdom advancement was not about an address, it wasn't about a denomination—it was about a movement."

SACRIFICING TO DEVELOP OTHERS

Another great example of sacrificial leadership is seen among churches intentionally giving away their resources and leaders for the sake of the church. Churches like this are raising up leaders, training them and then deploying them, rather than keeping them in house. They also are sacrificially giving away resources that are precious to them, simply because they want to see the kingdom of God grow. Element Church (No. 30, Fastest-Growing), outside of St. Louis, Mo., is a church working diligently to do just that.

Element Church was planted in Wentzville, a suburb on the west side of St. Louis. Erik Lawson, who is its lead pastor, told us two stories that struck us as great examples of selfless, sacrificial leadership that are illustrative of the kind of sacrifice we see occurring across the nation in effective churches.

In the early stages of Element Church, long before it became the church it is today, it was established but still small. Lawson heard about a struggling church planter in the area. Believing that God was encouraging him to help the other pastor, Lawson invited him to lunch. In the vehicle on the way to meet with the other pastor, Lawson believes the Lord called him to give financially to this neighboring church plant. The amount he was called to give from Element Church to this area church plant was no small amount.
It was an amount that, at the time, Element could have used, being a church plant itself. However, in response to the prompting of God's Spirit, Element gladly blessed the other congregation, desiring to be obedient to God and to see the kingdom grow.

Another example of this kind of selfless leadership comes from Element Church's desire to see staff go beyond their church to start new churches and ministries, and Element's willingness to encourage them to that end. Rather than keeping people, resources and giftedness to itself, Element looks to grow the kingdom by deploying these things wherever there is need.

"There are senior pastors who are threatened by staff who feel called to go out and plant," Lawson says. "There is [often] an environment where you better not tell your pastor, or you are going to need an attorney because you're going to get fired. It's a very unhealthy paradigm.

"2 Samuel 18:15 says, Absalom had no sons, so he had to build a monument to himself. The role of the pastor is to reproduce spiritual sons in the Lord. They are our ministry," Lawson says. "My first ministry is my staff, and my ministry is to help equip them for the purpose that God has for them. And if some of them are called to go out and plant a church, then how much better is it for me to be a part of that process, to be a spiritual influence in their life, and see that legacy, something that can outlive me?"

This kind of selfless, sacrificial behavior is the kind the church calls for from her members, and it is the kind she must model if the church is going to grow, if Jesus is going to be honored and if those who do not know Jesus are going to see their lives transformed.

**CHURCH GROWTH, KINGDOM GROWTH**

Pastor Stovall Weems and Celebration Church, in Jacksonville, Fla., are familiar names to many people. Celebration Church has found a place on both the Largest list (No. 37) and the Fastest-Growing list. In fact, this year it is recognized as the fourth Fastest-Growing church in America. For some, it might seem surprising that a church this large, and a church growing as rapidly as Celebration is, is also committed to sacrificially distributing its time and people to plant other churches. And yet it is aggressively doing so. For many, it would seem to require funny math to combine aggressively distributing funds and personnel to plant other churches, with rapid growth in the same church, and yet Celebration is another example, in a long line of examples, showing that sacrifice to multiply churches often goes hand in hand with growth in the church doing the sacrificing.

Before Weems started Celebration Church, he had a desire to serve overseas as a missionary and church planter. Instead, God had other plans, and he found himself in Jacksonville, Fla., planting Celebration Church. The missionary mindset that once drove him to consider overseas church planting was still heavily influential in his own life as he planted Celebration.

"I realized that through planting Celebration I could plant so many more mission-minded churches, and we could have a far greater impact planting a church here in America that would be a mission-minded church that would plant other mission-minded churches," Weems says.

This commitment to multiplication, not just growth, continues to drive Celebration today. In fact, Weems is not only committed to planting other churches, but he is also committed to sending members of Celebration out with each church it plants. He wants Celebration to be a missionary sending church.

"Any launch we do, people from our church always go with them," says Weems. "We had several people go to D.C. to be part of the launch team. We consider it part of God's blessing.

"We believe if we keep sending, God will keep bringing, so sending is a big part of our church culture. Whether that is through missions or a campus or a church plant, we want to send," adds Weems. "We want to extend the kingdom through church planting, which we are very passionate about."

I am convinced this kind of missionary spirit, this apostolic impulse, is what allows Celebration Church to not only be a fast-growing church itself, but to be a multiplying church as it works to expand not just a church, but God's kingdom.

One final thing that intrigues me about the sacrificial spirit of Weems and Celebration Church is their desire to plant in partnership with others, rather than planting alone. I have written before that I believe denominations and networks are a good thing. When
they are functioning well, they can be a great tool God uses to grow his kingdom.

Weems agrees with that. He currently serves on the leadership council for the Association of Related Churches (ARC), a network that is planting churches all over the world. Of his commitment to plant through ARC, as opposed to going it alone, he says, "We have planted several churches; besides our own campuses and international churches, we do all of our church planting through ARC. We are able to do far more in partnership with other churches, which ARC allows us to do."

I think more churches need this kind of partnering and sacrificial spirit, and I am convinced they are key ingredients to Celebration Church's own church growth, as well as its amazing investment in kingdom growth.

The word of God reminds us that the kingdom of God will advance. There is no stopping it. God will be victorious, and his bride, the church, will be glorious. We can either be a part of that or not. As I look across the landscape of contemporary evangelicalism in the United States, I am encouraged to see churches that take seriously God’s call to be like Jesus and that are committed to advancing the gospel, even when it hurts. May we see this trend continue to grow.
Evangelicals Now Have More Competition for Hispanic Catholic Converts

Hispanic Values Survey adds new wrinkle to research on Latino religious life in America.


Public Religion Research Institute

A new survey sheds more light on the ongoing trend of many Hispanic Catholics becoming evangelicals in America. Seems the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated are now an equal destination.

Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) recently surveyed more than 1,500 Hispanic American adults on their political and religious affiliations and values. One conclusion:

Compared to their childhood religious affiliations, Hispanics are significantly less Catholic but are in equal measure becoming more evangelical Protestant and more religiously unaffiliated.

Catholic affiliation has dropped by 16 percentage points (from 69 percent in childhood to 53 percent today). Evangelical Protestant affiliation has increased by six percentage points (from seven percent in childhood to 13 percent today), while the percentage of those claiming no religious affiliation has increased by seven percentage points (from five percent in childhood to 12 percent today).

"The [media and academic] narrative has often emphasized Catholics converting to evangelical or charismatic forms of Protestantism," notes PRRI. "The Hispanic Values Survey reveals that this is only half of the story."

PRRI, which released the report today at the annual conference of the Religion Newswriters Association, puts the current breakdown among U.S. Latinos as still majority Catholic (53%), but now one-quarter Protestant (25%) and one-tenth religiously unaffiliated (12%). Protestants are "nearly evenly divided" between evangelical (13%) and mainline (12%) Christians.

Examining attitudes among Hispanic evangelicals (among other religious affiliations), PRRI asked on which topics people believe they can disagree with church teachings and still be considered a good Christian.

More than half of Latino evangelicals (59%) say this regarding contraception, but only 29 percent say this regarding abortion, and only 24 percent say this regarding homosexuality. By comparison, among all American Latinos, 66 percent believe this regarding contraception, 39 percent regarding abortion, and 47 percent regarding homosexuality.

PRRI also found that Hispanic American evangelicals are roughly split between identifying most closely with Republicans (43%) and Democrats (49%), and twice as many have a favorable view of Pope Francis (51%) than of the Catholic Church (26%).

In February, Gallup found significant differences not only in religiosity between Latino Protestants and Catholics in the United States, but in how much each group is losing adherents to the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated. CT reported the details, but in
short: The rise of religious "nones" is affecting Hispanic Catholics much more than Hispanic Protestants.

CT has regularly reported on Latinos, including previous research on Hispanic religiosity, recent evangelical efforts to better understand Hispanics, and whether an immigration slowdown will prompt a bilingual ministry bust.

CT also previously noted the growing "intensity gap" between American Catholics and Protestants.
First significant study of new African-American churches prompts discussion.

Kate Tracy  [ posted 9/05/2013 ]

Courtesy of LifeWay Research

The findings of one of the most thorough studies of African-American church planting to date are being shared publicly by its private sponsors.

The new study by LifeWay Research, which surveyed 290 African American church planters from more than 20 denominations, found that most black church plants start small (average Sunday worship attendance: 37) but grow steadily and become financially self-sufficient within four to six years.

What doesn't keep growing: the number of "new commitments to Christ," which peak in the third year of a church's existence. Two standout sources of conversions: door-to-door evangelism (75%) and offering a class for new members (68%).

More than half of surveyed pastors started their churches before 2007, and only 6 percent have had to close their church. The three main predictors of success, according to the survey: delegating leadership tasks to volunteers; training new members in leadership skills; and having a plan of personal spiritual formation for the church planter.

"This research has described in detail African American church planting today," said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research. "More importantly, this research has begun productive conversations among church planting leaders across the U.S. about how best to train and equip new African American church plants."

Stetzer offers a long list of in-depth results on his CT blog, as well as an explanation from study advisor Carl Ellis on the "increased efforts at church planting" by African American pastors.

Baptist Press also offers more details on the study, which was sponsored by the Presbyterian Church in America’s Mission to North America, the Assemblies of God, the United Methodist Church's Path 1, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Southern Baptists of Texas, the Foursquare Church, and the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board.
The church is not dying.

Yes, the church in the West—the United States included—is in transition right now. But transitioning is not the same as dying, particularly if you hold the belief that Christianity is represented by people who live for Christ, not check "Christian" on a survey form.

While I believe we need to understand reality inside our ranks, I don't believe the situation is quite as dire as many are making it out to be. Actually, no serious researcher believes Christianity in America is dying. Not one.

Instead, I believe this current cultural shift is bringing clarity that will assist in defining who we are as Christians, and that is a good thing in some ways.

I have talked about this before, but I think it bears repeating, if for no other reason than to encourage us in our shared mission once again.

In the American context, 2009 was a turning point in regards to the perception of Christianity's health in the United States. That year, the results of the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) caused quite a stir. In its wake were several articles in prominent national publications touting the coming demise of Christianity in America. And Americans bought in.

The ARIS results showed the percentage of self-identified Christians had fallen 10 percentage points, from 86 to 76, since 1990. It also showed that the "Nones"—those who claim no religious affiliation—rose from 8 to 15 percent in the same time period.

Following the release of the results, Newsweek ran a cover story entitled "The End of Christian America." Earlier the same year, Michael Spencer—the Internet Monk—penned "My Prediction: The Coming Evangelical Collapse" that was picked up by the Christian Science Monitor. The settled narrative became that Christianity was in precipitous decline. The sentiment has continued to grow ever since.

An October 2012 Pew Research Study added fuel to the fire, stating that the "Nones" had increased more than five percent in the previous five years alone. A cursory look at the numbers may very well lead people to frightening conclusions, and the numbers are only going to get worse when you look at people who call themselves Christians.

That being said, the sky is not falling. Christians are not leaving the faith in droves, even though some people are screaming that loudly. In many cases, people who once called themselves Christians are simply no longer doing that. That is a different issue, which I explained further in my USA Today column last year.

Most believers likely realize that though 86 percent of Americans checked the "Christian" box on a survey in 1990, the population was not made up of that many genuine followers of Jesus. For many, the idea of being Christian and being American are one-in-
People who once called themselves Christians are simply no longer doing that.

Around 75 percent of Americans call themselves Christians—they "self-identify" as Christians, regardless of how others might define them. I find it helpful to separate those who profess Christianity into three categories: cultural, congregational and convictional.

Now, these are NOT exact numbers, but broad categories. The numbers are different from region to region, but as a whole, the categories might be helpful.

The first category—Cultural Christians—is made up of people who believe themselves to be Christians simply because their culture tells them they are. They are Christian by heritage. They may have religious roots in their family or may come from a people group tied to a certain religion, e.g., Southern Evangelicals or Irish Catholics. Inside the church, we would say they are Christians in name only. They are not practicing a vibrant faith. This group makes up around one-third of the 75 percent who self-identify as Christians—or about a quarter of all Americans.

The second category—Congregational Christians—is similar to the first group, except these individuals at least have some connection to congregational life. They have a "home church" they grew up in and perhaps where they were married. They might even visit occasionally. Here again though, we would say that these people are not practicing any sort of real, vibrant faith. They are attendees. This group makes up another third of the 75 percent—or about a quarter of all Americans.

The final group—Convictional Christians—is made up of people who are actually living according to their faith. These are the people who would say that they have met Jesus, He changed their lives, and since that time their lives have been increasingly oriented around their faith in Him. Convictional Christians make up the final third of the 75 percent—or about a quarter of all Americans.

Interestingly, since 1972 and according to the General Social Survey, the percentage of the final type of Christian in the U.S. population has remained generally stable. On the other hand, mainline Protestantism has declined, but other areas within evangelicalism have grown slightly to offset that loss.

As I see it, the numbers of people who those of us in the church would say are actually committed Christians—those who are practicing a vibrant faith—are not dying off. The Church is not dying. It is just being more clearly defined.

The "Nones" category is growing quickly, but the change is coming by way of Cultural and Congregational Christians who no longer feel the societal pressure to be "Christian." They feel comfortable freeing themselves from a label that was not true of them in the first place. Convictional Christians are not leaving the faith; the "squishy middle," as I like to call it, is simply being flattened.

As Christians find themselves more and more on the margins in American society, people are beginning to count the cost. While it used to serve Americans well to carry the label "Christian" in most circumstances (think about running for public office, for instance), it can actually be polarizing or considered intolerant now. So for those who really don't have any skin in the game, shedding the label makes sense.

As the trend continues, we will see the "Nones" continue to grow and the church lose more of its traditional cultural influence. Christians will likely lose the culture wars, leading to difficult times ahead for us. But we do not need to lose hope. This is not cause for despair. It is a time to regroup and re-engage.

Christianity may be losing its top-down political and cultural influence, but Jesus spoke of His followers making an impact in a very different manner. He taught that God's kingdom was subversive and underground. He used examples like yeast, which changes things from the inside, and mustard seeds, which are small and must be planted in order to grow up and out.

As the distinctions between Christians and an ever-growing post-Christian culture emerge, we will have to set aside any nominal belief systems and become active agents of God's Kingdom. The answer is not found in waging cultural wars incessantly, or in
making a theological shift to the left to pacify a culture offended by the gospel. The answer is in all of God’s people, changed by
the power of the gospel and propelled by love, moving into the mission field as agents of gospel transformation.

This is no time to panic or exaggerate the situation. As I said in Lost and Found, in the midst of a hysterical panic about 94 percent
of evangelical young adults leaving church, “Crises sell books but usually don't fix problems.” (And, it is nowhere near 94 percent.)

Yes, we need a serious dose of what I write in Christianity Today a few years ago: Curing Christians Stats Abuse.

Facts are our friends, and the facts do point to a cultural change. And, in the midst of that cultural change we do see that
American looks more like a mission field. However, what we need is a mobilized—rather than demoralized—mission force.

Bad stats and hyperbole do just that—demoralize God's people.

Today, we need a mobilized mission force in the midst of this mission field. So, it’s time to time to work for the sake of the gospel,
and to live for the cause of the gospel, not run around proclaiming the sky is falling.
Wrongful Love

Students sue when Christian school expels them for 'lesbian behavior.'

Brad A. Greenberg [ posted 9/01/2006 ]

A pending civil rights lawsuit in California carries national implications about whether religious schools have rights and protections that exceed those of other private schools. The case against a small Lutheran high school that expelled two students for alleged "lesbian behavior" also has highlighted the decision by some Christian schools to quell unchristian behavior—such as homosexuality—by removing the offending students.

The school's attorney, John McKay, said the girls exhibited "lesbian behavior" in photos and written messages on MySpace.com. After interviewing them, principal Greg Bork determined "they were in love with each other," McKay said.

Christopher Hayes, the students' attorney, is asking the courts to award unspecified damages and to reinstate the girls. He told CT they were "mugging for the camera" and that no inappropriate conduct was seen or reported. "Whether they were in a relationship is irrelevant," he said.

Officials at California Lutheran High School (CLHS), a Riverside County school of about 140, determined the girls' relationship violated the school's code of conduct, which does not explicitly mention homosexuality. The school is run by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which considers homosexuality a sin. McKay told CT the girls received the same punishment that would be given to a heterosexual couple having premarital sex.

"It's a religious institution, and it was concluded that anybody engaged in non-Christian conduct would be expelled," McKay said. "By keeping them there, they would have condoned the conduct the girls were engaged in, and it would have been a bad influence on the other students."

The CLHS case is not unique, especially as teens face sexual pressures at younger ages. But some schools draw the line differently. Within weeks of the CLHS controversy last fall, Ontario Christian School—less than an hour's drive away—expelled a student because her mother is gay.

Religious schools often argue that their ...

This article is currently available to CT subscribers only.

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Wrongful Love
Students sue when Christian school expels them for 'lesbian behavior.'

Brad A. Greenberg [ posted 9/01/2006 ]

A pending civil rights lawsuit in California carries national implications about whether religious schools have rights and protections that exceed those of other private schools. The case against a small Lutheran high school that expelled two students for alleged "lesbian behavior" also has highlighted the decision by some Christian schools to quell unchristian behavior—such as homosexuality—by removing the offending students.

The school's attorney, John McKay, said the girls exhibited "lesbian behavior" in photos and written messages on MySpace.com. After interviewing them, principal Greg Bork determined "they were in love with each other," McKay said.

Christopher Hayes, the students' attorney, is asking the courts to award unspecified damages and to reinstate the girls. He told CT they were "mugging for the camera" and that no inappropriate conduct was seen or reported. "Whether they were in a relationship is irrelevant," he said.

Officials at California Lutheran High School (CLHS), a Riverside County school of about 140, determined the girls' relationship violated the school's code of conduct, which does not explicitly mention homosexuality. The school is run by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which considers homosexuality a sin. McKay told CT the girls received the same punishment that would be given to a heterosexual couple having premarital sex.

"It's a religious institution, and it was concluded that anybody engaged in non-Christian conduct would be expelled," McKay said. "By keeping them there, they would have condoned the conduct the girls were engaged in, and it would have been a bad influence on the other students."

The CLHS case is not unique, especially as teens face sexual pressures at younger ages. But some schools draw the line differently. Within weeks of the CLHS controversy last fall, Ontario Christian School—less than an hour's drive away—expelled a student because her mother is gay.

Religious schools often argue that their ...
Christian icons are back in fashion... and more subversive than ever.

Whitney Bauck, guest writer  [ posted 8/16/2013 ]

Photo by Kate Shellnutt

Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, and Pope Francis share very little wardrobe-wise, apart from one very significant, very trendy item: the cross.

The cross has been frequently recycled as a fashion element since becoming a staple of the rock glam and punk looks of the '80s. Over the past few decades, the Christian symbol has shown up on countless celebrities and in the collections of respected designers like Versace and Dolce and Gabbana—often with little apparent regard for the symbol's religious import.

Despite any frustration I may feel as a Christian over the commodification of the cross, I find fashion's tendency to pull from religious imagery unsurprising and even inevitable. Like most creatives, fashion designers draw inspiration from wherever they can find it, and the church's rich history of symbolism and aesthetic excellence make it a prime source. Plus, most nominal Christians or unbelievers wearing the cross often do so without ill intent—adopting the symbols into their style for aesthetic or even sentimental reasons.

Recently, the cross's place in fashion has shifted. Influential Internet style stars wear Christian imagery with attitude. Their stylistic use of the cross transcends indifference, landing squarely in the territory of irony or even mockery. Juxtaposing a cross-emblazoned cardigan with a "Cute as F#%K" T-shirt or wearing a cross ring while flipping off the camera, for example, results in plenty of Internet hype from fashion-lovers on sites like Tumblr, Lookbook.nu, and We Heart It.

Creative and cutting-edge, fashion bloggers love to break the rules and subvert convention. Blatant disrespect for the cross, which used to mostly reside in small subcultures like the goth music scene, increasingly appears in their style mashups. Since these online trendsetters wield real influence in an industry that turns to street style for inspiration, even mainstream retailers have begun to follow their leads.

As a result, Christian imagery has begun showing up on the clothing of well-established fashion retailers like Topshop. And it's not just crosses anymore, either. Religious imagery has proliferated in every stratum of the fashion hierarchy. Nordstrom carries a pair of leggings adorned with stained-glass iconography. The religious paintings of Hieronymus Bosch inspired a recent designer collection by Carven. (And if Carven's dress depicting the Garden of Eden isn't edgy enough for you, what about leggings showing off Creation or a swimsuit with hell imagery?)

Why did fashion's street style elites start using Christian symbols with such aggression? Las Vegas-based fashion blogger Bebe Zeva told me in an e-mail, "Teenagers and young adults prided themselves in the cross because it seemed disrespectful to take it out of context. Disrespecting religion and God has been an extremely chic idea for most of the digital age... Irony is at the core of most trends post-1980."

Zeva, age 20, started wearing the cross in 2010 because she viewed it as "a symbol of allegiance to a 'cool' hedonistic subculture, not of allegiance to the Christian religion." In posts documenting her outfits, Zeva shows off a cross sweater studded with spikes.
and pairs a chain full of dangling crosses with a rocker-skeleton tee.

While the average shopper at Forever 21 may not view that cross-print blouse as a sign of "cool hedonism," the influential attitudes of Zeva and her peers nonetheless present a troubling question for Christian shoppers: How do we respond to this commodification of our faith's most central symbol?

We start by considering how we wear, display, and treat Christian imagery ourselves. The fact that I spend my Sundays in church doesn't necessarily mean I'm wearing the cross any less flippantly than a nonbeliever who does so because it's trendy. If the proper use of images was serious enough to spark the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy, isn't it also important enough to make me consider the appropriateness of leggings that stretch the Madonna's face over my rear?

We might also need to examine the other symbols tucked into our own closets and wardrobes. Bebe Zeva pointed out that "the same companies that appropriated Native American motifs... are now appropriating Christian icons."

Urban Outfitters was sued last year by the Navajo Nation for marketing products like the "Navajo Hipster Panty." American Indian Sasha Houston Brown wrote to Urban Outfitters' CEO, "There is nothing honorable or historically appreciative in selling [such] items," adding that they "make a mockery of our identity and unique cultures." If Christians want to see our own symbols treated with respect, we must consider the difference between cultural appreciation and appropriation in our own styles.

Ultimately, Christians should enjoy and appreciate our freedom to wear the cross, even if it means sharing that freedom with unbelievers. Recent legal battles have been fought in the UK by employees denied the right to wear the cross in their workplaces. These lawsuits should serve as a reminder that the liberty to visibly express one's belief is indeed a privilege—and one that has been denied to countless Christians throughout the ages.

The appreciation of this fact, combined with the awareness that the "coolness" of disrespectful fashion will likely fade as quickly as most trends do, ought to make any believer think twice before tucking their crucifix away.

As author Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach noted, "So soon as a fashion is universal, it is out of date." Let's give thanks that the fickle status of the cross as a fashion icon will never change the relevance of the incredible act of redemption that took place on that cross 2,000 years ago.

Whitney Bauck is a freelance writer and photographer who blogs regularly about the intersection of fashion and faith at Unwrinkling.com. She currently studies photography in the Chicago area, but still considers Manila, Philippines her hometown.

Questions on Jesus and Jewish affinity produce surprising results, Pew Research finds.

Jeremy Weber  [ posted 10/03/2013 ]

Pew Research Center

A massive new study on American Jews reveals some interesting tidbits about how today's Jewish community views Jesus, and how American Christians view Jewish identity and Israel.

Among many findings, Pew Research asked American Jewish adults, "What is compatible with being Jewish?" They found that the majority believe a person can be Jewish even if he or she works on the Sabbath (94%), is strongly critical of Israel (89%), or does not believe in God (68%).

In stark contrast: "Believing in Jesus, however, is enough to place one beyond the pale," notes Pew. Only 34 percent say that believing Jesus was the Messiah is compatible with being Jewish. (Jews of no religion (47%) are more likely than Jews by religion (30%) to say this, as are those with a high school diploma or less (48%) vs. college graduates (28%).)

However, the fact that 1 out of 3 American Jews today do see belief in Jesus as compatible with being Jewish (including 35 percent of Ultra-Orthodox Jews) may seem surprisingly high for those who follow the fortunes of Messianic Jews. For example, a new multi-million dollar Messianic center (previously profiled by CT) that recently opened in an Orthodox Brooklyn neighborhood has drawn much scrutiny. (Among top concerns told to the Jerusalem-based Times of Israel: "They will make inroads because they are offering free services to the community and unconditional love.")

Additionally, when Pew Research asked "What does being Jewish mean in America today?", majorities say remembering the Holocaust (73%) and leading an ethical life (69%) is essential to their Jewish identity. Of interest: More than twice as many say "having a good sense of humor" (42%) is essential than "observing Jewish law" (19%).

On the subject of Israel, researchers found that American evangelicals feel more strongly than American Jews on several topics. For example, "Twice as many white evangelical Protestants as Jews say that Israel was given to the Jewish people by God (82% vs. 40%)," notes the Fact Tank blog.

Pew Research also examined the "interesting groups" of Americans of Jewish background who are no longer Jewish, as well as Americans who are not Jewish by religion or heritage yet have a self-proclaimed Jewish affinity.

The majority of both groups are currently Christians: 70 percent of Americans of Jewish background, and 64 percent of Americans of Jewish affinity. Messianics remain quite small: 2 percent of those of Jewish background, and 3 percent of those of Jewish affinity.

Yet, to go back to the "Jesus question," Pew Research found:

The majority of people of Jewish background (67%) and people with a Jewish affinity (72%) say that someone can be
Jewish even if they believe Jesus was the messiah. By comparison, three-in-ten Jews by religion (30%) and about half of Jews of no religion (47%) believe this.

Nearly 1 out of 3 Americans of Jewish affinity (31%) "say they are Jewish because Jesus was Jewish." By contrast, nearly 1 out of 10 Americans of Jewish background (8%) say the same.

More than half of Americans of Jewish background (58%) say they were raised as Christians. Nearly nine-in-ten of Americans of Jewish affinity (86%) say the same.

Americans of Jewish background and Jewish affinity also have higher levels of religiosity. Notes Pew:

Roughly six-in-ten respondents with a Jewish affinity (62%) and of Jewish background (58%) say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 31% of Jews by religion and just 8% of Jews of no religion. Those of Jewish background and Jewish affinity also are far more likely to say they are absolutely sure God exists (72% and 81%, respectively) as compared with both Jews by religion (39%) and Jews of no religion (18%).