Inspirational Quotes
"We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations."
- Chuck Swindoll

So do not fear for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
- Isaiah 41:10

Prayer - Petition - Praise
**Pray for this summer** Texas NAD Ministerial Meetings and the General Conference Session. [Learn more...](#)

**Pray for the AACP Committee** as they meet to pray and discuss LGBT topics that relate to summer camp ministry.

**Pray for the Christians** who are being threatened and killed for their faith around the world. [Learn more...](#)
**Ministry Openings**

Atlantic Union Youth Director: For more information call (978) 368-8333

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**Ministry Movement**

Upper Columbia Conference: Wayne Hicks is retiring after serving as conference Pathfinder Director for 35 years. Wayne's leadership will be missed!

South Central Conference: Lola Moore was recently elected as the director for the Young Adult Ministries. Learn more...

Arkansas-Louisiana Conference: Jeff Villegas was recently chosen as the new Youth and Young Adult Ministries director.

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**Adventist Resources**

New Pathfinder Honor: God's messenger is an honor that introduces pathfinders to the basic facts of the life of Ellen G. White. This honor can be completed by downloading the free app in the app store or google play. For more information go to www.whiteestate.org or www.honor.ellenwhite.org

New Pitcairn App: This app launched by the E.G.White Estate tests players' knowledge of White's life. Make 200 points in 7 minute or less and earn the Pathfinder "God's Messenger" honor. Learn More...

NAD Young Adult Life: This is the official young adult ministry movement in the NAD. The new website will be a communication center for all young adult ministry teams in the NAD. Read More...

Kids Ministry Center Newsletter: This leadership newsletter provides excellent information for Children's Ministry leaders at the local church. Sponsored by NAD/LUC/CYE Read
Pathfinder/Youth Legacy Movement: The Youth-Pathfinder Discovery Learning Center Ministry is an NAD and GC supported ministry that has three new initiatives that will offer worldwide youth organization and Pathfinder Directors opportunities to become involved in the “pass the torch and build your legacy now” movement. Learn more...

Non-Denominational Resources
Shaping Effective Ministry Leaders: The Equipping Institute has developed courses to provide ministry leaders with support to conquer challenges they may face. For the latest courses offered visit www.group.com/equipping

Pastor’s Conference: Join pastors, elders, and ministry staff for a conference at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois. This event will be held May 18-21, 2015. Learn more...

Microphone App: Waiting for a microphone at a meeting will soon be a thing of the past. The app Crowd Mics sends a voice from a cell phone to the sound system in the room. Attendees can download the free app and connect to a Wi-Fi network. The system will also allow event organizers to survey participants and ask questions. Learn more...

World’s Largest Bible Class: According to Christianity Today’s April issue, more than 22,000 students from 180 countries took Harvard professor Laura Nasrallah’s class on the apostle Paul’s New Testament letters, using a free massive open online course (MOOC).

Adventist National / International Events
Cruise With A Mission 2015: Recharge your Young Adult spiritual
batteries, and share a heart for service during this annual meaningful adventure. The ship sails from Seattle, Washington, July 26-August 2, 2015. More info. at www.cruisewithamission.org or www.cye.org. Sponsored by CYE/NAD Education Department. Contact Brad Hotelling hotelling@andrews.edu

**Children’s Leadership Conference (CLC):** Come join in some of the best Adventist speakers in Children’s Ministry April 17-19, 2015 at Andrews University. Sponsored by NAD/LUC/CYE. [Learn more...](#)

**CALLED:** NAD Pastors Kids Congress will be held in conjunction with the NAD Pastors “Called” convention, June 28-July 1, 2015 in Austin. Sponsored by the NAD Youth Ministries Department. (301) 680-6000 [Learn more...](#)

**IMPACT San Antonio:** Join young adults from around the world in a global experience for 10 days during the General Conference session July 2-11, 2015 at the San Antonio, Marriott River Center. [Learn more...](#)

**West Point 2015:** Adventist West Point for evangelism is a premier training event focusing on innovative evangelism strategies and training for church growth. This event will take place April 5-8, 2015, in San Diego, California. More info. (805) 413-7254 or visit www.AdventistWestPoint.org. Sponsored by the Pacific Union Conference.

**SONscreen Film Festival:** This event will be held at La Sierra University, April 2-4, 2015. Attendees will have the chance to view some of the best films submitted by talented, primarily-Adventist film creators. Sponsored by the NAD Communications Department. [Learn more...](#)

**My Church Public Campus Ministry Involvement/Retention Summit** will be held at Mohawk College, in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada May 28-30, 2015. Sponsored by ACF Public Campus Ministries of the NAD and Ontario Conference Youth. [Learn more...](#)
General Youth Conference (GYC) 2015 “Called, Chosen, Faithful” will be in Louisville, Kentucky, on December 30, 2015 - January 3, 2016. Learn more...

Pathfinder Camporees
August 12-17, 2019 Chosen International Camporee Ticket Sales: For more information www.camporee.org or call 269-471-8380 or www.cyc.org The first 2,500 tickets sold will receive a special souvenir lapel pin and backstage tour pass. Deadline for this offer is December 31, 2015.


Inter-European Division Camporee: This camporee will be August 3-9, 2015 in Switzerland. Learn More...

Research and Surveys
2015 State of Atheism: According to recent studies done by Barna Group there are five demographic shifts among skeptics that have changed in the past two decades. Learn more...

What Influences Americans: In a survey done by Barna Group to see what are the primary influences of self-identity in Americans, the primary factor with 62% of votes was family influence. Read more...

How Islam and Christianity Will Change: In a recent article Pew Research examines the influence of births vs. conversions, and presents the first formal demographic projections using data on age, migration, religious switching, and other factors. Read more...
Miscellaneous

**Easter Attendance and Effective Follow Up:** In this article for Christianity Today's April issue Ed Stetzer shares insight on how to effectively minister not only on the highest attended church day of the year, but after that as well. [Read more...]

**Affirmation of the Role of NAD Regional Conferences:** In response to requests the North American Division Administration voted the action concerning Regional Conferences. [Read more...]

**Forgiving ISIS:** Compelling video of a ten year old girl whose family had to flee from ISIS becomes Christian broadcasting station SAT-7's most watched interview. [Read more...]

**Family Christian Stores** has decided to withdraw its’ bankruptcy plan. This decision was reached after dozens of christian publishers sued the ministry over $20 million of consignment inventory. [Read more...]

**Creflo Dollar Jet:** The Atlanta based minister who preaches and encourages his membership to tithe 10% of their income so that they may receive "wealth" and "health" asked for donations to purchase a $60 million dollar jet. [Read more...]

**Same Sex Marriage Approval:** The Presbyterian Church has approved a new definition of marriage that includes same sex marriage, which will be effective as of June 21, 2015. [Read more...]

**Volunteer Tax Deduction for US Residents:** If you volunteered last year, see whether you can deduct out-of-pocket charitable expenses, such as the cost of driving your car or buying ingredients for a soup kitchen. [Read More...]

**The Aging of the American Population:** According to the online journal The Kiplinger Letter, by 2020, 16.8% of the population will be 65 or older, up from 13% in 2010, and just 9.9% in 1970.
Live streaming: According to The Kiplinger Letter March 2015 issue, look for businesses, small, and midsize churches to turn to live video broadcasting on the internet. Live streaming is getting easier and cheaper, with fewer glitches. Popular events to stream are conferences, training sessions and meetings. Providers include: Lifstream, Ustream, Youtube, and others.

If you like archaeology you will love this BBC article about the flood story that was written before the Bible wrote about the flood story. Read more...

Heaven Tourism: Books describing the experiences of people who have "visited" Heaven have been pulled from almost 200 Christian bookstores. Read more...

It's an Honor to Play Jesus: In an interview with Christianity Today's April issue, actor Haaz Sleiman shares what it was like to be the first Middle Eastern Muslim actor to play Jesus. Read more...
147 dead, Islamist gunmen killed after attack at Kenya college

Story highlights

- A total of 147 people were killed in the attack, Kenyan media and National Disaster Operation Centre report
- Four terrorists have been killed and operation has ended "successfully," Kenyan official says
- Islamist militant group claims responsibility for the carnage

The massacre that killed 147 people and wounded scores of others at a Kenyan university lasted for hours Thursday before the terror was over.

"It is a very sad day for Kenya," Interior Ministry Joseph Nkaissery said of the carnage at Garissa University College.

The death toll is the highest in a terror attack on Kenyan soil since the U.S. Embassy was bombed in 1998. More than 200 people died in the Nairobi blast.

A total of 147 people were killed Thursday, according to the official Twitter account of Kenya's National Disaster Operation Centre and Kenyan media reports. The agency also said 79 people were injured and 587 people were evacuated.

Attack at Kenyan university 23 photos

EXPAND GALLERY

Four gunmen were killed, officials said.

The Somalia-based Al-Shabaab militant group claimed responsibility for the assault.

Awaking to terror: 'I am lucky to be alive'

Islamist gunmen burst into the university before dawn Thursday, shooting students and taking hostages during early morning prayer services.

At one point, the attackers cornered a building in which 360 students live, but some of the students escaped, Nkaissery said.

Kenyan forces cleared three of four dormitories and had cornered the militants in the last one, the Interior Ministry explained.

"This is a moment for everyone throughout the country to be vigilant as we continue to confront and defeat our enemies," Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta said.

There are usually four guards at the campus gates overnight, Jackstone Kweyu, dean of students, told Kenya's Citizen TV.

The attack was deadlier than an Al-Shabaab attack on the Westgate shopping center in Nairobi in September 2013 that left 67 people dead.

What is Al-Shabaab, and what does it want?
Witness: Gunmen shot non-Muslims

Joel Ayora, who was on the campus and witnessed the attack, said gunmen burst into a Christian service. Taking hostages from the service, they then "proceeded to the hostels, shooting anybody they came across except their fellows, the Muslims."

The attackers separated students by religion, allowing Muslims to leave and keeping an unknown number of Christians hostage, Agence France-Presse reported.

"We were sleeping when we heard a loud explosion that was followed by gunshots and everyone started running for safety," student Japhet Mwala told AFP.

"There are those who were not able to leave the hostels where the gunmen headed and started firing. I am lucky to be alive because I jumped through the fence with other students."

For hours after the attack began, heavy gunfire and explosions continued, said Dennis Okari of CNN affiliate NTV.

Okari said he was told to take cover as hundreds of students fled, some crawling.

Photo of wanted man released

The ministry posted a "Most Wanted" notice for a man in connection with the attack. The notice offers a reward of 20 million Kenyan shillings, which is about $215,000.

The name listed is Mohamed Mohamud, who also goes by the aliases Dulyadin and Gamadhere. "We appeal to anyone with any info on #Gamadhere to share with relevant authorities and security agencies," the Interior Ministry posted on Twitter.

The post does not say what role the man may have played in the attack, if any.

It includes the words "Kaa Chonjo," which means to be on the lookout.

President: Kenya suffering from police shortage

Garissa is about 145 kilometers (90 miles) from the border with Somalia. Al-Shabaab militants have often launched attacks inside Kenya since the Kenyan government sent troops across the border to fight the group.

Kenyatta called on the inspector-general of police "to take urgent steps" to ensure that 10,000 recruits whose enrollment is pending "promptly report for training at the Kenya Police College, Kiganjo. I take full responsibility for this directive. We have suffered unnecessarily due to a shortage of security personnel. Kenya badly needs additional officers, and I will not keep the nation waiting."

The U.S. Embassy in Nairobi condemned the attack.

Police declared a curfew for the next several days in the region from 6:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m.

Garissa University College, which has 815 students, was established in 2011 and is the only public university in the region.
The Kenyan Red Cross and the country's health ministry organized a blood drive to help the victims.

**Al-Shabaab's carnage in Kenya**

The dangerously porous border between Somalia and Kenya has made it easy for Al-Shabaab militants to cross over and carry out attacks.

In a December attack on a quarry, Al-Shabaab militants separated Muslims and executed the non-Muslims, a spokesman for the group said.

Last month, the U.S. Embassy warned of possible attacks "throughout Kenya in the near-term" after the reported death of a key al-Shabaab leader, Adan Garaar.

"Although there is no information about a specific location in Kenya for an attack, U.S. citizens are reminded that the potential for terrorism exists," the warning said.

**Just Watched**

**Woman: I 'wiped myself' with blood to survive**

replay

CNN's Brian Walker, Vasco Cotovio and Lillian Leposo contributed to this report.
It is my privilege to announce the formation of the Office of Young Adult Ministries in the South Central Conference. The director of this new department is the cornerstone of our Young Adult Initiative, which the highest priority for the South Central Conference for the years 2015 and 2016.

The Young Adult Initiative, which I have shared with the Pastors of our conference and our Executive Committee, seeks to be intentional about fully involving young adults in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the operating of our conference and our local churches.

We shall fully share this initiative with our constituency immediately after the Christmas holidays, but its intent is to begin to change the culture of the South Central Conference.

Young adults are inevitably the future of our conference, but that is not enough—they must be a part of the present as well. We must both invite and challenge them to do more, to be the vital part of the mission of our church that the Lord intends for them to be. On a personal level, I consider leading out in getting that done as the most important thing left for me to do in the 19 months that remain for me in this office.

On this past Sunday, 12-14-14, the Executive Committee invited Pastor Lola Moore, to serve as Conference Young Adult Ministries Director, effective January 1, 2015. She currently serves as the Pastor of the Panama City/Greenwood, Florida district, Pastor Moore is a very gifted Pastor, whom the Lord has blessed both musically as well as in the declaration of the Word of God.

Pastor Moore will work with the conference young adults, and our churches to help them to maximize the gifts and talents. Additionally she has been tasked with working directly within the church of her choosing, in the Nashville vicinity in young adult ministry, once she relocates. This will enable her ministry to be less theoretical and more practical.

We welcome Pastor Moore to our office staff and ask for your prayers for her and for this initiative.

Happy Holidays and God’s Blessings,

Elder D.C. Edmond
President
South Central Conference
March 24, 2015—This past year, Barna Group has spent a considerable amount of time studying the unchurched—those who have not attended church within the past six months.

Much of that research is collected in the new Barna project *Churchless*, edited by David Kinnaman and George Barna. One of the most remarkable findings is that unchurched people are not always unbelievers—in fact, most aren’t. The majority are non-practicing Christians: They claim Christianity as their faith, but they haven’t been to church in a long time.

But what about atheists and agnostics? Are their numbers on the rise? Are more and more of the unchurched becoming unbelievers, too?

**Who Are the Atheists?**

For reporting purposes at Barna, we often combine atheists and agnostics into one group, which we call *skeptics*. Skeptics either do not believe God exists (atheists) or are not sure God exists, but are open to the possibility (agnostics). Skeptics represent one-quarter of all unchurched adults (25%). Nearly one-third of skeptics have never attended a Christian church service in their lives (31%). That’s nearly double the proportion of “virgin unchurched” who are not skeptics (17%).

The profile of a typical skeptic is different today from a decade or two ago. Today’s skeptics, like their counterparts from two decades ago, are defined by their denial of or doubts about God’s existence. But that is about the only thing they have in common with the unchurched atheist or agnostic of yesteryear. Below are five demographic shifts among skeptics in the past two decades.

**Five Demographic Shifts among Skeptics**

**They are younger.** Skeptics today are, on average, younger than in the past. Twenty years ago, 18 percent of skeptics were under 30 years old. Today that proportion has nearly doubled to 34 percent—nearly one-quarter of the total U.S. population (23%, compared to 17% in 1991). By the same token, the proportion of skeptics who are 65 or older has been cut in half, down to just 7 percent of the segment.

**They are more educated.** Today’s skeptics tend to be better educated than in the past. Two decades ago, one-third of skeptics were college graduates, but today half of the group has a college degree.
More of them are women. Perhaps the biggest transition of all is the entry of millions of women into the skeptic ranks. In 1993 only 16 percent of atheists and agnostics were women. By 2013 that figure had nearly tripled to 43 percent. This enormous increase is not because the number of skeptic men has declined. In fact, men's numbers have steadily increased over the last two decades—but not nearly as rapidly as among women.

They are more racially diverse. Religious skepticism has become more racially and ethnically inclusive. While whites represented 80 percent of all skeptics 20 years ago, that figure had dropped to 74 percent by 2013. This is largely a reflection of the increasing Hispanic and Asian adults among the skeptic cohort. Asian Americans, the least-Christian ethnic demographic in the United States, especially tend to embrace skepticism. While a growing number of skeptics are Hispanic, they still remain, along with Blacks, less likely than other ethnic groups to accept the idea of a world without God. White Americans, who constitute two-thirds of the country's total population, are well above average in their embrace of atheism and agnosticism; they comprise three-quarters of the skeptic segment.

They are more dispersed regionally. In decades past, the Northeast and West were seen as isolated hotbeds of atheism and agnosticism. They still remain the areas where skeptics are more likely to live, but the skeptic population is now broadly dispersed across all regions.

In many ways, skeptics resemble the rest of America more than they once did. And their numbers are growing more quickly than anyone expected 20 years ago.

### The Evolving Profile of the Skeptic

*In the past two decades, some significant demographic shifts have happened among American skeptics as a group.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 30</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College educated</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents of the West</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*year 1993 | year 2013*
Three Components of Disbelief

Just as believers arrive at their belief in God by amassing a variety of information and experiences, skeptics piece together different inputs to draw their conclusions. According to our research, however, it seems the three primary components that lead to disbelief in God’s existence are 1) rejection of the Bible, 2) a lack of trust in the local church and 3) cultural reinforcement of a secular worldview.

Skeptics dismiss the idea that the Bible is holy or supernatural in any way. Two-thirds contend that it is simply a book of well-known stories and advice, written by humans and containing the same degree of authority and wisdom as any other self-help book. The remaining one-third are divided between those who believe the Bible is a historical document that contains the unique but not God-inspired accounts of events that happened in the past, and those who do not know what to make of the Bible but have decided it deserves no special treatment or consideration.

Given their antipathy or indifference toward the Bible, it is remarkable that six out of 10 skeptics own at least one copy. Most have read from it in the past, and a handful (almost exclusively agnostics) still read it at least once a month. The fact is, most skeptics have some firsthand experience with the Bible, and most had some regular exposure to it during their youth.

Churches have done little to convince skeptics to reevaluate. In fact, because more than two-thirds of skeptics have attended Christian churches in the past—most for an extended period of time—their dismissal of God, the Bible and churches is not theoretical in nature. Most skeptics think of Christian churches as:

- Groups of people who share a common physical space and have some common religious views, but are not personally connected to each other in meaningful or life-changing ways
- Organizations that add little, if any, value to their communities; their greatest value stems from the limited times they serve the needy in the community
- Organizations that stand for the wrong things—wars, preventing gay marriage and a woman’s freedom to control her body, sexual and physical violence perpetrated on people by religious authority figures, mixing religious beliefs with political policy and action
- Led by people who have not earned their positions of influence by proving their love of humankind, and are thus not deserving of trust

Many of these ideas are initiated, promoted and reinforced by celebrity personalities and media exposure. There has arisen a new stratum of anti-religion celebrity apologists that includes Bill Maher, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, Peter Singer, Woody Allen, Phillip Roth, Julia Sweeney and the late Christopher Hitchens. It’s a chicken-or-egg conundrum to identify which came first: the atheist celebrity or an uptick in the number of atheists. Whatever the case, atheism has shifted in the past 50 years from cultural anathema to something the “cooler” kids are doing.

Understanding Today’s “Post-Christian” Trends

While what’s happening among self-identified atheists and agnostics is an important measure of belief trends, which corresponds with the much-examined “rise of the ‘nones,’” it is also important to look at actual faith practices and attitudes. This is why, at Barna Group, we have developed a “post-Christian” metric that helps us look at multi-dimensional factors to describe the rich and variegated experience of spirituality and faith.
This metric is based on 15 different measures of identity, belief and behavior. To qualify as post-Christian, individuals meet 60 percent or more of the factors (nine or more out of 15 criteria). Highly post-Christian individuals meet 80 percent or more of the factors (12 or more of 15 criteria).

These factors include a variety of practices (prayer, donating to a church, volunteering at a church, reading the Bible, etc.) and beliefs (belief in God, prioritizing faith, beliefs about the Bible, commitment to Jesus, etc.). You can see all 15 factors in this infographic.

Based on Barna’s aggregate metric, nearly two-fifths of the nation’s adult population qualifies as post-Christian (38%). This includes one in 10 Americans who are highly post-Christian—lacking engagement in 80 percent or more of the measures of belief, practice and commitment. Another one-quarter is moderately post-Christian (28%), refraining from at least 60 percent of the factors.

Analyzing the nation’s post-Christian profile gives an important viewpoint on the population’s spiritual, moral and social future. While self-described atheism and agnosticism may be on the rise in America, the post-Christian metric reminds observers that most Americans remain connected in some way with Christianity.

What the Research Means
David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group, says, “The data show that some cities—and younger generations—are more gospel-resistant than others. It is increasingly common among Millennials to dismiss religion, God, churches, authority and tradition. For years, some observers have claimed colleges and universities are a breeding ground for anti-God sentiment. The data does lend support to the notion that college campuses are comfortable places for young people to abandon God and assume control of their own lives.

“Yet in spite of clear trends and obvious needs, our research suggests that most of the efforts of Christian ministries fail to reach much beyond the core of ‘Christianized’ America. It’s much easier to work with this already-sympathetic audience than to focus on the so-called ‘nones.’ And it’s no mystery why: Figuring out how to effectively engage skeptics is difficult. One of the unexpected results we uncovered is the limited influence of personal relationships on skeptics. They are considerably less relational and less engaged in social activities than the average American. Christians for whom ‘ministry is about relationships’ may be disappointed when they find that many skeptics are not as enamored of relational bonds as are those who are already a part of church life.

“But in giving his followers the Great Commission, Jesus didn’t mention anything about doing what is easy. New levels of courage and clarity will be required to connect beyond the Christianized majority.”

Comment on this research and follow our work:
Twitter: @davidkinnaman | @roxyleestone | @ClintJenkin | @barnagroup
Facebook: Barna Group

About the Research
This research contains data from twenty surveys, encompassing interviews with more than 23,000 churched and unchurched adults. The number of unchurched adults involved was 8,220.

These surveys were done using random digit-dial telephone samples for landlines and listed cell phone samples for calls to mobile phones. Each of the studies entailed completing interviews with a minimum of 1,000 randomly chosen adults. The samples were developed to provide a reliable representation of the national population of people ages eighteen or older living within the forty-eight continental states. The estimated maximum sampling error for each survey of 1,000 adults was plus or minus 3.1% age points at the 95% confidence level; the maximum sampling error estimate diminished as sample size increased. The number of interviews completed with cell-phone owners was based on federal government estimates of the number of cell-only households.

The January 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014 surveys also included samples of approximately 1,000 adults conducted online. Those studies relied on a research panel called KnowledgePanel®, created and maintained by Knowledge
Networks. It is a probability-based online non-volunteer access panel. Panel members are recruited using a statistically valid sampling method with a published sample frame of residential addresses that covers approximately 97% of US households. Sampled non-Internet households, when recruited, are provided a netbook computer and free Internet service so they may also participate as online panel members. KnowledgePanel consists of about 50,000 adult members (ages eighteen and older) and includes persons living in cell-only households.

In all of these surveys regional and ethnic quotas were designed to ensure that the final group of adults interviewed reflected the distribution of adults nationwide and adequately represented the three primary ethnic groups within the United States (those groups that comprise at least 10% of the population: white, black, and Hispanic). Those quotas were based on current US Census Bureau data regarding the population. Additional quotas were employed to balance the gender of respondents included in the samples. Upon completion of a survey, the data were run and the demographic outcomes were compared to the census statistics on key demographic attributes. In some cases the full survey database was then statistically weighted to bring the database into closer approximation of the true population proportions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>study conducted in:</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Unchurched adult sample</th>
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<td>May 2008</td>
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<td>November 2012</td>
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About Barna Group
Barna Group (which includes its research division, Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. 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).

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What Most Influences the Self-Identity of Americans?

March 19, 2015—While many factors make up human self-identity, most Americans agree the primary factor that makes up their identity is family. Nearly two-thirds of Americans say their family makes up “a lot” of their personal identity (62%).

In a recent study, Barna Group asked adults how much a variety of factors influences their personal identity. While it may not come as a surprise that “family” ranks first, it is perhaps unexpected how much more likely certain groups (Elders, practicing Christians, residents of the Midwest) are to say so and how much less likely other groups (Millennials, people with no faith, residents of the West) are to point to family as a key part of their identity.

What other factors do adults consider central to their identity? And how do faith, age, politics and even area of the country affect people’s self-perceptions?

**Family, Country, God**

“God, family, country” might be the oft-touted creed of country music, but most Americans scramble the order. Adults are most likely to point to their family as making up a significant part of their personal identity, “being an American” comes second and “religious faith” is in third. In a tie for a distant fourth are people’s career and their ethnic group. Significantly fewer adults would claim their state or their city have much impact on their personal identity.
When asked how much each of the factors make up their personal identity—“a lot,” “some,” “not too much” or “not at all”—nearly two-thirds say their family makes up a lot of their personal identity (62%).

Patriotism still runs strong in most Americans: More than half of all adults say being an American makes up a lot of their personal identity (52%).

While religious faith squeaks into the top three, there is a sharp drop from the first two factors in the number of Americans who say their faith is a major part of their identity. A majority of Americans agree their family and their country are central aspects of who they are, fewer than two out of five adults say their religious faith makes up a lot of their personal identity (38%). About the same proportion of adults give little or no credence to the idea that faith is part of their identity: 18 percent say faith doesn’t make up much of their identity and one in five say it doesn’t affect their identity at all.

Most Americans seem to agree with the familiar maxim that what you do is not who you are: Less than one-quarter of adults say their career makes up a lot of their personal identity (23%), though more than a third admit their career makes up some of their personal identity (36%). Similar percentages point to their ethnic group as shaping their identity: Just under a quarter (23%) say it makes up a lot of their identity.

Hometown and state pride might spike during football and basketball seasons, but in general Americans don’t believe their state or their city significantly affects their personal identity. Only one in five Americans say their state makes up a lot of their personal identity (21%) and even fewer say their city or town does (16%). However, more than two out of five—more than for any of the other factors—admit their locale has at least some impact on their personal identity: 41% say their state makes up some of their identity and 43% say their city does. In other words, geography is not a predominant aspect of self-identity, but it plays a surprisingly important part in the background for most adults.
What Most Influences the Self-Identity of Americans? - Barna Group

How much are each of the following a part of your personal identity?

**MY FAMILY**
- A lot: 62%
- Some: 24%
- Not too much: 8%
- Not at all: 5%

**BEING AN AMERICAN**
- A lot: 52%
- Some: 30%
- Not too much: 11%
- Not at all: 7%

**MY RELIGIOUS FAITH**
- A lot: 38%
- Some: 23%
- Not too much: 18%
- Not at all: 21%

**MY ETHNIC GROUP**
- A lot: 23%
- Some: 33%
- Not too much: 25%
- Not at all: 19%

**MY CAREER**
- A lot: 23%
- Some: 36%
- Not too much: 20%
- Not at all: 21%

**MY STATE**
- A lot: 21%
- Some: 41%
- Not too much: 22%
- Not at all: 16%
Generational Identities

When it comes to identifying as an American, there is nearly a 50-point drop between the oldest generation—Elders—and the youngest. Four out of five Elders say that being an American makes up a lot of their personal identity, but only one-third of Millennials say the same (34%). While there is a significant drop between each generation and the next, the sharpest decline is between Boomers and Gen-Xers. The generation that came of age during Watergate and the turbulent Vietnam War era still says, on the whole, that being an American makes up a lot of their identity (66%). But their children—the generation of globalization, MTV, and the Monica Lewinsky scandal—are far less inclined to claim it as a significant factor: Only 37% of Gen-Xers say being an American makes up a lot of their personal identity.

Patriotism is not the only institution that has less of an impact on younger generations. Gen-Xers and Millennials are significantly less likely than their older counterparts to claim any of the factors make up a lot of their personal identity. The exception is career: 23% of Millennials, 22% of Gen-Xers and 25% of Boomers say their career makes up a lot of their personal identity. Only 17% of Elders, who are primarily retired from the workforce, say so.

The most dramatic differences, after patriotism, are family and faith. While Millennials, like most adults, identify more with family than any other factor—53% say family makes up a lot of their personal identity—they are still well behind any other generation in feeling this way. Even Gen-Xers, typically much closer to Millennials in their answers, are more likely than Millennials to connect family to their identity (61%). This may be the result of more Gen-Xers than Millennials having started families of their own.
What Most Influences the Self-Identity of Americans? - Barna Group

How much are each of the following a part of your personal identity?

**Percentage who say the following make up "a lot" of their personal identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Gen Xers</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
<th>Elders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Family</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an American</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Religious Faith</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Ethnic Group</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/712-what-most-influences-th...
Identity Politics

Age is not the only divide. For each of the factors surveyed, there are significant gaps along religious, socioeconomic, political and even regional lines.

When it comes to naming family as a primary influence on personal identity, those more likely than average to do so include Elders, those of various religious faiths, Republicans, those with families of their own (married adults, adults with kids under 18), Black adults, upscale Americans and residents of the Midwest. Those less likely to do so include adults with no faith, unregistered and Independent voters, Hispanics, those who have never been married, Millennials and Democrats.

THE DIVERGENT

GROUPS MORE AND LESS LIKELY THAN AVERAGE TO SAY THE FOLLOWING MAKE UP “A LOT” OF THEIR PERSONAL IDENTITY:
Conflating personal identity with “being an American” is the factor on which various groups most significantly diverge. Once again, institutionally minded groups such as evangelicals, Elders and married people are more likely to do so, while unregistered voters, registered Independent voters and those with no faith are less likely. In what will be of particular interest to political parties, Republicans are much more likely than average to say being an American is central to their identity (65% compared to 52% of the general population), while Democrats are less likely than average to do so (42%).
There are few surprises in terms of who highlights religious faith as essential to their identity. Practicing Protestants of all denominations are significantly more likely than the general population to say faith is central to their identity; in fact, aside from practicing Catholics, these groups are all more likely to say their faith, more than any other factor surveyed, makes up a lot of their identity. Practicing Catholics are more likely to say family makes up a lot of their identity (86%) than to say their religious faith does (79%).

Of course, those with no faith are least likely to say religious faith makes up a lot of their personal identity (6%)—and residents of the Northeast (where a larger proportion of non-religious people live) are also less likely (27%). Conversely, residents of the South (the “Bible Belt”) are more likely than average to say faith makes up a lot of their identity (45%). Black Americans, Republicans and women are also more likely than average, while Democrats and men are less likely.

It is worth noting that non-practicing Christians are the second-least-likely group, behind those with no faith, to say faith makes up a lot of their personal identity (22%).
When it comes to those who say their ethnic group makes up a lot of their personal identity, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans and other non-white groups are the most likely to say so. Similarly, other segments that tend to have higher numbers of ethnic minorities—Catholics, Democrats, practicing Christians and mainline Christians—are more likely to say so. Downscale and unemployed Americans are also more likely than average to say their personal identity is closely tied to their ethnic identity, while those with mid-range incomes are less likely—further evidence that economic hardships such as unemployment and underemployment disproportionately affect minority communities.

What the Research Means
“For many people, these numbers will confirm ideas they already had about various groups,” says Roxanne Stone, a
vice president at Barna Group and the designer and analyst on the study. “However, there are some themes of disconnection that are worth paying attention to. Younger generations—Gen-Xers and Millennials—are generally less trusting of institutions than older generations. This disenfranchisement holds true in their relative reluctance to claim any of these factors as part of their identity. It is also true that Gen-Xers and Millennials have a reputation for wanting to be individualists—for wanting to break away from traditional cultural narratives and to resist being ‘boxed in’ by what they perceive as limiting expectations. Of course, it will be interesting to see if, as they age, these groups begin to gravitate toward their own institutions and grounding narratives.

“The opportunity, then, for those who hope to reach these younger generations, is to ask where these groups are finding their sense of identity,” continues Stone. “If these traditional institutions and relationships are not as defining for them, what most impacts their identity? Their friendships? Their lifestyle? Technology or entertainment? The media they consume? While Gen-Xers and Millennials might resist being defined by anything, their identities are certainly impacted and shaped by external forces. Recognizing those forces and the impact they have—for better and worse—on their identity will help young adults make decisions about what and where they want to give allegiance.

“In addition to this generational trend of disenfranchisement, Barna has reported on the growing number of unchurched Americans. Much of this group is reflected in the ‘non-practicing Christians’ segment of the population: people who self-identify as Christian but for whom faith and church are not priorities. This group represents a massive slice of the adult population, and their reticence to claim religious faith as a central part of their identity is in line with their general tendency to distance themselves from institutional forms of Christianity. However, the fact that these Americans claim a Christian faith yet are the second least likely group to say faith makes up a lot of their personal identity, should certainly come as an alarming indicator to Christian leaders. This is a group that, as a whole, does not appear to be moving closer to the church or to Jesus.”

Comment on this research and follow our work:
Twitter: @davidkinnaman | @roxyleestone | @ClintJenkin | @barnagroup
Facebook: Barna Group

About the Research
This research contains data from a study conducted among 1,000 U.S. adults conducted online from February 3 to February 11, 2015. The estimated maximum sampling error for this study is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

Millennials are the generation born between 1984 and 2002; Gen-Xers, between 1965 and 1983; Boomers, between 1946 and 1964; and Elders, in 1945 or earlier. People are identified as having a “practicing” faith if they have attended a church service in the past month and say their religious faith is very important in their life.

“Evangelicals” are defined in this survey as people who meet nine belief conditions. These include saying they have made "a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today," that their faith is very important in their life today; believing that when they die they will go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all the principles it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent on church attendance, the denominational affiliation of the church attended or self-identification. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as “evangelical.”

The study relied on a research panel called KnowledgePanel®, created and maintained by Knowledge Networks. It is a probability-based online non-volunteer access panel. Panel members are recruited using a statistically valid sampling method with a published sample frame of residential addresses that covers approximately 97 percent of
US households. Sampled non-Internet households, when recruited, are provided a netbook computer and free
Internet services so they may participate as online panel members. KnowledgePanel consists of about 50,000 adult
members (ages 18 and older) and includes persons living in cell-only households.

About Barna Group
Barna Group (which includes its research division, Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit
organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. 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).

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Here’s the Best Prediction Yet of How Christianity and Islam Will Change Worldwide by 2050

Pew Research examines influence of births vs. conversions, and how China could change everything.

Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra

[ posted 4/2/2015 10:26AM ]

Christianity will gain three times more converts than any other world religion in the coming decades. Yet it will also lose 11 times more members than any other.

If fertility rates, the size of youth populations, and rates of religion switching remain the same, Christianity will still be the largest religion in the world in 2050, according to a detailed report released today by the Pew Research Center.

But Islam will be gaining fast, nearly neck-and-neck with Christianity "possibly for the first time in history," and potentially eclipsing Christianity after 2070.

The numbers are the “first formal demographic projections using data on age, fertility, mortality, migration and religious switching for multiple religious groups around the world,” said Pew.
At 2.92 billion, Christians will make up about 31.4 percent of the population—the same as they do now. Meanwhile, Muslims will shoot up from 23.3 percent of the population in 2010 to 29.7 percent in 2050.

Pew’s projections aren’t as optimistic as the latest numbers from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, which predicts more than 3.3 billion people, or 36 percent of the world’s population, will be Christians in 2050. (Mid-2015, CSGC counts 33.4 percent of the world’s population as Christian.)
The numbers are higher because CSGC uses Christian informants to learn about informal movements like house churches, and anticipates “more non-traditional growth not picked up by censuses and surveys” than Pew does, CSGC director Todd Johnson told CT.

Since there is a lack of reliable data in China and India regarding conversions, Pew doesn’t include it, CSGC stated. But that doesn’t mean the conversions aren’t happening.

“On-the-ground contacts in China and India consistently report that Christianity is growing due to conversions, and many of these Christians are organized in ‘underground’ or secret communities,” CSGC said. That explains why CSGC’s projection for the number of Christians in both China and India in 2050 is 330 million, compared to Pew’s projection of 108 million.

Most future Christians will be living in Africa, according to both reports. The rate of Christianity there is expected to double, from 517 million in 2010 to 1.1 billion in 2050, according to Pew. CSGC numbers are similar, with a prediction of 1.2 billion Christians in Africa in 2050.

Sub-Saharan Africa, now home to a quarter of the world’s Christians, will hold 38 percent of them in 2050, Pew said.

But Islam is the world’s fastest-growing religion, and Pew predicts the tipping point will come in 2070. After that, if current trends hold, there will be more Muslims worldwide than Christians.

From Pew’s report:

![The projected growth of Muslims and Christians would be driven largely by the continued expansion of Africa’s population. Due to the heavy concentration of Christians and Muslims in this high-fertility region, both groups would increase as a percentage of the global population. Combined, the world’s two largest religious groups would make up more than two-thirds of the global population in 2100 (69%), up from 61% in 2050 and 55% in 2010.](image)

It bears repeating, however, that many factors could alter these trajectories. For example, if a large share of China’s population were to switch to Christianity (as discussed in a sidebar), that shift alone could bolster Christianity’s current position as the world’s most populous religion. Or if disaffiliation were to become common in countries with large Muslim populations—as it is now in some countries with large Christian populations—that trend could slow or reverse the increase in Muslim numbers.

Eight countries will slip below 50 percent Christian in the next 40 years, according to Pew: Australia, the United Kingdom, Benin, France, the Republic of Macedonia, New Zealand, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Netherlands. That will leave 151 countries with a Christian majority.
At the same time, two countries—the Republic of Macedonia and Nigeria—will see populations that are more than 50 percent Muslim, in addition to the 49 countries that are currently 50 percent Muslim, Pew said.

Christianity’s slight growth likely won’t come from converts, but from birth rates, Pew said.

Christianity is expected to gain 40 million adherents from “religious switching” over the next 40 years, but will also lose 106 million. No other religion comes close to losing—or gaining—converts this drastically. Overall, Muslims will gain about 3 million from converts, while Buddhists will lose 2.8 million.

So which group gains from the roughly 60 million people who will leave the church? The unaffiliated.

CT has already noted the growing number of religiously unaffiliated in the United States. Their rate of conversion is strong: 61 million are expected to convert to the “nones” by 2050, according to Pew.

By 2050, the number of unaffiliated in the United States is expected to grow from 16 percent to just under 26 percent. That growth comes straight from Christianity, which is set to drop from 78 percent in 2010 to 66 percent in 2050, according to Pew.
In fact, the “nones” are poised to become the majority religion in France, New Zealand, and the Netherlands over the next four decades, Pew said.

But the location of the unaffiliated—in low birth rate countries of Europe, North America, China, and Japan—means both Pew and CSGC predict that the number of people worldwide who believe in nothing will drop by 2050.

The atheist population peaked in 1970 at about 165 million but has been dropping ever since, CSGC reported. By 2050, the numbers will have dropped to just over 125 million atheists. In fact, by 2050, the number of people classified as non-religionist (either atheist or agnostic) will drop from 19 percent in 1970 to less than 9 percent in 2050.

Pew’s percentages are slightly different, but predict the same trend. The unaffiliated will drop from 16 percent of the world’s population in 2010 to 13 percent in 2050. The reason is partly geographic, as “today’s religiously unaffiliated population ... is heavily concentrated in places with low fertility and aging populations, such as Europe, North America, China, and Japan.”

CSGC adds more good news: the growth rate of evangelicals from 2000 to 2015 was a rate of 2.13 percent, higher than that of Hinduism (1.26 percent), Islam (1.88 percent), or Christianity overall (1.32 percent).

While a little more than half the world’s population was unreached with the gospel in 1900, CSGC calculates that percentage has dropped to just under 30 percent today and should drop by another two percentage points by 2050.

Past CSGC studies have examined the surprising countries most missionaries are sent from and go to, the European country that’s less Christian than North Korea, and the cost of baptizing an American convert. CSGC researchers have also weighed in on why tallies of Christian martyrs vary so widely and whether persecution fuels church growth.

Pew Research has previously explored the increasingly numbers of Latin American Catholics converting to Protestantism, the rate at which Russians are returning to Orthodox Christianity, the world’s leaders of government destruction of religious properties, and the top 10 countries with the largest number of Christians living as minorities.

[Image courtesy of David Evers - Flickr]
Don't Waste Your Spike: Easter Attendance, Effective Follow Up, and Your Church

Easter is this weekend, but pastors, are you ready for next weekend yet? You should be. |

Ed Stetzer

Seize the Easter Moment.

Easter is an opportunity, but it has to be seized. More people will hear the message this Sunday than any other of
the year. If it is worth preparing a well-done service and great message, it is certainly worth following up with each and every person who attends.

Unfortunately, most churches don't follow up or they follow up poorly. They see a one-day spike in attendance and hope it continues, but they make little to no effort to engage their guests and encourage them to return.

They waste their spike.

**Intentionally Focus on Easter.**

First, we should focus on our Easter service for worship reasons. If you follow a liturgical calendar, this is the most important day of the year. If you don't, well, it still is the most important Christian celebration of the year and you don't need a calendar to tell yo that. As my friend Adrian Warnock explained, the resurrection changes everything.

Second, we should focus on Easter for outreach reasons. Ironically, whether you like it or not, people will be coming. Even grumpy pastors who complain about churches focusing guests will have them this Sunday.

Many of those guests will not know know you, your church, or the gospel. As such, your church should be, right now, getting "ready for company." If you are having new people over, you make sure everything is ready. Lots of churches will have company on Sunday and churches of all sizes are getting ready. But if your focus is entirely on the service, you will completely miss out on assimilation.

For too many churches, instead of post-Easter assimilation, they focus only on pre-Easter preparation.

**Have a Plan.**

So what should our post-Easter plans include?

First, work toward keeping people who visit—move them from visitors to attendees. I've never pastored a church that did not see a post-Easter bump that stuck. However, I've never pastored a church that did not have a follow-up plan ready and then implemented.

Easter should not just be a one-time deal—after all, we celebrate the resurrection every day.

To do that, you need some planning. Churches need a way to gather names and contact info from people willing to give it, a plan to follow up those names with several points of contact (phone call, letter, invitation card to come again), and a plan to connect them into a smaller group if they return.

Second, remember that people do not move from being an Easter visitor to a growing disciple after one "awesome" Easter sermon. This is the start of a relationship with your church—and, like any other, that relationship needs to be cultivated. Part of that cultivation is that they need to then hear about the gospel your church preaches. So, it is a great time to begin a new series and encourage people to come back the following week.

So, Easter should not just be a one-time deal—after all, we celebrate the resurrection every day. As far as outreach goes, Easter can be the first step in well-thought process.

Have an intentional process in place. If you don't have it already, repent for that and then order Gary McIntosh's Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church. It's on Kindle if you need it right now.

**Stay Focused on Jesus—His Message and Mission.**
We all know (or should know) that Easter is all about Jesus. His death on the cross and his resurrection undergird everything we do. We must not let gimmicks to get people there at Easter distract us from the Easter message. The point of Easter is Jesus. As pastors, it is crucial that we don't get so caught up in the Easter work of the Lord that we forget the Lord of the work. Focus on the message and don't get distracted from that message.

Yet, you must seize the opportunity. The Christ we worship on Easter sends us out on mission to reach people. And, those people are more open and more present on Easter than any other day. So, focus on the mission.

Be intentional in your planning, execution, and follow up.

_Don't waste your spike._
3-25-15 Affirmation of the ‘Mission’ Role of North American Division Regional Conferences

Responding to requests, the North American Division Administration voted the following action concerning Regional Conferences:

The North American Division has been given a mandate by both God and its constituency to serve one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the world. Since a request has been formally made to clarify the history and present role of its Regional Conferences, which have been a valued and integral part of our North American Division governance structure since 1944,

We resolve that:

Whereas the North American Division is one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the World…

Whereas the North American Division is presently ministering in a racially-charged society…

Whereas, the effectiveness, challenges, and history of our Regional Conferences need to be better understood...

Whereas, there is a growing number of requests for the NAD leadership to clarify the history, mission effectiveness, and cultural relevance of Regional Conferences...

We vote, to affirm that the historical establishment and current role and function of Regional Conferences are structurally essential, mission effective, and relevant in reaching the diverse populations and urban centers within our division.

The Administration of the North American Division and the Administrations of our Regional Conferences are deeply committed to continuing our mission focus and evangelistic unity as we seek to fulfill God's commission within our territory.

Throughout our division we will continue to seek ways and means to further racial cooperation, understanding, and growth.
Forgiving ISIS: Christian ‘Resistance’ Videos Go Viral in Arab World

International; Theology

Ten-year-old girl from Mosul becomes Christian broadcaster SAT-7’s most-watched interview ever.

Jayson Casper in Cairo

[ posted 3/17/2015 10:44AM ]

SAT-7

More than 1 million people have viewed Myriam's forgiveness of ISIS.

Muhga Ghalab paused carefully as she spoke on the role of mothers in maintaining social cohesion.

“We must teach our children to love, but we are not doing so,” said the dean of Islamic Studies at al-Azhar University, one of the Muslim world's most respected schools. The Muslim version of the Golden Rule rolled eloquently off her tongue in perfect Arabic diction. But then she fiddled with her notes. She was keen to convey a less familiar passage correctly.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’” she read from Matthew 5. “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Ghalab spoke at a seminar last week sponsored by the Egyptian Family House, an official initiative promoting national unity between Muslims and Christians.
But if two recent viral videos from Christian broadcaster SAT-7 are any indication, there is a growing familiarity with Christian forgiveness in the Arab world in the wake of ISIS-sponsored atrocities.

Image: SAT-7

SAT-7 interviews 10-year-old who fled Mosul.

A prime example of Ghalab’s wish for loving children: 10-year-old Myriam from Mosul, Iraq.

Her family fled their home last July with hundreds of thousands of other Christians, finding safety in Kurdistan’s Irbil. Essam Nagy of SAT-7 Kids visited the refugee camps and connected with Myriam, a faithful viewer who praised God for not allowing ISIS to kill them.

Asked about her feelings toward those who drove her from her home, Myriam wondered why they did this. Then she said: “I will only ask God to forgive them. Why should they be killed?”

To date, more than 1 million people have seen her witness online. [Full video at the bottom]

SAT-7’s 5 channels reach an audience of 15 million in North Africa and the Middle East, though it’s impossible to measure how many people watched Myriam. However, numbers can be tracked through the social media campaign, which has reached 25 times its normal audience, with subtitles of the video provided in English, Spanish, Turkish, and Chinese. Word spread not only through SAT-7 affiliates, but also in the local secular press.

Pan-Arabic al-Arabia praised Myriam for confronting ISIS with love. “Everyone who listens to her is astounded,” echoed the Egyptian Youm 7. Leading Lebanese daily al-Nahar called for the clip to be shown in the nation’s schools as a lesson in humanity.
Another forgiveness message was broadcast from al-Our village, 150 miles south of Cairo and home to 13 of the 21 Christian martyrs in Libya. Bashir Estephanos, who lost two brothers in the killings, phoned in to SAT-7 and surprised all by thanking ISIS. Half a million people have now listened to his testimony online.

“ISIS gave us more than we asked for,” he told Maher Fayez on the popular *We Will Sing* program. “They didn’t edit out the part where [as their throats were cut] they declared their faith and called out to Jesus.”

Estephanos prayed on air for God to save the killers from the ignorance they have been taught, and related a conversation with his 60-year-old mother. If someone from ISIS was in their village, “she said she would invite him in her home … and ask God to open his eyes.”

“These clips provide a counter-shock to the horrifying videos of killings that people receive on mainstream media,” said Farid Samir, executive director of SAT-7 in Egypt. “Myriam's and Bashir's calls are a form of resistance —through forgiveness.”

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has authorized a church to be built in memory of the martyrs.

Back in Syria, more than 200 Assyrian Christians remain hostages of ISIS following the late February attack on their villages. In Iraq, the first formal Christian militia has enrolled with the Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces.

CT has previously reported on the various strategies Christian evangelicals employ against ISIS, including the “carrot or stick” evangelism techniques employed by Arab satellite channels and a Bible Society tract on the Libya martyrs (which is now estimated to be the most widely distributed piece of Christian literature in Egypt outside the Bible).

Related Topics: None

Posted: March 17, 2015 at 10:44AM
Gleanings aggregates what others are reporting. Learn more.
Family Christian Stores Withdraws Bankruptcy Plan

(UPDATED) CEO: "The stewards of the ministry have done this out of love for the mission of Family Christian.'

Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra

[ posted 3/17/2015 03:59PM ]

Family Christian / YouTube

CEO Chuck Bengochea explains Family Christian Stores's bankruptcy.

[Updated with official FCS statement]

The nation's largest chain of Christian retail stores has withdrawn its initial bankruptcy plan, according to a court filing yesterday.

The decision by Family Christian Stores (FCS) comes after dozens of Christian publishers sued the ministry over $20 million of consignment inventory, and both the US Trustee and creditors committee objected to how the proposed sale plan would allegedly benefit one of FCS' owners.

The president and CEO of FCS, Chuck Bengochea, told CT that the proposed buyer of the struggling chain—Family Christian Acquisitions, a new subsidiary of FCS' non-profit parent ministry, Family Christian Ministries—has withdrawn its bid to purchase FCS' assets under Section 363 of Chapter 11 of the US Bankruptcy Code.

"The stewards of the ministry have done this out of love for the mission of [FCS]," said Bengochea. "We believe that this will help to satisfy certain objections of the Creditors Committee and the US Trustees. This action will lead more quickly to a successful outcome in which we can continue to serve our customers and glorify God."
Day-to-day operations at the chain’s stores will continue as usual.

Commercial Bankruptcy Investor described it as a "surprising move." C. Scott Pryor, who teaches on bankruptcy at Regent University's law school, wrote that FCS had "bowed to the inevitable" amid skepticism of the "close relationship between debtor, lender, and buyer."

The withdrawal does not mean that FCS will stop seeking Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection entirely, but that it is no longer pursuing protection under Section 363. Normally, creditors need to approve a bankruptcy reorganization plan. But under Section 363, only the bankruptcy court judge has to approve the sale of the business.

FCS’ lawyer, A. Todd Almassian, told CT, “The stalking horse bid was pulled, so the 363 sale motion isn’t going forward at this time.”

A "stalking horse" bid is an initial bid on a bankrupt company's assets made by a buyer chosen by the company. In this case, the proposed buyer was controlled by one of FCS' owners, Richard Jackson, thus the concern by the creditors committee that Jackson "wears three hats" as the ultimate owner of the debtor being sold (FCS), the proposed purchaser (FCS Acquisition), and the first lienholder (FC Special Funding).

The US Trustee also objected on those grounds, noting that Jackson was the only creditor slated to receive anything from the sale.

Calling off the sale is “a pretty big development,” University of Pennsylvania law professor David Skeel told CT. “That presumably means they’re going to a normal Chapter 11 proceeding.”

FCS explained its initial plan on its website:

Through a newly formed subsidiary, Family Christian Ministries will serve as the lead bidder for the Section 363 sale process, putting forward a plan that acquires the streamlined organization’s assets and maintains operation of the chain’s 267 stores in 36 states, as well as its e-commerce site www.familychristian.com. Family Christian Stores is asking the court for a schedule to complete the sale process in about 60 days.

After the judge approves the sale, we’ll be immediately cash-flow positive and profitable. This process is similar to the one taken by the automobile and airline industries in recent years. We see this as the start of a fresh new day for Family Christian Stores and look forward to delighting our customers for many years to come.

On its FAQ page, FCS states:

This web site will be updated from time to time to share important information, news and updates for our employees and our customers surrounding our restructuring process. In this time of transition and change, we feel strongly it’s important to be as open and transparent as possible with our customers, our vendors and our associates.

FCS has assured customers that it “does not expect” to close any of its more than 250 stores or lay off any of its approximately 4,000 employees.

CT will update this report as more information becomes available.
Presbyterians give final approval to same-sex marriage

AP 8:16 a.m. EDT March 18, 2015

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is now the largest Protestant group to recognize same-sex marriage as Christian. The denomination officially adopted a new definition of marriage. VPC

(Photo: Eric Risberg, AP)

NEW YORK (AP) — The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has approved a new definition of marriage that includes gay marriage.

The denomination is now the largest Protestant group to recognize same-sex marriage as Christian and allow same-sex weddings churchwide.

The new definition was endorsed last year by the denomination's top legislative body as an amendment to the church constitution. The change required approval from the majority of regional bodies or presbyteries. The Covenant Network of Presbyterians says the critical vote came Tuesday from the Palisades Presbytery in New Jersey.

The denomination has about 1.8 million members and 10,000 congregations nationwide.

The church earlier eliminated barriers for ordaining gays, and last year, allowed ministers to preside at gay weddings with congregational approval in states where the unions are legal.

The new definition takes effect June 21.

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By Daniel Silas Adamson BBC News Magazine

A reconstruction of the palaces built by the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal by Austen Henry Layard

In today's Magazine

Two of the ancient cities now being destroyed by Islamic State lay buried for 2,500 years, it was only 170 years ago that they began to be dug up and stripped of their treasures. The excavations arguably paved the way for IS to smash what remained - but also ensured that some of the riches of a lost civilisation were saved.

In 1872, in a backroom of the British Museum, a man called George Smith spent the darkening days of November bent over a broken clay tablet. It was one of thousands of fragments from recent excavations in northern Iraq, and was covered in the intricate cuneiform script that had been used across ancient Mesopotamia and deciphered in Smith's own lifetime.

Some of the tablets set out the day-to-day business of accountants and administrators - a chariot wheel broken, a shipment of wine delayed, the prices of cedar or bitumen. Others recorded the triumphs of the Assyrian king's armies, or the omens that had been divined by his priests in the entrails of sacrificial sheep.

Smith's tablet, though, told a story. A story about a world drowned by a flood, about a man who builds a boat, about a dove released in search of dry land.

Smith realised that he was looking at a version of Noah's Ark. But the book was not Genesis. It was Gilgamesh, an epic poem that had first been inscribed into damp clay in about 1800BC, roughly 1,000 years before the composition of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). Even Smith's tablet, which had been dated to some point in the
7th Century BC, was far older than the earliest manuscript of Genesis.

A month or so later, on 3 December, Smith read out his translation of the tablet to the Society for Biblical Archaeology in London. The Prime Minister, William Gladstone, was among those who came to listen. It was the first time an audience had heard the Epic of Gilgamesh for more than 2,000 years.

Smith's reading caused a sensation. There were some who seized on the poem with pious satisfaction, taking it to corroborate the essential truth of the Bible. But there were others who found it more troubling. As the New York Times put it in a front page article the following day, the Flood Tablet had exposed "various traditions of the deluge apart from the Biblical one, which is perhaps legendary like the rest".

Coming less than 15 years after Darwin's On the Origin of Species, the Epic of Gilgamesh felt to many like another great crack in the edifice of Victorian Christianity.

The story of how the Flood Tablet emerged from the mud of northern Iraq begins in a place called Kouyunjik - one of the archaeological sites now being mined for Assyrian antiquities by IS. It's a story told by Prof David Damrosch of Columbia University in The Buried Book: the Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh.

Kouyunjik sits directly opposite the Iraqi city of Mosul on the banks of the Tigris, and 2,700 years ago it was part of Nineveh, the last capital of the Assyrians. At its height, this was an empire that stretched from the shores of the Persian Gulf to the mountains of Anatolia and the flood plains of Egypt. For a period of about 300 years (roughly 900-600BC), it was the most advanced civilisation ever seen, a technological superpower built on the wealth of its merchants and the ruthlessness of its armies. A carving found at Kouyunjik shows the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal enjoying a picnic in his garden while the severed head of his enemy, the Elamite king Teumman, swings from the branches of the trees.
But Assyria was not invulnerable. In 612BC, Nineveh was sacked in a rebellion led by the Babylonians. They left the world's richest city in ruins, its palaces smouldering, its people dead or deported into slavery. Dust settled over the shattered library of the dead King Ashurbanipal, and over his carefully transcribed copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Two-and-a-half millennia later, in the winter of 1853, the poem was lifted out of the dirt by a man called Hormuzd Rassam.

Rassam had grown up in Mosul, just across the river. At a time when the imperial powers saw the locals as little more than spade handlers and donkey boys, he had been appointed by the British Museum to lead the most important archaeological excavation of the age. He was, by some distance, the first archaeologist born and raised in the Middle East.

Rassam's family were Chaldean Christians, descendants of the ancient Assyrians who had converted to Christianity in the Fourth Century and had remained ethnically distinct from the Arab and Kurdish populations of Iraq. This is the same community that has, in the past year, been forced by Islamic State to convert to Islam, pay a special tax, or be killed. Most of Mosul's Assyrian Christians now have fled east into the autonomous region of Kurdistan or north, across the border, into Turkey.
When Rassam was growing up, Mosul was a peaceful place. The city was part of the slowly dying Ottoman Empire, a provincial backwater that offered few prospects for a young man of energy and talent. But in 1845, when Rassam was 19 years old, he met someone who changed the trajectory of his life - Austen Henry Layard.

Layard was an adventurer who had arrived in the Middle East on horseback at the end of the 1830s, armed with plenty of cash and a pair of revolvers. By the time he got to Mosul he had already seen the temples of Petra and Baalbek, as well as the living cities of Damascus and Aleppo. But it was the unexcavated ruins of Iraq that really captured Layard's imagination.

"A deep mystery hangs over Assyria, Babylonia, and Chaldea. With these names are linked great nations and great cities... the plains to which the Jew and the Gentile alike look as the cradle of their race," he wrote.

"As the sun went down, I saw for the first time the great conical mound of Nimrud rising against the clear evening sky. It was on the opposite side of the river and not very distant, and the impression that it made upon me was one never to be forgotten... my thought ran constantly upon the possibility of thoroughly exploring with the spade those great ruins."

After years of negotiation with the Ottoman authorities, Layard finally sank a spade into the mound at Nimrud, 20 miles south of Mosul, in the summer of 1845. This is the site that, according to Iraqi officials, IS began bulldozing earlier this month.

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Ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud
- Nimrud covers some 3.5 sq km (1.35 sq miles), with a prominent “citadel” mound within the city walls
- Main administrative and religious buildings include the enormous palaces of several Assyrian kings and the temples of Ninurta, the god of war, and of Nabu, the god of writing
- The Palace of Ashurnasirpal, also known as the North-West Palace, was first excavated by Austen Henry Layard in the 1840s
- Extended excavations were next carried out in the 1950s-60s by Max Mallowan, the husband of Agatha Christie

Unrivalled riches of Nimrud

On the first day of the dig, Layard found the outlines of a royal palace. A week later he was unearthing the huge slabs of alabaster that had lined its walls, panels that depicted the power of the Assyrian king and the grovelling submission of his enemies. Within three or four years, Layard had unearthed the civilisation of ancient Assyria - until then nothing more than a name mentioned in the pages of the Bible - and had filled the British Museum with sculpture and writing from the birthplace of urban civilization.

Published in 1849, his account of his excavations, Nineveh and its Remains, became an immediate bestseller.

But by his own admission, none of this would have been possible without Hormuzd Rassam.

The Englishman may have known how to get funding from the trustees of the British Museum, but it was Rassam who knew how to deal with the villagers of northern Iraq, and spoke Arabic, Turkish and Syriac Aramaic, the language of the Assyrian Christians. It was Rassam who knew how to haggle with a tribal sheikh, how to bribe a local governor with a gift of coffee, how to hire 300 workmen to drag a colossal statue of a winged bull down to the Tigris and float it on a raft of wooden planks and inflated goatskins.
Determined as they were, Rassam and Layard could not ship everything to the British Museum. Among the sites they excavated was the gate of Nergal in the northern wall of Nineveh - the same gate where an IS jihadi stood last month to film a tirade against the polytheism and idolatry of the pre-Islamic world.

The gate is flanked with what Layard described, in his 1853 book Discoveries among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, as "a pair of majestic, human-headed bulls, fourteen feet in length and still entire, through cracked and injured by fire".

Known as Lamassu, these beasts were set into the gates of Assyrian cities to intimidate enemies and ward off demonic spirits. They did not ward off the vandals of IS, who broke the Lamassu's face with a pneumatic drill.

As they jointly brought Assyria back from oblivion, Layard and Rassam forged a friendship that lasted the rest of their lives. Where Layard - like so many European Orientalists - delighted in dressing up in eastern clothes, Rassam did his best to present himself as a Victorian Englishman. He rode across the plains of Iraq in a waistcoat and jacket. He converted to Protestantism, which he described as "the pure religion of Great Britain". He spent 18 months studying at Oxford, where he learned to ice skate and from where he wrote to Layard, "I'd rather be a Chimney Sweeper in England than a Pasha [lord] in Turkey."

The excavations were so reliant on Rassam that, when Layard retired from archaeology to become a diplomat and politician, the British Museum appointed the young Iraqi to continue the excavations alone. Returning to Mosul, he demonstrated an astonishing devotion to the interests of his adopted country.
Austen Henry Layard depicted in Oriental costume

Archaeology was central to those interests. Across the whole of the upper Tigris, the British were vying with the French for the antiquities of the ancient world. The first to excavate Nineveh had been a Frenchman called Paul Emile Botta, and, although he had suspended his dig to focus on the nearby village of Khorsabad, it was generally understood that the site remained within the French sphere of influence. Rassam, though, was on his home turf, right opposite the town where he had grown up. He was not going to see the treasures of Nineveh, like those of Khorsabad, shipped off to the Louvre.

Without any kind of official permission, and working under cover of darkness, Rassam had his team dig into the northern corner of the mound. In December 1853, about a week into the excavation, a huge bank of earth collapsed and Rassam heard his men shouting "Suwar!" - images. There, in the moonlight, were stone panels that had been carved more than 2,500 years earlier for the rooms of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (who ruled from 668 to 627BC).
Assyrian relief of lions being hunted

This was art of a breathtaking quality - scenes of a lion hunt across the plains of Mesopotamia, of the animals succumbing to the arrows of the king, scenes that held a pathos and a dramatic intensity beyond anything that had previously been excavated from the Middle East. "The lion hunt scenes date from the most developed period of Assyrian art," says Dr John Curtis, President of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq. "The lions are depicted in a wonderful way, full of life and naturalism. They are the finest products of Assyrian relief carving."

If it had contained nothing other than the lion hunt, Ashurbanipal's palace would still have been one of the most important archaeological finds of the 19th Century. But the floor of the palace was strewn with the broken remains of the king's library. "Amongst these records," wrote Rassam, "were found the Chaldean accounts of the Creation and Deluge." Rassam, although he didn't read cuneiform and didn't yet know it, had found the Flood Tablet.

The crates containing Ashurbanipal's library arrived in London around the time that the young George Smith was leaving school. Like Rassam, Smith was not a natural member of the Victorian establishment. Born into a working-class family, he was apprenticed at the age of 14 to a firm of banknote engravers. The boy was a fine draughtsman, but by the time he started work, his imagination had already been caught by the swashbuckling adventures of Layard and by the antiquities that were arriving from Nimrud and Nineveh. By the middle of the 1850s, Smith was hanging around the British Museum in his lunch hour, peering at the cuneiform tablets that had come from the palaces of the Assyrian kings.

By 1860, when he was 20, Smith had started to understand both the cuneiform script and the Akkadian language in which most of the tablets were written. A year later the museum's staff hired him to clean and sort the tablets. He had an astonishingly good visual memory, reassembling and deciphering lines of near-illegible text that were dispersed across hundreds of shattered fragments. It was not long before Smith, who had never attended a university and had never left Britain, was making major discoveries in the history and literature of the Assyrian empire.

Head of a winged bull from Nimrud, in the British Museum
Smith was gratified by the recognition of his fellow Assyriologists, but what he really wanted was something that would make his name with a wider public - something that might justify an expedition to Iraq. In November of 1872, as he spelled out the poetry of the Flood Tablet line by line, he knew he'd found it. Smith was so excited, wrote one of his colleagues, that he "rushed around the room" and "to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself".

Two months later, with 1,000 guineas put up by the Daily Telegraph, George Smith was dispatched to Iraq to resume the excavations that had begun a generation earlier.

Lacking the flamboyance of Layard and the street smarts of Rassam, Smith struggled to cope with the heat and squalor of the Ottoman Empire. He was, says David Damrosch, appalled by the hygiene, revolted by the sight of a kebab, too naive to pay the small baksheesh that could have eased every transaction.

But there can be no doubt that George Smith was an out-and-out genius. By the time he died in 1876, wasted by dysentery in Aleppo, he had published eight groundbreaking books on Assyrian history and linguistics, made dozens of major archaeological finds, and rediscovered the world's first great work of literature. He was just 36 years old.

With Smith dead, Rassam was recalled to the service of the British Museum. He went on to find and excavate the Babylonian city of Sippar, to discover the great bronze doors of the palace of Balawat, and to send more than 70,000 cuneiform tablets back to London. These were discoveries that should have made him famous - but by the time of his final expeditions in the 1880s, Hormuzd Rassam was being erased from the record.
Hormuzd Rassam after he settled in England

Sir Henry Rawlinson, who had been British Consul in Baghdad at the time of Rassam's nocturnal excavations at Nineveh, now claimed the discovery of Ashurbanipal's palace for himself. Rassam, he wrote, was just a "digger" who had overseen the work. Even more insulting was the insinuation, made by one of the British Museum's curators, that Rassam had profited from the illicit antiquities trade that had grown up around the excavations in Iraq.

Hormuzd Rassam, who had been so impressed by the manners of the Victorian elite, and who had given his entire career to the service of the British Empire, was treated to a generous serving of snobbery, racism, and contempt. He could find no British publisher for his memoirs, and by the time he died at his home at Hove in 1910, even his name had been removed from the plaques and visitor guides at the British Museum.

The one Englishman who stood by Rassam was his old friend Layard. Rassam was, wrote Layard, "one of the honestest and most straightforward fellows I ever knew, and one whose services have never been acknowledged".
"Rassam is still remembered in Mosul," says Dr Lamia al-Gailani, an Iraqi archaeologist at University College London. "They are very proud of him."

In the UK, though, his reputation has never been fully rehabilitated. A generation after he left the field, archaeology developed into a disciplined, scientific search for knowledge rather than a greedy, imperialist scramble for treasure. Every handful of earth was now sieved, every seed and tooth collected, every shard of pottery measured and analysed.

Layard and Rassam, who had been paid by an imperial power to dig out the masterpieces of Mesopotamian art before the French, had gone shovelling through the mud walls of ancient buildings without even noticing them, had kept only the most rudimentary records, and had churned up sites that, explored with less haste and more method, could have yielded a wealth of knowledge about the lives of the Assyrians. By the standards of modern archaeology, they were not much more than treasure hunters in the pay of the British Museum.
"For Iraqis, of course, it's emotional," says al-Gailani. For a long time they've come to the British Museum and seen these antiquities, and they feel that they should be returned to Iraq. But at the moment they keep quiet. Because they see what's happening in Iraq, and they see that these things in the British Museum and in the Louvre have at least been saved."

Not everyone is so willing to exculpate the colonial powers. But for all the treasure that Layard and Rassam removed from Mesopotamia, there were lines that they did not cross.

On the smaller of Nineveh's two ancient mounds was a shrine that the locals called Nebi Yunus. It was the burial place, they said, of the Prophet Jonah. For centuries it had been a site of prayer and pilgrimage for Mosul's people, Christian and Muslim alike. Layard and Rassam knew that it stood above an Assyrian royal palace. But this was a sacred place, and it could not be disturbed.

IS, though, has no such scruples. On 24 July 2014, its fighters packed the shrine of Nebi Yunus with explosives and blew it to smithereens, sending a cloud of debris into the sky above Mosul.

Thieves working for Islamic State began digging into the ruins beneath the demolished shrine. According to Qais Hussein Rashid, Iraq's Deputy Minister for Tourism and Antiquities, artworks from the site have already been smuggled into the hands of private dealers in Europe.

There are hundreds of ancient sites now in the hands of IS. But beneath the rubble of Nebi Yunus is a stretch of ground untouched by archaeologists - ground that holds the palace of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon, and that might might contain some of the great artistic or literary treasures of the ancient world.

In all likelihood, we'll never know.

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NASHVILLE (BP) — LifeWay Christian Resources has stopped selling all "experiential testimonies about heaven" following consideration of a 2014 Southern Baptist Convention resolution on "the sufficiency of Scripture regarding the afterlife."

LifeWay told Baptist Press about its decision to halt sales of heaven visitation resources today (March 24) in response to an inquiry about the book 90 Minutes in Heaven by Don Piper, which is being made into a movie slated for release this fall. The book recounts Piper's supposed experience of heaven following a severe auto accident and has sold 6.5 million copies in 46 languages.

"Last summer, as we began developing LifeWay's new structure and direction—that we’ve now identified as One LifeWay—the role of heaven visitation resources was included in our considerations. We decided these experiential testimonies about heaven would not be a part of our new direction, so we stopped re-ordering them for our stores last summer," LifeWay spokesman Marty King told Baptist Press in written comments.
"Now that we’ve begun implementing the new direction, the remaining heaven visitation items have been removed from our stores and website and will not be replenished. We have more work to do aligning the LifeWay Retail Division with LifeWay's vision and core values so we covet your prayers as we continue to provide trustworthy Biblical Solutions for Life," King said.

Though LifeWay "was not mentioned in the SBC resolution affirming the sufficiency of biblical revelation and affirming the truth about heaven and hell," King told BP in an interview, "the resolution was approved overwhelmingly and was considered during our process."

The resolution, adopted by messengers to the SBC annual meeting in June, warned Christians not to allow "the numerous books and movies purporting to explain or describe the afterlife experience" to "become their source and basis for an understanding of the afterlife."

The resolution did not list specific book or movie titles, but it seemed to describe works like 90 Minutes in Heaven, The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven by Kevin and Alex Malarkey, and Heaven Is for Real by Todd Burpo (along with its companion movie released last year by Sony Pictures).

The resolution affirmed "the sufficiency of biblical revelation over subjective experiential explanations to guide one's understanding of the truth about heaven and hell."

In January, LifeWay announced it would stop selling The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven after coauthor Alex Malarkey admitted that he lied about having a vision of heaven as a 6-year-old. At the time, King said LifeWay was "committed to becoming even more proactive in the next few months in evaluating the resources we carry."

Giving Films announced the completion of filming for 90 Minutes in Heaven March 12. The movie stars Hayden Christensen of Star Wars and Kate Bosworth of Superman Returns. The film also features veteran actor and former US Senator Fred Thompson as well as singers Michael W. Smith and Dwight Yoakam, according to a news release from Giving Films.

"I'm an ordinary man with an extraordinary story," Piper said according to the news release. "I want people to see hope in their challenges, to see that pain can come with purpose."

Malarkey’s retraction doesn’t seem to have affected the sales of otherworldly experiences. Heaven Is For Real, which has shown up on the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association's bestseller list every month since it was published in the fall of 2010 (including a 10-month stretch as No. 1 in 2011), still made the list in February (at No. 17).

Publishers Weekly (PW) noted that such books have been "megasellers" for evangelical publishers, and reported that both 90 Minutes in Heaven and Heaven Is for Real "remain popular even after now-16-year-old Alex Malarkey recanted the experiences he detailed" in The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven.

Several Christian publishers told PW that they would continue to print books in the genre. “This is a good category for us, and we’re going to continue to publish credible stories,” David Lewis, Baker Publishing Group’s vice president for sales and marketing, told PW. “As unfortunate as [Malarkey’s admission] is for Tyndale, it has had no effect on sales of heaven books that we can see, nor on our decisions to publish them.”

Indeed, Thomas Nelson released a father’s visions of heaven in The Hope of Heaven: God’s Eight Messages of Assurance to a Grieving Father earlier this month. Meanwhile, Tyndale published Visits to Heaven and Back: Are They Real?, which explores the discrepancies in popular stories of visits to the afterlife.

Before declaring bankruptcy in February, Family Christian Stores announced a sister company would produce 90 Minutes in Heaven as a movie to be released in the fall.
Haaz Sleiman in 'Killing Jesus'

From Jeffrey Hunter and Max von Sydow to Robert Powell and Willem Dafoe, the actors who play Jesus have been strikingly European, ethnically speaking. Even Campus Crusade's *Jesus* movie, which once advertised the fact that all the Jewish supporting characters were played by local Israeli actors, cast British actor Brian Deacon in the central role.

Haaz Sleiman in 'Killing Jesus'

Over the last few years, however, filmmakers have been aiming for greater accuracy in their depictions of Jesus and his kin. As controversial as *The Passion of the Christ* was, Mel Gibson did make a point of altering Jim Caviezel's appearance, going so far as to digitally change the actor's eyes from blue to brown. *The Nativity Story* cast a Maori girl as the Virgin Mary and Palestinian and Iranian actors as her relatives. The Lumo Project, whose *Gospel of John* came out on Netflix last year, cast an actor of South Asian descent as Jesus.

And now, Haaz Sleiman—born in the United Arab Emirates and raised in Lebanon—may be the first actual Middle Eastern actor to play the Middle Eastern carpenter at the heart of Christian faith in an English-language movie. The film in question, *Killing Jesus*, is an adaptation of the book by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, and it airs on the National Geographic Channel on March 29 (Palm Sunday).

Sleiman, who was raised Muslim, might be best known for playing an illegal immigrant in *The Visitor*, which earned him an Independent Spirit Award nomination in 2008. Sleiman spoke to me after attending the world premiere of *Killing Jesus* at the Sun Valley Film Festival in Idaho earlier this month. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.
So how was it, seeing the finished film?

I have to see it again. That's just how it works, man. You watch it and there's a lot going through your mind, and you want to see it again.

I did a movie called *The Visitor* that I shot a while ago, and the director, Tom McCarthy, I remember he screened it for me at the agency, and before he screened it, he was like, "Watch it, and then we're going to go to the bar and get some drinks." He knew why I needed to get some drinks, because as actors, you watch it and have expectations. I actually hated my work in *The Visitor*, but then it was one of the most well-received things I've ever done in my life. So I don't want to make it about me, I don't want to talk about me.

In terms of the film itself, I thought it was beautiful. I always thought from the script it was beautiful, and the intention that they had for it, so seeing the film was not in any way an exception, and I just loved the idea of telling the story in the most humanly way possible, and the final product didn't in any way disappoint in that sense. And that's the most important thing for me. A lot of these productions make it sort of ethereal and otherworldly and not relatable almost, and I think in this production, we were able to somehow hopefully make the movie relatable—I think we did—and I'm really proud of that.

One of the really interesting things about the film is the focus it gives to Jesus' family. Practically the first thing we see the adult Jesus do is throw some food at James. Was that a piece of bread or something?

Yeah!

*Haaz Sleiman in 'Killing Jesus'*

And then of course, later on, you have the scenes where you meet your brother, and you talk about the fact that he doesn't believe, and then he's there later on for the Passion as well. So any thoughts on that?

Absolutely. It's about celebrating humanity. So throwing the piece of bread is the fun of it. The closeness and the specificity of the relationship between people, and how beautiful that can be, and the playfulness of that. And I think that is so important. As people, we all have families, right? Who cannot relate to that? Even if you didn't have maybe the best experience of family, you can still understand and get what that means and what that represents, for a human being growing up, and what family means in terms of your growth as a person. So it's a heightened state of caring and love and connection with family.

During the Q&A, you talked about how, when you got the role, you talked to your mother about it. What were her words again?

"Bless you, my son, for playing our prophet, peace be upon him."

Right. I thought that was interesting, because we've heard plenty of talk about how you can't depict the prophets [in some Islamic traditions], and I know that in Egypt there's
been controversies over films about Joseph and so forth, and it was interesting to hear that your mother encouraged you like that.

Well, in Islam, Jesus is a prophet, and if you look at Mohammed and Jesus and Moses, it's not like Moses is better than Jesus and Jesus is better than Mohammed. They're all so highly respected and honored and followed and they're all there for a reason. Jesus is probably even more important than Mohammed in a way. He came before Mohammed, and I think he's mentioned in the Koran so many times, people would be shocked.

I've heard that there's an entire chapter on Mary.

Oh absolutely! Absolutely. So it's an honor for me, as someone who was raised Muslim, to play him. It's beyond an honor. Now, I know that in Islam, they sometimes say you cannot put a face on Mohammed, and equally they say you cannot put a face on Jesus. I think they came to celebrate humanity and show us how beautiful we are. So yes, absolutely, for me, it is in no way degrading to them, because that's what they came for—for us. Why else would God send them to us, if that's your belief? So if we feel like it's degrading to be human, that is exactly the problem that we've been dealing with all our lives, for all the centuries: that we think being human is degrading and unworthy. That is why there's so much pain and suffering, because we believe that.

Haaz Sleiman in 'Killing Jesus'

What scene did you like filming the most? People always ask what's the hardest scene; I want to know which one you liked the most.

Hmm. I liked many. I don't want to sound cheesy, but I loved scenes like the leprosy scene, or the scene with the child that was possessed. And the mother, Mary, those scenes with his family. I loved those scenes because it was an opportunity to show what we as human beings are capable of, miracles or not. I think of the intensity of the love he had for his mother and the amount of pain that he felt, that he actually had to make her go through that. He knew that he was going to make his mother see her own child go through all of that, but he still did it, knowing that it was for a bigger cause. That's what we as human beings are capable of. And that, to me, was beautiful.

And I also love how he looks at those people, the meek. He never looks at them as weak, he always looks at them as strong. So for me, going on that day on the set, knowing that that was my intention—they are not weak, they are not less than me or anybody else around me—they're equal, is what it's all about. Every day we can walk around and see a homeless guy, a prostitute, somebody who's lost, and right away we feel sorry for them and we feel that they're weak, but actually that's not the truth, and that's why those are my favorite moments.

How about the journey of Jesus' self-discovery? The Jesus you play is very human, and yet he has this sense of a destiny or calling that most people don't have, so how do you make that relatable or play those parts of the story without making him seem like he's out of his mind? Not to put too fine a point on it.

Yeah, yeah, totally. I know people in my life that are exactly like that, and have healed people, and have done amazing things. I know a person in my life that has been able to pick up on energy just from being in New York and then coming to L.A. because they knew somebody was going to die, and they had to save that person. This stuff happens all the time, every day in our lives today. I think the idea of self-discovery and the journey of that is as human as it gets. And the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, had to be born through a woman says it all for me. He didn't have to go through all that. But no, there was a reason. And so he had to go through all of that to get to that place.

The trick with Jesus films has always been to make him someone you can identify with as a person, but not to go too far with that, because after a while, if you go too far with that, he becomes just another guy, and I
think there has to be something a little "strange" about Jesus.

It's funny that you say he has something strange or different. Do you know how many people have that quality? Human beings that have that quality that you're talking about? You'd be surprised, but there are many human beings that have that quality, that specific thing that you call otherworldly or strange and it's different. Because here's the thing. If you really want to bring it down to the essence of it all, we think being human is weak. But we don't think enough that it is beautiful and powerful and compassionate.

It takes a certain kind of consciousness and awareness to be able to do that. But it's about having the ability to not judge. When Jesus goes and says, "I do love you," to somebody who is punching him and beating him up, then it's exactly what I'm talking about. It's really the most difficult thing, to not have judgment, but it's the most freeing thing. And so Jesus didn't say it for no reason, when he says, "Judge not so that you not be judged."

What about saying "tear down this temple" and stuff like that? Isn't he judging the priests?

No! It's no different from someone coming and waking you up. "Wake up! Wake up, stop!" In humanity, it's okay that we have these different emotions. It's about not judging even that. It's about being able to move to a more elevated place, which is what he did. Yes, he reacted in that way, but he also had a plan. He was trying to provoke them, so they could actually crucify him so he'd fulfill the prophecy. So he was doing that for a reason, too.

Peter T. Chattaway writes about Bible movies and other films at his Patheos blog.

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