

A LOOMING CRISIS IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH

By WCP Team
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The July 8, 2020 release of the Barna Group's latest study on the State of the Church has confirmed what some have suspected would occur as a result of COVID-19. The study revealed that 32 percent of practicing Christians stopped attending church, whether in person or online, since the outbreak of the virus. While the national public opinion survey of 1,000 US adults had a +/- 2.2% rate of error,

when extrapolated to the general Christian population, there could be as many as 43 million people who decided to no longer attend church. Whether or not their minds will change once gathering restrictions are loosened, the study does corroborate a growing trend in the rapid decline of church attendance over the past two decades.

Just five years ago, for example, University of Northern Colorado sociology professor Joshua Packard (2015) found that 65 million US adults were "done" with church. Similar to the Barna study, "done" did not mean that they left the faith, although Packard indicated that nearly 30 million adults actually did. "Done" simply meant that US adults no longer felt a need to attend church as it did not satisfy their expectations. If these two studies are correct, we have just witnessed nearly 100 million people leaving the church in the past decade.

Christianity in general and evangelicalism specifically have been trending downward since the 1990s when nearly 90 percent of the US adult population identified as Christian. Today, that number is only 65 percent of the approximate 209 million US adults. While there have been some who argue that in spite of the decrease of the general Christian population, evangelicalism is growing, this is only true among certain segments. Black evangelical growth has remained stagnate over time, while Hispanic growth has increased yet not at a rate to sustain evangelicalism's overall decline. White evangelicals in 2019 made up 15 percent of the US Christian population whereas in 2010 it was 21 percent (Jones 2019).

There is a trifecta for a perfect storm that has formed above the US religious landscape: 1) the perceived irrelevance of the legacy church (Packard 2015, Barna 2020); 2) the indicated heretical beliefs of a majority of evangelicals (State of Theology, 2018); 3) increasing distrust of pastors (Brenan 2017). If things do not change, the exponential rate of decline of the legacy church will result in a church-less America.

Even more disheartening, the impact will have global ramifications. As the church continues to decline, we might anticipate a concomitant reduction in the size of the missionary force coming from the United States as well as a reduction of financial resources. Economists and non-profit CFOs are already predicting as much as a 50 percent drop in giving as we go into 2021 (Holcombe and Kuntz 2020).

What will it take for American evangelicalism to recover? That is the focus of a new master class entitled *The Church in Times of Crisis*. Ephesiology Master Classes and William Carey Education are partnering to bring you an online experience focused on addressing issues confronting Christianity in North America. You'll hear leading experts, like Jeff Christopherson, co-director of the Send Institute at Wheaton College, and Alan Hirsch, founder of Forge and best-selling author, focus on what the future of evangelicalism and its leadership.

You'll also hear from church planters like Devlin Scott of NewCity Church, Russel Cravens of Neartown Church, and Heath Haynes of The Bridge Montrose as they wrestle with how the 21st century church must adapt to the new cultural realities of racial diversity, global pandemic, and pastoral leadership.



The Church in Times of Crisis

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