

American Church Attendance – Where Are We? And Where Are We Headed?

Pastor Ron Salsbury, New Life Community Church, Pismo Beach, CA www.newlifepismo.com

- Less than 20% of Americans regularly attend church – half of what pollsters report. 17.7% (52 million) vs. 40% (132 million.) ... The “halo effect” is people “reporting” more than they “do.”
- Although 40% of Americans are regular church attendees, a “regular attendee” is now defined as “someone who attends at least 3 out of every eight Sundays.” ... Our people come, in between youth sports, professional sports, car shows, garage sales and recreation.
- American church attendance is steadily declining. 1990 – 20.4%, 2000 – 18.7%, 2004 – 17.7%. At current rate of decline, it will be 15.4% in 2020, and 11.7% in 2050. There are two factors at play: 1.) population increase and 2.) attendance decrease due to lack of interest.
- 24.5% of Americans now say their primary form of spiritual nourishment is meeting with a small group of 20 or less people every week. 6 million people meet this way and rarely if ever go to church. (*BUT...organic/house churches are a part of The Church! They must be “counted,” they’re part of “us!”*) The lesson for traditional churches is to get connected in smaller groups!
- Small and large churches are growing, midsize churches are shrinking. Why? Midsize churches often lose evangelistic zeal when they get financially comfortable and develop a “club mentality.” Additionally, they cannot compete with what large churches offer to people with an increasing attitude of consumerism. Among our Nazarene churches, this has been true, but most of our large churches did not report an increase last year. Of 50 churches over 800, only 18 reported a gain. So, we must ask ...

What are the reasons? What do we need to re-discover?

- 1. Radical Love for Jesus.*** This is a serious, get on your face, desperate, “if I don’t get a fresh touch from Jesus I’ll die” sort of love! The means of grace for this are ancient and simple... fasting, prayer, repentance, solitude, silence, and other spiritual disciplines. The starting place may just be honesty about where we are personally and as a church. It’s time to SEEK Jesus! All people, young and old, are longing for genuine, spiritual reality! The greatest danger we face is not “separation of church and state,” it’s the “separation of church and Jesus!” The Church must seek *presence* more than *programs*. What we really need is Him!
- 2. Relational Connection with Each Other.*** We’re created in “the image of God” ... Who IS “a community of love” as a tri-unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We’re wired for worship and created for community! When the church fails to provide either, we become irrelevant. Large, authentic worship experiences are powerful! We must also provide connection within smaller groups, and, teach people how to develop authentic community within families and friendships. Small group ministries are an extension of a “culture of connection” in a church, and must not be a replacement for it. We need relational connection.

3. *Relevant Worship Experiences.* Every church has liturgy, which means “the work of the people.” We may not have it written down, but people know what their “work” is when they come to church, even if it’s just to sit there, put something in the offering, and try to stay awake. When I say “relevant,” I mean more than preaching series, subjects and expositional content that relates to the real lives and challenges that our people face (as important as that is!) And, by using “relevant” I’m not speaking of the fruitless and frustrating pursuit of trying to be “contemporary” (although often times church music, musicianship, sound, lighting and decor can be some of the world’s worst!)

When I say “relevant” I’m speaking of a simple pursuit of the presence of Jesus, an honest expression of our desperate need for him, a genuine celebration of our shared, redemptive story found in God’s Word, and, in the lives of our people. Many churches have lost the power of a simple, and fresh testimony! Some churches don’t have many, if any fresh stories of current salvation, healing or deliverance. Other churches have them, maybe many of them, but for some reason they are too big or too busy to figure out ways to ever hear them!

We must recover the power of presence ... the Presence of Jesus ... being gathered at His table, sitting at His feet, with His people, and listening to His Word. This is relevant worship.

4. *Redemptive Compassionate Ministry – both locally and globally.* I’m *really* tired of the word, “missional,” but the truth is ... that’s what The Church is supposed to be. We are on a mission together. There’s no such thing as “short term mission.” We’re all in it for the long haul ... for the rest of our eternal lives! As the great theologian, Buzz Light-year would say, “To infinity and beyond!” People long for significance, and want to be a part of a church that is significantly making a difference! Churches can become boring, shrinking, self-serving, sub-cultural islands of irrelevance when they lose their concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the lost. When a church is committed to redemptive, compassionate ministry – both locally and globally, they discover something more powerful than momentum, they re-discover the power of mission and ministry.

I can’t say where the American Church is headed. I can say where my church is headed. Our mission statement is simple ... “The Pursuit of Comfortable Survival.” No, I’m just kidding. Our mission statement is: **“Seeking God. Serving Others. Together.”** We are not a perfect church, with perfect people, with a perfect pastor. Far from it. We are however, very serious about existing for something and Someone greater than ourselves. These four points are things that all churches need to pursue and re-discover these days. What is at stake is more important than our organizational survival or ecclesiastical success. What is at stake is Christ’s mission in the world that He has given to us – His Church. We need to get back to the basics of who we are and who’s we are and what we’ve been called to do.

(Bullet Point Stats taken from “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America – Barnes & Lowry)